

Disrupting the Party: A Case Study of Ahora Madrid and Its Participatory Innovations

Quinton Mayne and Cecilia Nicolini

September 2020



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

The Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation advances excellence and innovation in governance and public policy through research, education, and public discussion. By training the very best leaders, developing powerful new ideas, and disseminating innovative solutions and institutional reforms, the Ash Center’s goal is to meet the profound challenges facing the world’s citizens. Our Occasional Papers Series highlights new research and commentary that we hope will engage our readers and prompt an energetic exchange of ideas in the public policy community.

This paper is contributed by Quinton Mayne, Ford Foundation Associate Professor of Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School and an Ash Center faculty associate, and Cecilia Nicolini, a former Ash Center Research Fellow and a current advisor to the president of Argentina. The paper addresses issues that lie at the heart of the work of the Ash Center—urban governance, democratic deepening, participatory innovations, and civic technology. It does this through a study of the fascinating rise of Ahora Madrid, a progressive electoral alliance that—to the surprise of onlookers—managed to gain political control, just a few months after being formed, of the Spanish capital following the 2015 municipal elections.

Headed by the unassuming figure of Manuela Carmena, a former judge, Ahora Madrid won voters over with a bold agenda that reimagined the relationship between citizens and city hall. Mayne and Nicolini’s analysis is a case study of this innovation agenda. The paper begins by exploring how Ahora Madrid’s agenda emerged as a response to, and built off of, historic levels of political disaffection and mass mobilization spurred by the 2008–2014 Spanish financial crisis. The authors examine how the alliance’s agenda of democratic disruption was realized, first through an unusual bottom-up electoral campaign and then, after taking office, by challenging and rethinking established relations between public officials, civil society, and city residents. Mayne and Nicolini show that while Ahora Madrid’s time in power was not without its challenges, it still successfully implemented a set of far-reaching democratic reforms centered on institutional innovation. This included the creation of an internationally recognized online civic engagement platform, the establishment of neighborhood forums, and the implementation of a €100 million participatory budgeting process.

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Although Ahora Madrid lost the 2019 elections and the city swung back to the right, a number of its reforms, explored by Mayne and Nicolini in the case study's conclusion, live on in an altered form, serving as a reminder of the alliance's original bold vision for the city.

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Tony Saich, *Series Editor* and *Director*

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ABOUT THE ASH CENTER

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INTRODUCTION

On June 13, 2015, Manuela Carmena—a former judge and novice politician—stood in the ornate neo-gothic surroundings of Madrid’s Cibeles Palace. As she prepared to be invested as the city’s mayor, an enthusiastic crowd outside chanted “Sí se puede” (Yes we can). After less than three months of political campaigning, Ahora Madrid (Madrid Now), the electoral alliance that Carmena headed, had pulled off a seemingly impossible political feat—ending twenty-four years of rule by Spain’s main center-right party in the country’s capital.

It was a political triumph for the alliance, disrupting the establishment and paving the way for what promised to be a new political dawn for the city. Ahora Madrid’s emergence and electoral victory echoed and built off the anti-austerity Indignados movement that had swept through Spain in 2011. Like the Indignados, Ahora Madrid used elements of direct democracy to win the election. They promised to govern in ways that would respond to the needs of the underserved, a burgeoning immigrant population, and a growing number of renters who had been evicted from their homes, as well as address contentious issues related to climate change, clean transportation, and urban sustainability. Importantly, they committed to undertaking this progressive renaissance by establishing new mechanisms of participatory democracy and sharing power with citizens.

However, over the course of Ahora Madrid’s time in office, numerous roadblocks and political infighting surfaced as the alliance sought to implement its agenda. Eight seats short of a majority, Ahora Madrid relied on a confidence-and-supply agreement with the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE, or Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party), Spain’s dominant party on the left. This forced Ahora Madrid to temper some of their objectives, which in turn created internal tensions among councilors elected on their ticket, some of which spilled on to the pages of the local and national press. In the lead-up to the 2019 elections, Ahora Madrid city councilors faced an existential challenge: Could they preserve the unity of the alliance that had brought them to power while also working with other parties to advance their progressive agenda and citizen-oriented program?

