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Consenting Participation? How Demands for Citizen Participation and Expert-Led Decision-Making Are Reconciled in Local Democracy

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Consenting Participation? How Demands for Citizen Participation and Expert-Led Decision-Making Are Reconciled in Local Democracy

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Abstract

The rising participatory demands of citizens have been addressed with a variety of democratic innovations. However, increasing demands for democratization have been accompanied by a parallel rise in scepticism and doubt about the capabilities of representative democracies to ensure policy efficacy. I seek to address this democratic ambivalence by focusing on the demands for citizen participation in the context of local democracy. In a series of qualitative interviews, and using Vienna's Seestadt Aspern, Europe's biggest city development project, as an illustration, I examine (a) bottom-up and top-down understandings of democracy and participation among administration, city-planners and citizens and (b) strategies to reconcile inconsistent expectations of participation. I show that conflicting understandings of participation are dealt with in different settings and that, despite a public commitment to democratic participation, citizens, city-planners and administration alike expect a democratically concealed yet controlled management process allegedly ensuring more efficacious policy decisions.

Keywords

democratic ambivalence, democratic theory, participation, urban planning, democratic innovations

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Introduction

Contemporary demands for individual democratic participation keep rising while at the same time scepticism about the efficacy of democracy and participation is soaring. How are these contradictory developments reconciled in political practice? On the one hand,

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participatory demands are constantly growing and are being catered to (Saurugger, 2010). Contrary to many accounts, which interpret shrinking party membership and voter turn-out as evidence for *declining* participation, a *qualitative change* and an *expansion* of the forms and the scope of political participation in Western societies is occurring (Theocharis and van Deth, 2016; Walker et al., 2015). Instead of stating political apathy tout court, demands for unmediated engagement by citizens, shrinking levels of trust and anti-system (populist) movements indicate that established institutions of democratic mediation are increasingly questioned (Gerbaudo, 2020). More and more groups that have not been engaged in traditional channels of participation in the past voice demands for democratic participation (Della Porta et al., 2017). Consequently, direct citizen participation in policy-making has become a new normal, especially at the local level (Bherer et al., 2016).

On the other hand, there are increasing doubts about the ability of democratic participation to guarantee policy efficacy. As policy programmes to the Covid-19 pandemic have recently shown, expert-led, top-down forms of decision-making are thriving, because they are believed to enhance problem-solving capacity (besides spurring resistance such as anti-vaxx and anti-mask-mobilizations) (Cassani, 2021; Rapeli and Saikkonen, 2020). Thus, while the expectation to integrate citizens directly is growing, it appears that the magnitude of problems our societies are facing – ranging from the international pandemic to rising inequalities, economic decline and the climate crisis – calls for an expert-informed governance including only the most knowledgeable specialists. The parallel rise in demands for bottom-up participation *and* top-down steering has been conceptualized as a growing *ambivalence* with regard to the problem-solving capacities and normative foundations of liberal and representative democracy (Blühdorn, 2019).

This ambivalence points to a growing tension between, on the one hand, the expectation that representative democracies include citizens *ever more and more directly* and, on the other hand, the expectation that only *more technocratic top-down decision-making* can deal effectively with increasing social crises and urgencies. While protesters against COVID restrictions demand more direct democracy and warn about imminent expertocratic authoritarianism, social movements such as Fridays for Future call for a more expert-led rule to fight a threatening climate crisis. These developments are not new but have been conceptualized as a democratic dilemma between effectiveness and participation (Dahl, 1998) for a long time. Yet, what is specific about the current societal configuration is that the resulting ambivalences emerge *within* citizens vis-à-vis democracy itself (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2020) as opposed to *between* different sections of society (which could then be addressed through electoral politics). The growing demand for individual autonomy and participation in decision-making is contrasted by increasing calls for expertocratic effectiveness to manage ever-expanding societal challenges (Blühdorn, 2019). Scholars seeking to disentangle the *democratic ambivalence* have therefore called for a combination of normative *and* empirical approaches (Müller-Rommel and Geißel, 2020), institutional *and* citizen-oriented perspectives (Mayne and Geißel, 2016) and a revision of established indicators for democratization (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2020). In this article, I address the difficult relationship between citizens' demands for being included and the confidence they have (or lack) in expert-led planning through the lens of understandings and expectations that are attributed to citizen participation and examine how possible contradictions are dealt with in the context of local democracy.

