Urban movements and municipalist governments in Spain: alliances, tensions, and achievements

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Urban movements and municipalist governments in Spain:
alliances, tensions, and achievements

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ABSTRACT
In 2011 the 15 M movement occupied squares across Spain demanding true democracy. Four years later, bottom-up municipalist initiatives won the 2015 local elections in seven medium-size and large cities. In coalition with traditional parties, these initiatives formed new left-wing governments that incorporated former activists as mayors and councilors. This history has sparked debates about the consequences of co-optation, institutional alliances, and state openness to social movements. In this article we aim to contribute to that debate with a discussion of the outcomes of municipalist governments in four cities (Madrid, Barcelona, A Coruña, and Cádiz) during the 2015–2019 mandate. Theoretically, we argue for the necessity to interpret these outcomes against the background of the political and economic contexts that constrain (and enable) a progressive urban agenda. Empirically, our results reveal that municipalist governments only to a certain extent performed as instruments of grassroots movements. Despite favorable alliances and partial achievements, we identify various constraints to the responsiveness of municipalist governments to activist demands. Especially, we conclude that supra-local neoliberal policies, various concerned capitalist interests, and the relative waning of the 15 M protest movement limited the potential benefits of those alliances.

In 2011, the 15 M or Indignados movement triggered an unprecedented outburst of social discontent with Spain’s anti-austerity policies, crying out for true democracy on occupied squares across the country. Four years later, in seven medium-size and large cities, new bottom-up ‘municipalist’ initiatives won the local elections. In coalition with traditional parties, these initiatives formed left-wing majority governments that incorporated many former activists from grassroots organizations as mayors and councilors. Meanwhile, several post-15 M urban movements – especially focusing on housing – also remained active at the local scale. With these developments, a traditional research question came to the fore again: Can social movements influence state authorities? Social movement scholars have answered this question through an analysis of the features of the political regimes within which social movements operate, including its openness to activist claims,
the instability of political alignments, and the availability of allies within state institutions (Kriesi et al., 1995; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 57). This approach has helped to identify contextual conditions for successful social movements. However, in this paper we argue for additional attention to structural constraints to policy change, stemming from both supra-local levels of government and the capitalist class (Alexandri & Janoschka, 2018; Davies & Blanco, 2017; González et al., 2017; Lima, 2019; Mayer, 2016).

We come to this conclusion through an analysis of the ‘institutional alliances’ between progressive urban movements and municipalist governments in four Spanish cities – Madrid, Barcelona, A Coruña and Cádiz – during the 2015–2019 mandate. International scholarship has started to pay considerable attention to the post-15 M municipalist turn (e.g., Davies & Blanco, 2017; Petithomme, 2019; Piñeira et al., 2018; Russell, 2019). However, few authors have analyzed the impacts of the post-15 M urban movements on municipalist governments. We address this gap by investigating the influence of these movements and the related responsiveness of municipalist governments (Lukes, 1974; Schumaker, 1975). Our analysis will be guided by the following research questions: To what extent have municipalist governments been responsive to the demands of the post-M15 urban movements? Which factors have influenced this responsiveness?

We address these questions through an analysis of policy changes regarding two specific topics: housing issues and issues relating to the transition from welfare to commons (with a specific focus on remunicipalization, cooperatives and the solidarity-based economy, as well as community gardens and social centers). Our analysis will show that the municipalist governments have been partially responsive to the demands of social movements in these two areas, especially in the form of democratization and through various welfare provisions that were neglected by prior neoliberal and austerity policies. However, we observe clear differences between the four cities as well, and often the demands of social movements are only partially met. We will argue that this limited responsiveness especially stems from the structural constraints to policy change that stems from both supra-local government policies and the capitalist economy that we alluded to above.

We come to these conclusions in four sections. First, we will discuss the concepts and theoretical approach that frame our analysis. Next, we will explain our methodological choices. This will be followed by a presentation of our main empirical results in the third section. In the final section, we will draw conclusions and summarize the main lessons from our analysis of the four municipalist cases under examination.

**Municipalism and the outcomes of urban movements**

Over the last decade, there has been a growing interest in progressive municipal governments around the world (e.g., Davies & Blanco, 2017; Lima, 2019; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017; Russell, 2019). While these studies emphasize participatory governance and the remunicipalization of public services, they do not pay much attention to the role of urban movements in these processes. Spain is a case in point. Here, the 2015–2019 cycle of municipalism is deeply rooted in the activism of post-15 M urban movements (Díaz-Parra et al., 2017; Rodriguez, 2016, pp. 110–120). However, the role of these movements and their impact on the policies of municipalist governments are hardly researched.
The notion of municipalism has a long history, dating back at least to the brief revolutionary outbreak resulting in the 1871 Paris Commune. Since then, municipalism is associated with autonomous local democracy and socio-economic equality. In Spain, Republican Federalists and the anarchist movement of the late nineteenth century embraced municipalism, fostering a federation of ‘free municipalities’ based on direct democracy, local assemblies, and workers cooperatives (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014, pp. 39–45). These ideals were revived in the 1979 democratic local elections that followed four decades of dictatorship. In cities such as Barcelona and Madrid, left parties (especially the PSOE and the Communist Party) that built on former activists and their coalitions won office. Initially, they promoted new participatory channels, supplied services to poor peripheral areas, and regulated land-use. However, in line with an international shift towards neoliberal urbanism, since the late 1980s this municipalism transformed into more conventional growth coalitions that corrupted political and economic elites, enticed by the real-estate boom (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014, pp. 82–97; González et al., 2017; Mayer, 2016).

