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Opportunity Structures for Citizens' Participation in Italian Regions: A Case Study

Abstract

The Italian process of decentralization is opening new opportunities for action in the matter of political participation for Italian regions. Starting from the analysis of a regional case study (Emilia-Romagna), the paper tries to explain how a single region could elaborate a set of policy-oriented instruments to direct citizens' political participation and mobilize them on specific issues beyond the classic electoral channel. After the presentation of the selected case, the paper will analyze the concept of opportunity structures for citizens' participation and the way in which it can be applied in the study of Italian regions. The analysis of the Emilia-Romagna regional policy in the matter of participation shows that the regional choices are more and more following a path-dependent scheme strictly related to the cultural and institutional variables of the regional framework and its classic interventionist policy style.

Keywords

political participation, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, opportunity structures for citizens' participation, Italian Regions

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Introduction

The first studies on political participation in Italy (Alberoni 1967; Barbagli & Macelli 1985; Bardi & Pasquino 1995) underlined its exceptional nature compared with other European contexts and the American one. In fact, political participation in Italy was strongly facilitated by the role and weight taken on by the political parties; people participated exclusively within the parties that were the unique instruments through which citizens could influence the choice of their rulers and therefore the public policies. By confirming the situation described by Almond and Verba (1963) in relation to the political alienation of Italian people,¹ in 1995, Bardi and Pasquino tried to establish which forms of mandate and which modalities of representation (*ib.*, 41) could emerge following the crisis of Italian parties. This political un-anchoring was accompanied both by a deep crisis of cleavage politics and by an individualization of the political culture that manifested itself mainly with a drastic decrease in electoral participation.

Besides the crisis of the parties, the study of political participation in Italy must also take into account the long-lasting and uncertain process of decentralization, starting from the reform of the Title V of the Constitution in 2001 that increased the competencies of Italian regions in several policy sectors, including health, employment, transport, and so on. These transformations can also be seen to have an impact on political participation, which progressively bifurcates between the national and the subnational arenas both at the local and regional levels (Piana & Raniolo 2013, p. 304). To quote Ruffilli (1990, p. 133), the institutional decentralization and the consequent distribution of functions among the various levels of government will take place only if the effective participation of citizens in the activities of the *res publica* is guaranteed. Therefore, institutional and social decentralization should go at the same pace in order to guarantee full implementation of the second comma of Article 3 of the Italian Constitution that aims at effective participation in the political, social, and economic organization by removing the possible obstacles.

These considerations are inevitably connected with the crisis of the classical forms of representative democracy and the consequent necessity to provide the citizens with new forms of political and associative participation, considering the

¹ Almond and Verba (1963) described Italian political culture as parochial because it was characterized by alienation, social isolation, and lack of confidence, thus depicting Italian citizens as uninformed and less interested in politics. But as Bordandini pointed out (2006, 29), this research started from a wrong assumption, that is, the presence of a common political culture across all Italian territories and therefore in all Italian regions.

exclusive regional competence on this subject. For these reasons, the Italian regions (understood as a meso-national level of government) are an interesting unit of analysis in the study of political participation to understand the ways in which they can overcome the historical role played by the Italian mass parties.

The Case Selection

The case selected was that of Emilia-Romagna. The model of participation in this region has been the subject of several studies in the past that aimed to explain the specificities characterizing the behavior of the citizens in this region compared to other national contexts. In fact, it was characterized by the presence of a higher level of political participation in Italy.²

The exceptional nature of this region was already emphasized in Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti's studies (1985; 1993). The three scholars showed interest in the study of *civicness* and the level of social and political commitment in Italian regional communities. They identified Emilia-Romagna as

among the most modern, bustling, affluent, technologically, advanced societies on the face of the earth. It is, however, the site of an unusual concentration of overlapping networks of social solidarity, people buy citizens with an unusually well-developed public spirit—a web of civic communities. Emilia-Romagna is not populated by angels, but within its borders (and those of neighboring regions in north-central Italy) collective action of all sorts, including government, is facilitated by norms and networks of civic engagement. [...] These norms and networks have vital roots in deep regional traditions, but it would be nonsense to classify Emilia-Romagna as a “traditional” society. (1993, pp. 114-115)

Ten years after the publication of their last book, the existence of a very high stock of social capital and the presence of this social and political commitment in

