



# Madrid City Observatory

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## The origin story

The Observatorio de Ciudad (OC) was the first permanent chamber of randomly selected citizens at the city level in Europe. Its origin story begins in the aftermath of the 15M movement, one of the biggest popular mobilizations against austerity policies in Spanish history. In May 2015, Ahora Madrid took power in the city administration, ending 24 years of rule by Spain's center-right party in the capital. The merger party was composed of a coalition of progressive actors, many from 15-M, who converged around the agenda of participatory reforms. Following the implementation of [Decide Madrid](#), an online petition platform, a diverse group of social innovators convened at the newly launched citizen participation laboratory (ParticipaLAB @ MediaLab-Prado) to develop tools or organs that could complement the observed shortcomings of the petition model<sup>1</sup>. Following a one-day pilot based on the G1000 model, energy consolidated around a “hybrid democracy” approach that would link Decide Madrid to a permanent mini-public tasked with evaluating and selecting digital proposals for referendum. On January 29, 2019, the “[Ley Orgánica](#)” instituting this body, the Observatorio de Ciudad, was approved by the Council Plenary.

## The model

### *Institutional Linkage*


The OC was institutionalized by a legal framework at the highest level of municipal law (Ley Orgánica). The Reglamento Orgánico del Observatorio de la Ciudad was approved by the Council Plenary with support from Ahora Madrid and the traditional left party (PSOE). Rather than starting from scratch, organizers revamped the existing “City Observatory,” an inactive body intended to be run by councilors and public officials.

### *Deliberative Process*

The core aim of the OC's deliberative process is to supplement the limitations of the Decide Madrid online petition system. Decide Madrid enabled citizens to upload policy proposals online, and bound proposals that accrued endorsements from at least 1% of the city population to be considered by the City Council and put on a ballot for referendum. This threshold was lowered from the initial 2% as the lower bar was only reached by two of the 26,000 submitted proposals. Additionally, the platform exhibited common symptoms of a mass participatory approach,



1. <https://archive.org/details/FutureDemocraciesLCPD/page/n77/mode/2up> p. 78.



including low levels of information, buy-in, and genuine deliberative exchange. The two laws that passed the 1% threshold ended up replicating a policy already in motion or fell outside the jurisdictional scope of the City Council.

Downstream of these difficulties, the “hybrid approach” sought to combine the benefits of mini-public deliberation—namely, considered judgment—with the mass participation enabled by an online petition system. The OC convened 49 participants selected by two-stage sortition. Their mandates were three-pronged:

1. **Filtering Decide Madrid:** Deliberate on proposals submitted by the wider public and decide which to send to city-wide referendum. Proposals most supported online were addressed and assembly members had the freedom to explore others.
2. **Agenda-setting:** Generating and passing its own proposals to send to referendum.
3. **Standing deliberating body:** Remain available for requests by Plenary, Mayor’s Office or Governing Board to deliberate and deliver reports on policy issues.

### ***How has it worked in practice?***

Following the institution of the OC, the first session was held in March 2019. 49 sortition-selected participants convened to evaluate the most popular Decide Madrid proposal at the time, “Derecho a jugar” (the right to play), laying out a package of reforms for child-friendly urban planning. Before the second session, a coalition of three right-wing parties out-seated Ahora Madrid in the City Council. A decision was made to revert the OC back to its original form (removing the deliberative component).

### **What worked well?**

Combining mass participation and mini-public deliberation While the Citizens’ Observatory is closed, the hybrid model piloted in its design no doubt lives on, and remains a useful model to be replicated in other contexts. In short, the model links together multiple forms of democratic activity in a mutually reinforcing chain:

*Online petitions (direct democracy) → deliberative mini-public (deliberative democracy) → City Council (elite deliberation) → referendum (direct democracy).*

This case therefore models a systems approach to institutionalizing citizen participation in collective decision-making. It also “excuses” one site of participation from having to be perfect: deficiencies of one can be made up elsewhere in the chain.

### ***Networking for democratic innovation***

The OC further exemplifies the benefit of networks and knowledge sharing within the deliberative wave. Initially, members of the ParticipaLab were inspired by existing models such as G1000 and the growing energy around sortition and deliberative methods in neighboring countries. During the design of the process, independent advice from newDemocracy, an Australian organization with extensive experience in deliberative mini-publics, was instrumental given the novelty of the methods in Madrid’s context ([see Carson & Mendiharat 2020](#) for reflections on political and organizational barriers to independent consulting, however). Finally, the outputs of the OC process have likewise nourished the network. The Decide Madrid software is now used by over 110+ institutions in the form of [Consul](#), and the conceptual model of “hybrid democracy” likewise stands as a replicable approach.



## **What were the challenges and what can we learn from them?**

### ***Building cross-party support in a polarized political context***

The decision to implement the OC at the highest level of municipal law was undertaken despite time costs in order to preempt reversal from other parties. In 2019, the regulation passed with support only from PSOE and Ahora Madrid. The obvious learning from this case is the importance of building cross-party support for mini-publics, and institutionalized democratic innovations more generally.

First, the effort was perceived as a “left-wing” endeavor from the beginning. This association was most likely bolstered by Ahora Madrid’s identity as a “movement party” designed to transmit the grievances of the anti-austerity movement into an institutional form. Looking beyond the Madrid case, it is critical to develop narratives for increasing deliberative engagement that resonates across the political spectrum.

Second and relatedly, party polarization in Madrid was exacerbated by a lack of previous experience with deliberative experimentation on both sides. For example, the right-wing coalition cited as justification the suite of other modes of citizen engagement, included Decide Madrid and bottom-up self-selected assemblies, when dissolving the OC. Independent education and skills-building within

the government on distinctions between deliberative and participatory modes of citizen engagement is a critical foundation for gaining political buy-in.

### ***Managing relationships with the commissioning body***

The tight linkage between the OC and Ahora Madrid created a perception throughout the design phase that the city government “owned” the process. This resulted in an unusually hands-on bureaucratic presence which not only slowed the design but jeopardized the recommended arms-length distance between commissioning and delivering bodies. This case underlines the importance of basic project management components such as roles and responsibilities, expectations, and norms of conduct which ought to precede collaboration.

### ***Trading off agility for institutionalization?***

A common concern in debates on institutionalization is that processes will ossify and lose agility. Specifically in the Madrid case, model specs were extremely “fleshed out” early on in the design phase in council meetings, and eventually, the Reglamento, before the OC had even begun. This overprescription choked off practitioners’ ability to respond to changes on a need basis. Instead, principles of deliberation and broad design features might be regulated while allowing space for the development and adaptation of a model.



## References

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