

RESEARCH

Double Democratization and the Politics of Property in Municipalist Barcelona

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Abstract

This contribution proposes a conceptual lens on analyzing the political engagements with property by the new municipalist government of Barcelona (2015-2023) as a two-pronged approach to democratization: On the one side, the municipalists intended to strengthen public authority vis-à-vis property; on the other side, the objective was to build democratic capacities among civic, cooperative and administrative actors and promote grassroots-based collective decision-making around local resources. Three examples show the differentiated application of this double democratization, as well as the political and legal obstacles faced: the attempted municipalization of water management, the regulation of private property through public procurement and the cession of publicly owned sites for civic self-management. The critical contribution of the article is to reflect on these cases and show how multiscale relations of property pushed themselves in front of the “politics of proximity”, thus compromising the foundation that the municipalists sought to build on.

Keywords: municipalism/new municipalism, urban democracy, property, municipalization/re-municipalization, civic participation, public-commons partnerships, community-based management, Barcelona

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1. Introduction

For several decades, trends in commodifying or underfinancing social infrastructures – from education to health services – have ushered in a new urgency to the social question. The promise of efficiency through privatisation which has dominated for decades now looks riddled with cracks, as more and more people have been pushed over the brink of poverty and into precarious lives. Effectively, the conditions of possibility for democratic participation have been undermined for ever larger parts of the population. In response, social movements against the “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2004) of welfare state citizens have been gaining influence following the financial crisis. Their demands do not only center on redistribution and re-enlarging the public sector but also on instituting democratic practices to gain control over and shape key aspects of everyday life and social reproduction, particularly at the local level (Kishimoto et al. 2020; Roth et al. 2023).

Against this backdrop, an analysis of the eight years of government under a municipalist leadership from 2015 to 2023³ is interesting because the governing party *Barcelona en Comú* with its mayor Ada Colau emerged from such a protest movement and sought to institutionalize a comprehensive democratization. Its ambitious original anti-austerity politics emphasized a reversal of privatization by (re-)municipalizing key infrastructure and a renegotiation of *the public* based on civic co-production and public collaborations with commons initiatives (La Hidra Cooperativa 2019). The political project gained traction locally and became a lighthouse project for new municipalism in Europe and beyond (Thompson 2021).

In the following, we will argue that the political program of the municipalist government of Barcelona can be usefully understood as an approach that we term *double democratization*. This approach involves what we interpret as a *differential politics of property* by engaging underlying social relations around resources that are collectively deemed valuable. Double Democratization is characterized by two prongs, one of which emphasizes a stronger public authority to regulate and control property

3 The governing period included a coalition with the social democratic party PSC from 2016 to 2017 and from 2019 to 2023. The unsuccessful mayoral re-election bid of Ada Colau in May 2023 can be considered a turning point for the municipalist party and calls for greater analysis than we are able to provide here.

that has public relevance. The other prong calls for greater grassroots participation and decision-making competency concerning access, use, and management of resources.

To reconstruct our approach to the *politics of property*, we draw on the so-called bundle theory of property which conceives property as a heterogeneous bundle of rights. Bundle theory raises awareness of the fact that, given the diverse social, labor, and private law regulations, real existing private property cannot be reduced to the unrestricted, exclusive, and despotic power of disposal once described by William Blackstone in 1765 (Blackstone 1979). Building on the work of Anglo-Saxon legal scholars since the end of the 19th century, A.M. Honoré (1961: 113) differentiates eleven property-related rights, whereas Ostrom and Schlager (1992) identify four main bundles concerning a resource: (1) access and withdrawal, (2) management, (3) exclusion of others, and (4) transfer to others (Gamble/Kelly 1996: 72). Unbundling property as we shall do in the following into a differentiated set of rights, raises the question of how democratic any such given rights are – *de jure* and *de facto*. Such scrutiny needs to differentiate between the resources in question and therefore we study three examples: the case of managing municipal water service (focus on public property), managing publicly owned sites for civic management (focus on common property), and public procurement (focus on private property). All of these fields have in common what municipalists call a *politics of proximity*, building on the local and everyday issues of importance as matters for collective self-organizing and decision-making. Moving beyond a dichotomy of private and public property, we focus on Ostrom and Schlager’s distinction between rights at the operational level (access and use) and rights at the decision-making level (management, exclusion, and transfer) in order to distinguish forms of authorized use from graded forms of ownership: “It is the difference between exercising a right and participating in the definition of future rights to be exercised. The authority to devise future operational-level rights is what makes collective-choice rights so powerful” (1992: 251).

Our take on the municipalist program of double democratization brings together two premises of politics that, considered individually, show significant shortcomings: The premise of *grassroots activism as a progressive force* and the premise of *the state as the reliable steward of the public*. The underlying idea of democratization thus can be thought of here in terms of a double, complementary movement from two ends towards each other, i.e. *top-down* and *bottom-up*. The conjuring of these complementary movements, however, differs depending on the field of concern with distinct roles for public, private, as well as civic actors *and* with different forms of property involved. In this approach, we provide a more nuanced account of property that crosses formal distinctions between public, private, and common. The most

innovative policy aspect that we discern within what we call a municipalist politics of property is that it is not only about shaping formal rights and regulatory frameworks but also about what we call capacity-building, namely the enabling of particular actors to mobilize rights and property.

We must emphasize upfront that the concept of double democratization and its related politics of property is our interpretation of municipalist strategies. In fact, *Barcelona en Comú* largely neglected property as an explicit topic in political engagements which in retrospect suggests that it has underestimated how relations of property push themselves in front of relations of proximity. In the conclusion, we therefore propose some learnings for the debate around the future of municipalism.

Our primary data included more than 60 expert interviews, including governmental officials, administrative staff, activists, professionals, and researchers, as well as fieldwork observations from three field trips, all of which were collected between 2021 and 2023 (see appendix). In terms of primary documents, we analyzed election programs of *Barcelona en Comú* and government programs from the two election cycles as well as preparatory commissioned reports, material on program websites as well as official presentations of programs and policies, particularly around *Patrimoni Ciutadà* and progressive procurement were central primary sources from party and governmental side. We also consulted with relevant laws, particularly the austerity-driven *Organic Law 2/2012, of April 27, on Budgetary Stability and Financial Sustainability*, also known as the Montoro Law, and the Spanish *Public Sector Contract Laws* of 2017 following the EU Directive 2014/24/EU as they applied to our respective objects of analysis.

In the first part of this paper, we outline the ideal type of double democratization by reconstructing the ambiguity inherent in the idea of the public between state authority and civic deliberation and engagement. To do so, we draw on literature that rethinks the public on the backdrop of experiences with privatization, as well as from perspectives that have inspired leftist politics, i.e. commoning and the foundational economy approach. In the second part, we discuss double democratization by presenting political ambitions in three different relationships of property: municipalization of water services (transformation of private to public property), the public procurement policies that have sought to regulate private economic actors towards social aims (regulating private property) and the program *Patrimoni Ciutadà* of leasing publicly owned land and real estate to civic self-administration (managing public property as a commons). The concluding part reflects on the achievements and shortcomings of these programs, on the particularity of the capacity-building efforts, and considers the challenge of double democratization within the context of the capitalist state.

