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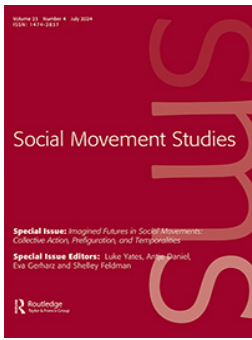
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# Explaining the impact of citizens' initiatives on social movements: insights from the Spanish housing movement

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## ABSTRACT

How do instruments of direct democracy affect the social movement organisations that sponsor them? Drawing on social movement studies and direct democracy research, we argue that direct democracy has a transformative effect on its sponsors because it triggers a triple process of movement building, learning, and bargaining with political elites. This triple process sets in motion enduring trends within the organisation that has undertaken the burden of promoting the initiative. We illustrate this argument with the case of a people's legislative initiative (a non-binding mechanism of direct democracy) organised by a housing rights organisation between 2011 and 2013 to counter the eviction crisis in Spain. This initiative did not result in the reform that activists demanded. Nevertheless, it contributed to consolidating the sponsor organisation, innovating its repertoire of action, and broadening its strategic options.

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## Introduction

Policy and legislative changes are crucial goals for social movements. Most of the time, challengers try to achieve them via indirect channels, using persuasive and disruptive tactics to pressure decision-makers and influence public opinion (Amenta et al., 2005; Burstein et al., 1995; Jasper et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2005). Alternatively, challengers can participate in the decision-making process via instruments of direct democracy, such as referendums and citizens' initiatives (Altman, 2018; Kriesi, 2005; Setälä & Schiller, 2012). After the 2008 financial crisis, social movements began showing more concerted interest in the latter, using direct democracy instruments to oppose regressive policy measures and express 'dissatisfaction with the ways representative democracy works' (Della Porta et al., 2017, p. 4).

Research about the impact of direct democracy instruments has flourished as their use has intensified. Since these instruments 'are often legally non-binding (. . .), guaranteeing citizens no direct control over policies' (Jäske, 2017, p. 1), recent research has mainly focused on effects 'beyond policy change' (Tosun et al., 2022). Social movement research, for example, has shown the diverse effects these instruments have had on contentious actors and their repertoires of action (Bouza García & Greenwood, 2014; Kriesi & Wisler, 1996).

However, the concrete mechanisms through which social movement organisations are influenced by their use of direct democracy instruments remain understudied. This article aims to fill this gap and explain *how* soft direct democracy tools, such as citizens' initiatives, have a transformative impact on the groups that use them. We will do so by examining a single, spatially- and temporally-situated case (Snow & Trom, 2002): the people's legislative initiative (PLI) against evictions, organised by a housing group called the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (known by its Spanish acronym, PAH) in Spain between 2011 and 2013. This initiative did not result in the policy change that housing activists wanted. Nevertheless, activists in the PAH praise this endeavour for the role it played in making their organisation grow and diversifying its strategic options (Alvarez de Andrés et al., 2015; Colau & Alemany, 2013). The transformative impact of the people's legislative initiative remained visible many years after its promotion (Martínez, 2019; Martínez et al., 2022; Sanmartín Cava, 2019).

Building on social movement studies and direct democracy research, we argue that the PLI against evictions transformed the structure of the PAH by fuelling a process of movement-building, learning, and bargaining, which established enduring, yet geographically uneven, trends within the organisation. This triple process stemmed from the design of the 'people's legislative initiative' as an institution of direct democracy and it produced effects influenced by contextual and conjunctural factors during the initiative.

In what follows, we first discuss the theoretical background of the impact of direct democracy instruments and propose an analytical framework to explain how social movement organisations can be transformed by using these tools. Then, we describe the context in which the Spanish PLI against evictions was launched. Next, we present our data and methods. After that, we analyse the process that transformed the PAH as a social movement organisation. Finally, we discuss our findings against the general background and formulate some concluding remarks.

## **The impact of soft direct democracy instruments**

Over the last two decades, participatory governance has developed through the introduction of instruments of direct democracy in several countries and at the European Union level (Altman, 2018; Bouza García & Del Río Villar, 2012; Setälä & Schiller, 2012). These instruments can be either citizen- or government-initiated. They can result in a binding decision or a non-binding one. The latter are more common and are described as 'a way to consult citizens instead of delegating direct decision-making power to the demos' (Jäske, 2017, p. 52) and as 'mechanisms subordinated to the political will of the representatives that could approve, alter or reject the citizens' proposals' (Cuesta-López, 2012, p. 256).

Scholars offer two main explanations of the recent turn towards participatory democracy: a democracy argument, that sees citizen participation as a way of counterbalancing the democratic deficit of the ordinary political process (Altman, 2018); and an effectiveness argument, that assumes that citizen participation helps improve the quality of the decision-making process (Jessop, 2002). However, soft forms of direct democracy are usually technically complex and entail substantial costs, making them a problematic tool. In her analysis of the participatory tools developed by the European Union during the 2010s, Boussaguet highlights that they 'have failed to involve lay people who are not stakeholders or interested citizens belonging to civil society organisations' (2016, p. 116).

Indeed, the enthusiastic vision of these instruments as a means of improving the attitudes of citizens towards politics and fostering the inclusion of marginalized groups has been widely challenged (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Christensen, 2019; Voigt & Blume, 2015).

Apart from critical appraisal of participatory instruments, a fertile field of inquiry into the consequences of direct democracy has developed. The relevance of direct democracy is questioned particularly in relation to its soft forms. Since the latter do not produce binding outcomes, many authors have been encouraged to look beyond their 'policy effects'. Boussaguet argues that the EU's participatory mechanisms have, above all, a symbolic effect because they show 'the willingness of European institutions to (...) address the EU democratic deficit' (2016, p. 120). For Bouza Garcia and Greenwood (2014, p. 247), European citizens' initiatives (ECI), a type of agenda-setting initiative regulated by the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, offer new opportunities in terms of visibility for issues that might not otherwise receive attention, as well as publicity for those promoting them. Also in relation to ECIs, Tosun et al. argue that soft forms of direct democracy have a political effect and bring about policy change. Nevertheless, they continue, 'to be able to observe these effects we need to acknowledge the EU's multi-level structure and the fact that they can materialize at a different level than the one originally addressed, and with a time lag' (2022, p. 2). This analysis is consistent with Weisskircher (2019), who showed the political effects of ECIs such as disappointment leading to the subsequent reform of the mechanism or the rescaling of issues; meaning the migration of the debates around a particular issue to a national scale following its 'failed' promotion at the European level.