² Moreover, previous studies on Italian subcultures (Cartocci 1987, 1990; Caciagli, 1988; Diamanti, 1996) placed the whole territory of Emilia-Romagna—except for the area around Piacenza (Bartolini, 1976)—in the so-called Red Zone, identifying the following characteristics of this zone (Bordandini 2006, 67): the diffusion of values, such as anticlericalism, antifascism, localism, and anti-capitalism; the high degree of social and political participation; the loyalty to the party and the use of the white ballot as a modality of protest (exit); the municipal socialism and the higher level of trust in the local institutions; the important role of political socialization promoted by associative networks; and the high level of unionization.

all the provinces of this region were confirmed by Roberto Cartocci (2007).³ Moreover, Emilia-Romagna's peculiarity has been recently confirmed by Bordandini and Cartocci (2014, p. 57) who arrived to a new final index of social capital measured at the regional level, according to which Emilia-Romagna ranks second on the national level, behind Trentino-Alto Adige.

Furthermore, in the same study, Putnam et al. (1993) emphasized the exceptional nature of this region also on the political-institutional level, describing it as a region with a high level of institutional performance. Moreover, the excellent levels of administrative efficiency reported in Emilia-Romagna have recently been confirmed in a study edited by Salvatore Vassallo (2013), who has also proved in the last years the presence of a regional policy style that is still strongly interventionist and a greater planning capacity compared to other regions in several policy sectors—in the policies related to the access and use of community funds (Profeti 2013), in immigration policies (Caponio & Campomori 2013), and in health-care policies (Pavolini & Vicarelli 2013). Furthermore, this Region has a guiding role in the actual process of territorial reorganization that is characterizing Italian regions in these years (Casula 2014).

As already mentioned, the study of the different policy style (more or less interventionist) present in a single region could be connected with its choice to decide to open (or not to open) concrete political opportunities for citizens' participation. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the single regional context and of its historical, institutional and political variables becomes a necessary condition for the study of this concept in Italian regions.

³ Roberto Cartocci (2007) empirically measured the stock of social capital in 103 Italian provinces. The indicators he chose were the following: (a) the diffusion of daily press, (b) the level of electoral participation, (c) the diffusion of basic sport associations, and (d) the diffusion of blood donation. To conform to Putnam's analysis, Cartocci employed the fourth indicator instead of using the preference vote, and he finalized the first and the second indicators using the latest data available to him. The first two indicators measure different aspects of the relations among citizens and political communities, through modalities of participation both visible (going to vote) and invisible (reading a newspaper). The other two try to measure, respectively, the diffusion of elective and formalized networks (that go beyond the primary bonds) and the diffusion of a sense of obligation toward the others. Therefore, in the choice of indicators, Cartocci aimed also at considering the ablative dimension, that is, the individuals' availability to offer themselves to the others, by offering, for example, a part of themselves (blood) or a part of their time in sport associations (as executives or coaches).

Opportunity Structures for Citizens' Participation in Italian Regions: Searching for a Definition

Advanced democracies should create concrete opportunities for citizens' participation by guaranteeing access to the political sphere and developing multiple forms of participation. Resorting to a military metaphor, Walzer (1999) underlined how political authorities should "call citizens to arms" by stimulating their interests and providing them a set of participatory (both polity- and policy-related) instruments among which they can choose. In fact, as Sartori argued, participation is neither "an 'inert be part' nor a 'be compelled to' be part", but an "active take part" (1993, p. 79). In other words, participation is a voluntarily and autonomous decision made by individuals, who choose among the alternatives and the opportunities proposed, rather than imposed, to them (Bobbio 1971; Fisichella 1982; Raniolo 2007).

The concept of opportunity structures for participation has been introduced by Kitschelt (1986) in his study on social movements, to explain what can influence the choice of protest strategies. He wrote:

political opportunity structures are comprised of specific configurations of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilization, which facilitate the development of protest movements in some instances and constrain them in others. While they do not determine the course of social movements completely, careful comparisons among them can explain a good deal about the variations among social movements with similar demands in different settings, if other determinants are held constant. (p. 58)

In this passage, Kitschelt pointed out how the diffusion of protest movements can be facilitated both by the set of resources provided by a specific institutional context and the historical precedents of mobilization. Avoiding the risk of its excessive "conceptual stretching" (Sartori, 1970), more recently, the concept of opportunity structures for participation has been also employed to study the dimension of political participation. For example, starting from Nie and Verba's classification (1975, pp. 7–9) of four sub dimensions of political participation,⁴ Raniolo (2007, pp. 28–30) identified in the opportunity structures for participation a fifth dimension that is crucial for its study. He defined it as "the set of prerogatives and mechanisms of influence available to citizens" (p. 73). By revisiting the thought