In recent years, especially in response to anti-austerity movements, there has again been a resurgence of municipalist ideals. Recent research shows that this contemporary municipalism has the following features: despite some shared events and networks, initiatives develop independent from one another; there is a high autonomy from national political parties; policies aim to open local institutions to citizen participation; and an eco-feminist approach emphasizes women’s roles and needs, horizontality, and cooperation (Petithomme, 2019; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017; Russell, 2019). The authors behind this research also argue that ‘fearless cities’, ‘cities of care’ and ‘sanctuary cities’ for migrants have defined the latest global municipalisms. In our view, one strong motivation for this ‘municipalist turn’ has been the lack of resources for competition at regional and national electoral arenas. As a result, municipalists have strategically privileged face-to-face interactions with their constituencies, promising better accountability, transparent management, and a non-professional dedication to institutional politics at the local scale (Castro, 2019; Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014; Russell, 2019, pp. 994–996). However, some observers have noted that this focus on local institutional politics might also result from pre-existing relationships between municipalists and local social movements, of which municipalists were often former members; something that as we will see is certainly true for municipalist initiatives in Spain.

Attention to the relationship between urban social movements and municipalist governments especially raises questions of efficacy: do municipalist governments help to fulfil the demands of urban social movements? While rarely focusing on urban politics, social movement scholars do provide valuable theoretical insights regarding this question. Tilly and Tarrow (2007, p. 87) for instance, suggest that the outcomes of social movements should be explained by combining the conditions and the processual events of political contention. Among these conditions, they identify institutional constraints and opportunities within the state, but also the social recognition of the movement’s identity (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 86). In particular, they stress ‘the availability of influential allies or supporters for challengers’ within the state and, importantly, its ‘decisive changes’ (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 57). They also claim that alliances are related to the stability of ‘current political alignments’ among the elites. In other words, the
existence of links between social movements and allies within the state are presented as an explanation for the realization of the demands of social movement although they warn that no single aspect of the political regime can sufficiently explain the movement’s impacts.

In this paper we aim to develop the analysis of the importance of allies through the concept of ‘alliances’, which we define as associations that are formed to advance common interests. Such alliances are key features of the political context but more changeable than political regimes, and can help to explain the outcomes of particular interactions in settings where regimes remain relatively unchanged. In particular, our analysis will focus on the alliances between activists and local councilors who were activists just a few months before the municipal elections, and who have thus become institutionally co-opted. We argue that these alliances differ from alliances between activists and political representatives without an activist background or who have not been co-opted. Our analysis will especially focus on the position of activist-former activist alliances vis-à-vis dominant factions in the local government. We will claim that activist-former activist alliances may open state institutions to the arguments of activists; but we will also argue that this friendly environment does not necessarily result in the accommodation of activist demands, as this can be obstructed not only by other dominant factions but also by the structural characteristics of the political and economic context within which alliances emerge. Hence and above all we suggest examining not only the nature of alliances but also their relation with the characteristics of these contexts.

Here we want to point at two issues regarding this discussion of ‘alliances’ in particular. Firstly, Tilly has argued that, above all, most social movements aim to be visible and heard and to recruit supporters in order to replicate their protest activities (Tilly, 1999, p. 257). This argument especially focusses on the internal outcome of movements: their persistence and legitimacy over time. In contrast, following our research questions, the focus of our study is external, highlighting the extent to which demands of social movements are fulfilled by changing the practices and ideas of other actors, and especially public policies (Amenta, 2014; Burstein & Linton, 2002; Kriesi et al., 1995, p. 209). Nonetheless, attention to the protest cycle may help disclosing which ‘decisive changes’ affect both the political structure and the movement (for example, in terms of their priorities). In turn this would result in more robust explanations.

Secondly, we argue that ‘co-optation’ – defined as the ‘incorporation of a previously excluded political actor into some center of power’ (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 215) – is only one of the ‘events’ or ‘mechanisms’ in a chain that leads to the accommodation of the demands of social movements. In other words, it is an empirical question if the existence of alliances between activists and either coopted or non-coopted political representatives will actually result in the accommodation of social movement demands. Does co-optation result in the institutionalization of movements, and, if so, what are the consequences (Kriesi et al., 1995, p. 231; Mayer, 2016)? In particular, we argue that the translation of alliances into the accommodation of demands can be more restricted by the forces of capitalism (Barker et al., 2013; Cox & Nilsen, 2014; Della Porta, 2015) than by the process of co-option and the alliances it entails. We therefore suggest to take a step back from the inventory of mechanisms proposed by Tilly and Tarrow, and to explicitly
investigate the influence of social movements and the responsiveness of governments in order to determine if the demands of social movements are actually fulfilled, and to understand why this happened, or not.