In the last fifteen years, the institutionalisation of soft direct-democracy instruments and the social crisis resulting from austerity measures have boosted the appeal of these instruments to social movements (Della Porta et al., 2017). For Bouza García and Greenwood (2014), agenda-setting initiatives help 'to solve a conundrum for social movements by providing *institutionalized access* while allowing them to avoid legitimising a political system whose core values they contest' (2014, p. 249, the emphasis is ours). Indeed, social movement scholars have analysed direct democracy instruments as a dimension of the political structure within which contentious activity emerges and develops in the sense of 'specific (...) institutional arrangements (...) for social mobilisation' (Kitschelt, 1986, p. 58). Following this argument, tools of direct democracy available to citizens are constitutive of an open political system responsive to social demands (Kitschelt, 1986; Tarrow, 1989) and 'add more channels of access' (Kriesi, 1996, p. 12).

Social movement scholars have noted that direct democracy instruments, as an aspect of the state's formal institutional structure, have a diversified impact on social movements. For Kriesi and Wisler (1996), the availability of full-scale initiatives -that is, initiatives with binding outcomes- in Switzerland has moderated social movement repertoires, stimulated a 'centralization and bureaucratization' of social movement organizations, and delegitimised the confrontational tactics of more radical, 'identity-based' social movements. Studying agenda-setting mechanisms at the European level, Weisskircher (2019) shows how their design shapes the strategies of the social movements that use them, incentivizing the organisation of nationally-focused campaigns instead of Europe-wide activism. Pursuing this question of how the repertoire is affected, Della Porta et al. (2017) argue that the participation of movements in referendums 'from below,' after the Great Recession that hit Europe in 2008, 'introduced innovative forms of organisation' (2017, p. 1).

In general, assessments of the impact of direct democracy on social movements are quite generic and lack a demonstration of the causal mechanisms explaining how impact happens. We propose to focus on this aspect, treating direct democracy tools as a means of contention whose performance implies intense resource mobilisation work (John & Mayer, 1977).

### **Explaining the organizational impact of soft direct democracy on social movements**

As shown in the previous section, social movement scholars have treated direct democracy instruments as institutional arrangements, making them aspects of the ‘political opportunity structure’. However, instruments of direct democracy can also be analysed as contentious actions shaped by past actions, cultural references, and the institutions of a given political system. Under certain temporal, spatial and cultural circumstances, contentious actors can conceive of them as tools for making claims (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004; Tilly, 1986). In the case under study here, the PLI appeared as a practicable option for activists participating in the PAH and familiarized with legal tools. Sponsoring it implied simultaneously performing several modes of action (collection of signatures, rallies, press conferences, lobbying) aimed at persuading members of parliament about the necessity of legislative reform to end the eviction crisis. Ultimately, some of these modes of action were disruptive (in the sense of McAdam, 1983), as they aimed at raising the cost for political elites of not supporting the housing movement’s legislative proposal.

Many authors have addressed the ‘mobilisation effects’ of contentious action (Staggenborg, 1986; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004), thus focusing on what contentious performances by a particular movement produce in other movements or in the context within which other movements operate. They have identified generative effects – leading, for example, to the emergence of protest waves, spinoff movements, or counter-movements –, and spill-over effects, meaning altering the way other movements define themselves, frame their issues, establish organisations and interact with authorities (Earl, 2004; Whittier, 2004). However, what we want to establish here is that, first and foremost, the PLI, as a contentious performance, had a transformative impact on the organisation that took on the burden of sponsoring it. Promoting the PLI involved the PAH’s engaging in high-intensity resource mobilisation work that led to enduring changes in the group.

Two features of the PLI as an instrument of direct democracy oriented the resource mobilisation work. The first feature concerns the technical aspects of the PLI tool: its sponsors have to draft a piece of legislation and meet many formal requirements to make it through all the phases of the procedure. These requirements compel sponsors to use specific and general knowledge, acquire new skills or look for them outside the inner circle of sponsors. The second feature concerns the political struggle around the legislative initiative. Sponsoring a PLI compels its sponsors to mobilise rank-and-file and political networks in such a way as to reach the threshold of signatures and help navigate through a complex sequence of phases within parliament. Therefore, the sponsors of a PLI need to reach out to thousands of people who will potentially sign in support of the initiative and open channels of communication with parliament insiders, both technical staff and elected representatives.

Responding to these features triggers a triple process of movement building, learning, and bargaining within the organisation promoting the direct democracy instrument. Through this triple process, the sponsors of the initiative can create, aggregate, and use the resources needed to perform the PLI as a mode of contention. Following Tilly and Tarrow (2015), by ‘process’, we refer to a ‘regular combination of mechanisms’, which are in turn defined as ‘a delimited class of changes that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations’ (2015, p. 29).

‘Movement building’ refers to expanding and strengthening the network that supports and shares the burden of sponsoring the direct democracy instrument. It is the result of the concatenation of several mechanisms, including brokerage (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015), direct and indirect diffusion (Givan et al., 2010; Strang & Soule, 1998; Soule et al., 1999), and framing work (Benford & Snow, 2000).

‘Learning’ refers to the gradual, individual and collective acquisition of valuable knowledge to advance the citizen’s initiative. It can derive from the mere experience of going through the institutional procedures a PLI involves. Learning happens through several channels: the application of previous individual knowledge resources, the organisation of activities intentionally deployed to make activists learn, and casual situations where activists incidentally acquire knowledge (Choudry, 2015; Scandrett, 2012).

‘Bargaining’ describes ‘any situation in which two or more parties seek conflicting ends through the exchange of compensations’ (Wilson, 1961, p. 291). According to Burstein’s ‘bargaining perspective’, social movement outcomes are ‘the result of interactions among movement organizations, the organizations whose behaviour they are trying to change, and relevant actors in the broader environment’ (1995, p. 277). The bargaining power of social movement organisations can increase through disruptive protest, which affects the calculations of political elites (Cress & Snow, 2000; McAdam, 1983), or through other means, like changing public preferences (Lipsky, 1968). In the case that concerns us here, ‘Bargaining’ refers to the actions and interactions that the promoters of a PLI deploy to persuade decision-makers to support the proposal and encompasses mechanisms of persuasion, expert lobbying, and disruption.

This triple process does not operate in a vacuum. The effects it has are influenced by the circumstances surrounding the promotion of the direct democracy tool. In the following sections, we describe each dimension of the process, following a similar structure: we start by explaining how movement building, learning, and bargaining happened in the context of the national PLI’s promotion between 2011 and 2013 and then we use empirical elements until 2017 to show its subsequent effects. Before delving into these findings, we will present the PLI tool and the specific case of the PLI against evictions, as well as our data collection and methods.