⁴ They are: the kind of influence, the scope of the results, the participants' commitment, and the dimensions of the conflict.

of the theorists of political development (Dahl, 1971; Marshall, 1973; Rokkan, 1970, 1999; Tilly, 1975), Raniolo highlighted how the problem of participation has historically concerned the achievement and the consequent extension of political rights and universal suffrage, which pave the way to the advent of political representation and, progressively, democratization (Cartocci, 2011, p. 242). In particular, Rokkan's studies on the four institutional thresholds⁵ and the cleavages around which the European party systems would have formed⁶ are fundamental to better understand the relationship among the concepts of participation, opportunity structures for citizens' participation and democratization. In fact, while the threshold typology contributes to define the institutional opportunity structure for participation by identifying the types of participation rights granted in a specific political system and their holders, the cleavage typology contributes to define the political opportunity structures for participation. To this purpose, Raniolo underlined the close interdependence between the two dimensions, accentuated by the power struggles between political elites and marginalized social groups. In fact, even if the political interpretation of cleavages emphasizes the rise of new changes in citizen participation, it contributes to create an involvement that divides rather than aggregates. Political participation translates into a sort of collective participation to a specific group, where one identifies himself/herself against the others.

However, in contemporary strengthened democracies, the concept of opportunity structures for citizens' participation calls for a redefinition that goes beyond the voting right and the possible existence of social conflicts. In fact, along with the passage from the democracy of the parties to the democracy of the public (Manin, 1995),⁷ a multiplication and differentiation of the channels of participation has

⁵ Rokkan (*ib.*, 142) pinpointed the presence of four institutional thresholds. He affirmed that crossing them increases the political participation. The legitimacy's threshold implicates the recognition of the rights of petition, critique, and demonstration against the regime. The incorporation's threshold implicates the appearance of the rights of political participation, such as the universal suffrage. The representation's threshold lowers the barriers of representation and allows the entry in the elective assemblies to new social groups. The executive's threshold implicates a real possibility to influence the parliamentary majorities to the executive, for example, with the use of the parliamentary confidence.

⁶ It is possible to identify the presence of four different cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Rokkan 1970, 1999) that gave rise to different political organizations, each of them representative of the issues relating to the cleavages. The first two cleavages are between the center and the periphery and between the State and the Church. They originated in the phase of construction of the State-Nation. The second two cleavages are between the city and the rural area and between the entrepreneurs and the workers. They resulted from the Industrial Revolution.

⁷ To explain the transformations of the representative executive, Manin (*ib.*) distinguished three different historical stages: parliamentarism, democracy of the parties, and democracy of the pub-

taken place through the elaboration of innovative forms of participatory and deliberative democracy that are increasingly flanking the classical electoral channel. Obviously, the presence of a particular political culture and legacies in this case also influences the types and methods of consolidation of these new practices in a specific context. Therefore, the analysis of the opportunity structures for citizens' participation in contemporary democracies requires a distinction that takes into account the social and cultural fabric in which political institutions are embedded (Granovetter 1985), both at a national and a subnational level.

As for the national level, Leonardo Morlino's *Change for Democracy* (2011) is the most important recent contribution that takes this sub dimension into consideration for the study of several contemporary democracies in Europe and Latin America. He considered the various opportunities for participation in each country in terms of different rights of participation (2011, p. 259). He used a final index, elaborated by Freedom House, that includes, for example, as one of its indicators the real political rights and electoral opportunities each political system offers to the cultural, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups.⁸

At the subnational level, no comparable comprehensive study exists. In fact, it is impossible to imagine a similar comparison for a plurality of subnational levels. Therefore, studying this dimension means questioning the actual possibility that a subnational level government has the power (and the will) to increase political opportunities for citizens' participation. In the introductory paragraph, these observations are considered together with the different processes of decentralization and the increase in competencies at the Italian meso-national level of government to canalize the participation.

lic. During parliamentarism, there was a centrality of the Parliament as a place of discussion and resolution of national and local problems, with a type of electoral participation characterized by trusty relations between elected representatives and voters. With the crisis of Parliament, parties began to play a central role. The political participation, and therefore, the electoral participation were totally conveyed by the parties. At this stage, voters are men of the apparatus, and the elected representatives must exclusively conform themselves to the identities of the parties. Finally, during the last stage of the democracy of the public, the previous crisis of parties allowed the voters to regain their autonomy among the parties. At this stage, political and electoral participation was not conveyed by parties, but resulted as a free choice of individuals, and it manifested also through illegal or unconventional forms of participation.

