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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Remaking Public Politics? New Municipalism, participatory governance and urban welfare in Barcelona

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ABSTRACT: Municipalist movements have sought to respond to multiple crises under conditions of austerity. The best-known example is the movement party Barcelona en Comú, which for eight years turned the Catalan capital into a flagship of new urban politics. A novel alliance between the municipalist government and civil society aimed to challenge the dominance of private economic interests and the austerity policies of the national government. In doing so, it sought not only to address widespread social precarity but also to transform the very practice of politics. Although social rights and precarity were central concerns of the protest movements that brought Barcelona en Comú to power, comprehensive analyses of municipalist social policy remain scarce, with the partial exception of housing. By focusing on social policy under municipalist governance in Barcelona, this article thus highlights an understudied policy field. Adopting a multi-sited approach across four domains—basic social protection, dental care, energy rights, and home care services—the article examines how politics have been reshaped in these areas, paying particular attention to civic participation and to the relations between the municipality, the central state, and the private sector.

KEYWORDS: Barcelona en Comú, Civil Society, New Municipalism, Participatory Politics, Public-Civic Co-Production, Social Policy, Urban Welfare

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1. Introduction

The multiple crises of our time are escalating dramatically: Following the 2008 financial crisis, austerity policies, the pandemic, and shifting geopolitics have intensified challenges and exposed gaps in welfare protection worldwide. While their causes are global, the social consequences are felt locally. Since the 2010s, “urban austerity” (Schönig and Schipper 2016) has further strained municipal budgets across Europe, with severe consequences for vulnerable groups. At the same time, “rebel cities” (Harvey 2013) have emerged as centers of resistance to austerity and crisis impacts. Most notably, this led to the 15-M protests in many Spanish cities (Romanos 2017; Lluís 2023). A key element of these movements was the denunciation of corruption within the conservative and social democratic two-party system, accusing elites of appropriating public affairs for private gain. While austerity measures spared elite economic interests, they imposed severe cutbacks that especially affected the working class (Observatori Metropolità de Barcelona 2014; Buendía and Molero-Simarro 2018).

Amid this backdrop, new political actors entered stage and sought to bring protests from the streets into town halls. In nearly all major Spanish cities, local anti-austerity alliances won the 2015 municipal elections, sparking a dynamic known as new municipalism (Brunner et al. 2017; Thompson 2021; Roth et al. 2023). Central to addressing the post-2008 crisis was the idea that “austerity can be challenged and circumvented at the municipal scale through judicious state-civil society collaborations” (Davies et al. 2022, 29). A new municipalist-civil society-alliance was supposed to break up the combined dominance of private economic interests and national government’s austerity and thus not only to address the social precarity of the many but also to revolutionise the way of doing politics. This intersection of inclusive social policies and municipal democratization is the focus of this article.

The best-known example for this strategy is the local alliance of movements *Barcelona en Comú* which, with its candidate Ada Colau becoming mayor of the Catalan capital from 2015 to 2023, turned Barcelona into the international flagship of a new urban politics (Blanco et al. 2020; Thompson 2021, 321ff.; Engler and Engler 2023). The movement was based on the idea of governing Barcelona in common, understood as a shared, collectively managed site. ‘Barcelona’ not only became a beacon for municipalist movements around the world, but has also been widely analysed from an academic perspective. In terms of policy content, the reception primarily focuses on housing, tourism and urban development (Zografos et al. 2020; D’Adda 2021; Pradel-Miquel 2021; Miralles-de-Imperial 2022) as well as on care and gender policy (e.g. Kussy et al. 2023; Moreno-Colom 2021), while overarching economic and social policies often take a backseat. If they are investigated, analyses mainly focus on the programmatic promises of *Barcelona en Comú*, even after eight years in power. Although social rights and precarity were a major focus of the protest movements that brought *Barcelona en Comú* to power, a comprehensive analysis of actually implemented municipalist welfare policy is still lacking, except for housing policies. This gap is mirrored by a complementary gap in welfare state research, where “the spatial dimension in welfare policy research is too often neglected” (Andreotti et al. 2012, 1926).

In contrast, the mode of policy-making and the democratisation of urban politics have received significant attention: The spotlight falls on the key role played by civic actors, the cooperation between public authorities and civil society, and a politics of the commons (Eizaguirre et al. 2017; Castro 2018; Bua and Bussu 2021; Bianchi 2023). Programmatic analyses of the municipalist governance model are often linked to concrete case studies, for example on participatory neighbourhood politics, digital formats such as the *Decidim* platform, civic management of public properties in the Patrimoni Ciutadà programme, or the participatory budget (e.g. Aragón et al. 2017; Pera, Bianchi and Salazar 2023; Blanco-Romero 2024). These studies impressively demonstrate that heterogeneous practices are gathered under the cipher ‘civic participation and

democratisation’, while their relationship to each other remains underdetermined due to the dominance of case-by-case analyses. Studies that examine the broad historical trajectories and dynamics of change in participation policy necessarily adopt a bird’s-eye perspective and therefore tend to do so at the expense of a detailed analysis of specific policy fields (e.g. Blanco et al. 2022).

In focusing on municipalist social policy in Barcelona, we draw attention not only to an understudied policy field. Using a multi-sited approach, we also analyse the way of doing politics, with a special focus on the role of civic participation in its various manifestations. Joan Subirats, political scientist, founding member of *Barcelona en Comú* and interim deputy mayor of Barcelona (2019-2021), articulated this dual perspective as the key concern of *Barcelona en Comú*: Cities are the starting point “for the attempt to reconquer the institutions with the aim of securing the standard of living and the minimum subsistence level of a large part of the population and at the same time the place where municipal, communal processes of social security are initiated from below” (Subirats 2017, 10; own translation). What has become of this endeavour? How did *Barcelona en Comú* change welfare policy in eight years of power? Given the emergence of new actors and a new politics of ‘the common’, is it justified to diagnose a change “from welfare to commonfare” (Subirats and Gomà 2020, 523)? To answer these questions, we need to open the black box labelled civic participation and examine how it is embedded amid the responsibilities and priorities of municipal authorities, the (central) state, civil society, and the private sector within in one policy field. We start from the assumption that the municipalist remaking of the public can only be understood in its complexity if, in addition to the municipality-civil society axis, the municipality-central state and municipality-private sector axes are systematically included in the analysis. To address the questions raised, we briefly present four exemplary case studies from the field of welfare policy, each representing a distinct mode of governance: the domain of basic social protection exemplifies a policy that reinforces the use of *social rights*; the dental program illustrates a policy of *municipalization and public ownership of infrastructures*; energy security represents a policy of *regulating private providers*; and home care services exemplify a policy of *civic co-production*. From these perspectives, the broadly emphasized yet highly heterogeneous practice of civic participation can be both analyzed and assessed with regard to the field-specific modes of doing politics.