A PATH TOWARD DEMOCRACY

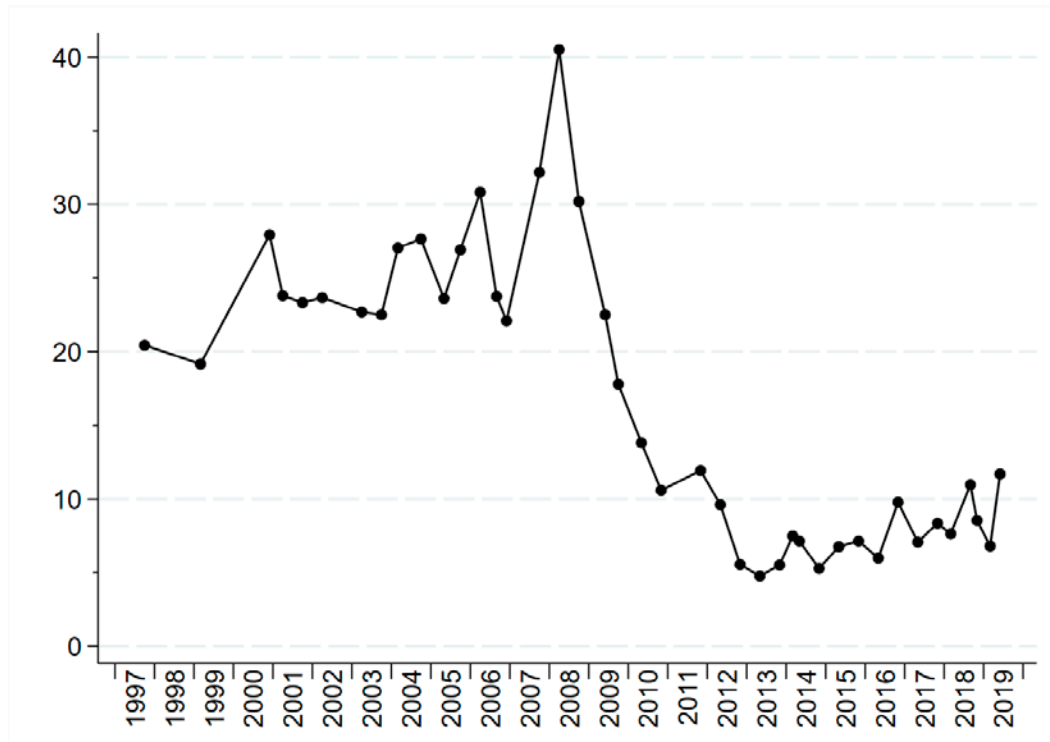
After almost four decades of authoritarian rule under Francisco Franco (1939–1975), Spain transitioned to democracy in the mid-1970s and soon established a political system dominated by two main parties: the Partido Popular (PP) on the right and the PSOE on the left. Both parties saw themselves as guarantors of Spain’s new democracy. In the ensuing decades, they alternated peacefully in power, helping to consolidate democratic rule, all while becoming more professional and resembling each other operationally more and more. By the 1990s, there was growing concern that the two parties were losing touch with citizens, reflected in low levels of political trust. The Eurobarometer survey series has, since 1997, regularly asked respondents about how much they trust political parties. Data from these surveys (visualized in Figure 1 below) confirm Spanish citizens’ low levels of trust in parties in the second half of the 1990s, rising over the next decade to a peak of roughly 40 percent in the spring of 2008.¹ This uptick in trust was short-lived, however. As Figure 1 makes clear, citizens lost faith in the country’s political parties as the Spanish financial crisis unfolded in the ensuing years. Moreover, even though the Spanish economy began to recover in 2015, levels of trust in parties have failed to return to what they were prior to the Great Recession.

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1. Authors’ own calculations based on Eurobarometer survey data: <https://www.gesis.org/en/eurobarometer-data-service/home>. Percentages are population-weighted estimates of share of respondents who say they tend to trust political parties.

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Figure 1. Share of Spanish Population with Trust in Political Parties



Source: Eurobarometer survey series

The Great Recession led governments across Europe to cut back public spending and impose austerity on middle- and low-income citizens, hammering out deals to provide significant taxpayer-funded bailouts to financial institutions that many viewed as having contributed to the recession in the first place. Spain was no exception. Thousands of people lost their jobs, leaving the country suffering from one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe—especially among young people. By 2011, 46.2 percent of the population under 25 was unemployed.² Families across the country, struggling to meet mortgage payments, were being evicted from their homes in

2. Eurostat, “Unemployment Rates by Sex, Age and Citizenship (%)” Dataset, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/lfsa_urgan.