‘Influence’ is a specific form of power, what Lukes (1974, p. 31) calls the power over. This entails the use of someone’s capacities – usually a collective actor – in order to change other actors’ practices, ideas, and capacities (power to). The result of influence can be either detrimental for the recipient – as is the case in all forms of domination, exploitation, repression, and symbolic violence – or it can add information, open up alternatives courses of action, and contribute with resources – as is the case in rational persuasion, negotiations, and cooperation to improve policies. In ideal democratic regimes, influence is generally expected to function according to this second way. However, parties that engage in political conflicts will assess influence according to varying criteria, especially when they operate in settings of hierarchical power. Thus, Burstein and Linton (2002, pp. 386–387, p. 398) argue that politicians accept grassroots influence because it can help to improve their electoral prospects; but they also warn that public opinion manufactured by mass media and powerful third parties usually enjoys more influence than social movements. A different view is proposed by Amenta (2014, p. 18) who argues that ‘the influence of movement collective action is contingent on specific contexts’. We agree, but we do not see any reason to limit these contexts to ‘the level of democratization in the polity’ or ‘the partisan regime in power’ because there also are ‘global power relations’ and historical shifts and crises of the dominant capitalist modes of production and consumption that structure the accommodation of demands of social movements (Barker et al., 2013, p. 5).

‘Responsiveness’ can be seen as the reverse side of the coin. A movement’s influence can be considered externally successful when authorities are responsive to its demands. In other words, ‘the political system’ responds with specific actions that partially or totally satisfy a movement’s demands (Schumaker, 1975, p. 494). This view has led Burstein et al. (1995, pp. 282–284) to distinguish six types of institutional responsiveness: 1) ‘access’ of activists so that their demands are heard by authorities; 2) the incorporation of the demands of a movement on the political ‘agenda’; 3) the adoption of legislation or ‘policies’ in line with the activist demands; 4) the implementation of those measures as policy ‘outputs’; 5) the alleviation of protesters’ grievances through observable ‘impacts’; and 6) ‘structural’ consequences for social groups beyond the protesters. These ‘structural’ consequences relate to Marxist concerns about the possibilities to take over the state and thereby ‘refashioning it from below’ (Barker et al., 2013, p. 21) in ways that resonate with the utopian intentions of many municipalists. Importantly, Schumaker (1975, p. 505) stresses that non-responsiveness can take different forms: lack of action, repression, ‘minimal policy responses’ that are unsatisfactory for activists or represent token gestures, and ‘compromise policy responses’ that only result in partial concessions. In fact, some concessions to movements occur without the adaptation of new legislation or policies. After all, concessions can serve to placate disruptive protests, and to distract attention from structural issues that are highlighted by activists, such as the influence of corporations on government decisions (Barker et al., 2013; Della Porta, 2015).
Methodological choices

Our analysis aims to understand the extent to which urban movements have influenced the policies of municipalist governments in Spain, and to which extent these governments have thus been responsive to the demands of urban movements. In order to answer these questions, we have followed a qualitative research strategy. In particular, we have conducted interviews with both activists and municipal authorities in order to understand the views of both on the realization of urban movement demands, and on the factors that have influenced this. Our interviews are were guided by the assumption that the success and failure of social movement to influence policies depends to a large extent on the views held by these two groups of actors involved. After all, political contention is an ongoing process in which the views, goals, and assessments change over time. Those changes need to be understood by taking into consideration the accounts of both protestors and authorities (Bosi et al., 2016; Cox & Nilsen, 2014; Giugni, 1998). However, following our discussion before, we also wonder to which extent broader practices and contexts structure the influence of social movements. Therefore, we also studied government documents (including official reports published in run-up to the 2019 elections) and mass media sources (see the end notes). In turn, these sources may serve to contrast or triangulate the information gathered from the interviews.

Following these choices, from 2015 to 2018 we conducted 79 in-depth, semi-structured interviews in four Spanish cities – Madrid, Barcelona, A Coruña, and Cádiz. The selection of Barcelona and Madrid as research cities was motivated by their centrality in Spanish politics. Both cities also act as economic engines for the country as a whole (Alexandri & Janoschka, 2018; Davies & Blanco, 2017; González et al., 2017; Rodríguez, 2016). In addition, we selected two medium-size cities in less prosperous regions as well: A Coruña in northern Spain, and Cádiz in the south. While these cities have so far enjoyed less academic and political attention, they can help to provide a broader picture of the responsiveness of municipalist governments to urban movement demands.