The paper proceeds thus: Section 2 introduces the state of research on new municipalism and multi-scalar governance, focusing on the role of civil society at the interface of welfare policies and democratisation. Following a brief characterisation of the Spanish welfare state and the Barcelona case (section 3), social policy guidelines in Barcelona are reconstructed through two strategically important programmes (section 4). We then analyse how the city government implemented welfare policy by looking at the four different domains basic social protection, dental care/public infrastructures, energy security, and home care services (section 5). In section 6, we reflect on the challenges facing such policies, paying particular attention to the interplay of the heterogenous actors and scales as well as the role played by civil society in municipalist Barcelona. In the concluding remarks (section 7), we ask what can be learnt from the Barcelona case for an inclusive, democratized municipalist welfare policy.¹

¹ The research for this paper is conducted in the project „Remaking the public and the future of the commons“, which is part of the collaborative research centre SFB 294 “Structural Change of Property” at the Universities of Jena and Erfurt in Germany. The empirical findings for Barcelona are based on a total of more than 50 semi-structured interviews with experts from the city government, the city administration, various parties as well as civil society and grassroots actors. The interviews were conducted in 2021, 2022 and 2023 and have been evaluated using qualitative content analysis. The interviews most relevant to this article are listed in the appendix. We also analyzed a broad corpus of documents comprising government papers, party programs, cooperation agreements, and policy guidelines. Two social policy documents, which are presented in section 4, are key to this article.

2. New Municipalism and the re-invention of cooperative public-civic governance

Progressive local governments are part of a fluctuating history of municipalism that began with local social programmes and infrastructures in the second half of the 19th century (Crewe 2016) and is based on the idea “that keeping power, authority and decision-making close to citizens’ everyday lives is more likely to result in policies that benefit the community as a whole” (Radcliff 2022, 44). Scholars and activists highlight the local scale’s unique capacity to control public infrastructure and foster direct relationships (Cooper 2017, 345; Davies et al. 2022, p. 91-93). Building on this, scholars have envisioned a politics of proximity, while acknowledging the limits of local competencies (Subirats 2016; Roth et al. 2023). At the same time, municipal governments seek to expand their authority through contestation within multi-level governance. Barcelona municipalists, for example, leveraged local power to push for change at other state levels (see Ada Colau’s foreword in Ajuntament de Barcelona 2018).

At the same time, the new municipalist project involves more than the devolution of power to city townhalls. Claiming that new municipalism is „about returning power to ordinary people“ (Bookchin, quoted from: Thompson 2021, 323), activists and scholars respectively highlight radical democratisation as the core aim of municipalist movements: “If we take the institutions that are closest to citizens, the municipalities, and we turn them into sites of direct decision-making, we can create a democracy worthy of the name.” (Observatorio Metropolitano 2014, 143) In this vein, the strategy was to change institutional politics and open it up for civic co-production, building on self-organization and promoting democratic forms of controlling local resources. Beveridge and Koch (2022, 139) describe the municipalist 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.” The key benchmark is the principle of the common, understood as the collective, non-competitive self-management of common resources and institutions (Dardot and Laval 2019). In contrast to the *commodification* of the public services and properties, which characterise the dominant liberal project, the radical democratic project has been summed up as the „*commonification* of public services“ (Bauwens and Niaros 2017, 52). This is not about isolated commons projects, but about integrating the principle of collective self-governance into public administration.

The conceptual linking of ‘public’ and ‘commons’ also implies pitfalls. The radical-democratic label ‘commonification’ becomes a catch-all, resulting in insufficient differentiation between participation formats. However, digital formats through which individuals submit proposals for the citizens’ budget differ considerably from the consultation of neighbourhood organisations, dialogue forums with third sector organisations, the co-management of public companies or the activation of volunteers – to name just few examples from the broad spectrum. A monolithic understanding of civil society can also obscure its internal power dynamics, neglecting how well-established actors are more likely to be involved than small grassroots groups or initiatives in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Davies et al. 2022, 102-103; Caravantes and Lombardo 2024, 191-192).

The fact that such a key political issue remains underdetermined is particularly problematic since calls for civil society can also be heard in completely different contexts and with different meanings: namely in the very austerity regimes these municipal actors are rebelling against. For example, Davies and Blanco (2017, 1539) state in a comparison of six Spanish and British cities: „The dominant tone in the sphere of participatory governance was retrenchment.“ Toothless participation without substantial decision-making power, a new rhetoric of co-production and appeals for a new division of labour between the state and citizens have gone hand in hand with welfare cuts since the 1990s. This delegation of responsibilities and duties to non-state actors, „without actually seeing an increase in their executive of self-government capacities“ (Castro 2018, 220), has been aptly described as „passive subsidiarity“ (ibid.; Bianchi 2020, 66).