### **Setting the scene: people’s legislative initiatives, the Spanish housing crisis, and the initiative against evictions (2011–2013)**

The people’s legislative initiative is an ‘agenda-setting initiative’ of direct democracy, which Setälä and Schiller (2012) distinguish from ‘full-scale initiatives’ leading to a binding outcome. In other words, the Spanish PLI is a soft form of direct democracy in which the decision-making power remains in the hands of elected representatives (Cuesta-López, 2012). Through a PLI, citizens can submit a legislative proposal to the

national or regional parliaments<sup>1</sup> provided they have gathered a certain number of signatures. The whole procedure is multi-phased and complex. In the first phase of the PLI procedure, a 'sponsor commission' sends a draft of the legislative proposal to the parliament board. If the submission meets all the technical requirements, the parliament board authorizes the collection of signatures. In the second phase, the sponsor commission has to gather a certain number of signatures in a limited time (500,000 signatures for a national PLI in nine months, extendable to twelve).<sup>2</sup> Once collected, an official authority validates the signatures and certifies that the minimum threshold has been achieved. The third phase consists of parliament voting on the draft. If the vote result is negative, parliament dismisses the PLI, regardless of popular support. If the vote is positive, the PLI continues its course like any other conventional legislative proposal, with members of parliament being able to modify the draft via amendments. Finally, the redrafted proposal goes through a final adoption vote in parliament.

Several authors have described the Spanish PLI as a mechanism 'in between representative democracy and direct democracy' because of the central role of parliament in the procedure (Larios Paterna, 2008, p. 184). Indeed, members of parliament can block the process at several points, and they maintain control over the outcome. Furthermore, during the deliberative process in parliament, they often rewrite significant segments of the legislative proposal. Therefore, even if a new piece of legislation stemming from a PLI is adopted, its content may differ from the initial goal of the sponsors. Moreover, the regulatory framework of PLIs imposes very demanding requirements: the minimum threshold of signatures is high, the time to collect them is short, the criteria to validate them are restrictive,<sup>3</sup> and the cost of producing signature sheets meeting the legal standards may be too high for sponsors (Presno Linera, 2012; Quintero Ortega, 2014).

Because of its non-binding character and demanding requirements, the use of PLIs was limited between 1984 (when the instrument came into force) and the beginning of 2000 (Illueca Ballester, 2015; Vidal Marín, 2015).<sup>4</sup> The situation seemed to reverse after the 2008 economic crisis and the wave of protests against austerity. In this context, the PLI tool started gaining popularity among social movements, who saw it as an avenue to both denounce and bypass 'the manifest lack of responsibility taken by political institutions for the suffering of their citizens' (Della Porta et al., 2017, p. 2; Feenstra, 2015; Flesher Fominaya, 2020). More concretely, activist coalitions launched several PLIs to promote progressive policies in social, housing, and immigrant rights (D'Adda et al., 2022; Fanjul & Fuentes, 2022; Sin Permiso, 2013).

In Spain, a crucial ingredient of the 2008 economic crisis was a housing crisis whose most blatant manifestation was skyrocketing evictions (Cano Fuentes et al., 2013). This situation had its roots in the economic model cultivated since the Franco regime, and continued during the democratic era, in which construction and real estate-related sectors are the main source of growth (DiFelicianantonio & Aalbers, 2018; López & Rodríguez, 2010). Between 1998 and 2008, credit availability from international markets and the deregulation of soil uses allowed more than 6.5 million residential units to be built (Coq-Huelva, 2013). Home ownership also exploded during this decade, based on a private debt boom boosted by easy credit and predatory lending practices (Palomera, 2014). The global recession, starting in 2007, led to the collapse of the housing sector. According to official data, foreclosures rose from almost 60,000 in 2008 to more than 90,000 in 2010, while evictions of families unable to repay their mortgage doubled during



the same period. In 2012, at the height of the mortgage and eviction crisis, the total number of evictions (70,257) represented an average of 282 per day.<sup>5</sup> Between 2008 and 2013, almost 500,000 houses were foreclosed, and 300,000 families were evicted.<sup>6</sup>

Against this background, a group of activists created the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) in Barcelona in 2009, mainly to denounce the role played by politicians and bankers in the housing crisis and organize people against evictions. Usually described as the leading social movement organisation in the field of housing justice in Spain, the PAH has been the subject of many studies investigating its networked organisation (Alvarez de Andrés et al., 2015), its capacity to involve international migrants in the urban struggle (Gonick, 2021; Ravelli, 2018; Suarez, 2017), and its diversified repertoire of action, combining institutional tactics and direct action (Ancelovici & Emperador Badimon, 2023, 2024).

The consequences of social movements are usually studied in their social, biographical, and political dimensions (Giugni et al., 1999), and PAH's legacies are multiple in each of these. Barranco and Parcerisa (2020) have highlighted its influence in increasing the visibility of the housing crisis and transforming the frames through which it is perceived. Through civil disobedience and direct action, it has blocked thousands of evictions and rehoused thousands of people. It also has pushed banks to modify their practices towards the people involved (Martínez et al., 2022). For several authors, PAH's 'insurgent practices' have created alternatives to the neoliberal housing model and forged subjectivities emancipated from its logic (DiFelicianantonio, 2017; García-Lamarca, 2022). Indeed, the PAH has empowered people affected by housing insecurity and transformed them into activists through collective work attentive to care (Santos, 2020, 2023). Several links can be established between the PAH and diverse policy innovations and models of governance (Martínez, 2019; Miralles Buil, 2018).

Since its inception in 2009, PAH's activists saw the mortgage law as the backbone of the eviction crisis. By that time, the law enabled banks to acquire a foreclosed property at auction at 60% of its worth. The difference between the amount of the mortgage and this 60% remained the former homeowner's debt. That meant that people were evicted from their foreclosed homes and still had to pay considerable amounts to banks. Thus, mortgage law reform rapidly became a leitmotiv for the PAH and launching a PLI appeared to provide an avenue for that.