To this end, I use the case of Vienna's Seestadt-Aspern, one of Europe's biggest city development areas, as an illustration of a development shaping many other contexts. Located at the eastern outskirts of Vienna, it presents a relevant and promising case as it

claims to develop a novel model of integrating ecological transformation (therefore organizing efficient social change) *and* participatory-democratic development goals (therefore promising more inclusion of citizens). Based on qualitative interviews with decision-makers, planners, and citizens, I analyse (a) bottom-up as well as top-down participatory expectations among administration, city-planners and citizens; (b) the corresponding understandings and perceptions of democracy; and (c) existing strategies to reconcile potentially inconsistent expectations of citizen participation. A contextual analysis of the Seestadt sheds light on contradictory expectations with a view to direct, representative and expertocratic forms of citizen involvement and allows us to approach the challenges that increasing complexity and efficacy requirements pose to Western liberal representative democracy.

In order to establish a theoretical foundation, the next section revisits different conceptualizations of citizen participation as portrayed in the literature. Then, I will provide details on the case selection and the empirical methods used (Section 3) followed by the different expectations with regard to democratic participation based on qualitative interviews with actors and citizen residents involved in the development of Vienna's Seestadt-Aspern (Section 4). In Section 5, I conclude by mapping the different participatory expectations and ask for strategies of reconciliation within local democracy. I argue that despite a public commitment to public participation, experts and planners always remain in control of how participation is used. Thus, unexpectedly, what I call *consenting participation* to some extent serves the purpose to integrate citizens into a framework of more efficient policy management and control. Yet, I also argue that this is *not* the result of an elitist and anti-democratic conspiracy. City planners, administration, *and* citizens agree on *not* diverging from the established hierarchy of expert-led planning figuring well above participatory processes.

Participation and Democracy: Between an End in Itself and a Means to an End

Scholars of Western representative democracies have underlined that democratic norms and societal expectations for their embodiment through democratic participation are constantly changing (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2020; Zorell and van Deth, 2020). However, recently, conflicting readings of how participation contributes to democratic legitimation have been thriving in democratic theory – thus emphasizing the notion of a democratic ambivalence in theory, too. While some emphasize participation as a democratic end in itself, other approaches understand it as a strategic political means to the end of organizing legitimacy. To guide the empirical analysis of the democratic ambivalence, and to establish a range of theoretical lenses, in this section, I revisit different motivations and functions of participation that have been developed in democratic theory (see also Teorell, 2006). I focus on how different democratic approaches imagine different ways citizen participation contributes to democratic legitimacy and how they attribute different roles and contesting powers to citizens.

Theories of a *liberal democracy*, which have been the scholarly mainstream for a long time, have described the role of participation within a democracy as rooted in the principle of political equality (Warren, 2016). In this perspective, and with the help of mediating institutions and elections, participation shall peacefully integrate different interests into legitimate democratic decisions as well as hold representatives accountable (Dahl, 1998). Therefore, in a liberal democracy perspective, participation focuses on

providing input and throughput legitimacy which suggest that democracies are considered legitimate when the input from citizens (input *by* the people through participatory processes) is considered sufficient or when the institutional processing of citizen demands (*with* the people) meets the requirements of 'efficacy, accountability, transparency, openness and inclusiveness' (Schmidt, 2013). When looking at today's Western democracies, it is this liberal notion of participation providing equality and accountability via elections and institutions that is most visibly challenged.

Reflecting new participatory demands, *participatory democracy* and *deliberative* conceptualizations of democracy have considered participation as the democratic core of the task to reconfirm democratic values in a society whose institutions are not able to continuously do so. Yet both approaches seek different pathways to reach this goal (Habermas, 1996). *Participatory* approaches highlight the effects of democratic participation on the individual (Teorell, 2006). An engagement with questions of public interest is expected to promote individual growth and self-efficacy. This notion assumes that democracy and democratic norms rely on social preconditions they themselves cannot guarantee (Macpherson, 1977) and picks up Alexandre de Tocqueville's accounts of participation as a 'school of democracy', which reproduces the 'democratic citizen' (van der Meer and van Ingen, 2009).

In contrast, participation in the reading of *deliberative* democratic theory leads to a common interest-oriented discursive and political culture and promotes a societal consensus on policy decisions in the long run (Thompson, 2008; Zittel, 2007). People deliberating upon matters of the collective are expected to consider diverse perspectives, to establish a shared sense of responsibility and to develop a common culture of consent about matters of society. Furthermore, by including many different perspectives, deliberative democracy seeks to enhance the quality of political debates and decision-making. Thus, while participatory democracy emphasizes input legitimacy, deliberative approaches focus on input and throughput legitimation.