As explained above, our interviews targeted two groups. On the one hand, we interviewed 23 city councilors and managerial staff members closely related to local government: six in Barcelona, nine in Madrid, five in A Coruña, and three in Cádiz. Following the theoretical focus of our research, we especially tried to interview councilors and staff members with an activist background. On the other hand, we interviewed 56 activists: 15 in Barcelona, 23 in Madrid, nine in A Coruña, and nine in Cádiz. Most of these activists started their engagement in 2011 during the 15M movement. The specific interviewees were chosen according to their involvement with housing, remunicipalization, cooperatives and the solidarity-based economy, and community gardens and social centers – the policy fields on which our analysis focused in particular. In selecting these activists, we first approached contacts in our personal networks, and then proceeded with a snowball strategy to approach others. In nine cases this resulted in group interviews. We aimed to reach a gender balance in our sample; eventually we interviewed 45 men and 43 women. We also preferred selecting activists with a long-term engagement.
During the interviews we discussed the demands of activists, the protest activities of urban movements, the responsiveness of municipalist governments to activist demands, the limitations experienced by city councilors, and the main urban affairs at stake during the municipalist mandates. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed in line with critical discourse approaches (Wodak, 2013).

Results

The 15M movement was triggered by the 2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent austerity policies of the Spanish government. This crisis had caused a dramatic rise in unemployment rates and primary home evictions. At the same time, many beneficiaries of the past economic growth – both capitalists and political elites – were embroiled in widely publicized corruption scandals (Alexandri & Janoschka, 2018; Díaz-Parra et al., 2017). Together, this resulted in multi-week occupations of city squares around the country that started in May 2011. The protests then unfolded through various grassroots campaigns, spin-off movements, and local assemblies (Flesher Fominaya, 2020; Romanos, 2013; Tejerina & Perugorría, 2018). However, at the time that the new left political party Podemos gained five seats in the European elections of May 2014, street mobilizations were already in a declining phase -with the remarkable exception of housing activism. Meanwhile, many activists entered the realm of institutional politics. In this development, it is important to keep the differences between 15M and Podemos in mind. While 15M was a highly diffuse protest movement, Podemos was an increasingly conventional political party. And while many 15M activists continued to reject electoral and institutional politics, the leaders of Podemos refused to be identified as representatives of 15M. However, they did repeatedly acknowledged that the origins of Podemos were tightly linked to the 15M movement. Many 15M activists also helped shaping the organizational basis of Podemos, as well as the municipalist platforms that participated in the 2015 municipal elections, either as full members, candidates, or electoral supporters (Calvo & Álvarez, 2015; Font & García-Espin, 2020; Rodríguez, 2016, pp. 81–89).

Surprisingly to many of its local supporters, Podemos originally decided not to run in the 2015 municipal elections. At the same time, however, many grassroots initiatives fostered the ‘municipalist turn’, attracting support of many who were mobilized through the 15M movement. As a result, popular candidacies mushroomed across Spanish cities. Amongst these municipalists, the 15M anti-austerity and anti-corruption agenda was even more pronounced than in Podemos. Most bottom-up municipalist platforms soon gained an independent identity as a political party as well. A few weeks before the 2015 elections, Podemos ended up negotiating agreements with many of these municipalist initiatives, which enabled them to share seats in cities such as Madrid and Barcelona (Calvo & Álvarez, 2015). A Coruña also combined several political factions, whereas in Cádiz Podemos took the lead itself, establishing a coalition with a municipalist initiative after the elections.

The outcomes of the May 2019 elections were less successful for the municipalists, who only won second mandates in Barcelona and Cádiz. Subsequently, they again needed to form coalitions with non-municipalist political parties to return to power. While we do not examine the causes of these election outcomes here, they illustrate the need to contextualize the relations between social movements and local governments. After all, before the 2019 elections, municipalists in each of the four cities that we discuss in this
paper showcased the success of their policies. At the same time, however, many activists contested or nuanced those successes, indicating that in their views, their demands had not been met. In short, we need to gain a better understanding of the responsiveness of municipalist governments to activist demands.

The housing question

The municipalist government in Barcelona developed far-reaching, comprehensive policies for housing after the 2015 elections. It assessed problems, enacted programs, and allocated extensive municipal budgets in relation to the housing crisis in this city. Policies included a substantial increase of the public housing stock, rental subsidies, increased control over tourist accommodations, and measures against housing and land vacancy. As we were told by both activists and officials, the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) also became a regular participant to advisory boards. A PAH spokesperson in Barcelona, was positive about the creation of ‘true spaces for participation [...] where we can voice our demands’ (B20_2017_PAH). They congratulated the local government for ‘some structural changes which are initiated regarding the housing issue’ but at the same time also stressed that the measures were insufficient as ‘there is a lot to do yet; they should be braver’ (B20_2017_PAH). According to them, the PAH had become a key actor regarding the local housing policy because its opinions were taken into account, and also because politicians were apprehensive of the PAH’s capacity for disruption.