Although the municipalist project aims in the opposite direction, understanding these dynamics is crucial to grasping the obstacles to radical democratisation from below in a multi-scalar setting. Helpful for such an understanding is the concept of ‘community capitalism’ (van Dyk and Haubner 2021), which shows that neoliberal austerity is not limited to social cuts and commodification. Community Capitalism gives its name to an era of capitalism in which non-waged reproductive forces (in neighbourhoods, communities, cooperatives, voluntary organisations) are re-organized, governed and exploited in new ways, offering at once social value and legitimacy to the capitalist system. The combination of post-wage politics and community politics is proving to be an answer to both, the functional reproductive crises under austerity and a response to declining consent and the crumbling neoliberal hegemony since the financial and economic crises 2008 ongoing: „The emergence of a new political economy of social value extraction and cost reduction is accompanied by a moral economy that utilizes the emotional ladenness of voluntarism and community – an emotional ladenness that veils the precarious and exploitative implications of this ‘solution’.“ (van Dyk 2018, 539)

Without a doubt, municipalist-civil society alliances and state-led attempts to exploit community resources are far from congruent. Delegating service provision through *outsourcing* to local communities, neighbourhoods and volunteers is fundamentally different from democratising public politics through the integration of civic actors in decision-making processes, i.e. the *insourcing* of civil society (cf. van Dyk and Haubner 2021, 151-161). In practice, however, the boundaries can be fluid: The municipalist strengthening of communities always takes place under socio-economic conditions that enforce the exploitation of non-waged activities at the local level and the ‘emotional ladenness’ of community references has the potential to attract heterogeneous actors under the same roof. With this conceptual framework, we thus draw attention to the potentially ambivalent role of civil society in the re-organisation of public policy. This focus is particularly important for the analysis of social policy, where the delegation of care and provision to non-state actors plays an utterly important role.

3. The multi-scalar context conditions of municipalist Barcelona

The Spanish welfare state is a latecomer by European standards, largely due to the Franco dictatorship. Created in the late 1970s, its development coincided with the end of the *Trente Glorieuses* elsewhere and the emergence of cuts in public expenditure. Spain has a decentralized welfare system in which the regions enjoy considerable autonomy: responsibility for most public services lies in their hands, and they have a long history of urban self-administration: Municipalities and regional governments, with their responsibility for healthcare, education, and social services, administer roughly half the Spanish budget for welfare state payments (Martí-Costa and Tomàs 2017, 2112). In order to fulfil these tasks, however, the autonomous regions are dependent on central government transfers. When compared with federal systems, the Spanish model stands out partly because the decentralized system of benefits provision exists in parallel to the persistence of central state regulation. Additionally, though, the areas and levels of regulation are highly segmented due to the absence of federal structures, which favours informal forms of negotiation (Subirats and Gomà 2020, 523).

The Spanish welfare state is categorized as a southern European regime type in which family support plays a key role in the context of fragmented wage replacement schemes (Montagut 2011). Wage replacement payments related to retirement and unemployment are organized by the central state and are similar to systems characteristic of conservative-type welfare states (Aguilar-Hendrickson and González de Durana 2020). However, it is not just families but also civic networks that play a major role for social provision. An additional factor in Catalonia is its long tradition of cooperatives and neighbourhood networks, toward which many actors regardless of their political background display a positive attitude (Observatori Metropolità de Barcelona 2014,

6f.; Font and García-Espin 2020, 397-398). Of particular importance is the history of the “Barcelona Model” (Blakeley 2005), which stands for re-localisation and civic participation as part of the democratisation of Spanish institutions in the post-Franco era: “By 1986 this approach had translated into regulations establishing a series of participatory initiatives (i.e., public hearings; petitions; right to information) and sectoral and territorially differentiated advisory councils, which played an important role, particularly in social policy.” (Bua and Bussa 2021, 722) Yet it is not very controversial that a more liberal policy geared towards competitive advantages and economic growth increasingly became the centre of the model, associated with gentrification, touristification and growing social inequality (Marti-Costa and Tomàs 2017; Bua and Bussa 2021). Nevertheless, the assessment of its participatory character remains controversial to this day: While some emphasise “strengthened forms of urban citizenship” (Eizaguerre et al. 2017, 430), others criticise the activation of civil society as neoliberal subjectivation (Charnock, March and Ribera-Fumaz 2021, 593).

The welfare state environment for Barcelona has undergone major changes in the recent past. While the central government initially responded with anti-cyclical measures, in Summer 2010 it implemented a U-turn toward austerity politics. This involved budget cuts of 10 percent compared with the previous year and was accompanied by record levels of unemployment and growing social inequalities (Gray 2020, 29-30). In September 2011 the governing social democratic party PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*), together with the conservative PP (*Partido Popular*), pushed through a constitutional amendment that enabled the subsequent PP government to pass the Montoro Law in 2012, making budget stability binding for all levels of government. The cuts passed on to the regions since 2011 – in education (19%), the health sector (10%), and long-term nursing care together with social services (13%) – have put pressure on the municipal and regional governments in charge to cut their own budgets (Del Pino 2020, 536). Meanwhile, major areas of jurisdiction were curtailed in the course of a wide-ranging process of recentralization (Davies et al. 2022, 59-60; Navarro and Pano 2019, 112-114). Unlike regional and central government, municipalities had to balance their annual budgets, while strict restrictions on public sector hiring were imposed. Since municipalities are simultaneously responsible for key areas of welfare provision, a precarious situation arose in many places (Lain and Torrens 2019, 387).

Barcelona was likewise affected by fiscal austerity pressures, yet it was able to cushion their impact more effectively than other municipalities thanks to substantial local tax revenues. Among these, the Catalan *Impuesto sobre Estancias en Establecimientos Turísticos* (Tax on Stays in Tourist Establishments), to which the city added a municipal surcharge, generated roughly €100 million annually due to the large inflow of tourists.² Even more significant, however, was the municipal property tax, whose yield benefited from the high valuation of real estate in Barcelona and accounted for around 60 percent of the city’s total tax income (Valls 2024).

Under these conditions, *Barcelona en Comú* unexpectedly came to power in spring 2015 and initially formed a minority government under Mayor Ada Colau, followed by a coalition with the Catalan social democratic party PSC (*Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya*) from May 2016 until November 2017, followed by a period of minority government until July 2019 and a subsequent coalition with the PSC lasting until the end of the term in June 2023.

² https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/economiatreball/en/news/news/new-projects-for-city-residents-funded-with-the-icet-tourist-tax-1525891?utm_source=chatgpt.com (accessed 1 november 2025).