Assuming ever-growing complexities and political acceleration, others have emphasized that democratic theory has increasingly incorporated pleas for democratic *output* and *efficacy* (Buchstein and Jörke, 2003; Michelsen and Walter, 2013). *Policy analysis*- and *governance-centred* approaches have conceptualized democratic participation as leading to a more effective policy output and output-focused legitimacy (Heidbreder et al., 2013). In this perspective, democracy is considered legitimate if it can provide an effective policy output *for* the people (Schmidt, 2013: 3). Thus, participation shall provide the necessary information for expert-led decision-making and might take a different form as it is not primarily concerned with political equality or accountability. In times of shrinking mobilization through established political institutions, more information about local context and citizens' preferences could be gathered through direct forms of citizen participation and help to create better-designed and more responsive policy solutions. This perspective indicates a shift from understanding participation as a democratic goal in itself to understanding participation as a *strategic means* to generate output and throughput legitimacy. Also, this take assumes that any democracy failing to fulfil the demands of its citizens will not be able to recover this loss through an increase in input legitimation because citizens turn away in disaffection (Schmidt, 2013).

Furthermore, participation has been portrayed as an *instrument* to make people feel involved in the decision-making without handing over decision powers (Bennett et al., 2018). In this perspective, democratic participation helps manage societal opposition and pacify demands for co-determination in politics and society (Ehs and Mokre,

Table 1. Understandings of Democratic Participation.

Approach	Goal of Democratic Participation	Sources of Democratic Legitimation	Hierarchy	Participation challenging power
Liberal Democratic Theory	Political Equality; Accountability of Representatives	Input & Throughput Legitimacy	Bottom-up & Top-down	Limited
Participatory Democracy	Political Culture; Individual Self-Efficacy	Input Legitimacy	Bottom-up > Top-down	Yes
Deliberative Democracy	Public Consent; Epistemic Quality of Decisions	Input & Throughput Legitimacy	Bottom-up > Top-down	Yes
Policy Analysis, Governance	Responsiveness	Throughput & Output Legitimacy	Top-down > Bottom-up	No
Simulative Democracy	Reconcile Outcome Effectiveness and Participatory Demands	(Throughput &) Output Legitimacy	Top-down > Bottom-up	No

2021; Walker et al., 2015). By precluding veto powers in ever more complex societies, it establishes a more expertocratic character of politics while at the same time suggesting democratic input-legitimation (Blühdorn, 2019; Greven, 2009; Michelsen and Walter, 2013). Scholars focusing on modernizing Western societies have conceptualized a *post-democratic condition*, in which a growing number of participatory processes provide democratic empowerment and participation while keeping existing power structures intact. Instead, they suggest an allegedly more efficacious policy output devoid of the complicated and time-consuming side-effects of bottom-up participatory input while still enabling citizens to feel democratically engaged (Blühdorn, 2019). These forms of participatory simulation might also be understood as relieving the individual from the burden of the diagnosed democratic ambivalence while at the same time preserving the ideal of individual emancipation and liberation (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2020).

Hence, while the former three readings (liberal, participatory and deliberative) emphasize participation's contribution to a democratic culture, equality and accountability, the latter two (governance-/policy-centred and simulative) highlight participation's role in efficacious and responsive policy output and managing democratic demands. Consequently, they assume different participation-legitimacy linkages and lead to very different hierarchies between participatory and expertocratic forms of decision-making. With a view to the research interest of this article, it will therefore be key to examine which readings of democratic participation are voiced by the different stakeholders and citizens in local democracy, which forms of legitimacy participation is expected to provide and how possible contradictions are reconciled.

Furthermore, beyond the question of how participation is contributing to democratic legitimacy, in recent years, participatory innovations have been discussed considering how they could 'democratize' democracy and increase possibilities for collective will-formation and decision-making (Müller-Rommel and Geißel, 2020). While most approaches conceptualize participatory innovations and new participatory processes as a

complement and enhancement to representative decision-making and not as a replacement, the implicit expectation often is that more involvement and more influence of citizens in participation equals more democracy. This draws upon attempts to rank participatory processes by using citizens' possibilities to influence and contest power as the defining category. All these approaches distinguish forms of participation allowing citizens to formulate an autonomous agenda from forms of participation restricting participants to pre-defined alternatives. In the context of this article, by looking at the concrete decision-power participants might exert, these conceptualizations allow us to understand whether citizens are expected to engage in collective will-formation or take part in decision-making and approach the hierarchy between bottom-up participation and expertocratic forms of decision-making. For instance, Arnsteins (1969) 'Ladder of Citizen Participation' distinguishes eight 'rungs' of participation ranging from non-participation and manipulation to different forms of 'tokenism', where participation is simulated and merely performed, to rising degrees of 'citizen power' culminating in the category of 'citizen control'. Accordingly, and following a 'deliberative turn' towards more and more direct forms of participation, Kersting (2016) suggests a continuum from 'invited' to 'invented' forms of citizen engagement to distinguish whether participation is induced by those in power (invited) or if power can be contested by citizens themselves (invented). In the research on social movements, demands for participation have been conceptualized as ranging from conventional (i.e. accepting power and integrating into provided mechanisms and spaces) to disruptive practises, reinforcing the understanding of power contestation as the core of citizen participation (Daphi and Anderl, 2016; Tarrow, 1998).

