

Including immigrant voices in local mechanisms of citizen participation? Insights from the crucial case of Barcelona

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Abstract

The deliberative democracy and governance literature indicates that the challenge of participatory mechanisms (e.g., participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies) is to be inclusive of all citizens, especially marginalized ones from the political system. Immigrants as a marginalized group are a target of inclusion. Asking the circumstances under which these mechanisms promote immigrants' effective inclusion is still a pending question. This article proposes a theoretical model centered on their inclusion in these mechanisms. We apply our model to the incorporation of immigrants into Barcelona's Neighborhood Council Meetings, revamped under the radical-left *Barcelona en Comú*-led government (2015–2023). Findings show that opening participatory mechanisms for immigrants did not build de facto inclusionary dynamics in Barcelona. We explained such findings on the mismatch between the political quest to deepen democracy and promote social justice through participatory mechanisms and the limitations to implement practices leading to a pluralist engagement with immigrants.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The deliberative democracy and governance literature defines mechanisms of citizen participation at the local level (e.g., citizen assemblies, citizen juries, participatory budgeting (PB), among others) as institutionalized and public forms of participation involving ordinary citizens in the local decision-making of issues affecting their neighborhoods, towns, and cities (Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Fung & Wright, 2001). A fundamental challenge in these mechanisms is to remove obstacles preventing marginalized groups in the political system from participating (Ianello et al., 2019). To make truly inclusive mechanisms, their design and implementation must identify, engage and provide voice to marginalized citizens (e.g., ethnic and racial minorities, the urban poor) (Fung, 2015; also Hayduk et al., 2017; Su, 2017). Key actors (i.e., local governments) sensitive to a greater involvement of disenfranchised citizens in local affairs are crucial to achieving inclusion (Blanco, 2015).

Immigrants, as a social group holding a marginal position in the receiving society's political system, are a target of inclusion in participatory mechanisms (Moutselos & Schönwälder, 2022). As they take residency –and not formal citizenship or legal status—as the criterion for participating, the mechanisms become an alternative to voting rights (Pin, 2020). Nevertheless, the literature has not sufficiently studied the drivers leading to the effective inclusion of migrants, as a marginalized group, into these mechanisms.

Our article proposes a theoretical model that aims to identify and discuss the conditions under which participatory mechanisms at the local level are conducive to the effective inclusion of immigrants into them. We argue that participatory mechanisms promote effective inclusion when their design and implementation engage with immigrants as a marginalized group. Such engagement needs a favorable institutional framework—regulating citizen participation—and favorable local political leadership to involve immigrants in local affairs. Conversely, not engaging with immigrants would not lead to effective inclusion even under favorable institutional and political conditions.

Our theoretical model builds on institutional, political and organizational dimensions that elucidate when inclusion happens in participatory mechanisms. By doing so, we treat the three dimensions as interrelated and necessary ones. The crucial design and implementation of these spaces under the organizational dimension is informed by the surrounding institutional and political conditions. We apply our theoretical model to the incorporation of immigrants into Neighborhood Council Meetings (NCM, *Consells de Barri*, in Catalan) in Barcelona. Neighborhood Council Meetings are a mechanism of citizen participation that the local government has bolstered since 2015. This is when Ms. Ada Colau became mayor on a radical-left political platform named *Barcelona en Comú* (BeC). The government she led made an explicit political and policy focus on citizen participation and immigrants' inclusion.

We expected NCMs' design and implementation to engage immigrants as a marginalized group given favorable institutional and political conditions in Barcelona. Nonetheless, we found that opening participatory mechanisms to immigrants has not translated into de facto inclusion. We identified that despite the formal openness, implementation challenges in the NCMs' organizational dimension hampered developing a pluralist engagement that recognized immigrants' practical obstacles to participation. Thus, an unwitting monist approach prevailed, which did not consider immigrants' unequal social position when accessing political institutions. Further, the Barcelona government incorrectly assumed that promoting participation as a right for everyone and designing an explicitly welcoming mechanism would automatically result in immigrants' effective inclusion, especially when compared to previous governments.

Our theoretical contribution and empirical application explicitly bring together dimensions not necessarily studied simultaneously in the deliberative democracy and governance literature, especially regarding immigrants' inclusion. Ianello et al. (2019) claim that scholars need to learn more about de facto inclusion in these mechanisms beyond normative premises. Concretely, we address the need for studies on the participatory preferences chosen in the mechanisms' design and the implications that such design has on the inclusion of marginalized citizens (as claimed by Abbott & Touchton, 2022). This is particularly relevant for immigrants as research has so far mainly centered on their lived experiences in these mechanisms to assess participation (Pape & Lim, 2019; Pin, 2020). Such an approach has not sufficiently studied policy design implications on migrants' participation. Moreover, applying our model also connects the design and implementation to surrounding political and institutional dimensions. Although the political element (e.g., the implications of local political leadership on participation) is present in research on the urban poor (Ganuza & Francés, 2012; Mazeaud & Nonjon, 2020); its implications on immigrants' inclusion are not explicitly studied. The same applies to the institutional dimension regulating citizen participation locally (Font & Navarro, 2013; Royo et al., 2011). When looking at immigrants, it has not sufficiently studied the administrative scope cities have to develop participatory mechanisms that include marginalized citizens. Our paper then expands our understanding of the terms, extent, and environment where marginalized citizens, such as migrants, are included in participatory mechanisms.

Next, we develop our theoretical model. We then apply it to NCMs in Barcelona. Finally, we discuss our findings considering our model and conclude by reasserting our contribution and suggesting further research.