4. Programmatic guidelines governing municipal social policy

Two programmes are crucial for understanding Barcelona's municipal welfare policy from 2015 to 2023: *The Strategy for Inclusion to Reduce Social Inequalities* (2018) and the *Social Innovation Strategy* (2021). The municipalist government framed its welfare policy within Barcelona's tradition of participatory politics, referencing similar initiatives by previous social democratic and conservative governments. The 2018 inclusion strategy builds on the Citizens' Agreement on an Inclusive Barcelona, launched in 2006 by the PSC-led government and signed by 235 organizations. However, it marks a strategic shift, adopting a more critical stance: It aims to reduce income disparities, dismantle educational inequalities, improve access to civic associations, and combat stigmatization and spatial inequalities. Unlike earlier programmes, it strongly critiques regional and central governments while emphasizing municipal efforts in social policy. Cooperation with private companies plays a much smaller role. A close analysis of the programme reveals a dual social policy strategy: providing immediate emergency aid as well as "the mission to change the socio-economic structures in order to realise the social rights of every resident" (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2018, 19). In her foreword, Mayor Ada Colau describes welfare policy as co-designed and co-managed by the municipality and civil society as equal partners, valuing civil society's knowledge for joint problem-solving.

The *Governance measures for social innovation programme*, adopted in 2021, addressed the social challenges posed by the Covid19 pandemic. The city has substantial autonomy over public health matters, particularly health-related social services such as care provision, yet lacks jurisdiction over clinical healthcare, which falls under regional control. The dilemma regarding the limited jurisdiction of the municipality was stated more explicitly now, with social innovation being described as a strategy for dealing with the limits to the city's executive powers and financial resources. In light of the pandemic, the aim of the programme was to ensure that "social services communicate with citizens in a simple, direct, transparent, comprehensible and non-stigmatizing way so that citizens are able to exercise their rights fully" (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2021, 14). A close reading of the document reveals two major strategies for inclusive municipal policy. The first strategy is citizen empowerment: This involves training in household economics to enable citizens to manage better with few resources. In addition to promoting individuals' responsibility for themselves, the aim is also to generate a collective power to act. Legal support and networking initiatives should help citizens claim services and advocate for social rights. Second, the strategy seeks to bolster communities of solidarity and to promote the co-production of welfare: the idea is for people in one's immediate environment to be included as potential service providers. Unlike in the inclusion strategy, here it is primarily individuals like neighbours that are addressed, while the co-design of welfare policy by civil society organizations takes a back seat. The main motivation behind this strategy is not to democratize municipal politics, but rather to acknowledge the city's limited financial options: "Co-production is being promoted because the public sector is not in a position on its own to cope with all the existing social challenges." (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2021, 3)

Both programmes place the municipality-civil society axis at the centre of municipalist welfare politics, albeit with different emphases: Co-design and co-management by civil society organisations are at the heart of the *Inclusion Strategy*, while the *Innovation Strategy* focuses on co-production through civic care.

5. Municipal welfare policy in Barcelona

The city government's social policy has had little resonance in everyday politics and media beyond housing. Alfredo Palomera, advisor for urban policy in the parliamentary group of *Barcelona en Comú* and one of our interview partners, points out: "People were not talking about dental health. We were seen as freaks [...] and

they were like: ‘When are you going to talk about housing?’” Èlia Gran, Head of Communication of the City Council's Department of Health, Ageing and Care from 2020 to 2023, stresses the low appeal of welfare policies for vulnerable people: They “are not sexy enough to keep you in office. Even though these were ideals that I think we all shared on all levels, this is not enough to win the city again because these are not your voters.” As outlined above, municipalist welfare policy has also remained an underexposed field in academia, although the social effects of austerity policy were a key driver of municipalist movements.

To fill this research gap *and* to open the black box of doing politics, we now explore the four domains of municipal welfare policy – basic social protection, municipal dental care, energy security and home care services – and examine how the city government proceeded in concrete terms within the complex web of municipal, regional, central state, private sector and civil society actors. As outlined in the introduction, our choice of policy fields is based on their capacity to exemplify the city government’s different approaches and modes of steering within the Spanish multi-level system. We do not claim to cover all important areas of urban welfare and have deliberately decided to exclude the broadly analysed housing complex at this point. Each policy field represents a prioritized mode of steering, thereby bringing into focus four distinct social policy strategies: the use of social rights, public ownership, regulation of private providers, and civic co-production. Owing to these diverse modes of public governance that constitute the focus of our research, the policies selected for illustration vary widely, ranging from concrete policy programs through shifts in ownership structures to the codification of progressive procurement rules. Throughout, we address the actual role of civil society and participatory politics.

5.1 Basic social protection and access to social rights

Up until recently, responsibility for non-contributory basic protection in Spain has laid exclusively at the regional level (Aguilar-Hendrickson and González de Durana 2020). In 2020 the governing coalition of the social democratic PSOE and the left-wing ‘newcomer’ in the party system *Podemos* centralised and standardised benefits when they introduced the *Ingreso Mínimo Vital* (IMV). Their aim was to improve provision for those affected by extreme poverty after the European Commission criticized that regional basic protection programmes only reached about 20 percent of those potentially eligible (Villa Cigales 2021, 42). The introduction of the IMV gave rise to a complex situation, since the Catalan basic protection system *Renta Garantizada de Ciudadanía* (RGC) continues to exist – just like other regional systems. However, both systems of basic social protection still reach only a minority of those affected by *extreme* poverty (Petit 2021, 64f.).

The Barcelona city government responded to this situation by implementing the programme *Xarxa de Resposta Socioeconòmica* (XARSE).³ This programme aims to help people in precarious circumstances to gain access to assistance and to assert their social rights; as staff at the program highlight (Interview Anonymous 1; see appendix), it has become an important point of contact for migrants in particular to understand the Spanish welfare system. The city government has also made substantial financial contributions to address the precarious situation, mainly through emergency subsidies geared toward housing, energy and food. Though this is not unique for the municipalist government but reflects the structure of the Spanish welfare state (Navarro-Varas and Porcel 2017, 57), it is also true that Barcelona’s financial circumstances remained relatively favourable, enabling municipal welfare policies considered far-reaching and innovative by Spanish

³ https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/bombers/es/noticia/en-marcha-el-proyecto-xarse-redes-de-respuesta-socioeconomica_1008668 (accessed 3 December 2025).

standards.⁴ Experts from the social rights department and the trade union CCOO (see appendix) stressed that the City Council has used emergency payments to offset shortfalls caused by cuts in welfare payments (in the education and health sector, for example) – even though these are not genuinely municipal domains of responsibility.⁵ Emergency intervention is mainly needed due to the limited reach and low level of payments provided by the regional and central state systems of basic social protection.

