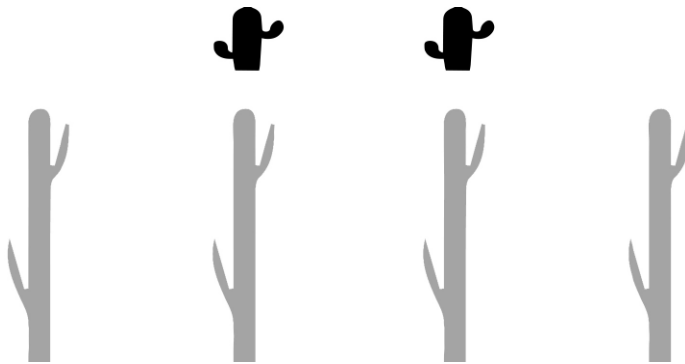


**Extended abstract**

*Urbanormativity in Citizen  
Participation: Evaluation of the Quality  
of Participation and Demographic  
Dimension. A Study of the Valencian  
Community (Spain)*



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DOI: 10.4422/ager.2024.01

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Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural  
Journal of Depopulation and Rural Development Studies

*Highlights:*

1. Citizen participation in small municipalities is different from urban.
2. Evaluating urban and rural participation with the same criteria gives biased results.
3. The bias is a clear example of urbanormativity and urbancentrism, also in science.
4. New ways of evaluating citizen participation in rural areas must be generated.

*Abstract:* Urbanormativity refers to the fact that urban-centric thought has become global, becoming the measure of everything that happens, also in the field of social sciences. As an example of this, this article is based on the recognition of a common error in measuring the quality of citizen participation when it occurs in rural areas. After justifying the concepts that explain the perspective that motivated the first suspicion -and the whole work-, the results of an initial study that had the purpose of measuring the quality of participation in the municipalities of the Valencian Country are presented. The rest of the investigation shows how, indeed, not only this but also other investigations present biases that can be framed within that urban normativity: in rural areas, participation is made in other ways and with other instruments, but these are not always recognized as participatory processes. This not only underestimates the involvement of rural citizens from abroad, but also encourages a kind of vision contrary to reality among the rural population itself.

*Keywords:* Valencian Community, Urbancentrism, Urbanormativity, Citizen participation, Rural.

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## *Extended Abstract*

### **1. Introduction and Justification**

There are few publications that address Citizen Participation in rural areas. In most of these works, a methodology focused on the identification of specific instruments is used, leaving aside non-institutionalized participatory practices. Consequently, the critical analysis tends to focus on the difficulties that small municipality councils have in developing these citizen participation instruments. When evaluating the quality of Citizen Participation, small councils with few staff and resources do not fare well compared to larger municipalities.

This perspective contradicts the idea that rural communities typically have more participatory dynamics than those found in urban communities, which are seen as more individualistic and anomie. This raises the hypothesis that the systems for measuring the quality of participation suffer from certain biases, which may originate from a conception of citizen participation excessively focused on formats used to produce it in larger political communities, such as cities.

### **2. Objectives, Methodology, Sources, and Study Areas**

The approach of this work is based on the idea that citizen participation tends to be socially defined and measured academically with urban-normative parameters. This premise generates inconsistencies between the real experience and what is reported from the rural environment.

To this end, the article works on the concepts of "Urbanism" and "Citizen Participation". In this regard, and in the case of the Valencian Community, we have found a paradigmatic point of connection in the empirical analysis: we can see an appreciable distance between the participatory experience in the rural environment and the treatment it receives at a technical and academic level.

For that, an empirical work organized in three phases has been carried out. The first consisted of a survey of local administrations' technical and political leaders with the aim of enabling the analysis of institutional perceptions of participation.

Subsequently, and from several studies of the Center for Sociological Research (CIS), an analysis of secondary data is proposed in order to objectively contrast participation indicators. Finally, face-to-face interviews have been used to obtain information on the ways in which participation occurs and the problems that arise when implementing formal processes in small rural populations.

### **3. Results**

The results confirm that there is a mismatch between the participatory reality that exists in rural communities and the assessment received by a large part of the studies on participatory quality and also by the technical and political body dedicated to participation in the municipalities studied. These perceptions, more or less formal, judge citizen participation on the basis of the existence or use of a set of more or less sophisticated instruments necessary for its management in the urban environment. However, they leave aside other forms of participation away from these instruments that do achieve the involvement of citizens in matters of management and local government, and probably to an even greater extent. This is the case in rural areas.

### **4. Discussion**

The degree of participation in rural communities is not lower, nor are lower quality mechanisms used, but are constituted in different ways and forms. However, the evaluation of participation is carried out according to urban patterns, which permeate the very conception of the agents who are in charge of it. This phenomenon turns out to be an excellent example of "urbanism": the external observer judges the object of observation with tools designed for cases with urban characteristics as if they were valid for all habitats.

It is quite evident that in small localities it is not very useful to assess the quality of citizen participation on the basis of whether or not a set of formal participation practices are carried out.

It seems more appropriate to measure the quality of participation by the objectives achieved, rather than by the technical mechanisms used, introducing a main evaluation variable such as the transformative capacity of citizen action.

The possibility of effective citizen participation lies in the specific characteristics of the rural environment itself, which meets ideal conditions for certain forms of citizen

involvement in general affairs. Among them, the fluidity of communication between the population and the local authorities stands out; and the high level of personal knowledge, trust in citizens and co-responsibility that makes excessive formalities unnecessary.

At the academic level, there is an "urbanity bias" that could be overcome if indicators are considered more generously, so as to take into account the characteristics of each territorial reality.

## **5. Conclusions**

The quality of participation is a political and scientific concern. In most cases, they are measured using quantitative techniques that score a set of formal instruments of participation. In rural areas, characterized by small population centers, the results of applying this system indicate that the quality of their processes is low. But this does not fit with what the theory or the observed reality indicate, specially an observation through the use of qualitative techniques that do not count instruments, but focus on the processes and their effective results. We understand that the standardization of measurement systems with meaning and applicability in the urban environment is an example of urbanism that goes against the interests of the inhabitants of rural areas. Participation in rural areas must be qualified, not only on the basis of its results, but also through the use of qualitative techniques capable of breaking with the urban-normative inertia. This propensity makes the technical staff and authorities of small municipalities assume the dominant discourse in which the use of certain instruments constitutes the maximum indicator of participatory quality.

## **6. Next Steps**

It seems reasonable to rethink the ways in which processes are classified, especially when they are evaluative in nature. In fact, the change in formula can even be considered as a good exercise in order not to lose sight of the main objective of the evaluation, which should be none other than to measure the population's capacity to influence the management and governance of public affairs. We do not intend to deny the importance of mechanisms, but, without a doubt, the important thing about processes is the objective and, therefore, measuring their effectiveness should be what is truly substantial. To this end, new study variables must be thought of that demonstrate their consistency precisely because of their application in various scenarios.