2 | A THEORETICAL MODEL TO IDENTIFY THE EFFECTIVE INCLUSION OF IMMIGRANTS LOCALLY

Following the deliberative democracy and governance literature, we develop a theoretical model on immigrants' inclusion in participatory mechanisms locally. We first define our dependent variable: the inclusion of marginalized groups, in our case, immigrants. From here, we identify the crucial organizational condition where the inclusion of immigrants, as a marginalized group, should de facto occur. We then discuss the relevance of such a condition in connection with favorable institutional and political context for inclusion. We then operationalize those conditions in a three-dimensional model.

2.1 | Defining inclusion in participatory mechanisms

A fundamental question in the literature is how inclusive participatory mechanisms are for all citizens (Fung, 2015; Yang & Pandey, 2011). Research identifies two crucial challenges to participation: including as many citizens as possible and having a large diversity of opinions (Dryzeck, 2007; also Arnstein, 1969). Such challenges speak about reaching inclusion as a goal descriptively and substantively. While including as many citizens as possible implies assessing whether those normally excluded from decision-making are present (Ansell et al., 2021; Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2020); having a large diversity of opinions requires looking into the structures and processes facilitating or hindering substantive participation (Abbott & Touchton, 2022; Muradova, 2021; Nabatchi et al., 2012; Wampler, 2015).

Including marginalized groups, such as migrants, in participatory mechanisms requires identifying social inequalities that hinder participation (Miller et al., 2019). This is to empower citizens, especially the worst-off ones, through mechanisms that recognize social pluralism (Bobbio, 2019). If not done, participatory mechanisms may become processes solely aimed at legitimizing efficient policy-making without considering certain citizens' unequal access to political institutions (Blanco, 2015). Our interest in immigrants as subjects of inclusion is shared with the literature on their political participation at the local level. However, and different from this literature, we consider incorporation as occurring beyond immigrant-exclusive electoral (e.g., ethnic/migrant candidates) (Cordero et al., 2021; Janssen et al., 2021), consultative (e.g., municipal migration councils) (Schiller et al., 2020; Takle, 2015) or associational politics (e.g., grassroots organizations) (Castañeda, 2020; Nicholls & Uitermark, 2017; Pilati & Morales, 2016). We suggest then defining *effective inclusion* as occurring when all citizens, especially those traditionally marginalized from the political system, such as migrants, are present in participatory mechanisms and can substantively participate in the participatory dynamics occurring within them.

2.2 | Identifying conditions to inclusion

Policy design and implementation of participatory mechanisms, grouped under an *organizational dimension*, has received significant attention when assessing citizens' participation (Ianello et al., 2019). Bobbio (2019) claims that policy-makers need to make choices regarding the purpose of participation and the topics they address. Design choices entail looking into the methods to select participants, the way discussions and decisions develop, and the objectives of the decisions taken in overall policy-making (Fung & Wright, 2001). When looking at marginalized citizens, Fox (2015) points to the selection of participants as the most relevant element in boosting their incorporation through evaluating 25 mechanisms globally. This point entails introducing incentives for marginalized citizens' participation (e.g., making recruitment strategies for specific groups) (Wampler, 2015) to promote pluralist societal representation. Moreover, Collins (2021) empirically shows how marginalized citizens' attitudes toward participation within these mechanisms are influenced by internal participatory dynamics. When shaping public policies, the way discussions occur is crucial to increasing marginalized citizens' voices (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014). Scholars also acknowledge that failing to implement these organizational elements may result in citizen frustration as they perceive local governments as being distant from their concerns (Bherer et al., 2016; Fernández-Martínez, et al., 2020).

The nascent literature on immigrants' incorporation into participatory mechanisms as ordinary citizens has studied the organizational dimension from an implementation perspective rather than from its design. It mainly focuses on migrants' experiences in PB experiments in North American cities (Su, 2017). Such research provides important insights. For instance, on New York PBs, Hayduk et al. (2017) suggest that language barriers, logistics, and fear of declaring immigration status shape immigrants' experiences. Pape and Lim (2019) find that Chicago PBs did not engage with marginalized citizens (i.e., socio-economically excluded racial and ethnic minorities) signaling problems reaching them. Despite these challenges, de Graauw (2021) shows that activist city officials contributed to engaging undocumented migrants within PBs in New York and San Francisco. Beyond PB, urban planning scholars have examined minorities' participation in neighborhood and city-level planning boards in the US (Allen & Slotterback, 2021; Hum, 2010; Meléndez & Parker, 2019). These studies indicate that socioeconomic

positioning poses challenges to racial minorities' engagement in low-income neighborhoods. One of the few articles focusing on European cities, Sacco (2011) examines Brussels-based District Contracts - a participatory planning tool for deprived neighborhoods. She shows that immigrant leaders in neighborhoods with high immigration did not participate enough due to local authorities' de facto exclusionary practices.

The literature also signals the surrounding *political environment* as a crucial condition for framing the mechanisms' design and implementation. Paying close attention to the politics of a specific locality (Kearns, 1995) is crucial to explain why participatory mechanisms are the chosen democratic innovation (Ianello et al., 2019). By looking at who governs and what they decide, researchers can uncover political elements related to the direction regarding the (non-) inclusion of marginalized citizens in a mechanism (Juarez & Brown, 2008).

Political leadership is highly relevant when considering marginalized citizens' inclusion, as it can determine whether to prioritize redistribution or management. The initial focus on poverty alleviation and income redistribution of pioneering mechanisms in Brazilian cities in the 1980s was connected to progressive political leadership (Mazeaud & Nonjon, 2020). When looking at research on migrants' participation in participatory mechanisms, it *implicitly* assumes that their participation mainly occurs in contexts where progressive politics are present (e.g., New York, San Francisco, Chicago) (de Graauw, 2021; Hayduk et al., 2017). Even in contexts where technocratic premises guide these mechanisms, as in the case of city planning boards, facilitators and participants are assumed to be linked to ideas defending social justice in their communities (Meléndez & Parker, 2019 also in the USA). Similarly, but in their case explicitly, scholars who study local migration policy making have recognized the impact of local politics (i.e., who is in power) on city policies (Bazurli, 2019; Michon & Vermeulen, 2013; Schiller et al., 2020).