In addition to emergency assistance and advisory services, the city government undertook steps to increase acceptance of an unconditional basic income – even though formal responsibility lies with regional authorities and the central state. In the context of the “B-MINCOME” project, co-financed through the EU *Urban Innovative Action Programme*, a basic income model project was launched. Given its considerable ambition, the model project expired with very little fanfare, largely because the end of the programme coincided with the start of the pandemic (García 2022).

Regarding basic social protection, then, the City operated at three levels, reflecting the dual perspective of the 2018 *Inclusion Strategy*: On the one hand it granted emergency aid, on the other it addressed “the socio-economic structures in order to realise the social rights of every resident” (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2018, 19) in two different ways: The municipality provided support for those seeking to assert their social rights, and it initiated a model project to advocate for unconditional basic protection. As for the role of civic and grassroots actors, it is striking that these strategies entailed no participatory elements.

5.2 Public infrastructures and politics of municipalization

A key strategy was the (re)municipalization of infrastructures to “regain democratic control over sectors that have a powerful impact on people’s lives” (Badia and Gornes 2021). This successfully returned a women’s shelter and privatized kindergartens to municipal ownership, as well as establishing the public electricity company *Barcelona Energia*. However, other (re)municipalization plans were abandoned. Amid austerity policies, financial and legal hurdles in public-sector hiring proved particularly obstructive (Rubio-Pueyo 2017; Gillespie 2020, 37-38; Interview Basteiro, 2021, see appendix). One example is the municipalization of the *Servei d’Ajuda a Domicili* (SAD), which provides home care services. Competition rules requiring even city-run companies to maximize cost efficiency, along with state austerity policies, prevented the creation of a public company to absorb the 4,000 care staff (Kussy et al. 2023, 10). Unable to municipalize SAD, the City government instead tightened public tendering criteria, particularly regarding care workers’ pay and conditions—shifting toward public regulation of private providers (see section 5.3.).

Other plans for (re)municipalization triggered powerful resistance from private service providers (Montaner 2023). While the creation of a municipal, participatory water company was blocked by the courts after the intervention of private supplier AGBAR, the introduction of a municipal dentist provoked opposition from private sector dentists in Catalonia. In Spain dental healthcare is only partially integrated into the national public health system, which gives rise to a variegated situation in terms of coverage and quality (Solís-Baltodano et al. 2019). In 2019 the City Council decided to establish a municipal dental service, offering treatment up to 40 percent cheaper than private providers—without burdening the municipal budget (Badia and Gornes 2021). Intended to increase competition and lower prices, the self-financing service was not subject to national austerity policies under the Montoro Law. However, the Catalan private dentists’ association filed

⁴ Barcelona spends more than double the amount of many other Spanish cities per capita per year on social services: <https://directoressociales.com/37-ayuntamientos-mayores-de-20-000-habitantes-alcanzan-la-excelencia-en-inversion-de-servicios-sociales-39-son-pobres-en-esta-materia/>

⁵ Cf. also Gillespie (2020, 66): the city invested €350 million in social services between 2012 and 2018, despite these being the responsibility of the regional government.

a complaint, and in October 2022, the supreme court ruled that municipal dental care constituted a “duplication of powers,” as dental health falls under Catalonia’s jurisdiction (Altimira 2022). Barcelona en Comú’s appeal was overturned by a national court in autumn 2024. Beyond legal resistance from private providers, the case highlights jurisdictional conflicts within the Spanish welfare state that hinder municipal social services.

The situation differs where private providers see no profit: In 2018, as part of its welfare strategy, *Barcelona en Comú* established a municipal dental service offering free treatment to vulnerable people classified as eligible by the social services department.⁶ The service is operating and has not been questioned. Barcelona en Comú also used it politically to pressure regional and central governments to expand national healthcare coverage and close gaps in Catalonia’s system (Barcelona en Comú 2015, 2019). Since the government change in Madrid, efforts to integrate dental care into state-funded healthcare have indeed increased (Secretaria de Estado de Comunicación 2022). In December 2024, the *Plan de Acción de Atención Primaria y Comunitaria 2025-2027* was adopted, providing free dental care for children up to 14, pregnant women, and vulnerable people.

Civic participation plays a key role in governing public infrastructures, as seen in plans for collective governance of municipalized water supply (Geagea et al. 2024). In practice, however, the municipalist-civil society axis in infrastructure governance remains weak or even absent, as in dental healthcare. The case of municipal electricity provider *Barcelona Energía* in turn highlights how contested participation remains. According to its director, Iu Gallart, the goal was to involve citizens in shaping priorities, tariffs, and investments.⁷ However, experts – from within the administration, but especially from civil society – doubt whether the relevant bodies enable meaningful participation beyond mere consultation (cf. interviews Basteiro 2021; Cotarello 2022, see appendix; Varo et al. 2023).

5.3 Energy rights and the regulation of private providers

Energy poverty is defined as the “inability [of a household], to achieve a socially and materially necessary standard of domestic energy services” (Tirado-Herrero 2018, 10). In 2021 14.3 percent of the Spanish population were unable to heat their homes to an adequate room temperature.⁸ A policy of market liberalization and privatization has fostered this trend: during the period from 2009 to 2019 electricity prices increased by around 70 percent (Destatis 2023). The private sector for electricity is structured in a highly oligopolistic way, with just a few major companies dominating the market (González-Gómez et al. 2014, 2). One strategy “to break up oligopolistic structures”, was the founding of *Barcelona Energía* as public competitor that supplies municipal institutions and also offers tariffs for renewable energy below market prices (Interview Gornes 2022, see appendix).