In fact, after 2014 the PAH has been the most active post-15 M movement (Martínez, 2019). Managers and politicians who were former housing activists recognized the influence of the movement and explicitly stated that they attempted to respond to its claims. According to one municipal manager, the agreement between activists and town hall had resulted in changes to the criteria of the ‘housing emergency board’ regarding evictions, unauthorized occupations, and cases where residents were unable to pay utilities (B21_2017_City). The same manager also referred to deals with banks (in particular with SAREB) that resulted in the transformation of 200 units into affordable houses for eight years. The municipalist government also expressed the intention to purchase these units, in line with earlier demands of grassroots housing groups. However, some activists disagreed with deals involving SAREB-owned properties, as they were amassed with state resources.

As others have noted (Blanco et al., 2020, p. 28), the Plan for the Right to Housing that structured most of these efforts in Barcelona exemplifies two core ideas of the municipalist agenda: a) the reassertion of political leadership in the urban economy and containment of the influence of the corporate class; b) social inclusion and welfare rights as priorities of local policies. However, at the same time Spanish municipalities cannot implement rent control or change the legislation regarding home evictions without support of the central state (Blanco et al., 2020, p. 31). As a result, the dramatic price hikes in the overheated Barcelona housing market and the social displacement that it entailed set strong contextual constraints to the reach of the municipalist measures.

The interventionist agenda in Barcelona contrasts with the less ambitious measures regarding housing in Madrid. In this city, the municipal government mostly focused on assistance to extreme poverty and homelessness (‘housing vulnerability’), as well as on increasing the social housing stock. However, those measures were not supported by
targets for additional units, nor by additional budgets. According to our respondents, housing activists became increasingly detached from the Madrid administration especially following the failure of the ‘mortgage intermediation office’ (Oficina de Intermediación Hipotecaria, OIH) and the resulting lack of alternatives for evicted families. ‘The OIH functions terribly […]. It only focuses on foreclosures when most cases are not of that kind’ (M21_2016_PAH). Another housing activist attested that in Madrid nothing substantial was achieved except for some minor issues such as negotiations regarding norms for the allocation of social housing and a blockade on the presence of municipal riot police in an eviction procedure. They admitted that ‘a seat at a table with the City and the banks never existed before and this is important to me […] but the results are appalling’ (M15_2017_PAH).

The handling of unauthorized occupied houses (squats) in particular was met with strong opposition of the dominant faction of the Madrid municipalist authorities – the mayor and her closest councilors – so even agreements to use bank-owned properties became stuck and did not end up in the same positive results as in Barcelona, despite tireless efforts of the PAH. In view of the considerable resources of this city and the promises included in the electoral program, it was strikingly rare that housing activist demands were accommodated, which was due to not being a clear priority for the dominant faction of the municipalists. As a city councilor stressed, ‘you do not set the agenda […]. There is a huge problem with the rise of tourist apartments […]. We were only able to purchase 90 or 100 apartments in the last months […]. And the EMVS [municipal housing company] is almost bankrupt’ (M9_2017_City). He also admitted that there was limited contact with the PAH and other housing groups such as the Tenants’ Union or Bloques en Lucha, and that most evictions were ‘very complex’ and, therefore, channeled through the municipal social services.

For a large capital city, with 6,000 units the volume of the social housing stock was very small, especially in view of the considerable waiting list – 30,000 requests – and the price inflation of housing over the past three decades. The Madrid municipalist government initiated the construction of additional 3,374 units. However, these were not yet completed by the end of its mandate in 2019.2 Housing activists were not satisfied at all with these results, nor with the city’s approach to the local movements. According to a representative of the Tenants’ Union, ‘[t]he most powerful councilors haven’t respected the housing movement […]. They say the municipality has no competencies regarding housing […]. However, we reply that they should study the legislation and identify all possibilities’ (M2_2018_Sindicato). Such possibilities included support in cases of expropriations, inspections, and institutional messages of support to threatened tenants. Remarkably, these overall shortcomings of Madrid’s municipalist government regarding housing have not yet been discussed in earlier studies (Petithomme, 2019; Piñeira et al., 2018).

With a humbler budget and policy goals, A Coruña managed to relocate some residents from three informal settlements, and others after foreclosures. This city also promoted a ‘housing first’ program for homeless people,4 while responding quickly to some of the urgent demands of housing activists. Importantly, claims of the PAH were usually not relayed to the housing department, but to the social services department instead. The city councilor in charge had a collaborative attitude towards housing activists, offering assistance in cases of evictions and sudden impoverishment regularly. Local authorities also reached an agreement with private firms not to
disrupt the electricity supply to households unable to pay their bill, and mediated with banks threatening with housing repossessions. When relocations caused urgent needs, the government channeled these cases through a public Foundation (EMALSA). Operating as a magnet for all the policies related to housing, a unique ‘basic rent’ program was launched by this municipalist government: ‘300 people are now beneficiaries […]. Some families told me that they were invisible before. Now they can have a life. An 8 year-old child came to me crying because her mom can finally buy clothes, food, and pay for utilities’ (A3_2018_City).