2. Conceptual Considerations: Double Democratization and the Renegotiation of the Public

There has been significant controversy in recent years about whether *the public* – given its frequent historical articulation as a realm of elite or authoritarian politics – can be a reference point for leftist politics or whether it should be rather substituted by a notion of *the common* that emphasizes democratic processes of collective self-management (Dardot/Laval 2019; Hardt/Negri 2009). In the following, we will develop the concept of double democratization as a political strategy that includes both a *commonification of the public* as well as a *publicification of the commons*. To develop this, we recognize a broad spectrum of ideas from commons conceived by Ostromian neo-institutionalists to the common proposed within post-Marxist accounts. We don't need to go into their theoretical differences here, as it is the shared impetus for radical democracy that is conceptually relevant for our analysis. Various accounts emphasize the principle of civic self-governance of resources deemed important for social reproduction as a key dimension of democratization. Developing our argument of double democratization in relation to the common(s) in the following, we should clarify that we don't consider democratization to be restricted to commoning but more broadly about the empowerment of civil society. Such empowerment encompasses a great variety of publics and associational forms, that may be ephemeral, charitable, labor-based, or campaign-related and thus not always geared towards the common(s).

Several authors have noted an ambiguity inherent within the notion of *the public*. Studying the meaning of *public* in public services, Newman and Clarke (2009: 13) reflect on the variety of usages of the term public: “public=public sector=state”, “public=legal and democratic values=public sphere” and “public= citizens= the people=nation”. Despite such variety, scholars like Habermas emphasize the ongoing relevance, even indispensability, of the terminology within the ordinary language and the sciences. Habermas contrasts the usages of *public* as referring to events and occasions “when they are open to all” with the “public” in “public authority” tasked with “promoting the public or common welfare of its rightful members” (Habermas 1991: 1-2). This two-sidedness of the notion of *the public* relates to the two prongs of double democratization: public authority, on the one side, civic participation in and democratic appropriation of public matters, on the other.

2.1 Between the State and Profit Interests

The frequent equation of the public with the state can draw on historical experiences in which state elites have proven to be bad trustees of public property, filling their own pockets through its sale (Kratzwald 2015: 28). Dardot and Laval (2019) even push

this idea of an alienation of the public from its origins as an arena of common issues and highlight that the public has become an instrument of class domination. “Public ownership, in this sense, is not the protection of the common, but rather a form of ‘collective’ private property reserved for the ruling class, which it can dispense where it sees fit, and deprive from the population according to its desires or interests” (Dardot/Laval 2019: 4). While we reject their collapsing of any conceptual distinction between public and private, we recognize that historically, elite-driven private appropriation of the public at the expense of the working class has taken place in a variety of forms in the Global North since about the 1970s (Mericille/Murphy 2016: 687). On the one end of the spectrum, commercialization within public provisioning, governmental withdrawal of responsibility, as well as the commodification of public services, have formally retained infrastructure within the realm of the public sector. So-called public-private partnerships (PPPs) have been discussed as catalysts for these processes (Ringger/Wermuth 2020; Savas 2000). Such transformations of the public sector commonly happened at significant costs for public employees and users depending on these services. At the other end of the spectrum is the formal privatization of public services and infrastructure in the Global North, a process that occurred most dramatically in post-socialist countries (see also Peters 2023).

Privatization processes have not simply implied a delegation of particular tasks from public to private. The state enrolls non-state actors in the processes of government, for example, opening new possibilities and logics of action through PPPs as Biebricher (2022: 157) highlights. Feminist scholars have highlighted the uneven social consequences of these processes, such as the *double privatization* which not only involves a marketization of basic goods and services but also a gendered downloading of new responsibilities within family structures (von Braunmühl/von Winterfeld 2005; Altvater 2003). While commercialization and privatization of the public sector have been widely considered characteristic features of neoliberal hegemony, this hegemony became undermined by the inherent contradictions of these processes as well as ensuing social contestations.

Within the current post-neoliberal interregnum period, the relationship between civil society and the public has been renegotiated, leading to variegated outcomes. For one, Schultheis highlights that within the conjuncture the idea of “the state as the tendential monopolist of the public” (2012: 11) has lost traction thereby opening up the possibility of civic participation to be recognized as a constitutive moment of the public. Newman and Clarke (2009: 10), in turn, also observe that capitalist and civil society interests have increasingly competed with the state around defining the scope and governance of the public realm. They are less optimistic about progressive moments democratizing public services and point to how civic engagements

have been coopted by the state. Emergent civic activism and volunteering practices quickly turned into a new object for policy-making raising all sorts of ambiguous questions about the developments towards a “community capitalism” (van Dyk/ Haubner 2021). As a form of governance, community capitalism involves a “passive subsidiarity” (Castro 2018: 220) that overburdens community networks without neither improving precarious living conditions nor substantially increasing the collective capacities or resources for democratic self-management (Oosterlynck et al. 2013; Bianchi 2020: 66).

2.2 Commonifying the Public

Social movements have also used the institutional and discursive openings for civic participation in liberal democracies to *reclaim the public* from both state professionals and private enterprises towards greater collective deliberation and decision-making, particularly in the provision of basic goods and services (Kratzwald 2015). In this respect, the literature on commons offers illuminating ideas around such reclaiming of the public. Caffentzis and Federici (2014: 102) note the difference between the public and the commons, but emphasize the need to defend both: “There is a crucial difference between the common and the public as the latter is managed by the state and is not controlled by us. This does not mean we should not be concerned with the defence of public goods. The public is the site where much of our past labour is stored and it is in our interest that private companies do not take it over.” Thus, they make the case for “connecting the struggle over the public with those for the construction of the common” based on the idea that “what we call ‘the public’ is actually wealth that we have produced and we must re-appropriate it” (ibid.).