In November 2010, the PAH coordinated with *Observatori DESC*,<sup>7</sup> a think tank specialised in strategic litigation and also based in Barcelona, to work on a draft to change the regulation of mortgages and evictions. The two organisations were close, as some of the founders of the PAH were employees at the *Observatori DESC*. The legislative proposal submitted to the national parliament board in March 2011 included the following demands: regulate the '*dación en pago*' mechanism, by which 'the bank cancels all outstanding mortgage debt in exchange for the house' (García-Lamarca, 2017, p. 9); increase social housing stock; and ban the eviction of vulnerable households. However, the political context the PLI had to navigate was tortuous and unstable. When the first draft was submitted to the *Congreso de los diputados* in March 2011, a progressist majority led by Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's socialist party (PSOE) was ruling. However, signature collection phase started in April 2012 under the rule of the conservative Popular Party (PP) led by Mariano Rajoy. The PP, which was even more blatantly opposed to all of the measures in the PLI draft than the PSOE, also had

a majority in parliament. In addition, between the time the PLI was submitted and the campaign to collect signatures started, the country witnessed the upsurge of the *Indignados* movement and the beginning of a remarkable wave of contention against austerity measures (Ancelovici et al., 2016; Carvalho, 2022; Portos, 2021).

At the end of the day, the legislative outcome of the national PLI against evictions was disappointing yet predictable, given the hostile correlation of forces in parliament. The sponsors of the PLI collected more than 1,400,000 signatures between April 2012 and January 2013 and, against all odds, national parliament voted to authorise the PLI to proceed in February 2013. However, the conservative majority in parliament utterly subverted the content of the PLI during the redrafting phase. In the end, parliament adopted a new mortgage law in April 2013 that was at the antipodes of the original proposal.

Nonetheless, PAH activists saw this process as a turning point for the PAH. The process of promoting the PLI against evictions was ultimately fruitful in its ‘secondary’ outcomes, meaning outcomes PAH activists did not explicitly name as goals of the action. For Colau and Alemany (2013), two founders of the PAH, the campaign launched to promote the PLI ‘consolidated the movement’ (2013, p. 34) by leading to the creation of dozens of PAH local nodes across the country. For Martínez et al. (2022), the national PLI against evictions strengthened the social legitimacy of the PAH and its internal cohesion. It also led parties who opposed these proposals to change their position and support them, paving the way for later legislative work more coherent with the activists’ demands in other regions of Spain. The 2011–2013 experience expanded the range of strategic options available to the PAH. From then on, sponsoring PLIs or other legislative proposals appeared feasible options for action. Indeed, the PAH attempted six more PLI in the following years, all at the regional level.<sup>8</sup>

How can we explain these secondary outcomes of the national PLI? To answer these questions, we will analyse the PLI as a contentious tactic, whose performance set in motion a process of movement-building, learning and bargaining yielding transformative effects for the PAH. Before that, we present in the next section the empirical data upon which we build our arguments.

## Data and methods

This article explains how direct democracy instruments impact the social movement organisations that sponsor them. Most of the time, direct democracy studies focus on a hypothesized impact – be it political trust (Christensen, 2019), better policies (Achen & Bartels, 2016), political inclusion or exclusion (Fatke, 2015), etc.- and assess whether the postulated impact exists. What we propose here is slightly different. Our *explanandum* encompasses both the outcomes of the Spanish PLI against evictions that are relevant in terms of organizational functioning and the causal mechanisms leading to them (Gerring, 2007). Our research design apprehends some objective facts, such as the organisational consolidation of the PAH and the diversification of its strategic options, as secondary outcomes of the national 2011–2013 PLI.

This way of shaping the enigma has implications for the data used here, which extend well beyond the strict temporality of the national PLI against evictions (2011–2013). This is why the period under study runs from 2011 to 2017. This interval comprises milestones

(such as the campaigns promoting a Catalan PLI in 2014 and a Madrid PLI in 2017) that materialise the enduring effects of the movement-building, learning, and bargaining processes activated in 2011 by promoting the national PLI. We approach this 2011–2017 period via a process-tracing method, examining the processes and sequences of decisions and events that lead to the situation under study (Bennett, 2010).

We obtained the data necessary for the process-tracing through multimethod research. One method of data collection was interviews with PAH activists (12 interviews), with allies involved in other social organisations (3), and with elected members of the parliaments that took part in the processing of three PLIs (5): the national one between 2011 and 2013, a Catalan PLI between 2014 and 2015, and a Madrid PLI in 2017. Table 1 offers a summary of these interviews. This sample of 20 interviewees was built using a criterion of participation in promoting or negotiating any of the three PLIs. Despite our attempts to reach out to parliamentarians of the Popular Party (the ruling party at the time signatures were collected

**Table 1.** Summary of interviewees.

Interviewee	Profile	Sex	ILP	Type of interview	Length
1	PAH activist (Barcelona)	F	Spain	In person, Barcelona	120 minutes
2	PAH activist (Barcelona)	F	Spain	In person, Barcelona	100 minutes
3	PAH activist (Barcelona)	M	Spain	In person, Barcelona	180 minutes
4	PAH activist (Barcelona)	F	Spain	In person, Barcelona	180 minutes
5	PAH activist (Murcia)	M	Spain	Zoom	120 minutes
6	PAH activist (Valencia)	F	Spain	Zoom	120 minutes
7	ODESC and PAH activist (Barcelona)	M	Spain and Catalonia	Zoom	120 minutes
8	Third sector activist (Girona)	M	Spain and Catalonia	Zoom	120 minutes
9	PAH activist (Barcelona)	M	Catalonia	Zoom	150 minutes
10	APE activist (Barcelona)	F	Catalonia	Zoom	120 minutes
11	Third-sector activist (Osona)	F	Catalonia	Zoom	90 minutes
12	PAH activist (Sant Celoni)	F	Catalonia	Zoom	90 minutes
13	<i>Coordinadora de vivienda</i> activist (Madrid)	F	Madrid	Zoom	90 minutes
14	PAH Centro (Madrid)	F	Madrid	Zoom	90 minutes
15	PAH Centro	M	Madrid	Zoom	60 minutes
16	Member of Parliament (MP) ( <i>Izquierda Unida</i> , left)	M	Spain	Zoom	80 minutes
17	MP ( <i>Partido Socialista Obrero Español</i> , center-left)	F	Spain	Zoom	80 minutes
18	MP ( <i>Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya</i> , independentist, left)	M	Catalonia	Written interview	
19	MP ( <i>Podemos</i> , left)	M	Madrid	Zoom	90 minutes
20	MP ( <i>Ciudadanos</i> , center-right)	M	Madrid	Zoom	80 minutes

and the PLI was debated in Parliament), none accepted to be interviewed. The interviews, conducted between 2021 and 2023, were aimed at learning about the non-public dimensions of the three PLI proceedings, especially negotiations between elected representatives and activists that unfolded alongside the formal bureaucratic process. Interviewees were asked about the PLI procedure they were involved in, the characteristics of their involvement, and their interactions with other actors and institutions. We invited interviewees to evoke both factual elements of the trajectory of each PLI and their subjective impressions about the factors that made these trajectories take the course of action they did. The interviews were conducted in Catalan and Spanish, in person or using videoconferencing when necessary. We recorded the interviews (with the explicit consent of the interlocutors), transcribed them, and analysed them according to the principles of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014). There is a table summarizing the interviews at the end of this article