Another strategy is the political regulation of private providers, which is anchored on different governance levels. Above all this is through the national *Bono Social* (Law 897/2017), a mechanism that guarantees those in need a discounted price for their electricity supply. The seven largest electricity companies are legally obliged to put a part of their profits toward safeguarding vulnerable clients. At the Catalan level, policy measures go beyond this, offering even more comprehensive protection for vulnerable households: In 2015 the Catalan parliament passed the law 24/2015 on urgent measures to manage the housing and energy poverty

⁶ <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/sanitalsalut/es/canal/dentista-persones-vulnerables> (accessed 3 December 2025).

⁷ <https://energy-cities.eu/webinar/remunicipalisation-of-energy-services-in-barcelona-the-advantages-and-challenges-associated-with-setting-up-a-municipal-energy-company/> (accessed 3 December 2025).

⁸ www.miteco.gob.es/es/ministerio/planes-estrategias/estrategia-pobreza-energetica/default.aspx (accessed 15 November 2025).

emergency. Since then, it is no longer legal to turn off any electricity, water, or gas supply in Catalonia, provided the household in question is categorized as vulnerable. The implementation of this law, pushed through by social movements, constitutes a recognition of the right to energy (Angel 2019, 337).

This is where the city government's energy policy comes in. Shortly after entering government in 2015 Barcelona en Comú stated in *The Emergency Plan for the First Month in Government* that private companies should be given the responsibility of guaranteeing energy rights. In March 2021 the municipality, together with the Catalan government, forged an agreement with the private company *Endesa*, Spain's largest electricity supplier. The agreement includes debt cancellation for families affected between 2015 and 2018 and the obligation to bear half the costs arising from measures to combat energy poverty.⁹ At the legal level, too, the City advocates for energy rights by repeatedly taking Endesa to court over alleged illegal disconnections of vulnerable households.¹⁰

Not least among the strategies is the empowerment of citizens by providing advice on energy poverty. Since 2017 eleven energy advice bureaus have been set up whose aim is “[to offer] the information, attention and intervention necessary for people to exercise their energy rights and stop companies from denying them access to basic utilities.”¹¹ Alongside individual empowerment it is also a matter of encouraging citizens (as in the XARSE programme) to assert their social rights. The service is in high demand and the number of people seeking assistance has increased steadily (Interview Uyà 2023, see appendix).

As far as the role of civil society is concerned, the establishment of energy rights through the regulation of private providers is an example of grassroots pressure from below and its significance for progressive municipal and regional policymaking.

5.4 Social care and civic co-production

A major example of municipal social policy that involves civil society was the programme *Vila Veïna*, which translates roughly as village of neighbours. Advertised as “pioneering municipal initiative”, it offered care services in “teams of specialised professionals, people who receive care and members of the community [which together] form part of a network which is jointly responsible for collective welfare”.¹² A community area encompasses 10,000 to 30,000 residents. Care, so the message, is a community task and not a matter of individual responsibility.

Vila Veïna was implemented as a pilot project in 2019 after detecting that 41% of Barcelona's population was responsible for people with care needs. The main aim was to improve the working conditions and quality of life of those who care at home. Here, too, the idea was to support people (carers as well as people in need) in asserting their social rights by providing information, support, and easy access to professional services. It was also intended to promote communication among unpaid carers and to involve neighbours, fostering a

⁹ www.barcelona.cat/infobarcelona/en/agreement-to-eradicate-energy-poverty_1054386.html (accessed 15 November 2025).

¹⁰ www.barcelona.cat/infobarcelona/en/tema/social-services/first-sentence-in-the-struggle-against-energy-poverty_835395.html (accessed 15 November 2025).

¹¹ <https://www.habitatge.barcelona/en/housing-services/problems-paying-your-home/energy-rights> (accessed 15 November 2025).

¹² https://www.barcelona.cat/infobarcelona/en/tema/social-services/vila-veina-the-new-community-care-initiative-2_1130635.html (accessed 15 November 2025).

professionally supported, community-based self-help approach. The model began with funding of 3.5 million euros and four bases; at the end of the municipalist government 16 of the targeted 115 bases existed.¹³

Vila Veïna was part of a broader process to restructure the city's social and homecare model. As such, it was dovetailed with the above-mentioned social services organization SAD (*Servei d'Ajuda a Domicili*), via which professional domestic care is offered. Of particular importance in ensuring that SAD and the *Vila Veïna* programme function well together was the introduction of 'care superblocs': the goal was to realize a social model of proximity that serves to help humanize care by developing a closely-spun spatial network of professionals and the community of carers and neighbours based on the Dutch *Buurtzorg* model (Moreno-Colom 2021). A key driver for this approach is the fact that the public funding is nowhere near enough to cover the actual needs. Lluís Torrens, former Director of Planning and Innovation in the City Council, asserted: "The idea of community power is that the public administration has no power or the budget or the capability to solve all the problems of the citizen." (Interview Torrens 2022, see appendix)

The *Vila Veïna* programme linked to SAD is a prime example of social policy with a community orientation: It was designed as a public-community project and uses neighbourhood ties and village-like relationships in promoting the ideal of social policy based on proximity. What is striking is the dual approach to improve the access to rights-based social infrastructures and professional support as well as to activate neighbourhood and community resources. In the programme's publicity materials, however, social rights appear as secondary to the notion of community as an alternative to individualism and loneliness. The slogan "Community care is better than solitary care" hides the question of where "public care" might indeed be better than "community care", since the latter is not based on reliable social rights.

While the program addressed neighbours and local communities as service providers, they played no discernible role in the design of a new neighbourhood-based welfare and care policy. Regarding the discrepancy between civic provision and civic participation/self-governance in municipalist care policy, Kussy et al. (2023, 15) note: "The case of BComú highlights the limitations when the municipalist platform creates or uses the communal assets for creating local welfare without the mechanisms for their self-governance."