While activists recognized this responsiveness, they also criticized the lack of a comprehensive municipal housing policy in response to the housing crisis in the area: ‘We call and tell them: “Hey! This bank is seeking repossession. You should press them in view of your political commitment and because you should not be involved with banks evicting people”’ (A14_2017_PAH). Another activist noted that a motion initiated by the Stop Desahucios group (affiliated to the PAH) was passed by city council, but also pointed at the lack of sufficient social housing as the main structural barrier to adequate affordable housing (A9_2018_PAH).

In a similar vein, the municipalist government of Cádiz promoted the rehabilitation of properties for affordable social housing. It launched the OMDEVI (Oficina Municipal en Defensa de la Vivienda) department with the aims to prevent home evictions and to facilitate housing relocations. However, in practice only a few affordable rental houses were acquired through the program Alquiler Justo/Vivir en Cádiz. Housing activists told us that the municipalists’ were very willing to hear them. However, most problems related to the banks that were the creditors, on which the town hall had little influence. After evictions, usually the municipal housing company was contacted, ‘when the family had lost their home and there was nowhere else to go’ (C10_2017_PAH). A municipalist representative confirmed that housing was on their agenda. They had tried to address this by first ‘conducting studies because we needed to know the vacancy rate and the number of sub-standard houses’ (C2_2018_City). These studies concluded that most of the empty properties belonged to private individuals and the Catholic Church, which increased difficulties of reaching deals with the city government. On the other hand, ‘the inherited situation of the municipal housing company PROCASA prevented us from initiating new constructions […]. However, we are starting to build now’ (C2_2018_City). In sum, in this city the interactions between the housing movement and the local government were rare. Therefore, results merely consisted of ‘compromise responses’ from the municipalist authorities, with no explicit dissatisfaction on either side. As Díaz-Parra et al. (2017, p. 80) observe, we should also consider that the housing movement was much stronger in other cities of the Andalusian region than in Cádiz. Table 1 shows the key aspects of the above analysis.

From welfare to commons

Municipalist platforms won office with an ambitious political agenda, which was informed by demands of social movements. However, as Blanco et al. (2020, pp. 22 & 28) suggest and our study confirms, this agenda had to be implemented in a setting of institutional and structural constraints: amongst others, these included the limitations of minority governments; unknown and slow bureaucratic procedures; legal limitations,
and insufficient powers especially regarding housing, health and education issues that are under regional and central government control; austerity measures imposed by the Ministry of Treasure; and the strong opposition exerted by the conservative media and capitalist corporations (Blanco et al., 2020, pp. 30–32; González et al., 2017; Piñeira et al., 2018; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). Despite these constraints, we observe two important shifts adopted by municipalist governments: a) a decentralization of local policies to the neighborhoods, especially in Madrid and Barcelona, which has resulted in a redistribution of resources to the poorest urban areas (Piñeira et al., 2018, p. 17); b) the promotion of participatory, accountable, and non-corrupt forms of governance, as well as of ‘spaces of social autonomy created under the logic of the commons […] (state or non-state) as an alternative to the mercantile and privatizing tendencies of neoliberalism’ (Blanco et al., 2020, pp. 21–29; see also Castro, 2019, p. 207; Font & García-Espin, 2020, p. 395; Sánchez & Garzón, 2019).

Three topics can help to explore this transition from welfare to commons: 1) remunicipalization; 2) the promotion of cooperatives and a solidarity-based economy; and 3) community gardens and social centers. The first of these topics – remunicipalization, or the recovery of hitherto privatized municipal services – constituted one of the leading policies of the municipalist governments, and it received full support of local movements. In Cádiz, for example, this approach was applied to the management of beaches and the regulation of a public company (Cádiz, 2000). For the upcoming second mandate from 2019 onwards, a wider application of this approach has been on the horizon. In Barcelona, plans to remunicipalize water supply were unsuccessful as a result of conflicts between political parties, a fierce counter-campaign by the private water-supplier (AGBAR), and the complexity of reaching agreements between municipalities across the metropolitan region. On the other hand, municipalists successfully created public companies for electricity supply and funery services. They also took back control over the management of three privately run kindergartens and the network of women centers (Castro, 2019, p. 208). Madrid government remunicipalized a profitable funery company, as well as a private electric-bicycle service (Sánchez & Garzón, 2019). However, in

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<th>Table 1. A summary of main outcomes with significant quotes from interviewees.</th>
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Source: The authors, based on municipalist reports and interviews
A Coruña four attempts at remunicipalization, including the management of public libraries, failed as a result of the effective resistance by a local growth coalition of economic, political, military, and media elites. While remunicipalizing these services, in all four cities municipals managed to decrease the municipal debt, thereby proving the pessimistic predictions of political adversaries adhering to the neoliberal mantra wrong.