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large numbers. By some estimates, 517 families were being evicted daily in 2012.³ In the face of the recession and its aftermath, first PSOE (who led the national government until 2011) and then PP implemented wide-ranging austerity measures, cutting back on education, health, and pensions.⁴

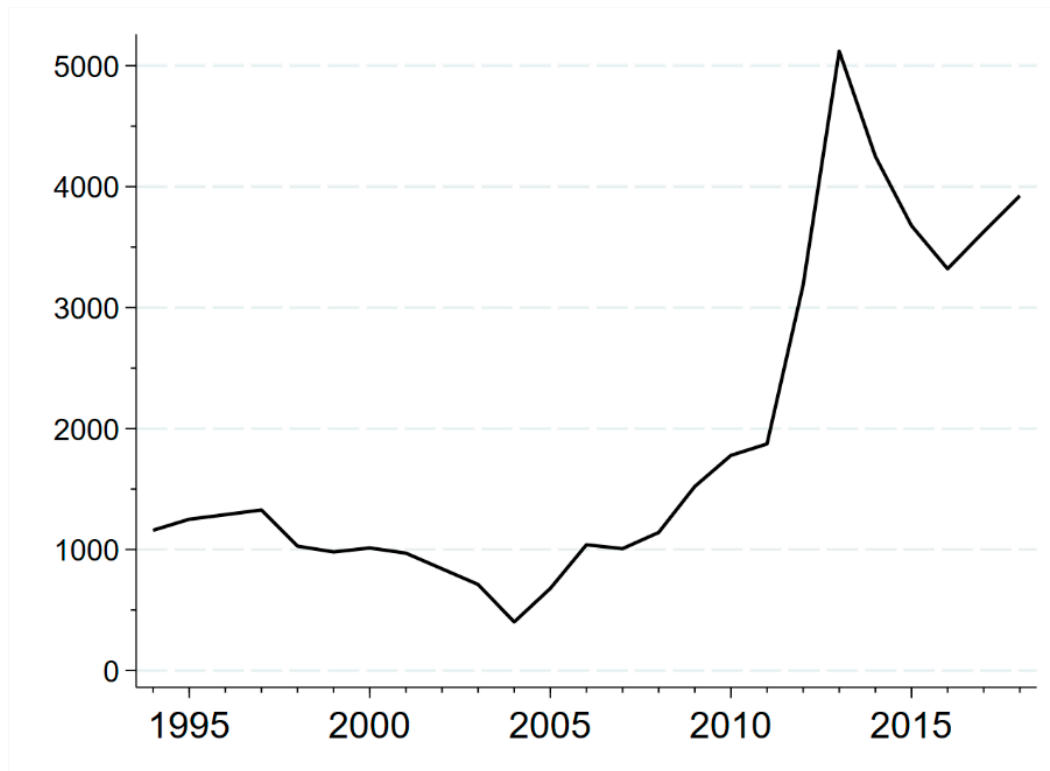
Desperate and facing economic hardships, people across Spain began to mobilize. In May 2011, a nationwide movement originally known as the Indignados emerged. It aimed to mobilize citizens to push for political change.⁵ The movement, eventually known as 15-M, blamed the country's two main political parties and their close relationships with special interest groups for the economic and social crises that had put the country in financial ruin. United around a common belief that the system was not working for them, people organized to demand more transparency and participation, and the inclusion of civil society in the governing process. The scale of mass mobilization was staggering. The Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, one of Spain's leading public research institutes, tracks citizen involvement in various forms of political activity, including street demonstrations. At the peak of social mobilization, between 2012 and 2014, around one in five Spanish adults surveyed reported having taken part in a demonstration in the previous two months.⁶ Official records of the number of demonstrations held in the greater Madrid region (visualized in Figure 2 below) also paint a vivid picture of the scale of citizen protest in the capital during and since the years of the Spanish financial crisis.