6. Discussion: Challenges and potentials of municipalist welfare

Is Barcelona a shining example "that austerity can be challenged and circumvented at the municipal scale through judicious state-civil-society collaborations" (Davies et al. 2022: 29)? The *Social Inclusion Strategy* (2018) and *Social Innovation Programme* (2021) focus on this, linking municipal-civil society alliances to a critique of austerity imposed by higher state levels. At the same time, these two programmes reveal the broad spectrum and heterogeneity of participation, including the important differentiation between the role of individual citizens and the part of civic organisations such as neighbourhood councils, third sector organisations or unions (Font and Garcia-Espin 2020, 396). However, this heterogeneity remains a black box in academia due to the underexposure of municipalist welfare (see, for instance, Andreotti et al. (2012) and the focus of participation research on individual formats. What is missing are systematic analyses of entire policy fields like welfare.¹⁴ Our four domains show that doing politics encompasses not only the 'municipality-central/regional state' and 'municipality-civil society' axes but also the often-overlooked 'municipality-private

¹³ In January 2024, the current city government led by the PSC, decided not to extend the project, but promised a similar service, of which there was still no sign in October 2025.

¹⁴ As an instructive example for feminist policies and politics in Barcelona see: Caravantes and Lombardo (2024).

sector' axis: "Market regulation has rarely been discussed, even though it became an important feature of the local political economic approach" (Kip & van Dyk 2024, 57). Only through the interplay of these axes can the actual role of civil society in municipalist Barcelona be fully understood. This perspective aligns with public and civic actors' reflections on "the real participatory reach of democratic innovations" (Caravantes and Lombardo 2024, 191), as explored in qualitative studies (Feenstra and Tormey 2021; Kip and van Dyk 2024).

Regarding the **municipality-state axis**, the city government operated under restricted jurisdiction, as key social policy areas such as basic social protection and key areas of health care fall under Catalonia and the central state. Three policy strategies can be identified on this axis, each addressing the problem of insufficient powers and limited resources: First, emergency assistance allowed the city to act in areas formally under regional or central government control, though with little civic participation in their design. Since this ad-hoc aid conflicted with the city's proclaimed social rights approach, a second strategy focused on empowering citizens as rights holders. This included professional advisory services and infrastructures for (self-)organization, enabling citizens to claim their rights. Finally, with its model project B-Mincome, the municipality pursued agenda-setting to challenge the boundaries of its own responsibilities.

The empowerment strategy connects to the **municipality-civil society axis**. Social policy guidelines, programmes like Vila Veina and some public infrastructures involve civil society in diverse ways. This includes encouraging and supporting neighbours to act as service providers, setting up action networks, opening municipal decision-making bodies, and incorporating civic knowledge into policy design. Various civil society actors we interviewed emphasized that *Barcelona en Comú* has been the most responsive organization to the voices of civil society (Interviews Anonymous 2 2023; Artique 2023; see appendix). However, certain segments of civil society reportedly received less attention than others. Moreover, participatory formats tended to attract individuals with greater temporal and educational resources, reflecting also gender-specific selectivities (Interviews Recio 2023; Romero 2023; see Appendix).

Beyond this, the interpretive open-endedness of participatory politics acquires explosive potential in the context of austerity, precisely because the call to involve civil society is made within the very frameworks against which municipalist actors are resisting. As outlined in section 2, it is crucial to distinguish between *delegating service provision* to third-sector actors, communities, and volunteers and *democratizing the public sector* by integrating citizens and civic associations into decision-making while ensuring adequate funding. This distinction is especially relevant in social policy, where public responsibilities are frequently shifted to civil society.

At the municipal level, with its limited financial competences, the line between democratization and delegation is often blurred, however. What we find in Barcelona are processes of *democratization* that involve 'insourcing' civil society in decision-making and policy design as well as processes of *delegation* of public responsibility that involve outsourcing tasks to civil society. The fact that this tension was not explicated by those in charge leaves a key question unanswered: At what point do we witness a de facto exploitation of civil society resources under austerity, while it is perceived as participation and democratization? Vila Veina highlights this issue, as democratization—despite being central to *Barcelona en Comú*—risked taking a backseat to volunteer-driven service provision (see Kussy et al. 2023, 15-16). Although the programme was designed to support people already engaged in caregiving — rather than to outsource new tasks — these responsibilities continued to lie outside public provision. Strengthening community care under such circumstances therefore mainly served to compensate for the limited role of the local state. Yet, the situation is more ambivalent than it appears at first sight. First, public-civic co-production of welfare policy responded to power and funding cuts by higher state levels, while the city government increased social spending (Gillespie 2020, 71). Second, the municipalist effort to encourage civic action was always (also) an effort to empower actors to advocate for their social rights. This could be described as an innovative strategy to link delegation

and organization, which at best could contribute toward the democratization of municipal politics. If unsuccessful, however, it risks becoming passive subsidiarity (Castro 2018, 220)—civic welfare provision without real decision-making power.

Finally, the **municipality-private sector** axis played a greater role than the City’s self-presentation suggested. The issue was not primarily public-private partnerships, which previously contributed to the commodification of public infrastructures, but rather the de-privatization of welfare provision through (re)municipalization and stricter regulation of private actors. Barcelona illustrates the significant legal, financial, and employment-related hurdles to (re)municipalizing infrastructures. Where (partial) municipalization succeeded—such as with the electricity supplier *Barcelona Energía* or the municipal dental service—the goal was not full public ownership but breaking up oligopolistic structures and exerting pressure on market prices through cheaper public services. Rather than excluding private providers from social services, the focus was on taming them. This *municipalization light* reflects the city’s limited room for maneuver under national austerity and private sector-friendly legislation. Here too, ambitious plans for civic co-management fell short. At *Barcelona Energía*, for instance, the idea of a cooperative structure where users were also voting owners was never actually realized (Varo et al. 2023).