To overcome the potential failings of a single-method approach, we used triangulation to bring multiple perspectives on our subject. In addition to interviews, we studied media sources and parliamentary documents. For media sources, we searched all occurrences of the three PLIs in *El País*, a national newspaper, and *Ara*, a Catalan one, for the period 2011–2017 to reconstruct the trajectory of the national PLI and its posterior effects. Parliamentary documents consisted of minutes of the Economy and Competitiveness Commission's sessions and of Plenary sessions that dealt with the PLI at the *Congreso de los diputados*, as well as minutes of the Territory Commission's sessions and Plenary sessions where the Catalan PLI was discussed at the *Parlament de Catalunya*. No parliamentary documentation was studied for the Madrid PLI because the draft was not allowed to proceed in the legislative chamber.<sup>9</sup> These documents gave us information about how the parties defended or, on the contrary, attempted to modify the drafts proposed by the housing movement. They also provided concrete information that helped us define our interview grids. The three data collection methods provided complementary information and we did not encounter fundamental contradictions between the three sources.

### **“Movement building” during the promotion of the PLI**

Sponsoring the national PLI against evictions between 2011 and 2013 drove the PAH into a movement building process that encompassed mechanisms of brokerage, direct and indirect diffusion, internal complexification, and increasing visibility.

The first step in promoting the PLI was to form a coalition of sponsors supporting the legislative proposal. Housing activists and ODESC members acted as brokers and invited other organisations to join them in the ‘sponsors’ commission’, a mandatory step to initiate a PLI procedure. Two unions, the *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT) and *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO), joined it, along with the Catalan federation of third sector associations (*Taula d'entitats del tercer sector*) and the Catalan confederation of neighbours' associations (*Confederació d'associacions de veïns i veïnes de Catalunya*). In assembling such a varied spectrum of actors, the PAH was sending a message: the PLI against evictions was a socially transversal project encompassing many political sensibilities. Further, since UGT and CCOO are the largest unions in Spain and enjoy a dense territorial network, including them in the PLI's promotion campaign could facilitate the increase of collection points for signatures. Nonetheless, it is worth highlighting the

centrality of Catalan activists in this initial stage. This fact will determine who most benefits from the learning and bargaining process.

When the sponsors' commission submitted the PLI draft to the national parliament board, the PAH only had branches in Catalonia and Murcia. According to Sanmartín Cava (2019), the housing organisation only had nine local nodes by the end of 2010. There was a steady development of the PAH between 2011 and 2012, with a remarkable increase of nodes – from 12 active in April 2011 to 40 in September 2011 – that seems to correlate with the upsurge of the 15 M movement<sup>10</sup> in May 2011. The PLI campaign, with its requirement to collect a minimum threshold of signatures in 9 months (starting in April 2012), appears to be the critical factor in the explosion in the number of local PAH branches. Indeed, to meet the challenge of gathering 500,000 signatures, the PAH was compelled to expand its reach and create new chapters throughout the national territory. In some circumstances, pre-existing relationships between PAH members and activists involved in other movements facilitated the creation of new nodes, following a logic of direct diffusion in the sense of Givan et al. (2010). A quote from a PAH activist from Murcia illustrates this logic:

A national PLI requires 500,000 signatures ... It means having many PAHs collecting signatures throughout the country. In Murcia, we took responsibility, and with José, we started to travel. We began expanding the PAH to other territories. We travelled to Valencia, we travelled to Asturias, we travelled to Madrid, to La Rioja, to Andalucía ... Mobilizing people who already knew each other from previous activism.<sup>11</sup>

The remnants of the *indignados* movement (Ancelovici et al., 2016; Carvalho, 2022; Flesher Fominaya, 2020; Portos, 2021) also contributed to the diffusion of PAH's organisational form through indirect channels. Indeed, when the campaign to collect signatures for the PLI started, many were still involved in the activist networks that outlived the summer 2011 *indignados* protests. These activists were eager to support activities related to the PLI against evictions; they participated in collecting signatures and created new nodes of the PAH, as an activist from Madrid recalls:

As people close to the Housing Committee (*Comisión de Vivienda*) of the 15 M in our neighbourhood, we had already been meeting several times to collect signatures for the PLI of the PAH. So we asked ourselves: why not create our own branch of the PAH?!<sup>12</sup>

In March 2013, one month before the end of the signature collection period, the number of branches had jumped to 133. In June 2013, right after the PLI adventure, the PAH declared 160 branches across the national territory. The consolidation of PAH's internal rules accompanied the diffusion of its organisational form (Martínez et al., 2022). To ensure the coherence of the newly created local sections, the node of Barcelona wrote some prescriptive documents. One of these documents, called 'Red Lines', bans certain attitudes in the PAH, such as exhibiting explicit support for a political party and an individualized approach to providing advice, thus breaking the rule of collective and assembly-based counsel. Other documents contained guidelines about how to organise eviction blockades, strongly inspired by the experience in Barcelona. As Alvarez de Andrés et al. recall, 'practices, procedures, forms, and documents were standardized and uploaded as files that can be downloaded freely from PAH websites' (2015, p. 257). A 'mediation commission' was set up with a heavy presence of activists from Barcelona,

whose task was to intervene in case of conflict between sections or breach of the ‘Red Lines’. In addition, to ensure the internal coordination of an expanding organisation, the PAH created a ‘national commission’ and instituted a principle of quarterly national meetings.