⁸ For a more precise list of indicators, see: <https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2014/methodology#.VMAeHZBd4iV>.

Opportunity Structures for Citizens' Participation in Italian Regions: The Case of Emilia-Romagna Participation Law 3/2010

Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, and Umbria are the only Italian regions to adopt an organic and structural legislation on the issue of citizens' participation, though proposing three different regional models of participation (De Santis 2013, p. 197).⁹ All three share the idea that participation is an individual right, and therefore all citizens should have equal possibilities to "take part" in the decision-making process. Therefore, it is necessary to create ad hoc legal institutes to provide procedural guarantees capable of increasing citizens' participation in the public decision-making process, thus limiting the insurgence of parties. It is obvious that these instruments opt for the participation of citizens in public policy decisions, and therefore, they are policy related, as opposed to the classical channels of representative democracy that are polity oriented (Bobbio, 2005).¹⁰

Law 3/2010 of Emilia-Romagna is characterized by the combination of a plurality of decisional models. In fact, the participation model proposed by this Region could be considered as a mixed model (Mengozi, 2011, p. 33) because it combines deliberation, negotiation, and vote. Therefore, it is halfway between participatory democracy and deliberative democracy. To better understand the characteristics of this model, it is necessary to start by explaining the modalities through which the process is activated and the actors that are involved in it. In fact, coining the concept of "paradoxes of the deliberation," Gloria Regonini (2005) recommended analyzing both the actors involved in the process and the quality of their involvement. In particular, the focus will be on the true role that citizens play in the general regional or local process and their effective involvement alongside other actors. Considering that the study of the quality of citizen involvement would require an in-depth analysis on a case-by-case basis, the next paragraph will analyze the types and general characteristics of the processes financed by Emilia-Romagna Region in 2012 to quantify its citizens' participation. Now, as already mentioned, the focus is on the process modalities based on the provisions of law 3/2010. The aim is to describe the regional procedure without complicating the matter by presenting too many legal technicalities.

⁹ Compared to the mixed model of Emilia-Romagna, the law 69/2007 of Toscana inserts exclusively the deliberation and includes the rational formation of the final decision (Lewanski, 2013). On the contrary, the law 14/2010 of Umbria does not propose a deliberative model and does not include all the actors involved in the same way. In fact, it exclusively involves the representative organizations of collective interests.

¹⁰ Norris (2007) proposed the distinction between citizen oriented, related mainly to elections, and cause oriented, or rather a participation that mobilizes citizens on specific issues.

The participant project is defined by the regional law (art. 10) as a structured discussion that links regional institutions and actors, allowing them to come to an agreement—that is, a vehicle for mediation or negotiation among the plurality of positions—that local or regional executives and the elective assemblies would take into consideration for a future project or law. In other terms, the aim is to create a discussion group composed by all those who, individually or collectively, are in charge of making the decisions to be included in a regional or local act. The regional executive, the regional elective assembly, and the local authorities (or their districts) are the possible proponent subjects. They discuss about the possible themes for the participation, the possible stakeholders, and the times and resources employable in the future participatory process. This first agreement will be examined by the public participation specialist (hereafter, *Tecnico di Garanzia*)¹¹ appointed by the president of the legislative assembly. Besides offering a technical support for the improvement of the participatory project, his/her main assignment is to certify the quality of projects and, eventually, to admit them to the regional contribution. With regard to this, the law 3/2010 makes a list of five quality items that projects must have to receive regional funds. First, the initial stage requires that all the social demographics are stimulated to become involved in the process, looking also at the differences of gender, age, language, and culture. Furthermore, it requires the immediate inclusion of new social subjects, the creation of methods for mediating disagreements (together with the use of instruments of direct, participatory, and deliberative democracy), and the transparency of projects' documentation and their processes (both for the *Tecnico di Garanzia* and the citizens, limited to projects receiving more than 20,000 Euros). Finally, the fifth quality item is represented by the creation of “a negotiation table, starting from the first stages, with the most important organized subjects who showed an interest in the process”. It is composed of the various organized actors of the territory in the form of representative associations, committees, parties, etc. Instead, its main task is to define in more detail the project's characteristics (including actors, times, and resources).