Beyond municipalization, the *regulation of the private sector* played a key role. A prime example is the establishment of energy rights, making it illegal to cut off water, electricity, and gas, with private providers contributing to costs. The basic principles of a foundational economy are clearly recognizable here: the foundational economy focuses on “the goods and services that are indispensable for well-being” (The Foundational Economy Collective 2019, 64) and seeks to place these consistently at the service of the public interest and to regulate them accordingly. This aim can also be identified in the politics of procurement – as we showed using the example of contracts with home care services. However, academic studies on New Municipalism, often rooted in urban and movement research, tend to overlook these ‘dry’ but crucial areas of public policy like procurement (for an exception see Salazar 2019). As a result, municipalist efforts to remake the public receive too little attention, while the municipality-civil society axis is overemphasized.

On all three axes, the municipalist city government acted as an “activist state” (Cooper 2017, 346) within a multi-level structure. Its goal—ideally with civic actors—was to challenge existing divisions of responsibility, strengthen social rights struggles, democratize the public sector, and increase control over the private sector. This included deliberately challenging jurisdiction and formal competences. A member of *Barcelona en Comú* in the city government stressed: “There was a gap between obligations and competences. We were more concerned about obligations than competences, and in this sense we stood for election on the premise that we could force the position by using our political strength to change the landscape” (quoted in Feenstra and Tormey 2021, 6).

7. Conclusions: Learnings from Barcelona

Barcelona is widely seen as a model case of municipalist politics, making its analysis relevant beyond the local context. We conclude by highlighting three key insights: first, the misfit between policies and politics; second, obstacles to reclaiming the public; and third, municipalist strategies for future self- and co-governance. As to the *misfit of (welfare) policy and (doing) politics* the former is characterised by great material urgency and has measured its success primarily by whether it has succeeded in actually supporting people in poverty. Attempts to democratise politics are less urgent, require more long-term efforts and were particularly focused on urban policies and anchored in neighbourhoods and movement hubs. Moreover, welfare and participation policies target different groups: Studies on new municipalism suggest that participation is largely “from the middle

class for the middle class” (Mérida 2024, 922), whereas Barcelona en Comú’s social policies prioritized vulnerable citizens, whose capacity for participation is lower. Following Archon Fung (2015), who differentiates three values of democratic governance – effectiveness, legitimacy and social justice – it can be seen that social justice is central to social policy, but subordinate in participatory politics. In this field, the question of the legitimacy of political decision-making took centre stage, while effectiveness also played a role when the knowledge base of civil society was addressed as a governance resource. In line with Juan Mérida, we conclude that “municipalist governments focused more on opening up social representation than on combating distributive inequality” (Mérida 2024, 921).

Second, to understand the *obstacles to reclaiming the public* through inclusive social policies and alternative ways of doing politics, all three axes of governance must be considered. The underexposure of the municipality-private sector axis means structural barriers to participatory politics and co-governance are often overlooked. We have seen that the regulation of private providers played a pivotal role in municipalist practice – unlike in programmatic statements. For this mode of governance, however, there is no discussion at all about alternative modes of governance, so that the municipalist government pursued progressive regulatory policies by conventional politics. On the municipality-central state axis, the municipal government effectively mitigated austerity’s social impact. This strategy was made possible by the city’s fiscal situation, which was comparatively less precarious than that of other Spanish cities, and was facilitated by the social-democratic coalition partner PSC, whose interests in poverty reduction were largely aligned. As outlined above, social urgency was at the forefront here and promoted a rather conventional mode of doing politics, a development that was reinforced by the PSC’s limited interest in alternative governance approaches. Additionally, after eight years in power and the 2023 electoral loss, it became clear that municipalist actors had overestimated civil society’s mobilizing power—a lesson other municipalities had to learn even earlier.

This brings us to the third key insight: *the empowerment of civic actors*. The analysis of four welfare domains shows that, despite obstacles, alternative governance approaches played a significant role. Various services empowered citizens to claim their rights and participate, laying foundations for future self- and co-governance. However, such policies do not align with election cycles. Positively, empowerment effects can outlast municipalist governments. Negatively, long-term democratization often takes a backseat to the urgent demands of welfare policies: While Barcelona en Comú placed democratisation and participation at the heart of its programmes, crisis management under challenging conditions also involved the delegation of social tasks to civil society without democratisation being able to keep pace with this dynamic. Given the misfit between policies and politics, structural impediments, and the empowerment agenda, it is clear that commonfare was Barcelona en Comú’s ideal—but remained far from reality.

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Appendix: Interviews

Anonymous 1: Interview with a social worker at a XARSE counseling center.

Anonymous 2: Interview with a volunteer worker at *Associació 9Barris Acull*, a network of various civil society actors in Nous Barris.

Jaume Artigue: Volunteer at the *AVV Dreta de l'Eixample neighbourhood association* and retired architect and urban planner.

Lluís Basteiro: Head of cabinet of the municipal council of presidency and Water and Energy Council 2015-2019; since 2020 Coordinator of the *Associació de Municipis i Entitats per l'Aigua Pública in Catalonia*.

Enrique Gornes: Political Consultant for Climate Emergencies and Remunicipalisation for Barcelona en Comú in the City Council (2019-2023).

Èlia Gran: Communications director at the City Council's Department of Health, Ageing and Care (2020-2023), since 2023 she is working in the foundation of Barcelona en Comú, *Fundació Sentit Comú*.

Aurora Huerga: Trade union officer at *Comision Obrera Nacional de Catalunya* (CCOO); since 2017 General Secretary of the Construction Industry and Services Federation.

Lluís Torrens i Mèlich: Director of Planning and Innovation for Social Rights in the Barcelona city administration 2015-2022.

Alfredo Palomera: Advisor for urban policy in the parliamentary group of *Barcelona en Comú* since 2024.

Albert Recio: At the time of the interview, vice president of the *Federation of Neighbourhood Associations of Barcelona*.

Carolina Romero: Technologist working on *Decidim*, an open-source digital participation platform developed by the City of Barcelona.

Joan Subirats: Professor Emeritus of Political Science; founding member of Barcelona en Comú; Commissioner for Culture at Barcelona City Council 2017-2019 and Deputy Mayor for Culture, Education, Science and Community at Barcelona City Council 2019-2021.

Isaac Uyà: Manager of the Barcelona City Council's Energy Advice Points (Punto Asesoramiento Energético) since 2022.

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