PAH’s consolidation throughout the promotion of the PLI was more than just organisational. It also translated into increased public visibility. Promoting the PLI implied that the PAH spent many hours in the streets, collecting signatures or performing outreach activities like rallies and conferences, which attracted media attention and widespread interest (Barranco & Parcerisa, 2020). Data from Google Trends indicate that the terms ‘eviction’ and ‘PAH’ peaked in interest between the fall of 2012 and the spring of 2013, during and just after the end of the PLI campaign. Around the same period, the national newspaper *El País* published the results of a series of surveys that showed an alignment between the diagnostic frames produced by the PAH and public opinion. Seventy per cent of respondents blamed the mortgage system for evictions, and 91% thought that banks had taken advantage of their customers’ lack of knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

The outcomes of this movement-building process set in motion by the promotion of the national PLI were visible long after April 2013. Even if the media visibility of the PAH fell abruptly after this date, Google Trends for 2014–2019 shows that searches for the term ‘PAH’ stabilised around the same levels as in 2011. The expansion of the organisation also continued for a while. According to Mangot Sala (2014), the PAH had reached 200 nodes in February 2014, and, in 2017, PAH’s website declared 254 active nodes (Santos, 2023).<sup>14</sup> As for the rules and internal coordination bodies established during the PLI period, they are still in force at the time of writing.

### **“Learning” while promoting the PLI**

Citizens sponsoring a PLI deal with a complex procedure within a bureaucratized arena. The technical features of the PLI compel sponsors to use juridical content and arguments and to comply with parliamentary protocols and temporalities. Moreover, sponsors must develop relational and rhetoric skills to interact regularly with elected members and bureaucrats. Summing up, promoting a PLI forces its sponsors to navigate an alien world, triggering a learning process. By ‘learning process’, we mean the gradual, individual, and collective acquisition of valuable knowledge for advancing the legislative initiative. The learning process means more than acquiring formal knowledge through formal learning activities, such as studying the legislation and rules and procedures of parliament. It also implies acquiring practical knowledge through casual situations of interaction with elected officials and bureaucrats who, because of their position in the parliament, can become critical informants.

Thinking of collective mobilisations as sites of learning is common in social movement studies (Cox, 2014; Eyerman & Jamison, 1990). Nonetheless, whether learning is approached as a mechanism encompassed in more comprehensive processes (Strang & Soule, 1998) or as a fundamental aspect of any collective action dynamic (Choudry, 2015; Scandrett, 2012), an account of how it happens concretely is usually missing. For this reason, here we focus on three constitutive aspects of the learning process triggered by the promotion of the PLI: the capitalisation of previous individual knowledge, training activities, and casual situations and informal interactions that generate helpful knowledge.

Promoting a PLI requires legislative and public policy expertise. Therefore, when PAH activists from Barcelona started to consider the possibility of promoting a PLI, they gathered internal skills (meaning PAH activists who already possessed helpful knowledge) and external skills held by allies (that is, people who had a personal, activist or professional affinity with the PAH). This capitalisation of knowledge resulted in the constitution of a ‘technical commission of the PLI’. Its role was to write the first draft of the PLI and subsequent versions, interact with parliamentary personnel (elected officials or bureaucrats), design the promotion campaign, and monitor the entire institutional procedure. The ‘technical commission of the PLI’ remained a small group of high-skilled activists, mainly from Catalan sections of the PAH.

Knowledge production went beyond the selective ‘technical commission’. Since promoting a PLI requires the active involvement of hundreds of volunteers across the territory, many training activities addressed to rank-and-file activists also took place. As an activist from PAH Valencia recalls,

The first training was about the collection of signatures, in order to be able to constitute a legion of ‘attestors’<sup>15</sup> (. . .). You know, the bureaucrats of the parliament scared us a lot about collecting signatures, reminding us that we had to be very scrupulous; otherwise, hundreds of signatures could be useless. After that, we had training in debate about how to defend the PLI. We made it simple because people did not even know how to pronounce correctly ‘retroactive *dación en pago*’.<sup>16</sup>

Casual situations and informal interactions were also crucial to acquiring valuable knowledge. Some occurred when PAH activists sought the help of critical informants, such as elected representatives and bureaucrats, who could resolve doubts about the institutional procedure and political negotiation. Thus, besides acquiring formal knowledge, the learning process also consisted of networking with individuals whose positions and social capital could be helpful.

The effects of the learning process triggered by the promotion of the national PLI can be observed long after the 2011–2013 campaign ended. Learning, whether intentional or accidental, affects the behaviour of actors in subsequent moments and makes ‘actors act in accordance with lessons drawn from relevant, often past, political experience’, as Falleti & Lynch argue in a theoretical article about causal mechanisms (2009, p. 1150). The experience of the first PLI proved to PAH activists that this was a plausible mode of action, despite all the difficulties involved, and it enlarged the tactical repertoire of the housing movement. The learning acquired for the first PLI promotion also enabled the PAH to adapt to the ‘politics of scale when authorities rescale resources, policies and decision-making processes’, as Nicholls and Beaumont (2004, p. 9) argue in their work about the relationship between space and social movements. Indeed, the Spanish PLI was the first of a series of six other PLIs that PAH activists brought at the regional level. In subsequent years, the PAH also engaged in more conventional lobbying, inviting political parties to support legislative proposals authored by the housing movement in parliament, either at the national or regional level. This approach reveals a new strategy in which the PAH takes advantage of the multi-level governance structure in Spain and selects national or regional targets according to the opportunities generated by inter-territorial and inter-governmental competition (Subirats & Gallego, 2012).

## “Bargaining” with parliamentary elites

As a soft form of direct democracy, the viability of a PLI depends on a majority of members of parliament not exercising their veto power. Thus, the sponsors of a PLI need to secure the support of elected representatives. This requirement triggers a bargaining dynamic that, like the ones previously mentioned, also enduringly transformed the PAH. We disaggregate the ‘bargaining’ in which the PAH engaged, as main sponsors of the PLI, into three aspects: discursive work aimed at influencing public opinion, expert lobbying, and disruption.

The ‘PLI’s technical commission’ was tasked with framing a discourse stressing the necessity of legislative reform to counter the eviction crisis and regulate the payment-in-kind mechanism. This framing also aimed to persuade people to sign the PLI. The PAH engaged in a social media campaign involving massive production of social media content to achieve this goal. Moreover, it physically occupied public space with dozens of press conferences and citizen forums. As we mentioned before, media coverage increased the relevance of this discursive work, and newspaper surveys conducted between the end of the signature collection and the bill’s introduction to parliament revealed the alignment of public opinion with the diagnosis and solutions proposed by the PAH. When the time for collecting signatures ran out, the sponsors had almost triple the minimum number of signatures required: nearly one and a half million. Such a colossal number of signatures was a success to them in terms of popular support and pressure on members of parliament.