A third and final element identified in the literature is related to the *institutional dimension*. It refers to "the pre-existing conditions within which citizen participation is expected to take place" (Ianello et al., 2019, p. 26). Not necessarily the most visible dimension in the literature, provisions establishing the capacity of local governments, as public entities, to promote participation is central for citizens (Royo et al., 2011). In fact, some authors highlight that understanding how citizen participation is regulated in a multilevel system helps to explain democratic innovations' diffusion locally (Fraenkel-Haeberle et al., 2015). This is because the institutional framework provides the scope to the local political leadership to promote participatory mechanisms and the inclusion of marginalized citizens in them (Wampler, 2015).

2.3 | Operationalizing the conditions to inclusion

In the abovementioned literature overview, we identified conditions for inclusion grouped under three dimensions. To operationalize our model, we argue that for participatory mechanisms to promote effective inclusion, their design and implementation needs to engage with migrants as a marginalized group in the organizational dimension. Based on this argument, we follow a sequential logic where the institutional and political dimensions offer the environment informing the mechanisms' design and implementation. We then zoom in on the organizational dimension where immigrants should de facto participate. The combination of the three abovementioned dimensions contributes altogether to the effective inclusion of immigrants as defined at the beginning of this section (see Figure 1 below).

- (1) The institutional dimension refers to national/regional laws and regulations defining local governments' role in citizen participation. We expect the effective inclusion of immigrants

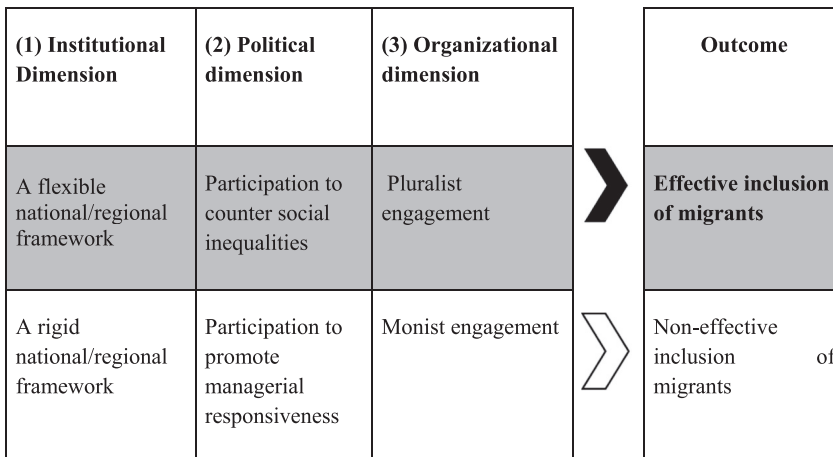


FIGURE 1 Our three-dimensional theoretical model. *Source:* Own elaboration.

to occur under an institutional framework allowing local governments to decide the scope of citizen participation locally. Conversely, a fixed framework limiting such scope may affect local governments' ability to propose participatory infrastructures that de facto include immigrants.

- (2) The political dimension refers to the local political leadership constructing participation to either rectify *social inequalities* and promote social justice or advance managerial responsiveness and *efficiency* in the policy-making process (Miller et al., 2019). Fung (2015) asserts that political actors advancing participatory mechanisms will directly lead to one or another framing. So, political leadership within the local government is crucial to shaping the construction of participation in one way or another (Abbott & Touchton, 2022). Applied to our study, we expect that for mechanisms to promote the effective inclusion of migrants, they need local governments to frame immigrants' participation as a way to counter intrinsically present social inequalities before the majority population.
- (3) The organizational dimension refers to the representation criteria and participatory dynamics derived from the mechanisms' participatory design (Ianello et al., 2019). By addressing organizational conditions, we can identify how the mechanisms' design affects internal participatory dynamics. When the design and implementation of participatory mechanisms recognize social pluralism, marginalized groups can substantively participate (as defended by Ganuza & Francés, 2012). Conversely, introducing mechanisms without recognizing social pluralism results in a homogenizing and monist engagement with citizens as it ignores potential obstacles to the participation of marginalized groups. In our study, we expect participatory mechanisms to promote pluralist engagement when immigrants, as part of the diverse representation of society, are present.

3 | CASE-SELECTION AND METHODOLOGY

Our case selection follows the premises of the crucial case (Gerring, 2007). A crucial case is defined as one that illustrates a concept or body of theory. Crucial cases have been defended as the most suitable for single-case analyses. This is because “the more a theory attains the status of a causal law, the easier it will be to confirm or disconfirm with a single case” (Gerring, 2007,

p. 235). Barcelona is a crucial case where the effective inclusion of immigrants into participatory mechanisms was likely to occur given favorable institutional and political conditions around their design and implementation. We found, however, that such a situation did not necessarily occur.

Over the studied period (2015–2022), the radical-left BeC-led local government pledged to include all residents, including immigrants, in participatory mechanisms (Blanco et al., 2020). Such commitment translated into policy actions encouraging participation at the neighborhood and district levels in local decision making (Ibid.). Illustrative of such commitment was the local government's leadership of the international "New Municipalist" movement "promoting urban solidarity and deliberative democracy in their fight against neoliberal austerity urbanism" (Thompson, 2021, p. 317).