Hence, to scrutinize a democratic ambivalence through the lens of democratic participation, I examine which kind of influence citizens might exert; how (and if at all) participation is expected to challenge existing power structures bottom-up and how it is understood to relate to expertocratic and top-down oriented processes of decision-making (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2020; Mayne and Geißel, 2016).

Method and Case Selection

Using a qualitative empirical approach, in the years 2016/2017, expectations and understandings of democratic participation have been the focus of a research project with stakeholders and citizens of Vienna's Seestadt Aspern.[1] Located on an abandoned airfield east of the Vienna city centre, this city development area has from its beginning in the early 2000s sought to reconcile a possibly contradictory 'planners triangle' (Campbell, 1996) of (a) an ecologically sustainable transformative city planning; (b) an economically innovative and economic growth-oriented development and (c) social equity as regards social and subsidized housing. By 2017, 7000 people already lived in the Seestadt, construction was still going on and the intended final size spans 20,000 people and 20,000 jobs, which makes it one of the biggest city development areas in Europe. Of its planned 2.6 million square metres, 50% are reserved for public space. There is restricted parking space, good public transport, space for new material practises and alternative development initiatives, an established public neighbourhood management as a contact partner for citizens, sustainable forms of construction, and various forms of living-labs to develop smart, IT-based solutions for housing, transportation, heating, electricity and so on. There are a variety of different forms of housing, from subsidized social housing to co-housing groups, 'normal' rented flats or owner-occupied flats – which results in a socially heterogeneous area. On the one hand, by relying on expert-based decision-making, it connects to the path

dependencies of top-down city planning in Vienna. Furthermore, it interlinks the Seestadt and the literature on smart cities in general, where technological innovation and specialization are improving administrative performance and increasing citizen satisfaction (Martin et al., 2018). A better control and steering capacity through data and IT innovation lies at the core of this promise and might have strong implications for the role participation is assigned (Vanolo, 2014). On the other hand, and in line with smart city initiatives in other places (Butzlaff, 2020) and a general trend in public administration and planning (Saurugger, 2010), Vienna's smart city initiative has also sought to encourage bottom-up citizen involvement. Therefore, to investigate how participatory processes and expert planning affect the problem-solving capacities of democracy, and how their apparent contradictions might be reconciled, it presents a relevant and promising illustration, which extends far beyond the single case.

In spring 2017, in a first stage, we conducted 12 semi-structured qualitative interviews (Lune and Berg, 2016: 69) with experts, planners, architects and stakeholders involved in the project, covering the institutional expectations regarding participatory processes. In summer 2017, we conducted 10 semi-structured qualitative interviews with 12 citizens already living in Seestadt, in which we addressed citizen demands and expectations of democratic inclusion. Interviewees were recruited using a mixture between snowball sampling and a predefinition of stakeholders and different backgrounds of citizens. For instance, representatives of different involved planners, administrations, city management programmes and locally active corporations were contacted, as well as a variety of different forms of housing in the Seestadt were identified, as these might represent different expectations with regard to participation as well as motivations to move to the Seestadt. The citizens were contacted at the local market, shops, kindergarten and through the neighbourhood management as well as through the existing co-housing groups in the Seestadt. Furthermore, an open question for a recommendation of important stakeholders and citizens that could be interesting to interview was included in the interviews. Interviewees were then selected in order to represent the spectrum of identified stakeholders and different groups of Seestadt inhabitants. An overview of interviewees as well as the interview questions is included in the supplementary material of this article. Interviews and observation focused on the varieties and different expectations with regard to inclusion, engagement and democratic citizen participation on the one hand and expert-led top-down planning on the other. How did planners and stakeholders perceive of citizens – and what kind, level and character of participation did citizens expect? Special emphasis was placed on the democratic question of scale. At which level do citizens and planners consider participatory processes suitable and efficacious? How, in the view of citizens, administration and planners alike, could policy efficacy be achieved between expert-based planning and the expansion of citizen involvement? The coding and interpretation of the material followed an interpretative paradigm (Sławecki, 2018) to focus on different understandings and notions of participation and democracy. The context of the interviews, the situation of the interviewees did matter greatly for the interpretation, but mostly I concentrated on the views and perspectives that were voiced consciously in the interviews. Furthermore, as the empirical research was guided by different assumptions and ambivalences in democratic theory outlined in the previous section, I employed a methodological design of directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) using a deductive category application and coding scheme which was then adapted and modified with new codes during the interpretation process.