However, such calls to reappropriate and thereby “commonify” (Fattori 2013) the public also entail significant shortcomings, when reducing the public to grassroots engagements and neglecting the positive functions and ultimately irreducibility of state authority. A significant line of research thus has occupied itself with the analysis of the relationship between state authority and the commons – and it is this strand that has been dominating research on Barcelona municipalism. Pera and Bianchi (2021), for example, find the local state in Barcelona to be an obstacle to the working of urban commons – even under a municipalist government – given technologies of power subjecting them to administrative norms and procedures as well as the “attempt by the local state to co-opt the transformative potential of these commons” (Pera/Bianchi 2021: 122). Roth et al. (2023) and Thompson (2021) don’t view the municipalist local state as an obstacle but as a site in need of democratization and potentially turning into a temporary instrument of alternative politics, a “partner state” (Bauwens/Kostakis 2014) or an “enabling state” (Foster/Iaione 2023) to facilitate commoning activities. Considering the municipalist cases of Barcelona

and Naples, Bianchi (2022) reflects on the challenges of codifying what she calls a local commons-state to foster the endurance of democratic institutions beyond electoral cycles. Milburn and Russell (2019) have strategized around “Public-Common-Partnerships” as a tactical appropriation of the state apparatus for the support of a commons-based economy – with the long-term goal of overcoming the reliance on the state. In a later work, Milburn and Russell (2021: 137) explicitly contemplate the withering of the state quoting Purcell’s (2013: 40-41) call to “manage our own affairs, we work hard at it, and we get to the point where it is evident that we can truly govern ourselves.”

Aside from the troubling question of who is (or who wants to be) included and excluded in the *we* that Purcell invokes, the withering of the state seems to be rather far-fetched when considering the provision of essential services that cannot be managed in a commoning fashion without involving a significant degree of professionalization and delegation. Movement scholars point to the inevitable character of public administrative capacities particularly in the case of basic infrastructures such as municipal water provision that are capital and knowledge-intensive and therefore “seem to limit the options for alternative institutional settings and direct community management. Thus, activists acknowledge that ‘the terrain of the commons and the ‘public’ are much more interwoven than appears to be the case when one remains hanging in the theory” (Carrozza/Fantini 2016: 115). The question, therefore, arises as to what extent the result of a *commonification* will be a commons or a hybrid moving in the direction of becoming one (Méndez de Andés et al. 2021). Or is such commonification more accurately understood as a co-production between public and civic actors (Brandesen et al. 2018)? Overall, most of this literature conceptualizing the link between the commons and the public doesn’t clarify the role of civil society more broadly speaking. In our view, however, it is important to bring processes of democratization into view that go beyond commoning.

2.3 The State Reconsidered: Public Regulation and Contested Multi-Level Governance

Another problem with the mentioned contributions is that they hardly ever question the inherently democratic quality of municipalist movements or commons. While most movements, commons, and civic initiatives emphasize values of inclusivity and collective, deliberative processes of self-management, the question is who gets to be involved in them – particularly given the prerequisites of time resources or knowledge about the when and how of participatory processes. Research highlights the class and education-specific conditions for engaging in civic and commoning initiatives such that well-educated, middle-class participants are overrepresented in them compared to working-class participants, a finding that also shows for Barcelona after

the real estate and financial crisis (Cruz et al. 2017; Eizaguirre/Parés 2018; Bianchi et al. 2020). While inter-class alliances have been built in several instances (Flesher Fominaya 2015), the question of the accountability of such initiatives towards their local environment remains. Thus, other scholars are more positive about the idea of a state as a public authority to uphold certain standards, if need be, against particular commons and civic initiatives that engage in public activities.

Concluding their research on housing commons in various European countries, Ferreri and Vidal (2021: 14) argue that the state can help establish housing commons beyond “an alternative for the ‘happy few’ by existing inequalities in access to and ownership of land, property, and capital required for their establishment and maintenance.” Public authority in housing commons can recognize ‘multiple claimants’ as legitimate going beyond a narrow definition of insiders and outsiders and implement broader social claims within particular housing commons initiatives, such as affordability criteria (Amin/Howell 2016). Implicit within Ferreri and Vidal’s statements is a doubt that commons initiatives would take on this oversight and responsibility for affordability from a broader societal perspective. Contrasting with ideas of a *commonification* of the public (Bianchi 2022; Fattori 2013), this aspect raises the need for a *publicification* of the commons and civic initiatives, i.e. the regulation of such initiatives that operate within the public according to universal socially defined standards. The thorny question thus is to what extent the public should and could have regulatory authority regarding commons and civic initiatives. Clearly, systematic state intervention is incommensurable with the inherent ideals of commons governance (Kip et al. 2015), or civil society more generally (Cohen/Arato 1994). Thus *publicification* in this case refers only to those commons and civic initiatives that address a public function and receive public resources.

Public authority, however, warrants more nuanced conceptualization to understand the specificity of new municipalist engagements. First of all, the municipal scale is engaged as a strategic entry point because of the distinct materiality of the local state. As many scholars and activists emphasized (Davies et al. 2022: 91ff.; Cooper 2017: 345), the geographic possibilities that the local scale affords to control the public infrastructure of the everyday, as well as to foster direct relationships among inhabitants, amount to a specific quality of municipal politics. Building on these possibilities, municipalist scholars have therefore envisioned a *politics of proximity*, even when acknowledging that local actors have only a certain set of legally authorized competencies (Subirats 2016). In the case of a government coalition, as it happened in Barcelona under Ada Colau, the municipalist competencies were restricted even further to particular political fields and administrative silos. Second, new municipalist governments sought to expand their competencies through contestations

within multi-level state governance. Barcelona municipalists attempted to leverage local state authority to push for political change at other state levels, be it towards regional, national, or international levels as we describe in the following. The question of commonification and democratization thus should not be posed in terms of its relationship to the state per se but in terms of what scale and what part of the apparatus.

In addition, the quest for democratization must not be limited to direct and radical democratic governance of vital resources. To develop this idea, the work of the Foundational Economy Collective is instructive as it emphasizes the regulation of private economic actors on the market as a key concern for democratic politics. According to Foundational Economy thinking, any basic goods and services deemed essential for social welfare can and should be regulated in the public interest, and therefore considered as part of the public (The Foundational Economy Collective 2018). The key issue is the public implementation and monitoring of the same ethical standards of all enterprises recognized as entities within the Foundational Economy (The Foundational Economy Collective 2018: 174). In other words, the concept of the public is open to various kinds of ownership, private, cooperative, public, etc., thus including private service providers as well as supermarkets (The Foundational Economy Collective 2018: 170). Interestingly, the idea of regulated private entities operating in a public interest amounts to a curious inversion of the previously mentioned insight that public ownership has often not precluded a (private) commercialization of the production of public goods (Böhnke et al. 2015). Market regulation has rarely been discussed in analyses of new municipalism, even though it became an important feature of the local political economic approach (see Salazar 2019 etc.) Aside from such standard-setting and monitoring approach to regulation, we find another form of regulation in Barcelona as part and parcel of the municipalists' double democratization that we call *capacity-building* and elaborate on in the following.