The supporting activity performed by the *Tecnico di Garanzia* is accompanied by the presence of a Technical Unit of Integration. Its task is the elaboration of technical recommendations related to the participatory processes even though these are not binding. Rather, it should try to monitor and study the best practices of participatory and deliberative democracies elaborated both in Italy and in Europe.

¹¹ In Emilia-Romagna, *Tecnico di Garanzia della Partecipazione* is a specific professional appointed by the president of the legislative assembly as a guarantor and supervisor in matter of participation.

Like the *Tecnico di Garanzia*, it is a consultative and supporting instrument for the actors involved in the process for its entire duration.

A third technical instrument is also sometimes created—a piloting committee composed of the representative delegates of the negotiation table. This serves as a sort of informative channel between all the local actors involved in the negotiation process and the *Tecnico di Garanzia*. While compulsory for projects receiving more than 20,000 Euros, it is facultative for the other ones, though recommended. In fact, its task is to monitor the participatory process and the respect of its operational modalities, above all the real inclusivity of the totality of actors, as established in the previous agreement. Moreover, it organizes the following stage of the process that directly involves the citizens. Through a representative sample,¹² a group of citizens is invited to open a reasoned discussion about the issue. In this case, the instruments that can be used are several and of different nature, such as town meeting, citizens' juries, participatory budgets, deliberative polling, etc. The final result of the discussion is a document that summarizes the main positions that emerged in the debate. Sometimes, if provided for in the project, the discussion can be also concluded with a vote. Lastly, the *Tecnico di Garanzia* approves the final document that represents the participatory proposal and sends it to the authority responsible for the administrative process. As for the latter, the document is not binding for its future choices, but the decisions that are also partially different from the conclusions of the participatory must be justified.

Policy Implications in Emilia-Romagna Participation Law

Starting from the analysis of law 3/2010, the relevant aspects for the study of the dimension of opportunities for participation are at least four.

First of all, the law hopes for a logic of action based on the multi-level governance because it requires the involvement of a plurality of actors and institutions. The Region takes on a role of guide and guarantor in the general process. On one hand, by using the instrument of incentive funds, it encourages the diffusion of these projects on the regional territory and certifies their quality. On the other hand, it creates a set of instruments for the staff in order to accompany the process from its beginning. Moreover, a continuous debate among them and the piloting committee is promoted. Similarly, the debate is also promoted among the piloting committee and the citizens.

¹² The sampling designs change from process to process based on what is included in the document of the participatory process.

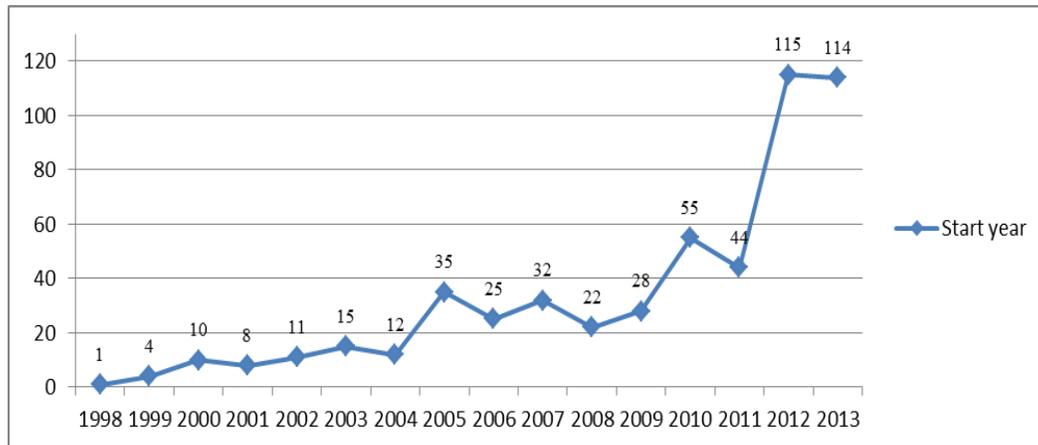
The second and third aspects are represented by the role played in the process by local authorities and citizens. The former are considered as guarantors of the decision-making process orienting the future choices of the legislator. The latter are called to take part in the process in the final part. In other terms, they are considered privileged witnesses whose opinions are heard by the proponents and the piloting committee before the definitive delivery of the final act. Moreover, citizens can be promoters of the possible processes, and in this case the Region will prioritize these projects in the attribution of financial incentives (art. 4, c. 2). But the law establishes two more provisions in favor of citizens' participation. On one hand, it declares that citizens, individually or in groups, can send petitions to the local and regional authorities about issues with economic and social relevance or those concerning the territory (art. 4, c. 1). On the other hand, it provides for an additional opportunity for intervention by the *Tecnico di Garanzia* in the case of problems between citizens and local authorities affecting the start-up of a particularly relevant participatory process.¹³