Barcelona has exhibited innovative and welcoming local policy frameworks specifically for immigrants since the 1990s (Bazurli, 2019; Triviño-Salazar, 2023). The BeC-led government and its predecessors maintained a similar approach over time, including the center-left Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC) (1978–2011) and the center-right Catalan nationalist *Convergència i Unió* (2011–2015). The approach consolidated as the city's foreign-born residents rapidly increased from 3% in 1996 to 29% in 2022, mostly from South America, China, Morocco, and Pakistan (Barcelona City Council, 2022). To represent immigrants' interest in local policy-making, the city created in 1998 the Barcelona Municipal Council for Immigration (CMIB, in Catalan). Still ongoing, it is a sectorial non-binding municipal board aimed at consulting immigrant leaders from organized interests on diversity-related policy-making. While this structure is relevant as immigrants face restrictive access to electoral and parliamentary politics in Spain,¹ its non-binding nature and solely immigrant-oriented objectives do not address mainstream issues. Conversely, NCMs aim at the population in general while covering daily neighborhood concerns affecting all residents, irrespective of origin or nationality.

As mentioned above, we conducted an in-depth study of immigrants' inclusion in NCMs. They represent the most significant formal arena for neighbors' participation. The local government considers NCMs to be the "body for community strengthening and citizen participation in matters affecting the territory" (Municipal Council Agreement of December 22, 2017, art.60). Neighbors, individually or through associations, can discuss and decide on matters related to their neighborhood. When BeC cameo power, the 2017 Regulation for Citizen Participation made NCMs compulsory. They must take place twice a year in each of the 73 neighborhoods comprising the 10 Barcelona districts (at least 146 NCMs are held yearly). We have looked into the design of NCMs in four neighborhoods, namely El Raval, Barri Gòtic, Sant Pere i Santa Caterina and Barceloneta, located within the Ciutat Vella District. This district exhibits the highest number of foreign-born residents in the city (51% in 2022), a central location where non-EU communities live (e.g., *El Raval* is home to Spain's largest Pakistani community), and the lowest per capita income (€14,865 or 67% of the 2019 average) (Barcelona City Council, 2022). The findings are analyzed on an aggregate level regardless of the NCM, as we seek patterns across the three dimensions.

3.1 | Data collection and analysis

Our study covers the period 2015–2022, which includes BeC's years in power, except for 2023. To contextualize immigrants' inclusion in Barcelona's NCMs, we take a historical approach dating back to the 1980s when the city started to build the so-called "Barcelona Model" of

citizen participation (Blanco, 2015). As for data collection, we have followed a multi-method strategy triangulating information from desk research, participant observation and interviews. Research documents such as strategic plans, local ordinances, royal decrees, council decisions, and reports related to participatory mechanisms have been analyzed. Regarding participant observation, we attended eight NCMs in the above-mentioned four neighborhoods in November 2019 and between September and November 2022. Participant observation was complemented by watching recordings of 16 NCMs held online or hybrid between January 2021 and July 2022 (due to the Covid-19 pandemic). Our analysis examined these videos to determine immigrants' role as participants in them. As Catalan and Spanish native speakers, we distinguished such participants through language features (e.g., accent/fluency). Our article draws on interview materials from two projects (Triviño-Salazar, 2021, 2023) on local reception and integration governance in Barcelona, as well as interviews with Barcelona City Council civil servants who design and implement NCMs.

We analyzed all the collected material using a thematic approach. Thematic analysis is defined as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). We assumed an abductive approach in our analysis where we organized findings around the three dimensions previously discussed: institutional, political, and organizational. The following section applies our model to study immigrants' inclusion in NCMs in the Ciutat Vella District.

4 | APPLYING THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL THEORETICAL MODEL TO BARCELONA

From studying the NCMs in Ciutat Vella District in Barcelona, the effective inclusion of immigrants clashes with a palpable reality: a remarkably low immigrant presence in them, especially Third Country Nationals (TCNs). A situation like this is particularly striking given that non-EU citizens have limited voting rights. Despite 52% of Ciutat Vella District residents being foreign born, mostly TCNs, the number of immigrants at NCMs is low. Such observation is confirmed by the interventions observed,² the interviews, and the statistical data obtained. In fact, city officials (interviews 02; 03) gave us access to internal official data on participation in NCMs, which statistically confirms our observations. Table 1 below³ summarizes the results:

This low immigrant participation rate is further confirmed by the 2019 *Assessment Report on the Democràcia Activa Program*, which states that for NCMs “the proportion of people of diverse

TABLE 1 Participation in NCMs in 2018 (latest full year before the pandemic).

Born in	Catalonia	Rest of Spain	EU	Third country
NCM Raval	81%	10%	5%	4%
NCM Gotic	68%	11%	5%	6%
NCM Rivera Sta Caterina	56%	19%	25%	0%
NCM Barceloneta	79%	11%	5%	5%
Total	74%	11%	11%	3.75%

Abbreviation: NCMs, Neighborhood Council Meetings.

Source: Own elaboration with internal official data from the Barcelona City Council (2019).

cultural origin is far from representing the diversity present in the city... On average, the percentage of people of diverse cultural origin is 5.9% of the people participating. This is a remarkably low figure, given that the average of foreign people in Barcelona is almost 20%". The *Report* also analyzes globally all the different participation channels. The general results point in the same direction: "in 42% of all participation channels, people or entities representing the diversity of origins and cultures have not participated. To this we must add the figure of 17% of processes in which the policy official has considered that there are no entities representing the diversity of that territory. In 8% of the cases, no information was provided" (p.32). The report ends by stating that "these data show the need to adopt strategies aimed at encouraging participation from an intercultural perspective" (p.61).

Applying the theoretical model to NCMs in the Ciutat Vella District shows that the institutional and political dimensions, especially during the BeC-led local government, offer some openness to immigrants. However, when looking at the organizational dimension, challenges in NCMs' implementation hampered their effective inclusion.