3. Differential Politics of Property: Three Examples

Our case study of Barcelona is situated in the national political economic context of Spain which has seen a drastic financial crisis since about 2007, followed by harsh austerity policies that were implemented starting in 2011. In its wake, public budget cutbacks were imposed on regions and municipalities, leading to waves of privatizations, and an underfunded public sector, while simultaneously, growing unemployment, poverty rates, and the increasing unaffordability of basic goods, such as housing in cities, have fuelled social unrest, leading most prominently to the 15-M protest on the squares of many Spanish cities and a subsequent movement that pushed for political change (Romanos 2017; Huke 2017). The charge of corruption

against the governing two-party system of conservative and social democratic parties and the economic elite was a key element in these movements, denouncing the ways in which public affairs (such as the public policy-backed construction boom) had been appropriated by elite private interests. Moreover, while the austerity measures to consolidate the public budget left elite economic interests largely untouched, heavy cutbacks for working-class inhabitants were imposed (Observatorio Metropolitano 2014; Buendía/Molero-Simarro 2018). Parts of this movement consolidated in a new type of *municipalist* parties that sought to change local politics as a cornerstone for broader political transformations and first and foremost as a reversal of austerity measures and the various processes of privatization that had ensued (Blanco et al. 2020; Gillespie 2020). Decisive for the intensifying crisis constellations since 2008 was the message, “that austerity can be challenged and circumvented at the municipal scale and through judicious state-civil-society collaborations” (Davies et al. 2022: 29). In this vein, the municipalist ambition was to change institutional politics and open it up for civic co-production, building on civic self-organization and promoting democratic forms of controlling or regulating local resources. Beveridge and Koch (2022: 139) describe the *Barcelona en Comú* project “as intentionally engaging with seeming incompatibles: representative and direct democracy, state and social movements, governmental office and neighborhood associations, political parties and popular assemblies.” Importantly, municipalists also made strategic use of the political clout of the local state to contest public authorities and reshape politics at other scales (see also Ada Colau’s foreword in Ajuntament de Barcelona (2018a).

The name of the new municipalist party *Barcelona en Comú* evokes the city as a common space shared by its inhabitants. For many party activists, the idea of the commons – that the party name also points to – became a common ground and alternative political orientation to design, produce, use, and administer essential services and goods with substantial citizens’ involvement or entirely left to civic initiatives. One of the party founders, Joan Subirats (2017), commented on the term *comú* that “it seemed interesting because it connected with the Commons movement, the idea of the public which is not restricted to the institutional and that was key” (quoted in Ambrosi/Thede 2017).⁴ Last but not least, *comú* also refers to the *ordinary* – the *gente comú* that the party refers to is used in the sense of the *common* or *ordinary people*. The combative orientation towards the common as a guiding principle of *Barcelona en Comú*’s movement politics is well captured by its International Committee:

4 Gillespie (2020: 39) sees little relevance of the commons concept in the overall political program of *Barcelona en Comú*, stating that „(t)here is little evidence, that the currency of the conceptual thinking extends beyond a proportion of the activists.“

“We took the social networks, We took the streets and We took the squares. However, we found that change was being blocked from above by the institutions. [...] So, we decided that the moment had arrived to take back the institutions and put them at the service of the common good. [...] For us, ‘winning back the city’ [...] means putting a new, transparent and participatory model of local government, which is under citizen control, into practice” (Barcelona en Comu 2016: 4).

Three important efforts of democratization by the government demonstrate different ways of engaging property, thereby envisioning distinct roles of public, private, and civic actors in these processes: (1) the remunicipalization of water management in Barcelona, (2) the progressive regulation in public procurement, and (3) the Citizen Asset Management program (*Patrimoni Ciutadà*) of leasing publicly owned land and real estate to civic initiatives.

3.1 Municipalization of Water Management

The *Barcelona en Comú* electoral program from 2015 (Barcelona en Comú 2015), included a strong push for the (re-)municipalization of public infrastructure, particularly around water services that had been managed by a private company *Aigües de Barcelona* aka *Agbar* by way of concessionary agreements with the City Council since the time of the Francoist regime. This effort can be understood as a democratizing attempt through direct public authority over water services management, a municipalization that would have transferred these services into public property and thus would have amounted to a form of insourcing of this service. At the same time, democratization through municipalization also implied “commonifying” the management through the involvement of civic actors.

The electoral program from 2015 uses the terminology of the commons for water provision that is also found in many other official articulations:

“Water is an essential common good for life and access to quality water is a human right recognized by the United Nations. The City Council must guarantee universal access, and its management must be guided by social and environmental criteria, and not be subject to private business. However, today water management in Barcelona is private, final prices have skyrocketed in recent years – an increase of 70% since 2009 according to data from the Catalan Water Agency – and tens of thousands of families have suffered cuts of supply” (Barcelona en Comú 2015: 30, our translation).

Municipalization was presented as a precondition for claiming water as a commons. In this vein, the electoral program proposes to “Make use of the instruments available to the City Council to achieve the municipalization of water and thus be able to

carry out public and democratic management” (ibid). Unbundling property here, we can thus see an envisioned shift in ownership with a substantial granting of decision-making rights (following Ostrom and Schlager 1992) for civic actors in collaboration with politicians and professional staff.

The case of water municipalization entails a double democratization strategy insofar as it has built on significant mobilization of movements and NGOs (particularly *Agua Es Vida*) that rallied around making water provision a public service based on significant civic involvement in its management. Municipalization of water services became one of the most prominent campaigns of the government in the first electoral cycle. The campaign, however, faced enormous counter-efforts from the side of the private water services company (*Agbar*) as well as other political opponents, including media campaigns and extensive court litigation.

In 2017, *Barcelona en Comú* was instrumental in the setting up of the Catalan Association of Municipalities and Entities for the Public Management of Water (AMAP) including Barcelona, six other local councils, two public water agencies, and the NGO *Enginyeria sense Fronteres* to provide support for municipalities that intend to implement public water management (March et al. 2019: 368). The passing of a local legal framework for Civic Participation in 2017 opened the way for introducing public referenda in Barcelona and the first cause that mobilized sufficient signatures was the question of municipalizing water. This framework was heavily contested, including by *Agbar*, and it eventually was brought to fall. The municipal collaboration with movement NGOs such as *Agua Es Vida*, *Observatori DESC*, and various others promoting the cause of municipalization also became a target of the litigation strategy of *Agbar* and its allies, denouncing members of the government for fraudulent public subventions to favor of these groups illegally (Montaner 2023: 148-50). The major blow against the municipalization attempts, however, was the ruling of the Spanish Supreme Court in 2019 that legitimized the concession of the water services to *Agbar*, overturning a previous ruling of the Catalan Supreme Court that had already ruled in favor of the municipalization cause (Popartan et al. 2020: 1428).

These experiences suggest for one, that the financial capacities of powerful private property, particularly *Agbar*, at the time owned by the multinational company *Suez*, allowed for the running of a massive counter-campaign that obstructed the advances of municipalization and mobilized national jurisdiction against these municipal politics. Montaner sees in these instances a concerted legal and communication campaign that he calls “urban lawfare” (2023: 76-79). Several criminal lawsuits were launched against government members that were found to be unsubstantiated and therefore mostly have been dismissed already. The lawsuits succeeded, however,

in his view as effective backdrops to public relations smear campaigns against the municipalist government.