Finally, the fourth aspect is connected with the consideration made at the beginning of the previous paragraph. Emilia-Romagna regional law for participation does not consider participation as an obligation, but as a voluntary choice both for citizens and public authorities. Referring again to Walzer's metaphor, through the instruments of incentive funds and persuasion, the Region stimulates the actors and offers them a set of instruments to improve their participation in policy choices and promote co-decision. In this way, though creating a set of greater opportunities for citizens' participation, it does not provide citizens with instruments that could offer them the possibility of entirely influencing the final decisions.

Therefore, Emilia-Romagna's policy on participation could be considered as a symbolic policy, but not in the sense of Gustafsson's definition (1983, p. 271).¹⁴ Rather, following Pasquino's suggestion (2009, p. 248), as a policy that serves "to strengthen and/or transform collective identities, feeling of belonging, ties between the holders of political power and the citizens and to legitimate the holders of power themselves". In fact, the aim of Emilia-Romagna participation policy is to reinforce the link between citizens and political authorities as well as among citizens themselves by eliminating possible divisions and ensuring that citizens

¹³ Specifically those which require the involvement of a certain percentage of inhabitants in that territory (art.15): 5% per 1,000 residents, 3% per 5,000, 2% per 15,000, 1% per 30,000, and 0.5% over 30,000 residents. Therefore, it incentivizes the participation of citizens in smaller, often peripheral, municipalities.

¹⁴ Starting from the analysis of Swedish policy making, Gustafsson defined symbolic policies as "decisions which are not intended to be fully implemented".

Chart 1. The participatory processes in Emilia-Romagna (1998–2013, start year, absolute values)

Source: Regione Emilia-Romagna (2014, 12)

feel themselves as an active part of public life. Obviously, law 3/2010 represents only an additional opportunity for participation. In fact, voluntary cases already existed before the start of the regional funding, and it is possible that a participatory process starts without its benefit. What is interesting to note is that the Region defines guidelines for evaluating a project based on its quality standard.

At the same time (given that Lowy's types are not mutually exclusive), it might also be seen as a mixed policy: partially regulative (of participatory processes) and partially distributive (with regard to the funds allocated for participatory projects), with a remarkable symbolic component.

Participatory Processes in Emilia-Romagna

This section focuses on the main characteristics of the participatory processes in Emilia-Romagna from 1998 to 2013 based on the results emerging from the reports on the participation in this region, elaborated yearly by the ERVET Institute. A careful analysis will be carried out on the reports up to 2012, for 2013 the report is still incomplete. Given that the main objective of this paper is to analyze the different degrees of citizens' participation in political issues, in this section, particular attention will be paid to the actual use of these instruments. Therefore, consideration will be paid to issues related to the proponent subjects, the object of participation, and the participatory forms adopted. In the first part, the main characteristics of the Emilia-Romagna participatory process as a whole will be presented, while the second part examines the main characteristics of the processes receiving regional funding. The analysis will allow us to determine if, and in

which way, the regional intervention is having a positive impact on the quality of these projects.

Chart 1 shows the trend of the participatory processes. Emilia-Romagna Region first started to allocate funding through calls for proposals in 2012. For this reason, during that year, there has been a decisive increase of participatory processes in the region (confirmed in 2013), demonstrating the efficacy of the persuasion lever. Such an important growth had been previously reported only in 2005 and 2010. The latter corresponds to the year when the regional law was issued and during which the presentation of this law was associated with a heated debate in the media, spurred by the exceptional nature of this law on a national level.

Of 376 total cases surveyed by 2012 report, in more than three quarters (76.19%), municipalities were the institutional authorities with decision-making powers. On the other hand, the remaining part was divided among the interprovincial (7.67%), provincial (6.88%), inter-municipal (5.03%), and regional (4.23%) levels. On the contrary, none of the processes funded by the Region took place at the provincial and regional levels, while in the 13.85% of the cases, the decision-making body was represented at the inter-municipal level. This is due to the fact that in the 2012 call for proposals, Emilia-Romagna Region also provided for rewards to be assigned to the projects submitted by unions of municipalities.