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3. "Se disparan los desahucios en España y alcanzan los 517 diarios," *Diario ABC*, July 23, 2012, https://www.abc.es/economia/abci-desahucios-espaa-201207230000_noticia.html.
 4. Emmanuele Pavolini, Margarita León, Ana M. Guillén, and Ugo Ascoli, "From Austerity to Permanent Strain? The EU and Welfare State Reform in Italy and Spain," *Comparative European Politics* 13 (2015): 56–76.
 5. Mayo Fuster Morell, "The Free Culture and 15M Movements in Spain: Composition, Social Networks and Synergies," *Social Movement Studies*, 11, nos. 3–4 (2012): 386–392; Kerman Calvo, "Fighting for a Voice. The Spanish 15-M/Indignados Movement," in *Understanding European Movements: New Social Movements, Global Justice Struggles, Anti-Austerity Protest*, eds. Cristina Flesher Fominaya and Laurence Cox, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 236–253.
 6. See: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas Data Bank, time series A.3.05.01.015, A.3.05.01.051, and A.3.05.01.055, <http://www.analisis.cis.es/cisdb.jsp>.

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Figure 2. Number of Demonstrations Occurring in Madrid Region⁷



Source: Statistical Yearbooks of Spanish Ministry of the Interior.

By 2014, parts of the 15-M movement had decided to take their fight to the ballot box. Podemos (We Can) was founded as a political party on the left in the early part of the year; and in an election that took place in May, Podemos won five of Spain's fifty-four seats in the European Parliament. On the right, Ciudadanos (Citizens), formed back in 2006, grew from a small regional party to win forty seats in the 2015 general election.

7. Data extracted from Ministry of the Interior Statistical Yearbooks (Anuarios Estadísticos del Ministerio del Interior): <http://www.interior.gob.es/web/archivos-y-documentacion/anuario-estadistico-de-2018>. Number of demonstrations are those recorded by the police as having taken place in the Community of Madrid, which includes the city of Madrid and the surrounding region.

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Cities also became fertile ground for new democratic experiments. In Barcelona, Valencia, Zaragoza, and A Coruña, so-called “municipalist” candidates, with links to the 15-M movement, vied for local public office with the promise of greater transparency and participation. It was therefore no surprise that a grassroots movement emerged to challenge the status quo and change the political landscape of Spain’s capital.

THE EMERGENCE OF A DISRUPTER

Ahora Madrid sought to win over voters in the capital with a more equitable economic model that included citizens, neighborhood associations, activists, and other stakeholders in the decision-making process.

In direct opposition to the battle-tested methods of PSOE and the PP, Ahora Madrid avoided calling itself a party and instead referred to itself as a “*confluencia*” (confluence). As a confluence, members were able to rally under a brand with a broad common vision while maintaining their independence. Formal parties such as Podemos, Izquierda Unida, and Equo joined the alliance, as did political movements like Ganemos and independent citizens.

The chance to create a space without traditional structures in the service of citizens galvanized the alliance around a central goal of giving the city back to its citizens.⁸ Their agenda included re-municipalizing key services such as waste management; halting evictions and providing a sustainable solution to the public housing crisis; guaranteeing access to basic services; and providing opportunities for the unemployed, especially young people. Furthermore, a key tenet of Ahora Madrid’s proposed agenda was increasing the active participation of citizens in public decision making.

While Ahora Madrid’s message resonated with progressives in the city, members of the alliance knew they needed to appeal more broadly to all those seeking change. They needed to create momentum with many different types of citizens through a bottom-up process.

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8. In their manifesto (p. 7), Ahora Madrid pledged: “To build a model of the democratic city in which all citizens can participate in defining, managing, and developing fundamental political issues—and not just every four years.” Ahora Madrid, *Programa Ahora Madrid*, Spring 2015.

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POWER TO THE PEOPLE

One way Ahora Madrid hoped to create this momentum was in deciding to select their mayoral candidate through an open and participatory primary process for the first time in Madrid’s history. The same process was also used to select the full slate of candidates running on the Ahora Madrid ticket. To ensure a broad and diverse turnout, any resident of Madrid could participate in the process, either as a voter or as a candidate. A form of preferential or ranked-choice voting, called the Dowdall system, was used, with the goal of ensuring people from across the various member groupings within the alliance would be selected.⁹ The process was judged a success by many, with Ahora Madrid’s final roster of candidates reflecting a broad cross-section of those seeking political change and parity between men and women.

Ahora Madrid also challenged political normalcy in its approach to designing the platform that selected candidates ran on. Unlike traditional electoral platforms developed by party elites, Ahora Madrid’s was drafted by members with broad input from citizens. Two weeks before the primaries took place to select candidates, Ahora Madrid launched a process to develop its proposed program of government. With the aim of making the whole process both efficient and equitable, the confluence set up working groups and discussion tables across the city that any interested individual could attend. These open participatory spaces dealt with a range of topic areas, including housing, economic development, sustainability, public participation, and jobs. The results of these deliberations were then further refined by activists and organizers alongside leaders of the confluence, and a preliminary program was posted to an open online platform.