While trying to influence public opinion through social media, activities in public space, and media coverage, the PAH also sought to establish communication channels with elected representatives. The purpose of these meetings was not only to ensure the support of elected representatives for the PLI during the voting stages in parliament. Also at stake were amendments a parliamentary commission would use to redraft the legislative proposal (once parliament had voted in favour of the authorisation to proceed). The reputation of the ‘PLI’s technical commission’ members as lawyers and experts on housing issues helped them obtain meetings with politicians. A member of the technical commission, a lawyer, recalled that ‘it is impossible for members of parliament to know everything. Thus, if you represent a respectable group, like lawyers, they trust you and buy your amendments’.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, capitalising on skills and knowledge also proved crucial in helping the PAH become a worthy participant in policy-making circles.

However, more than expertise and credibility were needed to persuade the elected representatives of the conservative Popular Party to support the legislative proposal. Because of its institutional position (party of the Prime minister and controlling a majority in parliament), the future of the PLI was in its hands. Thus, the PAH chose to generate negative inducements on PP members of parliament hostile to the PLI. Disruption, aiming at raising the cost of not supporting the PLI, materialised as rallies in front of the local and regional PP headquarters. The PAH innovated its repertoire of contention by including *escraches*, performances of public condemnation inspired by the Argentinian human rights movement that consisted of publicly pointing at and shaming elected officials in the PP reluctant to commit themselves to the legislative initiative (Romanos, 2014). Eventually, the party modified its position and voted in favour of the PLI to avoid further damage to its image.



The national PLI went to the vote and parliament authorised it to proceed. However, once the PLI had become a legislative proposal to be redrafted by amendment in a parliamentary commission, the PP used its absolute majority to push through a complete rewriting of the proposal. In April 2013, the Spanish parliament finally adopted a new mortgage regulation; the content of which had nothing to do with the proposal submitted by the PAH two years earlier.

Despite the disappointing yet predictable legislative outcome, the bargaining process activated during the PLI sponsorship induced a dynamic of collaboration between the ‘PLI’s technical commission’ and elected officials. The Catalan branches of the PAH benefitted the most from this easier access to political elites. In 2014, they launched a Catalan PLI, where activists practiced a cunning combination of expertise-based lobbying and disruptive actions. The older national PLI experience had taught Catalan activists to take advantage of electoral timing. The collection of signatures for the Catalan PLI took place during the electoral campaigns for the 2015 municipal and regional elections. During these periods, political parties sought electoral support and it was easier for the PAH to raise the cost of opposing the PLI. Activists were also careful to avoid criminalisation when organising disruptions. In 2013, the *escraches* used during the promotion of the national PLI sparked severe criticism.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, in 2015, Catalan PAHs innovated *within the innovation* and performed silent *escraches*, which were more difficult to delegitimise. This enhanced awareness resulted in a feeling of empowerment among Catalan activists:

With the Catalan PLI, we controlled the legislative text. This related to what we learned from the Spanish experience. We certainly had this feeling of being able to write the bill we wanted!<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the political conjuncture in Catalonia when the PAH sponsored a regional PLI between 2014 and 2015 was more favourable than the previous 2011–2013 national one: the fragmentation of political forces in the Catalan parliament and the dominant position of leftist parties prevented the formation of a majority able to block the housing movement’s legislative proposal. The majority of elected representatives in the Catalan parliament had, in 2015, many incentives to support the legislative initiative of the PAH *as it was*. Nonetheless, the learning and access to political elites, a by-product of the negotiation of the national PLI, certainly paved the way for Catalan activists to lead subsequent policy-making endeavours.

## Discussion and concluding remarks

For the PAH, carrying the national PLI against evictions had a transformative effect. Two years after starting the process, this housing rights organisation had become nation-wide, consolidated its internal structure, innovated its repertoire, and diversified its strategic options. Legislative initiatives had entered the contentious repertoire of the housing movement as a feasible tactic, and the PAH had broadened its strategic vision, taking into account the opportunities generated by the dynamics of multi-level governance and inter-territorial competition in Spain. Moreover, promoting a national PLI also left a legacy of routine access to political elites for Catalan PAHs. These consequences of the PLI have been noted by many researchers before us (Barranco & Parcerisa, 2020;

D'Adda et al., 2022; García-Lamarca, 2017; Martínez, 2019), but this article contributes to the debate by proposing an analytical framework to explain how they actually happened.

The transformations the PAH underwent throughout the promotion of the PLI were not obvious. They were the result of a movement building, learning, and bargaining process that operated within a particular context and conjuncture. A first conjunctural element that needs to be discussed concerns the temporality and scope of the PLI studied in this article. When the PAH launched the direct democracy tool, it was still a young organisation created two years earlier and only had nodes in Catalonia and Murcia. Because of its national scope, the PLI against evictions incentivised the organisation to grow and spread across other regions of Spain. This conjunctural element explains why the outcome of the movement-building process activated by the PLI's promotion was a territorial expansion of the organisation. This is evident when we compare the Spanish PLI of 2011–2013 with the subsequent Catalan (2014–2015) and Madrid (2017) regional PLIs. In these two other cases, the process of movement building activated by the requirements of the PLI indeed increased the visibility of the PAH at a regional level for a specific time. However, it did not materialize in any further territorial extension of the PAH (Emperador Badimon & Ancelovici, 2022).

A second conjunctural aspect that mediates the outcomes of the process activated by the promotion of the national PLI was its 'premiere' character. Promoting the national PLI was something that the housing movement was performing for the very first time. Since there was no prior experience with agenda-setting mechanisms, PAH's activists had everything to learn. Therefore, the feeling of 'discovery', of unveiling strategic possibilities, made possible by this first performance of the PLI, could not be repeated in subsequent attempts of regional PLIs, especially for activists who had already been involved in the Spanish PLI.

Finally, the extent to which the PLI was able to move through the stages of the institutional procedure also mediated the outcomes of the process. Against all odds, the Spanish PLI was authorised to proceed as a legislative proposal in the *Congreso de los diputados* and entered a parliamentary commission where MPs discussed amendments and redrafted it. This period of parliamentary work was determinant for the outcome of the bargaining process because it enabled a constant interaction between housing activists, their allies, and members of parliament, and it laid the foundations for future dialogue between activists and political elites. The same applied to the Catalan PLI, which also reached the stage of parliamentary discussion and ultimately became a bill. On the contrary, the *Asamblea* blocked the regional PLI launched in Madrid just after the collection of signatures, not allowing the draft to enter a parliamentary commission. The Madrid PLI was short-lived compared to the national and the Catalan PLIs, reducing the possibility of interaction between elected representatives and activists.