As advocated by the regional law, in almost all the processes (98.94% of 376 cases), the decision-making body is represented by a public authority, while private organizations represent the smallest percentage. The Regional Observatory of Participation estimates that 34% of municipalities in Emilia-Romagna have carried out participatory processes, and 40% of these have a specific department for participation. This data is certainly indicative of an actual voluntary choice of municipal administrations to create a set of institutional instruments aimed at improving citizens' participation. In general, municipalities where most of the processes were carried out are those in the plain provinces of Bologna (95 cases), Reggio-Emilia (57), and Modena (49) in which participatory practices seem to be well-established. On the contrary, the greatest difficulties are reported in the two peripheral provinces of Parma and Piacenza.

Focusing on citizens' participation in the processes, both voluntary and funded projects show a higher percentage of processes involving the participation of individual citizens. Compared to the 91.80% of voluntary projects, funded projects show a slightly higher percentage (95.38%) of individual citizen participation. Higher percentages are reported also when the analysis considers both representa-

tive organizations (74.6% for voluntary projects and 86.15% for funded projects) and non-formalized organizations (66.14% and 76.92%, respectively).¹⁵ Moreover, the Observatory also reports that the presence of women was equal to 12.96% of the participatory processes surveyed.

By limiting the analysis to the results of the 2012 call for proposal, it can be noted that only 18.46% of projects that received quality certificates were also granted the funds. The piloting committee was provided in 64.62% of the cases. The processes whose start was stimulated by a petition or an application were respectively 15.38% and 30.77% of the total. The modalities for including social communities in the processes were different. In 49% of the cases, traditional modalities were employed, such as public meetings, focus groups, media, distribution of posters and flyers, and the involvement of social “intermediaries” (the last two were the most used). In 30% of the cases, the typical instruments of citizens’ participation were used, such as bar champ, community outreach approach, team consensus building, door-to-door approach, workshops, and the use of mediators and facilitators (the last two were the most used). Finally, in 16% of the cases, ICT instruments were used, such as text messages, online forums, social networks, newsletters, and websites (the last two were the most used).¹⁶ As already mentioned, law 3/2010 provides for the creation of participatory instruments both when the process starts and when it concludes. As for the former, focus groups (41.54% of the cases), workshops (36.92%), and open-space technology (26.15%) were the most common. As far as the latter is concerned, the most common instruments were public meetings (52.31%), citizen assemblies (26.15%), and online surveys (15.38%).

In conclusion, the analysis of participatory processes in Emilia-Romagna before and after the law 3/2010 shows how voluntary processes have always existed, even if in a rather structured way. In fact, as previously mentioned, the predisposition of citizens of this region to spontaneously join to resolve problems with common interests can be considered an endemic characteristic. Regarding this, Barbagli and Colombo (2004, pp. 13–14) point out that one peculiarity of the Emilia-Romagna model of participation continues to be the presence of a widespread civic-mindedness among citizens, exemplified in their disinterested commitment to the problems of the community and their interest in politics. This consideration shows that participation in this region should not be interpreted as a

¹⁵ Obviously, the sum is not equal to 100% because more categories can be included in the processes.

¹⁶ In the remaining 5% of the cases other instruments were used, such as social dinners or role-playing.

consequence of a policy setting alone, but it can also be understood as a consequence of the citizens' interests in specific issues. With regard to this, several examples with reference to different areas (institutional, environment, local development, etc.) are possible.

For example, at the beginning of the last decade, the strengthening of an incinerator in Ferrara by the AGEA (now Hera) created a general mood of anxiety and apprehension among the citizens regarding the effect that it could have on the quality of their environment and, above all, on the quality of the air. To give answers to the citizens' requests and to the local civic committees, a memorandum of understanding among the municipality, the province, the North-West District (that is the area involved by the strengthening), and the previous AGEA was created, leading to the establishment of the RAB (Residential Advisory Board). Its aim was to create a solid channel of communication, information, and discussion among citizens, the business, and the local authorities on the adopted choices and their possible consequences, with the participation of external facilitators as well. Established at the beginning of 2005, the RAB continues to be present and active after 10 years, despite the constitution not having any regional funding. On the contrary, two examples of participatory democracy cases with a limited duration occurred in Bologna and the province of Modena, two areas with a high stock of social capital (Cartocci, 2007). In the former case, increasing demands of non-Italian citizens on educational services, coupled with a changing labor market that required a redefinition of women's roles in the workforce, led citizens to request the creation of a specific Technical Working Group that elaborated a proposal for municipal regulation of nursery schools in Bologna for the City Council in 2006. The final proposal arrived at the end of a long participatory process attended by roughly 400 citizens, in both public meetings and online forums. In the second case, the necessity to retrain and renovate the ceramic district of Fiorano Modenese required the creation of a bottom up path to inter sectorial consultation, discussion and planning. Its aim was to involve both the citizens and the representative organizations for the formulation of concrete development projects. Besides the use of facilitators, participation methodologies used were several: focus groups, in-depth interviews, Web blogs, bar camp workshops, etc.