Once posted online, citizens could comment on the preliminary program, offer their own ideas and suggestions, and ultimately vote on which issues should be included in the final program of Ahora Madrid. Leaders of Ahora Madrid highlighted that this process aimed to ensure that the program was “made from and for the citizens,

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9. Voters rank the candidates for each position. The final vote tallies are calculated using a “1/n formula,” where a voter’s first-ranked candidate receives one full point; the second-ranked candidate, half a point; and, the third-ranked candidate, one-third of a point.

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in continuous construction.”¹⁰ This approach was inspired by Propongo (I propose), a virtual platform for debate and decision making that had become well known thanks to its use by movements like 15-M. In the end, over 15,000 people took part in the process. Proposals that received the highest number of positive votes were adopted as priorities for Ahora Madrid to implement during its first one hundred days in office. This included increasing the supply of affordable housing; guaranteeing access to basic services such as electricity, water, and public health; and helping the long-term unemployed to find decent jobs.

Ahora Madrid also used an innovative, low-cost fundraising model that relied on citizens. It sought to avoid tapping the very banks that the confluence criticized for being involved in the financial crisis. Ahora Madrid therefore decided to initiate a series of crowdfunding initiatives to obtain loans that they could then repay through public campaign funds that they would receive after the election was over. This financing method, in the words of the campaign manager, Rita Maestre, “guaranteed maximum independence” from institutions, private companies, and individual donors. In only a few weeks, 956 people took part in the micro-credit scheme, reaching the €150,000 threshold needed for Ahora Madrid to be covered by public campaign finances after the election. A further €10,365 were received through private donations.¹¹

After candidates were selected, and with less than two months to go before the May 2015 election, Ahora Madrid launched a citizen-initiated campaign that leveraged the creativity, spontaneity, and imagination of city residents. Members of the campaign described the appeal of this approach as giving “the sensation of an ‘overflow’ characterized by a collective construction, impossible to be directed by anyone.”¹² In contrast to traditional party campaigns where voters received professionally crafted messages and focus-group-tested sound bites, citizen “artists” now had the

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10. “Abierto el proceso de primarias de Ahora Madrid,” *El Mundo*, March 9, 2015, <http://www.elmundo.es/madrid/2015/03/09/54fd65f3268e3ec74b8b4572.html>.

11. “Manuela Carmena saca a la luz el coste de su campaña electoral,” ABC Madrid, June 2, 2015, <https://www.abc.es/madrid/20150602/abci-manuela-carmena-saca-coste-201506012049.html>.

12. Felipe G. Gil and Francisco Jurado Gilabert, “Desbordarse para ganar,” *El Diario*, May 30, 2015, https://www.eldiario.es/zonacritica/Perder-ganar_6_393420666.html.

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opportunity to shape the image and brand of Ahora Madrid.¹³ Organizations like the Movimiento de Liberación Gráfica de Madrid (Graphic Liberation Movement of Madrid) or Madrid con Manuela (Madrid with Manuela) formed to lead the independent efforts of citizens eager to take ownership of the campaign’s narrative.¹⁴

To facilitate a shift from a do-it-yourself (DIY) to a do-it-together (DIT) or do-it-with-others (DIWO) mindset, Ahora Madrid launched an open platform where users could upload photos, graphics, and posters that anyone could download, modify, and share with others. In a matter of only two months, supporters with no formal ties to Ahora Madrid had developed videos and films, as well as jingles using traditional songs, sharing them online, and circulated hundreds of memes on messaging boards. Meetings and rallies were also self-organized, and to ensure maximum public awareness of events, an open-source platform was developed to track activities taking place throughout the city. In the swell of bottom-up campaigning, Manuela Carmena—the candidate selected to head the Ahora Madrid ticket— attracted a great deal of attention. In fact, Carmena became something of a pop icon, the hashtag #SomosManuela (We Are Manuela) took off, a Facebook community emerged that replaced their profile pictures with hers, and graphic depictions of Mayor Carmena as a superhero who would save the Madrileños from years of PP rule circulated widely.¹⁵

While some feared relinquishing the campaign narrative to citizens, there was also a deep-seated trust among Ahora Madrid candidates in what they saw as the collective intelligence of civil society, moved by hope and eager for change. These bottom-up efforts produced a burgeoning ecosystem that surprised even Ahora Madrid’s own candidates, one of whom noted that “it was totally out of control, and it was due to an external factor, not internal. The people took over the candidacy and

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13. María López-Trigo Reig, María Puchalt López, and Victoria Cuesta Díaz, “Artivism plus Grassroots. Study of the case: The Municipal Campaign of Manuela Carmena.” *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* 74 (2019): 1190–1203.