At the same time, a revealing shift in the counter-campaign took place that pointed towards changes in the hegemonic formation. Popartan and colleagues (2020) find that while the company *Agbar* initially ran verbally against the municipalization plans of the new city government, a re-framing of the company's public relations image gradually took place, indicating also a growing discursive pressure against which the company sought to find new legitimacy in the eyes of the public. *Agbar* presented itself as a quasi-public actor who had been managing the water on behalf of the population of Barcelona for decades. The argument was no longer aimed at the greater private-sector efficiency of the company, but at the idea that formal municipalization was superfluous since the corporation was already acting in the public interest as a trustee for water services.

Compounding this ideological battle, the hegemonic mobilization of the law within a multi-scalar constitution of the state put a halt to the legal ambitions of municipalization. More specifically, the case highlights, on the one side, the legal obstacles at the municipal level to transform property relations that are largely determined at higher political levels. Commenting on remunicipalization efforts of services that had been privatized by the previous local government, a municipal administrator criticized in an interview that the EU and national legislation are biased towards facilitating privatization of public assets while remunicipalizing them (again) needs to jump over much larger obstacles. In this respect, the national Montoro-Law stipulated that new public companies cannot be created, public spending is restricted, and retiring public employees cannot be substituted. Struggles around such (re-)municipalization continue in other municipalities of the metropolitan area of Barcelona and beyond; some of them are won by water movements (see e.g. Geagea et al. 2023).

While the establishment of a municipal electricity company and the remunicipalization of a women's shelter as well as several kindergartens were successful, key municipalization objectives related to water services, waste disposal, and home care were abandoned. The latter two were ultimately dropped mainly for financial and employment reasons. Legal and political disputes over the establishment of a municipal dental service and a funeral service continue to this day. Overall, no other project of the municipal government has generated as much opposition as the (re-)municipalization attempts (van Dyk and Gerstenhöfer forthcoming).

3.2 Public Procurement

As (re-)municipalization efforts have been confronted with so many obstacles, the municipal government can be seen to change political strategy after the failure of the water services campaign. Even when the politics of property shifted from expropriating and socializing property towards regulating property, an orientation towards double democratization remained. Realizing that the challenges of (re-)municipalization in several areas were greater for the municipal government than anticipated, a former high-ranking public administrator told us that after the failed municipalization of water services, increasing efforts were put into politics of regulating private property.

An example of this strategic shift was the decision of the municipal government to no longer pursue the municipalization of home care services, and instead adopt stricter criteria in public procurement of these services concerning the payment and working conditions of care workers. This regulation of private sector providers has succeeded, among other things, in securing a 14-percent pay rise and a guarantee of shorter traveling distances (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2019). In this vein, the public procurement system became a key arena of transformation towards democratic ends – yet it counted with little public recognition, as several interviewees underscored.

Barcelona en Comú can be seen as part of a wider international movement for such progressive procurement under the pressure of labor movements and civic organizations (Grandia 2018; Wiesbrock 2016; Caranta 2010). In the electoral program 2019, Barcelona had a budget of over 1,300 million Euros for public procurement thus giving the City Council leverage to generate thousands of jobs in private companies and the third sector (Barcelona en Comú 2019). Following its intentions in the electoral programs of 2015 and 2019, the government under *Barcelona en Comú* has fostered the use of social and ecological clauses in procurement bids to set standards for economic production and service delivery (Salazar 2019). Throughout the Colau government, the relevance of pricing in the formula of the administrative awarding process was reduced from 80% to 35% under the government of Barcelona (thus giving greater weight not only to social and sustainability questions but also to technical aspects and expertise). In 2022, in a written message, the Commissioner for the Social and Solidarity Economy in Barcelona stated that 92% of public tender contracts include social clauses. However, other expert interviewees also remark that the administration lacks monitoring capacities to check compliance. Moreover, efforts were made to enroll civic and private participants in the execution as well as in the setting of objectives for social public procurement of the municipality through a Procurement Governance Board (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2023).

In all three electoral programs to date, *Barcelona en Comú* (2015, 2019, 2023) has defined the objective of elevating the proportion of public procurement to entities of the Social and Solidarity Economy (*Economía Social i Solidaria – ESS*)⁵ to 25%. Such ambitions were an important part of the strategy to promote the creation and sustainability of cooperatives and non-profit third-sector organizations as strongholds of democratic practice, which also included services like training and counseling as well as the provision of material infrastructure. Throughout the municipalist government it became clear to officials that public procurement for ESS actors was a far cry away from the promised 25% of the total public procurement – even as the exact statistical figure could not be determined due to a lack of available data as we found out from official sources. Nevertheless, Martí-Costa and Conde López (2021) show how the remodeling of procurement practices by the municipalist government benefitted Third Sector organizations more so than for-profit companies in the field of care services between 2017 and 2019.

The democratization strategy through public procurement thus intended to realize a public interest by regulating private actors. In view of unbundling property, some use and management rights of private property including the setting of employment or ecological standards were regulated on condition of participating in the tendering process. However, collective-choice rights were out of the picture within public procurement.

Beyond integrating clauses in public tenders, the municipalist government's regulatory efforts aimed to facilitate private entities in putting their properties to public use. The promotion of local SMEs and Social and Solidarity Economy entrepreneurs was deemed important for the enhancement of the local and regional circular economy, the strengthening of economic actors with internal democratic decision-making processes, and a general orientation toward the common good. We refer to these regulatory endeavors of enablement as capacity-building.

One important capacity-building measure was the publication of the internationally recognized *Social Public Procurement Guide* by the municipal government in 2017 (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2017b). The guide praises the virtues of combining the autonomous and efficient operation of private actors with the regulation according to

5 The municipal strategy document for the promotion of the Social and Solidarity Economy defines the ESS as follows: „The companies and organizations of the economy social and solidarity (ESS) are managed in accordance with common characteristics, principles and values such as primacy of the person and the social over capital; voluntary and open membership; and democratic management” (Associació Economia Social Catalunya and Ajuntament de Barcelona 2021: 4, our translation).

public interest standards safeguarding social and ecological standards for producers, consumers, and their environment. As a main intention, the *Social Public Procurement Guide* sought to clarify the legal room of maneuver for the public administration to apply social and sustainability criteria in public tenders given national legislation. In addition, the municipality's Strategic Plans for the Promotion of the Social and Solidarity Economy (2016-2019 (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2016) and 2021-23 (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2021)) also included measures to increase the share of public procurement for this sector.