Differing Readings of Participation

As this article set out to map possibly contradicting understandings of participation and to analyse how an assumed democratic ambivalence plays out in the practice of local democracy, it is important to cover the range of different actors involved. The following section develops prevailing notions of participation (1) among those who shape and design the development and the participation processes within the Seestadt as well as (2) among citizens already living there.

1. The **stakeholder interviewees** include representatives of the Vienna city administration and the city management, the planners and architects involved in the Seestadt development, the organizations conducting the neighbourhood management as well as companies active in the Seestadt. What stands out among these interviews is that most understand participation as a rather non-binding opportunity to contribute if a citizen wishes to do so. This is, first, to maintain citizen satisfaction and, second, to ensure responsiveness of policy design and effective output. On the one hand, Austrian legislation requires a certain level of citizen participation in the decision-making on issues of city planning. This is rooted in a long history of citizen empowerment as an important value to Vienna's city development. On the other hand, top-down expert planning has also stood at the core of Vienna's development strategies for a long time. For the administration, the development project of Seestadt is too big to let it lack attraction because of disappointed residents. Participation understood this way is not so much a way to give decision-power to citizens, to shape development or to open up new pathways, but an instrument to manage the residents' satisfaction and to curtail possible citizen anger in order to maintain the project's attraction. As one interviewee from the Viennese city administration sums it up:

    To take possession of public space, [. . .] isn't that present in the perspective of the Viennese people. The Monarchy, the Social Democratic Party of Austria, all of that spirit of 'we give it to you', this paternalistic perspective –in Vienna this top-down perspective is very familiar. (S12_Dagmar)

    Many of the stakeholder interviewees frame the Seestadt as a living lab for technological innovations and the promise of more sustainable city growth and emphasize that the participation of citizens is but one ingredient in this process. Many understand the role of citizen participation in urban development generally as desirable, but only in very limited and predefined areas. It is considered a strategic decision which areas are opened up for participatory opportunities and which are not:

    There are areas where participation makes no sense, where the framework is too narrow to involve the citizens, where even top-down planning is challenging enough. That's why it is sometimes better to facilitate participation only in limited and specific areas. (S3_Jonas)

    Especially representatives of corporations, city planners and architects emphasize participatory planning and the opening of decision-making as a resource and a living lab for product research and development. To them, on the one hand, participation is a legal obligation (for instance, a certain share of the construction budget for public space, such as the design of gardens and courtyards, has to be spent involving the residents). On the

other hand, citizen participation is considered an experimental instrument for product development, a perspective that has been widely established (and criticized) in the development of smart cities (Butzlaff, 2020). An employee of a construction company active in the Seestadt notes the rewarding aspects of participatory processes helping to target the demands of their customers. However, he also states that organizing processes with diverse inputs can be costly and time-consuming:

> But not in all areas of urban development. [Participation] only on those issues where citizens are affected. It is a strategic question where to involve citizens, and where to give them the opportunity to make their opinion heard, in order to make them feel involved. (S8_Franz)

Others, especially the representatives from the neighbourhood management, emphasize a slightly different take on participatory processes. They understand their role as ensuring the necessary conditions for bottom-up citizen initiatives. But, as one of the interview partners summarizes, rather than imposing goals and choices on people, they see themselves as a mere facilitator in that process and underline that some citizens voluntarily avoid participation opportunities:

> Not everyone wants to know all of his neighbors or engage with how the neighborhood is actively shaped. But there are many people who do want to participate, and I think they should be given the opportunity to do so. (S9_Gerlinde)

A second interviewee adds:

> You always have to check if it makes sense. Participation is time-consuming and tiring, not only for us, but for the people. And not everybody wants to participate. Many are happy if they do not have to be involved. (S7_Christine)

By pre-defining the spaces where bottom-up engagement is desired and funded, assisting bottom-up participation maintains a strong top-down characteristic. Understood this way, the goal of making people more autonomous and self-reliant might well connect to the withdrawal of the (welfare) state and a neoliberalization of government especially visible in the proliferation of smart cities (Bauriedl and Strüver, 2018). Still, all of the stakeholders and planners highlight that in their perspective, in comparison with other development areas, the Seestadt citizens are being involved much more. However, as one interviewee underlines, this might turn into a burden for some:

> I have the feeling that this project is being handled in a more democratic way compared to other projects. We are very close to the optimum here. But sometimes even that is too much and for some of the Seestadt citizens, this creates a democratic overload and excess of participation. (S6_Daniel)