The promotion of cooperatives and the solidarity-based economy – the second topic of our analysis of the transition of welfare to commons – was especially pronounced in Madrid and Barcelona. It involved many movement participants who were employed in these networks. While this sector has been soaring in the aftermath of the 15 M movement, it has hardly been discussed by the mass media and academics. One example from Barcelona is Barcelona Activa, a new department within the local-development agency that was established in order to foster and strengthen ‘alternative economies’. It now encompasses 4,500 initiatives and more than 53,000 members, thereby making up 8% of total municipal employment, while contributing 7% to the city’s GDP (Castro, 2019, pp. 207–208).

A more conventional topic of the urban commons relates to community gardens and squatted social centers – the third topic in our analysis. Despite critical remarks, most of our respondents observed progress regarding community gardens and squatted social centers under the municipalist governments. In Barcelona, since the 1970s there had been a well-developed network of civic centers. More recently, there had been successful experiments with legalized self-managed social centers (e.g., Can Batlló) and public spaces at empty plots of land (for all kind of outdoor activities and not only for gardening). In addition, among urban movements this city already had a strong legacy of community gardens and squatted social centers. The municipalist government aimed to strengthen and expand this situation. While this policy was generally not made public, in many cases it actively started negotiations with various squatted social centers in order to legalize their status, even though the attitude of squatters regarding legalization generally had been reluctant. As one squatter stressed, ‘we are not the only ones approached by them’ (B2_2018_CSOA). And as an activist journalist explained: ‘The city has protected the squatted social centers that were an institution and were very much consolidated […] Can Masdeu, Kan Pasqual, Can Vies, Kasa de la Muntanya, Casal de Joves de Gracia […]’. The municipality has halted the eviction or has purchased the building’ (B12_2017_Directa). However, as the same informant noted, not all city-owned squats enjoyed the same protection, and two buildings were evicted against the will of the squatters.

In Madrid, councilors with an activist background supported squatting initiatives. However, the mayor and most of the other city representatives did not. The provision of legal spaces for forms of self- and co-management (e.g., EVA, Montamarta, and La Salamandra) was, nonetheless, usually considered a positive sign of policy responsiveness to the movements’ long-term demands. However, for many activists regulations passed by the municipalists were still insufficient (M18_2016_REC). Two of the many squatted social centers in the city were located in city-owned properties: La Dragona and La Ingobernable. Despite some failed attempts from both sides, negotiations with local government did not move forward. Local authorities then initiated legal proceedings
for a forcible eviction. Eventually, this took place after May 2019. One city councilor indicated that their sympathies for some autonomous initiatives should not prevent the government from promoting regulations applicable to all types of citizens organizations, including for sport and recreation: ‘these rules are not intending to meet the needs of the squatting movement, but to meet the needs of space for the whole society of Madrid’ (M10_2017_City). In this regard, the local government put more energy in the creation of participatory Local Forums in the city’s districts and kept itself fully engaged with the large network of community gardens, which had enjoyed the assistance of city managers from the environmental department even before 2015.

In the smaller cities of A Coruña and Cádiz there were fewer movement demands for autonomous spaces, but the municipalist authorities facilitated them whenever possible. One squatter from A Coruña, for example, was very positive about the lack of interference by the municipalist government (A13_2017_CSOA). However, the forced eviction in this city of the squat A Insunisa was controversial. Squatters told us that the municipalists initially applauded this autonomous project, but later obliged it to move to an alternative location, disregarding its self-managed nature. Eventually, activists stressed that ‘this was the most violent eviction in the history of the city’ (A6_2018_CSOA). The mayor of A Coruña also saw this particular conflict as a negotiation failure, especially in comparison to other participatory processes – such as the renovation of the building O Cárcere for sociocultural purposes – and the opening of several community gardens (A5_2018_City). In Cádiz, according to one councilor, the initiation and promotion of community gardens, sometimes combined with schools, and the inclusion of different social organizations beyond the traditional resident organizations, were amongst the most remarkable achievements (C1_2018_City).