In conjunction with this legal clarification, training sessions were provided, on the one hand, for public administrators to strengthen their understanding and competency in applying social and sustainability criteria when setting up tenders – though movement actors criticized that there were too few of these trainings offered (Xarxa d'economia solidaria de Catalunya 2019). On the other hand, actors within the social and solidarity economy received support for establishing themselves. A newly developed *Department of Socioeconomic Development and Proximity* within the municipal agency *Barcelona Activa* provides (physical) incubation centers and offers other services to these actors. Participants were trained to compete successfully in the tendering process, particularly when social criteria were applied. For larger tendering volumes, ESS actors were supported to develop collectively a tendering bid by joining forces. Such support could be considered vital attempts to even the playing field in public procurement. Otherwise, considered structurally, tendering processes with large volumes would favor large private companies, while cooperative or other collective entities are less likely to have the capacity to prepare a bid, administer a large tendering volume, and fulfill the requirements made in the tender.

Yet it is important to bear in mind that such ambitions to favor particular kinds of economic actors are still premised on subjecting them to a logic of market competition and pushing them into entrepreneurial forms. Efforts to restructure the playing field of such markets have also hit limits since municipal procurement policies are bound to legislation at the national level (Public Sector Contracts Law from 2017) which in turn follows an EU directive on public procurement (2014/24/EU). Under these conditions, the room for maneuvering in public tendering processes to promote particular actors or to limit the selection of potential bidders (such as ESS) is very limited – even as it improved somewhat through the promotion of social and environmental obligations in public procurement with the European Directives 2004/18/EC and 2014/24/EU (Salazar 2019).

Despite the transformative potentials in public procurement that have been highlighted in other contexts such as England by the Community Wealth Building approach

(Brown/Jones 2021; Manley/Whyman 2021), public procurement has received little attention from the local public in Barcelona. A public administrator in procurement commented in an interview that public procurement policies are not sufficiently sexy in public debates. Along such lines, Grandia (2018: 363) claims that the instrument has not been even given much attention in public administration research. This is even more true for the movement-focused research on new municipalism which has mostly left this administrative, yet crucial issue a blind spot. On that background, the municipalist policies and measures around public procurement in Barcelona did, however, receive considerable attention from public administration experts internationally, who took the new procurement policies, administrative regulations, and related programs in Barcelona as an inspiration.

3.3 Citizen Assets Management Program

A third case for the democratization strategy refers to the promotion of “urban commons” as an original objective for Barcelona municipalists. An early municipal manifest from 2014 (Observatorio Metropolitano 2014), an activist-research study in Barcelona published that same year (Observatori Metropolità de Barcelona 2014), and the report by La Hidra that was commissioned by the municipality (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2017a) highlighted urban commons as a mode of democratic collaboration around the use and maintenance of a shared resource that is deemed important for the collective members’ reproduction operating beyond state and market imperatives. La Hidra described such urban commons as a civic mode of self-organization of public services that involves its design and delivery – whether applied to the municipal delivery of public goods (such as water or energy) or to direct democratic appropriation of public spaces and places (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2017a: 11). A genealogy of this notion of *urban commons* in governmental municipalist activities points to a program that in an early iteration of its development still carried *urban commons* in its name (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2017a), but that was later referred to as *Patrimoni Ciutadà* only to avoid the immediate association between urban commons (*comuns urbans*) and the party *Barcelona en Comú*, also casually referred to as, *els comuns*.

The program of *Patrimoni Ciutadà* – the Citizen Asset Management program – is based on the existing stock of locally owned public property and sets the framework for the leasing of publicly owned land and real estate for self-management and programming by civic initiatives and neighborhood associations. The program entails around 400 sites, from community gardens, boulevards playgrounds to neighbourhood houses for Catalan folklore groups, and sociocultural centers with a range of activities from education to sports. It is important to note that the cession of these public sites and neighborhood and civic self-management has been practiced since the time of the

Spanish transition to democracy in the mid-1970s. The innovation of the program was to give greater legitimacy to these practices, promote transparency, and foster public-commons collaboration (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2022a).

Local activists saw this program as a significant shift towards enabling public-commons collaborations in the sense that here the local state is not perceived as the owner that grants and sets conditions for access and use of state-owned property, rather the state takes the responsibility to “guarantee that particular resources may be used for the development of common resources” (Castro Coma/Forné Aguirre 2021: 30, our translation). While formally speaking the Spanish constitution does not know *common property* and the sites of *Patrimoni Ciutadà* are municipally-owned and, the program seeks to take a step towards its de facto recognition when the official description of the program speaks about the underlying goal of “communalization of the public” – “*comunalització d'allò públic*” (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2022a: 3). In this program, the local state recognizes existing and long-standing claims to common property and associated practices of commoning. Considering property as a bundle of rights in this case, significant rights are conferred not only at the operational but also at the collective-choice decision-making level to civic and community self-organization for about three years, pending re-approval by program boards in which civic initiatives have a considerable influence.

While this aspect underscores the objective of democratization through the grassroots, the program also reveals an effort towards increased public authority through a participatory governance structure of the program. It includes representatives of the political and administrative sphere as well as from various participating associations. The previous practice of such cessions of municipally-owned public equipment had often faced severe accusations of political favoritism and clientelism. Seeking to rectify this problem and to expand on the potential, the ambition of this program is to make this process transparent and existing resources accessible to new civic initiatives. The program introduces democratic processes of oversight over the various activities and provides administrative support, on the one hand, to coordinate the overall development and the network of activities and sites, on the other hand, to provide assistance and training sessions for initiatives (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2022a: 6). Since it was recognized among coordinators and activists of the program (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2022c) that the existing practices of self-organization show social biases, particularly along the lines of class, race, gender, citizenship, and other, efforts were made to rectify this in part through a self-evaluation process with a community survey protocol that is another central piece of the *Patrimoni Ciutadà* called *Balanç Communitari* (Xarxa d'economia solidaria de Catalunya 2021). The *Balanç Communitari*, once it is officially established and passed as part of the

program, would form the basis for evaluation by the governance board. The renewal of cessionary contracts of such *common property* would thus be approved based on this survey. This monitoring process is complemented also by capacity-building formats, such as training in civic engagement, awareness around discrimination, and others. Two employees have been hired through the NGO Barcelona Associations Council (*Consell d'Associacions de Barcelona*) with public money to provide assistance and counseling to civic initiatives that participate in *Patrimoni Ciutadà*.