14. Movimiento de Liberación Gráfica Madrid, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/MLGM-Movimiento-de-Liberación-Gráfica-Madrid-663597840432462/photos/>.

15. Bernardo Gutiérrez, “Diez claves sobre la innovación de la #ManuelaManía,” Yorokobu, May 22, 2015, <https://www.yorokobu.es/diez-claves-manuelamania/>.

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brought it to a place that was unplanned.”¹⁶ All in all, with little funding and the absence of a professional electoral machine, the actions taken by thousands of individuals across Madrid not only generated a real sense of excitement among Madrileños but mobilized them to carry out what many saw as the most effective and successful campaign in the capital’s history.

THE DILEMMAS OF GOVERNING

After all the ballot papers were counted for the May 2015 election, Ahora Madrid emerged with the second highest number of votes (see Figure 3 below). This translated into twenty seats on the local council, just one behind the PP. PSOE won nine seats, and Ciudadanos took the remaining seven seats. Together, the two right-leaning parties of PP and Ciudadanos lacked a majority. So, with the support of PSOE, Carmena took advantage of the right’s shortfall to win the vote of investiture as mayor of the city, and Ahora Madrid took control of the city’s administration.

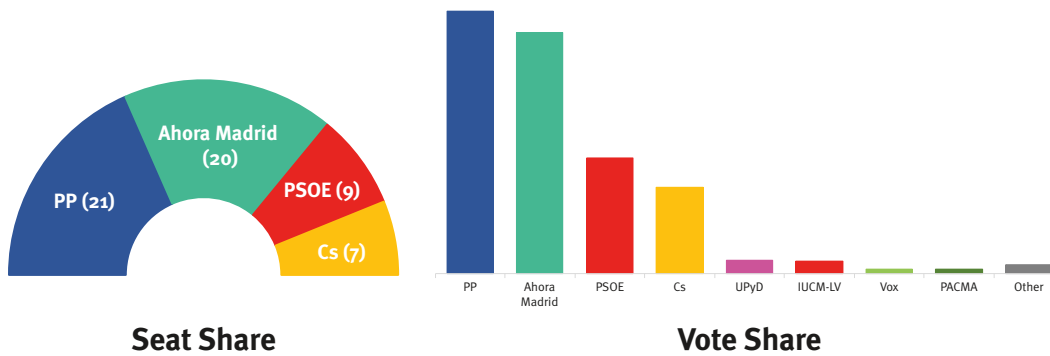
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16. Roberto Bécades, *El efecto Carmena*, (self-pub., Libros.com, 2015), <https://libros.com/comprar/el-efecto-carmena/>.

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Figure 3. Results of 2015 Municipal Race¹⁷



Sources: www.madrid.es and <http://www.juntaelectoralcentral.es>

The election results painted a striking picture of a fragmented city. More affluent neighborhoods in the north of the city voted for the PP, while communities in the south of the city, typified by higher unemployment rates and lower life expectancy, supported Ahora Madrid. The minority government recognized these stark realities and committed itself to addressing inequities in the city, most notably by increasing social spending that had been cut in some areas during the previous government.¹⁸

While winning the election through a range of innovations that challenged political normalcy in the city was welcomed by many, introducing similarly sweeping changes in government policy was far from a simple task. Transitioning from

17. Seat share data retrieved from: <https://www.madrid.es/portales/munimadrid/es/Inicio/El-Ayuntamiento/El-Pleno/Composicion/Corporaciones-antiores/Corporacion-2015-2019/Corporacion-2015-2019/?vgnnextfmt=default&vgnnextoid=b4f78a649b8ea610VgnVCM2000001f4a900aRCRD&vgnnextchannel=448fe583039e-a610VgnVCM1000001d4a900aRCRD>. Voting data extracted from “Acuerdo de 1 de julio de 2015, de la Junta Electoral Central, por el que se procede a la publicación del resumen de los resultados de las elecciones locales convocadas por Real Decreto 233/2015, de 30 de marzo, y celebradas el 24 de mayo de 2015, según los datos que figuran en las actas de proclamación remitidas por cada una de las Juntas Electorales de Zona. Provincias: León, Lleida, Lugo, Madrid, Málaga, Murcia, Navarra, Ourense, Palencia, Las Palmas y Pontevedra (BOE núm. 191, de 11 de agosto de 2015), Madrid: *Junta Electoral Central*, p. 72821.