Conclusions

This study has engaged with two theoretical approaches to the study of the relationship between social movements and municipalist governments. On the one hand, prior assessments of Spanish municipalisms (Castro, 2019; Petithomme, 2019; Piñeira et al., 2018; Rubio-Pueyo, 2017) and similar frameworks of participatory governance elsewhere (Lima, 2019; Russell, 2019) assume that favorable local governments facilitate the institutional access of urban movements. However, they do not clarify the extent of the influence of activist claims, and thus the responsiveness of municipalist governments to activist demands. Similarly, pluralist scholars tend to depict local politics as a favorable sphere for the achievement of social movement demands, but they seldomly identify the causal role of institutional alliances and the multi-scalar constraints exerted by regional, national, and supranational authorities (Davies & Blanco, 2017). On the other hand, institutionalist and ‘political process’ researchers have overcome these shortcomings (Amenta, 2014; Giugni, 1998; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). This was done with an emphasis on the national scale of the political regime, but without much attention to the constraints of economic structures. Importantly, when urban movements have been carefully assessed by the ‘political process’ scholars (Kriesi et al., 1995, pp. 230–236) repression and co-optation emerged as the main explanatory categories.
In response to these two perspectives, we have proposed to focus our analysis on the specific influence of urban movements and the responsiveness of municipalist governments to their demands (Luokes, 1974; Schumaker, 1975). We have showed that in Spain, the co-optation of activists in municipalist platforms has shaped governments favorable to the demands of local activists. However, we have also stressed that the actual consequences of these alliances for the accommodation of activist demands need to be researched empirically, especially as the extent of such accommodation is structured by several contextual factors as well. Our analyses of the outcomes in the four Spanish cities confirm that there are alliances between activists and municipalist government. It also suggests that regarding some policy topics, municipalist governments have to various degrees been responsive to activist demands. Specifically, our analysis indicates that for the housing question, the outcomes were substantial and even ‘structural’ in Barcelona; were partially attained with ‘compromises’ in Cádiz; and consisted of balanced responses in A Coruña (mainly through their unique ‘social rent’ program). However, at the same time, the outcomes in Madrid were not very satisfactory, especially in view of the political and economic capacity of this city, and the extent of social needs and grievances that helped to mobilize grassroots movements. In each of the cities except in A Coruña, remunicipalizations as well as the promotion of cooperatives and a solidarity-based economy experienced a significant upsurge. And while the same applied to other dimensions of the urban commons such as community gardens and civic centers, squatted social centers were only supported by Barcelona government – and even there not consistently and not without difficulty.

Despite these clear indications of responsiveness, at the same time our analysis also shows many tensions and extensive dissatisfaction in various policy areas – although to various degrees in the four cities – suggesting the necessity of continued local activism. Our interviews suggest that the allies of social movements within municipalist governments mainly consisted of former activists who had become councilors and mayors. Their co-optation has certainly not only proven to be detrimental for the urban movements. After all, they helped to open the doors to town halls through various participatory initiatives, which garnered attention for grassroots demands (Font & García-Espín, 2020). Sometimes this also resulted in the partial realization of those demands. However, in other cases such responsiveness was limited because the allies were not part of the dominant faction of the municipalist government – as was the case in Madrid – or because municipal policies were constrained by neoliberal policies determined by regional and central governments, and by campaigns against remunicipalization orchestrated by various capitalist firms (Alexandri & Janoschka, 2018; Sánchez & Garzón, 2019). In other words, the ‘political opportunity’ of institutional alliances was not a sufficient condition for positive results. While partially positive, these observations indicate the urgent need for an additional detailed analysis of the structural contexts of constraints to municipalist policies created by supra-local policies and capitalist corporations in the dynamics of contention (Barker et al., 2013; Davies & Blanco, 2017; Della Porta, 2015; Mayer, 2016).

Our analysis suggests that the constraints to urban movements and municipalist governments especially related to the austerity policies that were enacted following the 2008 global financial crisis, as well as to restrictions imposed by the EU and other supranational institutions (Davies & Blanco, 2017; González et al., 2017). After decades
of exacerbated real-estate construction, public and private debt had skyrocketed. Most of the money borrowed by the Spanish central government to fix the resulting rating crisis was used to bail out banks at risk of collapse. In parallel, severe budgetary cutbacks were imposed on regional governments which are crucial for the provision of many urban services, including health and education services. Furthermore, municipal expenditures were placed under strict supervision of central government, which threatened to suspend local autonomy in case of non-compliance. Together, these measures only sped up a development along the previous trajectory of neoliberal policies, based on the privatizations of public assets, the precarisation of the labor market, and a rampant financialisation of the local economy. Our analysis suggests that the capacity of municipalist governments and urban movements to counter these external constraints has been limited.

The coalitions between Podemos and municipalist platforms have certainly paved the way for a favorable environment in urban politics. In this setting, post-15 M local movements have kept raising their voices and have found friendly audiences amongst the policy makers. However, at the same time, with thousands of grassroots activists transferring to the realm of institutional politics, street mobilizations decreased. In the wake of the 2015 elections, notwithstanding some remarkable exceptions, the 15 M movements already experienced exhaustion, even though housing struggles attracted maximum attention and anti-neoliberal legacies were alive and kicking within municipalist governments. Hence, we argue that partial implementation of the progressive agenda of municipalism was instigated by the renewed episodes of contention and negotiation between the remaining activists and the new, and often inexperienced, municipalist governments. In other words, urban movements were prompted to keep using their contentious capacities of protest, disruption, and claim making, even when facing friendly opponents. Therefore, on top of the causal role of contextual constraints, we argue that these specific developments of the protest cycle further help to understand why movement outcomes were frustrating, even with sympathetic officials at the town halls.

In short, our study suggests that research on social movement outcomes would benefit from additional attention to the strategic actions of challengers and opponents in terms of influence and responsiveness, but also by analyzing the historical development of social mobilizations and the constraints exerted by other government levels and the dynamics of capitalism. In this regard we expect more empirical research illuminating how social movements actually achieve their goals when institutional allies do not provide a sufficient condition for success.

Notes

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