Revisiting the interviews with stakeholders, they understand participation as empowering citizens by granting them the opportunity to influence the development of certain and restricted parts of their environment. Yet, the interviewees almost unanimously expect that by tapping into participants' preferences and registering citizen/customer demands, citizen participation will render the current development more efficient and guarantee high future lot values. They encourage forms of participation (which then are outsourced to contractors of the neighbourhood management) that manage (and

understand) satisfaction levels with the residents in a top-down manner. One speciality of the Seestadt is its ongoing development, which means that current residents' satisfaction or dissatisfaction may influence future lot values, the demand for apartments or the possibility to attract corporations to create a business. Participation read this way has direct economic consequences. These perspectives connect to the governance-centred approaches as well as to elements of simulative democracy. Citizen involvement is first and foremost expected to contribute to output-oriented ideas of democratic legitimacy and only in second place to ideas of a throughput legitimation. The readings by planners, administration and stakeholders show a clear hierarchy of top-down steering figuring well above an input-oriented interpretation of citizen participation. In this view, participation shall provide data and resources for top-down decision-making and otherwise cater to demands for democratic empowerment. In light of a city development that is often perceived as being too complex for time-consuming and tiring processes of citizen participation, top-down steered participation is considered a way of dealing with the democratic ambivalence between demands for democratic engagement and output-centred notions of democratic legitimacy.

2. If we then look at the **citizens already living in the Seestadt**, three subgroups of people with different motives to move into this urban quarter can be distinguished. Their perspectives on participation differ accordingly. First, there are people from self-empowered co-housing groups, who are typically economically better-off, self-confident and well-educated people with well-developed social networks and a high sense of self-efficacy (Czischke et al., 2020). They represent the backbone of the active and involved people within the Seestadt. Yet, often enough, in the interviews, they show clear signs of a democratic overload and of being tired of the task of self-administrating their co-housing. They are happy not to be bothered too much with any participation beyond their local living conditions:

Partially, it is too much. I know two people from the co-housing groups, who have burned themselves out, because of their manifold engagement. (S56_Nicole)

Besides being closely connected to the ecological goals of the Seestadt, they hardly voice intentions to participate in the development of large-scale social change. Self-administrating their own co-housing group takes a big toll and the city development beyond their housing project, let alone questions of a wider socio-ecological transformation, are then left to the professional planners and those directly affected.

Personally, I do not have the need to engage (in the further development of new parts of the Seestadt, the author) [. . .] because I think this should be done by people who are affected directly and live there. (S59_Natalie)

They show a deliberative understanding of participation and presume that participating in the self-administration of their housing strongly shapes their democratic values. However, these expectations cannot be transferred to participation on a larger or even national scale due to energy and time restrictions. The practical daily life of self-administration is simply wearing them out.

There are manifold opportunities for engagement here [. . .] but there are not many citizens engaging intensely, which is clear. Most people come here to live or to work. Hence, there is not

so much interest to become active additionally. [. . .] It would be presumptuous to expect this, as people have to organize and manage their daily life, instead of permanently engage in how this city develops. You cannot expect that! (S55_Robert)

Furthermore, some of them also fear that too much participation could be problematic as it might endanger long-term goals of ecological transformation. To them, the transformatory goals of the Seestadt are too important to become diluted when people participate who do not share these goals. Therefore, while they still maintain participatory and deliberative understandings of participation within their immediate co-housing groups, together with a strong feeling of democratic overload and fatigue, they place their hopes on expert-led planning and emphasize notions of throughput and output legitimacy when it comes to policy decisions beyond this scope.

Second, there are people active in more autonomous projects around the Seestadt, such as degrowth initiatives, alternative construction experiments, new material practice groups and so on who experiment with resource-friendly forms of living. Here, we often meet younger, highly skilled and motivated people (often, but not exclusively, students) that are driven by the imagination of social and ecological alternatives. For the marketing strategy of the Seestadt project, they play an important role, as they embody the idea of a socio-ecological transformation. Accordingly, spaces that are not (yet) construction sites are temporarily assigned to initiatives and experimental movements for urban gardening or for experimenting with alternative construction techniques. The interviewees emphasize rejecting capitalist values and seeking to establish a more democratic inner-group participation. However, as with the members of the co-housing groups, this does not come without a cost. They, too, show clear signs of weariness, a perceived democratic overload, and the burdens of practical implications of participation. As one of their members explains, even in the realm of experimental initiatives, a professionalization takes place which in the end emphasizes the role of expert planners:

This is problematic with the voluntary environment, where there is a much higher fluctuation and only very few have the willingness to engage to an extent like me or others who do so in a professional manner. Because then automatically a difference in competence emerges, and it leads to power hierarchies. (S57_Thomas)

To their understanding, their demands for participation and their supposed innovative role in a small and experimental setting can and shall only provide better information for expert-led planning. Even if their own projects are framed as challenging established societal pathways, they rely on the conditions offered to them by the planning process (in terms of space and allowed scope and reach) and they hope for experts and the top-down city planning to adopt and to incorporate their experiences.