4.1 | The institutional dimension

The institutional dimension informing NCMs creation shows a flexible framework built upon administrative decentralization. This provides regions and cities with ample leeway to decide on specific participatory mechanisms. In this context, local political leadership is relevant to developing such mechanisms. The 1978 Spanish Constitution guarantees citizens' right to participate in public affairs (article 7). However, national legislation on local self-government only establishes general principles in this matter (Font & Navarro, 2013). To date, the most significant legal piece guiding local participatory mechanisms is Law 57/2003 on Measures for Local Government Modernization. According to this Law, local governments must regulate procedures and bodies to facilitate the effective participation of citizens in local public affairs (article 70 bis, epigraph 3). This is especially relevant to citizen participation as regional and local authorities formulate and implement socio-economic policies. Due to these competences, regions and cities play a significant role in migrants' integration (Triviño-Salazar, 2023).

Participatory mechanisms emerged in Spain in the wake of the participatory turn in Southern Europe in the 21st century (Font et al., 2014). Prior to that, citizen participation relied on neighborhood and citizens' associations represented on sectoral or neighborhood advisory councils belonging to the 'urban planning' sphere (Blakeley, 2010). Since the early 2000s, Spanish municipalities have promoted multiple participatory mechanisms like the citizens' jury and NCMs. As an example, Spain became the European country where PB grew the most after being imported from South America in the first decade of the 2000s. By opening new channels of citizen participation, local governments have built democratic governance models for meeting citizens' social needs (Bherer et al., 2016).

The decentralization framework in Spain, including specific local powers and competencies, have left an unequal participatory scenario away from a common model (Font & Navarro, 2013).⁴ Although some Spanish cities have formalized multiple mechanisms over time, others have not, especially smaller ones. The governing political leadership has significant flexibility as municipalities can decide what participatory policy to implement and how. When looking at the origins of participatory mechanisms such as PB in Spain at the beginning of the 2000s, leftwing-led local governments initiated them. Eventually, rightwing governments also promoted them by sharing a common agenda with leftwing ones: "modernizing the state by

improving relations between the governing and governed” (Ganuza & Francés, 2012). Since 2010, researchers observed a decline in these activities (Ibid), until radical leftwing governments were elected in several Spanish cities, including Barcelona, in 2015.

4.2 | The political dimension

Barcelona’s framing of participatory mechanisms has been characterized by an inherent tension between a managerial model that promotes engaging citizens with public administration and another one that seeks to deepen participation to counter social inequalities. Under the Mayor Colau government, the latter social framing became more central than in the previous conservative CiU-led government.

The current shape of participatory mechanisms did not start until the early 2000s under the center-left Socialist local government. Until then, and boosted by the 1992 Olympic Games, the local government had attempted to build an inclusive and consensus-based model of participation in decision-making and service provision coined the “Barcelona Model” (Blanco, 2015). Several government channels were used to integrate neighborhood associations and local CSOs (mainly Sectoral Councils, and citizen initiatives) (Blakeley, 2010). Including community leaders in the participatory model was based on the city’s neighborhood and associational movements (Catañeda, 2020). Such a movement had traditionally been quite strong in the quest for democracy during the dictatorship and afterward, in the expansion of social services in a social inclusion framework (Blanco, 2015). In this context, and to promote economic growth and social cohesion, the Barcelona government decentralized local government decision-making (Eizaguirre et al., 2017).

With the 2008 financial crisis and the election of the conservative CiU-led local government of, this dynamism was lost as citizen participation was not prioritized. In fact, after such experiences at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, academic and local social activists were critical of the model. They claimed it promoted “urban development based on collaboration between the public and private sectors” while emptying the power of participatory mechanisms (Blanco et al., 2020).

As part of managerial participatory framing, the 2002 Regulation of Citizen Participation established new mechanisms, such as public audiences (Barcelona City Council, 2002) that reinforced local administrative decentralization. As part of the Barcelona Charter of Rights and Duties approved in 2010, these ideas were further developed, emphasizing citizen participation locally. The city introduced NCMs in 2009 as a crucial mechanism in the relationship between neighbors and local government. However, their focus was not explicit on countering inequalities and looking for social justice. Regarding migrants’ participation, the participatory framework before the BeC-led government did not explicitly link their presence to these mechanisms. Until then, organized immigrants’ interests in Barcelona were promoted through pro-immigrant and immigrant-based organizations (Castañeda, 2020) and the 1998-created CMIB mentioned above.⁵

In 2015, the electoral victory of BeC sparked a radical shift in the agenda, with a strong focus on citizen participation, social inclusion and local (neighborhood) empowerment (Interview 01). Barcelona en Comú was formed by grassroot organizations, neighborhood leaders, and radical left political parties. In fact, Mayor Colau was previously a known housing activist leader in the popular Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (*Plataforma d’Afectats per la Hipoteca*). BeC’s supporters took part in the 2011 *Indignados* Movement, born because of the

financial crisis, high unemployment, corruption, and an overwhelming sense of lack of political legitimacy of the institutions (Blanco et al., 2020; Eizaguirre et al., 2017). The Movement renewed the interest in political participation as participatory mechanisms based on horizontal and deliberative processes (Eizaguirre, et al., 2017).