The key achievements of the program development thus have been to set up a common framework to promote these grassroots practices and to democratize their internal processes. Previously, these practices have been dispersed across different departments and districts, creating an intransparent situation in these cessionary contracts. After years of preparatory conceptual, legal, and administrative work that began in the first year of the Colau government in 2015, the program was presented in 2022, but it is yet to be approved by the City Council. So far, governmental officials have been concerned with publishing a catalog of the various locations that are part of the program. Substantial legal examination went into the preparation of the catalog for fear that its transparency might open the possibility for public attacks by political opponents questioning who has the right to use and manage these assets – and who doesn't and why. And yet, the catalog is still to be publicized, thus leaving the prospect of the program in limbo. A possible reading of this situation is to take politicians' hesitance as a political mode of avoiding conflicts around property issues. Criticisms also persisted within the program that the prerequisites in terms of time and energy to be spent for such volunteering acts were unevenly distributed along such social lines of discrimination. Last but not least, from a lens of community capitalism, the practices of civic initiatives under the umbrella of *Patrimoni Ciutadà* also warrant scrutiny given a fine line differentiating the delegation of public service tasks onto the civic sphere from the empowerment of civic actors to appropriate and manage public resources. In the most famous cessionary agreement in Barcelona between the city council and the civic initiative at a former factory site called *Can Battló*, the public evaluation emphasized the amount of money (roughly 1,5 million Euros in 2017 alone) that was saved by drawing on voluntary labor instead of spending money on employees (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2018b).

It has not been the intention of the program *Patrimoni Ciutadà* to challenge existing property relations and change the stock of such sites for community and civic management (e.g. through the expropriation of private assets or rededication of public land). Significantly, as one expert who was involved in the development of the program commented in an interview, the program does not *bite* any private interests. Even so, the co-production of the program by politicians, administrators, and

civic activists has also been a complicated process taking years and is still incomplete, given the concern with *lawfare*, i.e. strategic deployment of legal administrative complaints and lawsuits against the program from political opponents that seek to discredit the municipalist government. The fear was, as one administrator told us, that if one bit of the program doesn't hold legal challenges, the entire project might fall apart.

The initiatives produce civic and cultural content and facilitate civic participation at a level that hardly anyone has objections against. *Patrimoni Ciutadà* does not allow for services to be administered by civic initiatives that are legally defined to be public and that would fall under existing procurement law, requiring distinct regulations for the cession and operation. Thus, to make a transfer to local actors possible, the city government had to designate the projects as the promotion of civic participation, thereby effectively amputating the important socioeconomic functions of the commons – otherwise, their commoning activities would be considered services subject to a competitive tendering process.

4. Concluding Reflections

We have proposed a reading of municipalist strategies in Barcelona through our conceptual lens of a *double democratization* involving what we term a *differential politics of property*. In all three cases considered, municipalist efforts sought to enhance civic involvement and safeguard public interest as cornerstones of democratization. A key difference within these cases lies in the envisioned areas of responsibility for the provision of the services: From the perspective of the state, (re-)municipalization amounts to an *insourcing* within public sector responsibility. By contrast, in the case of public procurement and *Patrimoni Ciutadà*, the providing *source* is *outside* – either in the private or the civic sphere⁶ – and the state assumes the role of a democratically legitimated regulator.

4.1 Double Democratization

Against a dominant take in the academic literature on the Barcelona municipalist project emphasizing the movement-driven *commonification of the state*, our most remarkable finding was that the democratization strategy of *Barcelona en Comú* did not uncritically affirm grassroots activity as a one-way street of democratization. In our conceptualization, the move that renders the democratization strategy

6 We hesitate to use the term outsourcing here since it usually refers to a strategy of shifting provision to the outside (of the state, the firm, etc.) which doesn't apply in these cases.

double is the articulation of a public authority to ensure that a set of values apply universally across the urban population: whether this relates to cheap and reliable water services, transparency of and equal opportunities in ceding public sites to civic groups, or regulatory mechanisms to promote an economy that works in favor of the common good, thus reigning in on the negative consequences in production: (hyper-) exploitation, precarization, externalization of costs, and refusing social responsibility for the social and ecological environment. Importantly, this public authority to regulate property relations was conceived based on civic participation and engagement, resulting in broad legitimacy when intervening in civic or private affairs, or executing public standards and laws. It is thus misleading to take the state as a monolithic bloc vis-à-vis the grassroots. Complicating any simplistic understanding of statehood, the municipalists have affirmed public authority at the local level for multiscale political engagements to contest strategies and policies of the central government. Further, local state politics have also influenced legislation at other levels, as the development of *Patrimoni Ciutadà* exemplifies. The basic idea of this program has been taken up by a governmental initiative at the Catalan level and has been integrated into a draft law to promote the Social and Solidarity Economy. Since the municipal council cannot pass laws, such transference to the Catalan level would provide the *Patrimoni Ciutadà* with a more solid legal standing.

Two important qualifications concerning the goal of “the public to become commons” (Méndez de Andés et al. 2021; see also Castro 2018: 207) through greater civic participation need to be made, however: First, as much as such goal transforms the articulation of the public, the distinction is far from collapsing in practice. There is a positive role for the state in democratization that cannot be taken over by civic or commoning initiatives themselves. Far from advocating for generalized state regulation of such initiatives, in Barcelona, the public authority did monitor and potentially intervene in civic activities insofar as these were publicly funded or commissioned to provide services. Public authority, in this respect, was considered legitimate to execute democratic decisions and standards. As we have seen in the case of the (re-)municipalization and *Patrimoni Ciutadà* the state can play an important part in relieving civic initiatives and movements of coordination and administrative tasks.

Second, the capitalist state sets structural limits and selectivities to (civic) participation in political matters (Jessop 2008). As Habermas (1985), Offe (1984), and other analysts remind us, the late capitalist state requires a *mass loyalty* that becomes actualized in general elections based on the promised provision of public goods and privileges. The state is not simply a free-wheeling actor but rather a field crystallized in a historical play of social forces with significant selectivities toward ensuring continued capitalist accumulation (Jessop 2008). From this view, the functional

requirements of the capitalist state set limits to an encompassing civic participation and broader democratization in economic matters and political governance particularly when jeopardizing profit opportunities and political-administrative efficacy for retaining control. Calls for greater participation – even if promoted by the local government – are repeatedly resisted on various grounds including a lack of technical expertise or lack of property rights.

4.2 Differential Politics of Property

The constitution of the property order has posed a significant challenge to the transformative politics of property of the municipal government. Among the three examples, we saw how democratization efforts were most strongly contested when seeking to change ownership as in the case of (re-)municipalization. Moreover, many years of intensive engagements in regulatory efforts around public procurement and *Patrimoni Ciutadà* yielded only modest outcomes, a far cry from initial hopes of “winning back the city” or instituting a “transparent and participatory model of local government, which is under citizen control” (Barcelona en Comú 2016: 4). Considering Ostrom and Schlager’s (1992) distinction we mentioned in the beginning, collective choice rights around management were consolidated within the *Patrimoni Ciutadà*, however, otherwise did not expand to additional cases; rights at the operational level, in turn, made only modest advances within public contracting. The latter is strongly circumscribed by multi-scalar legislation and thus even small modifications demand significant energy and capacity-building efforts. Our cases showed how the local state is tightly intertwined within the multi-level state governance, and therefore, local government should not be mistaken as an instrument ready to implement universal standards at any given moment and within circumscribed fields of action, however small. Even modest changes require ongoing movement pressure at many levels simultaneously – as the story of the 15-M and the municipalist movement illustrate (see also Bua/Davies 2023).