Third, there are citizens who do *not* feel attached to the development goals of the Seestadt. They moved here because of affordable housing prices and the promise of a modern and convenient living environment, but not because of its sustainability-oriented transformation goals. Typically, they live in the areas of social- or subsidized housing or rented flats. They do like being asked about their preferences and demand planning to be responsive. But most of all they understand the Seestadt as a 'normal' city development area and expect the expert planners to deliver solutions without themselves having to become active. As one interviewee underlines:

> People have to manage and organize their daily life. You can't expect people to permanently be
> involved in questions of how this quarter is further developed. [. . .] For that, I have the city
> administration doing the planning. (S58b_Nils)

They show reluctance and even scepticism with regard to increasing citizen participa-
tion, yet still expect their preferences to be included in decision-making. Interestingly,
they show much less knowledge of existing participatory opportunities compared to the
people living in co-housing projects. This raises questions with regard to the feasibility of
the participatory organization of social change under socially heterogeneous conditions.
A large group of people became part of the Seestadt not because but despite its specific
goals, and this results in diverging political aims and democratic expectations.
Furthermore, they know that other groups are far more effective in making themselves
heard in processes of democratic decision-making. As a result, they fear broad participa-
tion opportunities might subordinate them to the will of other, more active social groups:

> Well, I do have the feeling that . . . this is not only a living space, but that it is desired that you
> change your style of living, too . . . that you are being educated here. (S58b_Nils)

Their participatory expectations remain very limited – or may even (in the face of feel-
ing intimidated by the desire for social change) result in a populist protest vote, such as a
high share of the right-wing FPÖ votes during the local elections 2015.[2] The efficiency of
coherent planning is often perceived as far superior. However, underlining a democratic
ambivalence, many are also upset when the openness and the outcome of participatory
processes are managed and restricted top-down. They often report on experiences with
participation opportunities that frustrated them when they felt that the planned outcome
had already been fixed and was just to be legitimated and confirmed:

> . . . they already knew how it would look like, and then they asked the citizens. I am sorry, but
> that is unacceptable! That is bullshit, we took that serious! And my husband had invested a lot
> of time! (S60a_Susanne)

With a view to the citizens of the Seestadt, most understand participation as a means
to a specific end and rather a practice to administer a societal status quo than to challenge
it. Many citizens also share a sceptical and ambivalent perspective on democratic partici-
pation. While some experience a democratic overload and a burden of 'having to be
active', others fear to be overruled by the participation of more active groups. Furthermore,
for all three groups, participation is expected to facilitate an opportunity for 'being heard'
and 'voicing opinion'. Subsequently, expert-led top-down planning is expected to process
this participatory input and produce a legitimation-inducing output. Politics, in this per-
spective, is seen as a supply of services, and democratic participation is contributing to
that. Especially the co-housing groups and – to a certain extent – people active in more
autonomous projects around the Seestadt cultivate a reading of participation inspired by
participatory and deliberative democratic theory, yet this covers only the immediate
groups and projects. Beyond this scope, all three groups of citizens portrayed here show
an understanding of participation that emphasizes democratic output-legitimacy and the
superiority of expert-led planning, always given that they *feel* involved as citizens.
    Comparing all interviewees, a perceived hierarchy of power is clearly visible, with
expert-led planning defining the place and the scope of citizen participation. In line with
the diagnosed shift within democratic theory, the interviewees agree that participation

creates a knowledge resource instead of co-deciding questions of public interest. In that it provides data and informs top-down planning, this reading turns participation into a consenting choice between predefined alternatives. However, the strong emphasis on notions of throughput and output legitimacy in the interviews is accompanied by strong demand for participatory opportunities to be open, transparent, and responsive. A democratic ambivalence, as it seems, is managed by citizen participation informing expert-led planning while remaining hierarchically subordinated to top-down decision-making.

Conclusion

This article set out to analyse the character of contemporary democratic ambivalence and to map different understandings of citizen participation. Among the various notions of participation observed, what stands out is that the interviewees agree that shaping the agenda of participation itself remains subject to expert-led steering. The definition of empowerment of citizens, of who shall be able to take part and of who might ask which questions, is decided upon top-down. There is a clear perception of hierarchy noticeable in the interviews indicating that participation ought to contribute to planning decisions and an output-legitimation of democracy. Indeed, the interviewees perceive democratic participation as crucial and important (some of which might be due to social desirability of answers). Yet, many citizens expect politics and politicians to 'deliver' and 'do their jobs', and top-down planning is often believed to cater to the needs of citizens more efficiently. Prevailing democratic overload and the expectation of politics as a provision of services are underlining these findings.