The political goal of placing citizen participation at the core of the BeC's agenda materialized in the 2017 Regulation of Citizen Participation and its 2022 updated version. The overall political framing was implicitly based on a social justice framing (drawing on Eizaguirre et al., 2017). The new local Regulation outlines the channels of participation and resources necessary to empower citizens through influence on local policy decisions. Such framework divided citizen participation into four areas: (1) citizen initiatives; (2) participation bodies (i.e., City Council, the District Councils, the District Audiences, the NCMs and the Sectoral Council Meetings); (3) proposals on specific municipal actions and (4) citizen consultation. These areas were complemented by the online participatory platform *Decidim.Barcelona* (Peña-López, 2019). The idea was to place social inclusion, and the reconstruction of basic social rights at the center of public action priorities (Blanco et al., 2020). Priorities included housing and environmentally sustainable agendas, public leadership in the urban economy, and containing the influence of the private sector on economic governance.

Under BeC's political leadership, individual immigrants were central to the new democratic governance model. Such relevance was in line with Mayor Colau's approach to making immigrants' welcome and integration policies central to the city's contribution to global social justice and solidarity Triviño-Salazar, 2023). Framing participation through an immigrant lens occurred in a moment where the local government raised its voice internationally in favor of a greater role of cities in refugee reception (Ibid).

Barcelona is renowned for its policy actions to include immigrants in governance structures over the last 3 decades (Bazurli, 2019). The BeC-led government deepened such an approach by placing newcomers at the center of participatory mechanisms and NCMs in particular (Interview 01). This is the case with the 2018 "Government measures to promote the participation of people from diverse origins and cultural contexts in the participation channels." For the first time, a Barcelona local government created a document to operationalize the Regulation of Citizen Participation through an immigrant lens. It formally linked immigrants' participation to the European Charter for Safeguarding Human Rights in the City. Similarly, the Barcelona Immigration Plan 2018–2021 emphasized the importance of immigrants' participation at the local level, and more specifically in neighborhoods. It admitted that "diversity is still very absent in public spaces, including the civil service, political representation and participation in city councils" (p.21).

4.3 | The organizational dimension

When looking at the organizational dimension, it is noted a transition between the previous conservative and the BeC-led government regarding the construction of a formally pluralist approach to immigrants' inclusion. However, translating pluralism into NCMs' de facto implementation proved challenging, especially regarding internal dynamics. To some extent, we identified an unwitting trend toward monist engagement.

Previously, the local conservative government discussed including immigrant voices in NCMs. The political intention, however, did not translate into systematic and compulsory policy efforts aimed at fostering participation, especially among immigrants. The 2012–2015

Immigration Plan states that “The city will foster a participation policy aimed at increasing migrants’ participation, always conceived within the framework of mainstream participation channels open to all Barcelona citizens” (Barcelona City Council, 2012, p. 40). As pointed out by Ortega: “up until the arrival of [mayor] Ada Colau and BeC in 2015, participation was basically articulated through a participatory process every four years around the City’s Action Plan... The participatory process around the Action Plan became active at the convenience of the government in power” (2022: 34).

BeC’s arrival in 2015 represented a quantum leap in local policy-making in Barcelona as it formally placed pluralism in decision-making processes involving citizens at the core of local governance structures. Neighborhood Council Meeting design and immigrant presence were formally linked in the 2017 Regulation for Citizen Participation, updated in 2022, and in 2018 Government Measure. A working group of diversity experts, civic leaders, and municipal officials developed the Measure in 2016. The group created guidelines to incorporate immigrants substantively into the city’s citizen participation strategy. Additionally, the new procedure rules were developed in the 2017 Regulation for Citizen Participation, updated in 2022. The 2022 Regulation update not only acknowledged the fact that the city was “diverse and plural” as expressed in the 2017 Regulation, but explicitly stated that the “profiles of people to be involved in participatory mechanisms must, necessarily be, as plural and diverse as possible...The Assessment Commission must ensure that mechanisms aimed at including the highest possible diverse and plural participants are put in place” (article 22.3).

Within this framework, the City published the *Practical Guidelines for Citizen Participation in Barcelona* in 2019 aimed at “strongly encouraging citizens to have a greater influence on political decisions.” The guide provided - and still provides - an overview of the different structures and mechanisms currently available for citizens, including NCMs.

Both the 2019 Guidelines and the 2017 and 2022 Regulations insist on two core ideas crucial to the current participatory processes in Barcelona: the need to (1) incorporate diversity of origins and (2) a plurality of voices into all policy-making processes and structures. As defined in the *Barcelona City Handbook on Evaluation and Monitoring of the Active Democracy Program*,⁶ diversity and plurality include four axes.

- Age: ensuring that all ages are represented
- Sex: striking a gender balance.
- Cultural origin: incorporating immigrants’ voices.
- Functional diversity: including people with different impairments.

We have identified two concrete strategies aimed at applying diversity and plurality to immigrants’ inclusion in participatory mechanisms: (a) Multilingual communication to reach migrants and (b) interaction with immigrant associations.

For the first strategy, we observed and confirmed during our interviews that informative posters were printed in the main immigrant languages and placed in all city buildings within the neighborhoods (interviews 01, 02, 03). These posters announce the date, location, and agenda of the upcoming NCMs. Interviews (02,03) with two senior officials within the Department of Citizen Participation, stated that the goal is to “reach the highest number of residents of diverse origin, including migrants, given that more than half of the population in Ciutat Vella District is of foreign origin. For this reason, we have included the main languages of our residents in all posters”. These languages include Arabic, Bengali, Tagalog and Urdu,

which are the main languages of the District residents (see Figures 2 and 3 below). Interviews also confirmed that the multilingual policy was initiated in 2015, once the BeC came to power.

The observations made within NCMs plus the document analysis show, however, that the multilingual strategy is only observed on printed posters. There are no mechanisms within NCMs incorporating those languages. This is further confirmed by interviewees 02 and 03. Documents are mainly in Catalan and Spanish (on the website) and mainly in Catalan within NCMs as explained below. One of the questions arising from this observation is the effectiveness of this multilingual policy.