Therefore, the innovation introduced by the law lies in the fact that by using the instruments of persuasion and incentive funds, Emilia-Romagna Region is now capable of guiding participatory processes toward a better quality and a greater involvement of citizens. For example, it provides an additional score for funding allocation based on a formal agreement between participants requiring them to give their availability during the entire duration of the process and to accept the result. In 2012, 64.62% of the processes that received a quality certification had a

formal agreement. On the other hand, if before the regional law, the processes that adopted co-decision as a form of participation were 45.24% of the total, in 2012, they were increased only to the 52.31% of the total processes.

Conclusions

Starting from the analysis of a case study, this paper tried to answer questions about the possible instruments that Italian regions can use to mobilize citizens' political participation on specific issues.

The analysis of Emilia-Romagna law 3/2010 showed how the choice to adopt a mixed model of participation involving a plurality of stakeholders together with the citizens is perfectly coherent with the policy choices historically adopted by this Region in several sectors. In fact, on one hand, the Region incentivizes the creation of inclusive participative processes and those involving quality certification; on the other hand, this choice is perfectly embedded within a logic of integrative institutions that have historically predominated in this "red" region, a logic that is related to an idea of politics seen as the pursuit of the common good and that tries to guarantee shared preferences and widespread support (see Messina 2012, p. 34). Moreover, the article has demonstrated that the legislation adopted by Emilia-Romagna in 2010 has been able to increase both the level of participation and the quality of the participation processes. In fact, the in-depth analysis of the case selected underlined the presence of a historically high level of social capital and the consolidated civic tradition of the citizens of this region. As compared with the past, it is now evident that the law has both lead to an increase of the level of participation in those provinces where this tradition is more consolidated and had positive effect on the institutional infrastructures of increased the participatory processes. In fact, with respect to the previous participatory processes, the data presented demonstrates that in recent years there is an increase in the use of new forms and modalities of participation; in the use of mediators, facilitators and of the piloting committee; a diffusion of municipal departments for participation; as well as an increase in the participation of representative organizations, non-formalized organizations and individual citizen participation in the recent funded projects. Moreover, the analysis of the dimension of the opportunity structures for citizens' participation has shown that an institutional perspective is necessary to better understand the characteristics of the political participation in this region. In fact, the analysis showed that the study of political participation in Emilia-Romagna requires balancing the reasons of the individual choices of the single actor (the citizen) and the contextual factors (both institutional and cultural) with-

in which the forms of participation are organized to off-set the possible excessive determinism of rational choice and the behaviorist logic of its analysis. Finally, considering the regional competence in this matter and in the absence of a common institutional national panorama, a structured comparison among all the Italian regions will be difficult to imagine. At the same time, a future analysis of the different ways in which every single region is deciding to open (or not to open) new opportunity structures for citizens' participation will be interesting. As the case selected has taught us, an in-depth comprehension of the single regional strategy must be done by looking at both the single historical, cultural, and institutional variables of the regional framework and at the classic regional policy style (more or less interventionist). For example, it might be interesting to look at the different subjects that every single regional policy could involve in the process, the nature of the involvement of the citizens (e.g., looking how and when they are heard by the authorities), the amount of money and the related incentive criteria used by the single region to finance a certain type of process rather than another, or the type and the model of participation adopted by the Region: focused more on participation rather than on deliberation or on a mixed model. Moreover, it will be necessary to use specific evaluation criteria to assess the impact of the single regional policy on the actual effectiveness of these instruments. Obviously, they will not consider only the quantitative increase of these processes, but also their capacity, along with the instruments of persuasion and monetary incentives, to improve the quality of the processes and the actual coherence between the results of participatory processes and the future choices of policy makers.

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