In this paper, we have limited the study of the PLI's organizational impact to the period 2011–2017. Some elements that we treat here as consequences of the promotion of the national PLI (such as the expansion of the PAH and the development of its internal rules) are still visible today. However, assessing the extent to which the PLI promoted between 2011–2013 is still producing impacts is beyond the scope of this work. More importantly, answering to this question would require further research.

Theoretically, our case study of the impact of an agenda-setting initiative confirms some arguments put forward in the literature on direct democracy and contradicts others. The case of the Spanish PLI against eviction illustrates the diversity of effects of soft forms of direct democracy, including policy and legislative impact, as Tosun et al. (2022) and Weisskircher (2019) contend. The experience of the Spanish initiative against evictions shows that the impact on the organisation can later materialise as policy effects: the expansion of strategic options available to the PAH enabled new legislative proposals to be promoted (in Catalonia and Madrid). As Tosun et al. argue in the case of European initiatives, some of these policy effects are indirect. We thus need to look at other scales of government than the one explicitly targeted by the direct democracy tool and beyond the timeframe of the initiative.

Contrary to what the literature on direct democracy assumes (Kriesi, 1996), the availability of these mechanisms has not moderated the repertoire of contention, neither for the PAH nor the housing movement in general. Years after the Spanish PLI, PAH's repertoire of contention can still be characterised as a combination of direct action and institutionally-oriented tactics (D'Adda et al., 2022). The housing movement landscape in Spain is now different from what it was in 2011–2013. Since the second half of the 2010s, the emergence of neighbourhood-based groups and tenants' unions has turned the housing justice activist space into a multi-organisational field. However, this structural complexification seems to respond more to the conjuncture created by a new cycle of financialization and deregulation fostering speculative practices in the rent sector (Gil & Martínez, 2021; Palomera, 2018; Rossini et al., 2023) than to a fundamental critique of the PAH's legislative adventures.

In the current context, in which soft instruments of direct democracy are increasingly used, we think this article makes an innovative contribution by proposing a way to analyse how these tools effectively transform the organisations that promote them. Their specificities aside, all instruments of direct democracy involve gathering popular support, producing policy proposals, and a certain amount of interaction with political and institutional elites. For this reason, the triple process of movement building, learning, and bargaining can be observed in other cases and can serve as a road map to explore the transformative impact of direct democracy. Opening the black box of direct democracy instruments, as we propose here, should enable more fine-grained findings on their diverse effects as a form of action available to contentious actors.

## Notes

1. The Spanish political system is decentralized and includes 17 autonomous regions (*comunidades autónomas*). Each region has its own parliament and president, in addition to the national parliament and the national president (the prime minister).
2. PLIs submitted to regional parliaments need fewer signatures. For example 50,000 signatures (gathered in 4 months, extendable to 6) are required for Catalan PLIs to proceed in the regional parliament.
3. Only adult Spanish citizens with full political rights can sign in support of a national PLI. The Catalan regulation for regional PLIs allows non-residents and minors over 16 years old to sign.
4. According to the civil rights organization Civio, 166 PLIs were promoted between 1984 and 2019 at the national level. Sixty per cent were submitted after 2011, while the remaining

- forty per cent belong to the period from 1984 to 2010. Only three of these 166 PLIs finished the process, reaching the final adoption stage. Cf. Ángela Bernardo, ‘Solo una de cada diez iniciativas legislativas populares llega a votarse en el Congreso’, <https://civio.es/2019/05/30/iniciativas-legislativas-populares/>
5. The official data on evictions is produced by the Spanish General Council of the Judiciary, cf. ‘Efecto de la crisis en los órganos judiciales’, Consejo general del poder judicial. Retrieved from: <https://www.poderjudicial.es/cgpj/es/Temas/Estadistica-Judicial/Estadistica-por-temas/Datos-penales-civiles-y-laborales/Civil-y-laboral/Efecto-de-la-Crisis-en-los-organos-judiciales/>
  6. We highlight this specific interval (2008–2013) because it corresponds to the period from the creation of the PAH to the promotion of the PLI against evictions. Since 2013, evictions have continued at similar levels (Observatori DESC, 2020).
  7. DESC is the Catalan acronym for ‘economic, social and cultural rights’.
  8. In Galicia (2014), Murcia (2014), Andalucía (2015), and Cantabria (2018), the drafts did not pass the first phase, examination by the regional parliamentary committee. In Madrid in 2017, although the draft made it through the first and second phases, obtaining the required signatures, most regional members of parliament voted against it. Only in Catalonia did the PLI launched in October 2014 go through all the phases and get adopted as law in July 2015.
  9. We accessed these documents through the websites of the Spanish parliament (*Congreso de los diputados*, <https://www.congreso.es/es/cem/dspl11-xiv>), and the Catalan parliament (*Parlament de Catalunya*, <https://www.parlament.cat/web/documentacio/publicacions/diari-ple/index.html>).
  10. The *Indignados* movement is also known as ‘15 M’ because it started with demonstrations against austerity and for ‘real democracy’ in many cities and towns on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011. After the demonstrations, many demonstrators remained in the streets, installing camps the same evening and creating committees (housing, health, education) to organise collective responses to the urgent needs provoked by the crisis. Some of these committees remained active long after the occupation of public squares had ended.
  11. Interview 5, conducted on Zoom on 17 December 2021.
  12. Interview 13, conducted on Zoom on 15 February 2022.
  13. El País, ‘Los desahucios unen a los votantes,’ 16 February 2013. Retrieved from: [https://elpais.com/politica/2013/02/16/actualidad/1361053281\\_008924.html](https://elpais.com/politica/2013/02/16/actualidad/1361053281_008924.html)
  14. The last time we checked PAH’s website, the organisation listed 216 local branches (<https://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/contacto/#listado>, accessed December 2023).
  15. The regulation stipulates that only attestors (*fedatarios* in Spanish) can collect signatures. These individuals are granted temporary power by the competent authority to certify the validity of signatures.
  16. Interview 6, conducted on Zoom on 29 December 2021.
  17. Interview 8, conducted on Zoom on 25 March 2022.
  18. Some elected representatives of the PP compared the PAH’s *escraches* with Nazi denunciations and with intimidation actions by the former Basque terrorist organization ETA.
  19. Interview 7, conducted on Zoom on 25 March 2022.

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## Compliance with ethical requirements

This research was conducted under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements recommended by French research institutions. All the interviewees gave informed consent for inclusion before participating in the study. The treatment of the information contained in the interviews ensured anonymity and confidentiality.

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