The second strategy observed is the interaction with immigrant associations. All our interviewees confirmed that city policy officials held regular contacts with the main immigrant associations in the Ciutat Vella District. In fact, interviewee 01 mentioned how the City Councilor responsible for the Ciutat Vella District has continuously organized diversity-related training sessions for District workers so they created synergies with immigrant associations' leaders within the District. The ultimate goal was to mobilize migrants and encourage them to participate in the local citizen participation structures such as the NCMs. The success of such mobilization seems to be partial and limited in time as in some sessions individuals of immigrant background were present while in others they were not. For instance, a handful of participants with immigrant backgrounds spoke during sessions held in *El Raval* neighborhood (sessions held on February 21 and June 3, 2021). In line with the multilingual and interaction strategies, interviewee 01 mentioned that city officials still need to monitor how effective these are and evaluate their impact.



FIGURE 2 Multilingual poster announcing NCM for neighborhoods in the Ciutat Vella District. NCM, Neighborhood Council Meeting. Source: Ciutat Vella District official Facebook account.



FIGURE 3 Multilingual poster announcing NCM in El Raval. NCM, Neighborhood Council Meeting. Source: El Periódico (December 11, 2016).

Despite the abovementioned efforts under the two strategies identified, a prevalent problem referred to by policy officials themselves is policy compartmentalization: immigrant issues are managed by the City Department of Immigration, Interculturality and Diversity whereas citizen participation issues fall under the Department of Citizen Participation. As confirmed by senior officials themselves, there is the need for more robust transversal cooperation and interaction between the different policy departments. The contacts with immigrant associations are mainly developed by policy officials within the Department of Immigration, Interculturality and Diversity. Therefore, participation in NCMs is not handled by them. Our interviewees confirmed that a more effective participation policy requires cooperation between the two departments. This is also one of the main conclusions of the 2019 Assessment Report. This states that “a more transversal and innovative approach is needed to guarantee the quality of [participatory] processes”.⁷

As to the NCM's internal dynamics, they are organized in a formal structure comprising three main blocks: (a) Proposals suggested by the city, (b) Previous proposals suggested by the residents and discussed in a previous NCM and (c) New proposals suggested by the residents. Our observations show NCMs' discussions to be quite technical and bureaucratic, pushing away pluralist engagement with all residents, including migrants. For instance, in a round of meetings we attended, the main discussion was around defining the features of the neighborhood plan to regulate the implementation of certain business and social activities on the territory. The language used was a mixture of legal and urban planning provisions. The room lay-out contributed to the sense of formality as attendees usually sat down in class-room-like configuration with the presiding table with the local councilor and other city officials in front.

Within the NCM meetings and following the language issue initiated above, we observed that all written documentation (PowerPoint presentations by city officials, informative brochures, among others) is in Catalan and the debates are conducted primarily in Catalan. Spanish is employed when an audience member uses it and city officials reply in Spanish. Despite the multilingual printed posters used as an external communication strategy, the internal process is

mainly monolingual (in Catalan). This fact is partially explained by the audience composition: it is made up of mainly senior, retired local residents, most of whom were born in Barcelona (as indicated by the internal statistics sent to us by interviewees 02 and 03), probably born and raised in that same neighborhood. This may be one of the reasons behind the overwhelming oral use of Catalan.

As we observed during the meetings, we also noticed the close relationship between city officials and attendees. Often, the City Councilor in charge of conducting the debates gave the floor to the attendees by using their name, evidence of close acquaintance. When asked about this fact, interviewees 02 and 03 confirmed that the City Councilor already knew the names of local residents who regularly attended NCMs.

Finally, throughout our interviews and document analysis, we confirmed the lack of tools to evaluate NCM meetings in terms of immigrants' inclusion in them. The only report we could find was the above-mentioned 2019 Assessment Report; however, it was a global assessment not focused solely on immigrants. Along these lines, a city official interviewed lamented the lack of official data to quantify and qualify the experiences of residents of foreign origin (not) attending NCMs. According to this interviewee, having such a tool could improve access to these individuals ([Interview 01](#)).

5 | DISCUSSING OUR RESULTS IN LIGHT OF OUR THEORETICAL MODEL

Applying our theoretical model to NCMs in Barcelona shows that building participatory infrastructures with immigrants in mind does not necessarily translate into effective inclusion. Compared to what previously existed, a positive change in the framework guiding immigrants' inclusion was noted under Mayor Ada Colau's government (i.e., the political dimension). Moreover, her government interpreted expansively the institutional context regulating the role of Spanish cities in citizen participation and immigrants' inclusion (i.e., the institutional dimension). Still, the centrality of the organizational dimension for inclusion in our model empirically shows a policy design and implementation gap despite the above-mentioned favorable political and institutional conditions. It is precisely here where we would like to concentrate our discussion.

The central element distilled from applying the model is the prevailing tension between a formally pluralist approach in the NCM design and practices that contest it. According to Bussu and Bartels (2014) on Italian cities, participatory mechanisms must invite all those affected by a given issue to reach fair decisions. However, if only "the usual suspects" are always present, participation is not necessarily inclusive. Such a situation speaks to the risk of increasing inequality as participatory mechanisms do not include those marginalized (Ganuza & Francés, 2012). As migration scholars discuss, this is not a situation unique to participatory mechanisms but also organizations portrayed as traditional immigrants' allies such as immigrant-based organizations (see Michon & Vermeulen, 2013) and left-wing political parties (Dacyngier, 2013; Janssen et al., 2021). Failing to promote a pluralist view in these organizations, as in participatory mechanisms, may result in further participatory frustration among immigrants as an unintended monist engagement persists. Formally speaking, NCMs, under the BeC-led government, addressed immigrants' inclusion; however, their practice did not necessarily accompany it. Important challenges prevented immigrant voices from being de facto incorporated, including lack of coordination among key municipal units, lack of a multilingual

communication strategy geared toward substantive participation, and excessive formality in meetings. Moreover, the lack of tools for policy evaluation affected the institutional self-criticism necessary to make these spaces truly inclusive.