In the context of the Seestadt, conflicting conceptualizations of participation are dealt with in different settings. A variety of participatory offers to choose from address different sections of the local community. This way, citizens might find opportunities for their specific demands, time and energy restrictions. Yet, the possibility to shape the agenda of participation itself remains strictly limited to an expert-led understanding of who, when, and how shall be able to take part in deliberation and decision-making. The forms of participation I have witnessed during this study are strictly *invited* in the sense described by Kersting (2016). Even when claiming to allow for bottom-up *invented* forms of participation, the spaces and issues at stake are often defined top-down. However, this does not seem to be a suppression of participatory expectations, as citizens expect just that. The provision of participatory processes is considered a political service – and taking part not a civil duty but an opportunity that one can take advantage of or waive. Consequently, and despite a rhetoric of a highly open, experimental, and democratic city development, citizens are consenting to a democratically concealed control. Participation in the realm of the Seestadt remains restricted to voicing preferences and choosing between predefined alternatives.

Going back to the established conceptualizations of democratic participation, governance-oriented and simulative approaches prevail, although liberal, participatory and deliberative understandings are sensible alongside. Along these lines, recent contributions in democratic theory have diagnosed that notions of output- and throughput legitimacy have gained importance vis-à-vis input legitimation (Buchstein and Jörke, 2003). With a view to the different functions of participation, a democratic ambivalence in local democracy is rooted in a perception of growing social complexities. For planners *and* citizens, an increasingly complex society calls for much more efficacy-oriented policy solutions – yet still requiring public commitment to open and democratic participation

opportunities. The strong hierarchy of steering and planning figuring above participation will have to be balanced and stabilized through an experience of democratic inclusion to maintain citizens' self-perception as free and democratic individuals (Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2019). In this perspective, participatory inclusion is of the utmost importance, but not to a degree where it wears people out, aggravates social inequalities or jeopardizes policy efficacy. For the citizens, the scope of participatory expectations often remains small and local. They are mostly interested in shaping their immediate surroundings and living conditions. Still, even a restricted local focus appears to be too wide for many of the interviewees, who feel overburdened by their own participatory expectations. Furthermore, some suspect more democratic participation would give more influence to people they do not trust. The specific character of democratic ambivalence is the fear that democratic participation might not contribute to the realization of the good, rational and necessary because of a thorough distrust in the motivations of other people participating (Butzlaff and Messinger-Zimmer, 2019). As the current pandemic and climate crises demonstrate, expectations for policy efficacy and the adjustment of thriving social inequalities might rapidly lead to calls for more top-down steering and planning, as participation opportunities are feared to exacerbate existing social bias and inequalities. Beyond the questions of different designs of participatory processes that have been addressed in participation research, incorporating this ambivalence is crucial for the future organization of democratic self-government in increasingly complex societies.

This is, of course, to be interpreted cautiously, as I have analysed stakeholders and citizens of a highly planning-dependent yet participation-emphasizing city development project. The results might therefore not easily be transferred to democracy in general. However, in light of the current Covid-19 pandemic and climate crisis shattering the confidence in the policy efficacy of liberal representative democracy, some of the conclusions point beyond the local context. Especially, as challenges such as societal complexity, crises, and increasing democratic demands are sensible in many other contexts. Further research might address how this ambivalence plays out on a national level and beyond the context of restricted urban development.

Furthermore, as many have shown, unrestricted bottom-up participation does *not* equal democratization (Bennett et al., 2018; Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2020). However, my findings might reshape the role of participation in increasingly complex democratic societies and have strong implications for the theory and the organization of democratic aggregation of interests. They indicate, first, that participation is often neither understood as contributing to an opinion-formation nor to decision-making but as 'harvesting' given citizen preferences that can inform planning decisions. Second, the current crises impressively underscore that notwithstanding the ideal of extensive citizen engagement of citizens the need for efficacious political decisions seems to have grown far more important than to let them be complicated by cumbersome processes of democratic participation. It is, however, as the interviews show, a ride on a razor's edge. As it appears, creating the *impression* of being involved in a democratic manner may be an important ingredient to legitimize top-down decisions. But if participatory processes are all too predetermined and a mere democratic simulation, this leads to even more frustration and disillusionment (Butzlaff and Messinger-Zimmer, 2019; Della Porta et al., 2017). Consequently, democratic participation is often framed as the provision of data and citizens' preferences for supposedly more efficient, expert-led planning and decision-making – and for citizens to consent, seemingly democratically.

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Supplementary information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.
Context
Supplementary Material 1: Table of interviewees
Supplementary Material 2: Questionnaire for Experts involved in the planning and development of the Seestadt
Supplementary Material 3: Questionnaire for Inhabitants of the Seestadt

Notes

1. https://www.aspern-seestadt.at/en
2. https://www.wien.gv.at/politik/wahlen/grbv/2015/sprengel-gr.html

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