In line with this insight, it may not come as a surprise that the municipalist government engaged substantially in what we have called capacity-building as a politics of property that channels civic and movement energy into entrepreneurship and the effective mobilization of rights. Here public authority is tasked to set up infrastructure or to offer opportunities for (self-)empowerment. This resembles “the partner state” as Bauwens and Kostakis (2014) or “the enabling state” as Foster and Iaione (2023) conceive it. As the sociology of law has long shown, formal rights entitlements are usually not realized in any straightforward way but depend on various other factors (Black 1973; Cyrus/Kip 2015), significantly (potential) rights-bearers’ capacities to claim them. Capacity-building can be realized in various ways, and we can distinguish three forms in which the municipalist government has implemented this:

via (1) infrastructural provision in the form of physical facilities or financial support services for incubation and collaboration, (2) training to disseminate knowledge and promote practices among both public administrators in relating to particular actors and programs as well as civic and private actors to mobilize them around certain opportunities and (3) incentivizing the creation of eco-systems or self-organized networks among cooperative and civic actors through events, public campaigns, or political recognition. Capacity building thus seeks to enhance the actors' abilities, on the one side, to collectively claim rights to objects, and on the other, to support civic collaboration or incentivize particular forms of entrepreneurship.

In contrast to (re-)municipalization efforts, cessionary agreements, or regulation of standards that are directly aimed at the property object, capacity-building thus targets various groups that deal with property objects, most prominently civic, cooperative as well as administrative actors. Capacity-building became an important and innovative strategic engagement for municipalist activities, precisely to increase the capacities of particular groups that have encountered structural disadvantages to produce more competitive bids, such as local SMEs or cooperatives competing with large corporations; or civic neighborhood initiatives competing with professional NGOs. Arguably, a major reason why capacity-building has become so important (and possibly convenient) is that it avoids conflicts with regulatory laws – particularly the Spanish Public Sector Contracts Law – restricting the government's ability to benefit particular groups.

4.3 Beyond the Movement Cycle

One activist lamented about the municipalist government that they failed to *govern to disobey*, institute activist politics to foster solidarity across municipalities and provoke changes at other political levels. However, it should also be borne in mind that the Indignadxs movement has also substantially demobilized since its peak in 2011 and the municipalist movement has also weakened for various reasons since 2015 (Sarnow 2021). In consequence, the political force to push for legal changes or back up politically courageous measures around procurement, (re-)municipalization, or public-commons-partnerships has been compromised. *Barcelona en Comú* was backed in the 2015 elections by a significant share of working-class voters but has over time lost its ability to reach and appeal to this constituency and actively enroll them in their political mobilization. Significantly, without major public attention to public procurement issues, it has been difficult for the government to push any transformation within an administrative apparatus that has enormous forces of inertia against changes. Simultaneously, the enemies of the municipalist government have consolidated over the years and launched massive campaigns of lawfare (as pointed to in the case of municipalization) against political representatives and

major political projects of the government, thus effectively slowing down or stalling progress on these matters (Montaner 2023).

At the same time, even with original political objectives unachieved, the municipalists contributed to instituting structures and platforms for civic engagement and democratic processes. They were able to shift the discursive terrain of politics as illustrated in the case of Agbar's reframing. *Participation*, a key concern following the uprisings and the first electoral cycle in 2015, was hardly mentioned as a concern in the municipal electoral campaigns of 2023 – partly, perhaps, because it had been mainstreamed through the introduction of participatory budgeting, neighborhood assemblies, and a new regulation on Civic Participation (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2022b). While this hasn't secured re-election for the *Comunes* in May 2023, these developments should not be discarded given their democratic potential and they might set a basis for movements to come. As for future municipalist research and practice, our analysis suggests paying closer attention to how relations of property push themselves in front of relations of proximity. While we highlighted the municipalists' differential and innovative engagement with property, the municipalists rarely made property relations an issue of public debate after the failed municipalization of water services and thus missed the opportunity to politicize the multi-scalar constitution of property.

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Appendix

Interviews that were most relevant for this analysis (in alphabetical order):

- *Luis Basteiro*, former administrative staff at the Barcelona City Hall responsible for matters of (re-)municipalization, 5.10.21 and 1.12.21
- *Mauro Castro*, researcher at La Hidra, 8.10.21
- *Pablo Cotarelo*, researcher at Ekona, 16.6.22
- *Laia Forné*, researcher at La Hidra and former staff at Barcelona City Hall responsible for Patrimoni Ciutadà 15.11.21
- *Enrique Gornes*, administrative staff at the Barcelona City Hall responsible for matters of (re-)municipalization Gornes 24.11.22 und 3.12.21
- *Albert Martin i Gomez* and *Fidel Gonzalez*, administrative staff at Barcelona City Hall responsible for Patrimoni Ciutadà 11.11.21; 16.6.22 and 23.5.23 (only with Albert)
- *Alvaro Porro*, commissar at Barcelona City Hall responsible for the promotion of the Social and Solidarity Economy 22.11.21 and 9.5.22
- *Xavier Rubio Cano*, administrative staff at Barcelona City Hall, responsible for the promotion of social and solidarity economy, 8.10.21
- *Yunailis Salazar*, researcher, and administrative staff at Barcelona City Hall on public procurement 17.6.2022
- *César Sánchez Rique*, administrative staff at Barcelona City Hall on public contracts 17.10.22 and 12.9.22 (written interviews)
- Kate Shea Baird, activist and representative at Barcelona en Comú, 7.10.21
- *Mariona Soler*, staff at Ateneu Nou Barris, 15.6.22
- *Jon Subirats*, former vice-mayor and co-founder of Barcelona en Comú and researcher, 6.10.2021
- *Ruben Suriñach Padilla*, project manager at XES and researcher 10.2.22; 25.11.21
- *Josep Vidal*, director general at the Generalitat de Catalunya responsible for the social and solidarity economy 14. Juni 2022
- *Jordi Via*, former commissar for the promotion of the Social and Solidarity Economy 25.10.21

Moreover group conversations with:

- staff at Barcelona Association Council responsible for Patrimoni Ciutadà (*Ana Rico* and *Miquel Caum*), 16.6.22
- members of the Casa Orlandai 14.6.22 (with *Aleix Porta*); 24.5.23 (*Natalia Oliete* and *Enric Capdevila*)
- members of umbrella cooperative ECOS, 4.10.2021 (*Guernica Facundo*) and 14.6.2022 (*Laura Hernández*, *Laura Cruz*, and *Joan Manel Sánchez*)
- members of FemProcomuns (*Monica Garriga*, 15.12.21 and *David Gomez* 21.1.22)