We also identified that implementing a pluralist engagement was complicated by not sufficiently explaining why immigrants should participate in NCMs. In Barcelona, speaking of their inclusion in the context of participatory mechanisms seemed to formally legitimize a progressive agenda of deepening democracy and advancing social justice. This approach did not necessarily convey the benefits of participating to immigrants in high migration neighborhoods as the ones studied. Local authorities advocating for a welcoming approach expected NCMs to become an active space for newcomers. However, such inclusionary potential required a clear message around and inside these mechanisms about the relevance of immigrants' participation. The lack of a clear message had disenfranchising effects as immigrants may not have felt fully invited to participate in the discussions.

Finally, when empirically contrasting the political and institutional dimensions with our model, our results do not necessarily weaken their relevance regarding immigrants' participation in participatory mechanisms. As previously discussed, for these mechanisms to promote immigrants' inclusion they certainly need a pluralist engagement in the design and implementation. However, they also need a political leadership that uses the existing institutional framework in a way that shapes immigrants' participation to counter their unequal social position. The other way around would entail local governments not prioritizing the social inequality that immigrants face in local agendas. As research on local migration policy-making indicates, failing to prioritize inequality adversely affects migrants' inclusion (Ambrosini, 2013, anonymous reference).

In Barcelona, migrants' participation ranked high on the BeC-led local government's agenda. Migrants were viewed as ordinary citizens, as neighbors, whose access to local decision-making needed to be expanded through these mechanisms within a framing that tackled their social inequality. During the first years of Mayor Colau's Administration, the city walked the extra mile in framing participation as a political and social right for immigrants. However, such rights-based framing did not travel well to NCMs' implementation in the organizational dimension. The main issue was not the political condition *per se* but the actual practice of NCMs as a management tool for neighborhood issues. This did not seem to radically change under the BeC-led government and compared to previous ones. In other words, the high political significance of citizen participation and the particular focus on immigrant participation did not yield the expected results in the analyzed NCMs.

6 | CONCLUSION

Our article proposed a theoretical model that considered the conditions under which the effective inclusion of immigrants in participatory mechanisms occurred. We applied our model to the incorporation of immigrants into NCMs in Barcelona. Based on our model, we expected NCMs to decisively include immigrants given a design geared toward engaging marginalized citizens and framed within favorable institutional and political conditions. However, our findings did not indicate a strong trend toward effective inclusion. Applying the model revealed a mismatch between deepening democracy through participatory mechanisms and the practical limitations of implementing spaces that included immigrants. It meant not developing a pluralist engagement when inviting immigrants to participate in these mechanisms. The model

also revealed that the Barcelona government wrongly assumed that politically emphasizing citizen participation would organically result in immigrants' effective inclusion in the studied mechanisms.

Our theoretical model and its empirical application contributed to the growing research on immigrants' inclusion in participatory mechanisms in the deliberative democracy and governance literature. Through this contribution, we attempted to clarify the terms, extent, and environment where immigrants's inclusion, as marginalized citizens, occurs. While the organizational dimension addressed the terms and extent of their inclusion, the political and institutional ones addressed the environment behind it. Offering such a model is relevant to deepening our understanding of these mechanisms' capacity to promote the incorporation of marginalized citizens (following Ianello et al., 2019). Empirically, applying our model to Barcelona shows that normatively aiming for immigrants' inclusion in local governance structures does not necessarily entail more participation. Further, having a government committed to inclusion does not preclude shortcomings in participatory mechanisms' design and implementation. In other words, fostering participation as a right for everyone through these spaces does not necessarily determine immigrants' effective inclusion. Moreover, idealizing mechanisms promoted by progressive political actors, such as the BeC-led government, as the panacea for promoting pluralism may deepen participatory frustration when participants' expectations are not met (see García-Espín & Ganuza, 2017).

Cities are increasingly becoming democratic arenas where substantive participation is combined with practical considerations. Establishing the nexus between deliberative democracy and governance and immigrants' participation through our model and its empirical application is an invitation to deepen research on the implications of local participatory mechanisms in the quest for including marginalized citizens. Still, we need our model expanded to other local contexts where sizable minorities are present beyond the Barcelona case. Concretely, comparative studies among cities looking at who participates, how and the strengths and weaknesses of such mechanisms can indicate how immigrants are heard and how they exert their agency through these spaces. As our study has shown, if participatory mechanisms wish to produce inclusion, they need to comprehensively consider marginalized groups, such as immigrants, in their design and implementation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Voting is only allowed in municipal elections for EU citizens and nationals from 14 non-EU countries.
- ² For confidentiality reasons, we could not collect information on the country of origin.
- ³ 2018 Statistics are the only ones available (interviews 02 and 03). For 2019 and 2020, statistics have not been processed.
- ⁴ As opposed to other European countries such as France or the UK (Font & Navarro, 2013).
- ⁵ The CMIB was criticized for being a token and top-down consultative institution based on established organizations (Però, 2007). However, the BeC-led local government revamped it to make it inclusive of peripheral immigrant voices (Bazurli & de Graauw, 2023).
- ⁶ Available online at <https://bcnroc.ajuntament.barcelona.cat/jspui/bitstream/11703/115389/1/190517%20Manual%20d%27%C3%BA%20actualitzat.pdf>.
- ⁷ Evaluating the *Democràcia Activa Program*. 2019 Assessment Report.

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