18. Bruno García Gallo, “Botella congela el gasto social y sube los impuestos en 2014,” *El País*, November 6, 2013, https://elpais.com/ccaa/2013/11/06/madrid/1383732874_755198.html.

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campaigning mode to a governing role became a formidable test, far more difficult than expected. Mayor Carmena and senior Ahora Madrid members encountered push-back, not only from opposition leaders but also from the media and councilors elected on the Ahora Madrid ticket.

After taking over the reins of governing Spain’s capital city, three projects—which epitomized the challenges faced by the new government—received wide media attention and became a focus of public debate.

Air Quality

Addressing Madrid’s high levels of air contamination and developing a sustainability plan were cornerstones of Ahora Madrid’s platform. The suite of policies that the city administration began to implement after coming to power to tackle air quality—with a budget of more than €500 million over the period 2017–2020—was collectively referred to as “Plan A.” This made reference to the idea that “there’s no Plan B.” To pass, the plan required majority support from the eleven-member executive commission (*junta de gobierno*) made up of Ahora Madrid councilors appointed by Mayor Carmena. Although approval for the plan was not required from the full city council, the leadership team of Ahora Madrid actively sought support from opposition parties and made efforts to reach out to city residents.

Plan A essentially built off a protocol that had been developed but never implemented by the PP administration, which preceded Ahora Madrid. By deciding not to jettison this original protocol, the leadership of Ahora Madrid believed they could more easily gain the support of the PP. The process of developing Plan A included bilateral meetings with a variety of actors, such as business leaders, cargo and public transporters, retailers, postal services, and NGOs. It also involved the establishment of an Air Quality Commission, comprised of technical experts and politicians, and the creation of a participatory process.

Given its broad membership, the commission had to deal with internal disagreements, especially between politicians from different parties. However, through the process, and faced with the issue’s growing visibility among voters, traditional opponents such as the PP started to reconsider their positions. Just a few years earlier, former PP mayor of Madrid, Ana Botella, had publicly declared that unemployment was a

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worse “asphyxiant” than air pollution.¹⁹ Yet, despite years of denying that there was a problem with air quality, the regional government of Madrid, controlled by the PP, was taking concerted steps to tackle the problem.

At the same time as experts and politicians were debating how the city should tackle poor air quality, the new administration reached out to city residents for their input. Using a newly developed online civic engagement platform, Decide Madrid, citizens were invited to debate the issue of air quality and provide ideas and suggestions. Once the Plan A draft was agreed upon by the Air Quality Commission, it was presented to the public for consultation. Over a period of three months, citizens and civil society organizations—including groups associated with the PP and PSOE—commented on the draft plan. In total, 244 public comments were received, and in September 2017, a modified Plan A was agreed on by the city’s executive commission. Soon after, the plan began to be implemented; measures included a lowering of speed limits in the city, the introduction of the first fully electric bus route, and a ban on highly polluting vehicles in the city center.²⁰ Plan A was subsequently boosted significantly with the introduction of the Madrid Central low-emissions zone in November 2018, which banned older, more polluting vehicles from entering the city’s historic core.²¹

Decide Madrid

Newly elected municipal councilor Pablo Soto, a longstanding champion of virtual participatory tools, oversaw the implementation of the Decide Madrid platform, which he described as “a major step toward democracy, not only for Madrid but for the entire world.”²² The open-source website had three main objectives: (1) to empower citizens by giving them the opportunity to debate issues, propose projects, and vote on policies and programs; (2) to promote transparency within the public sector; and (3) to

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19. “Ana Botella minimiza el problema de la contaminación en Madrid: ‘El paro asfixia más,’” Cadena SER, February 10, 2011, http://cadenaser.com/ser/2011/02/10/espana/1297299012_850215.html.

20. Raffaele Vergnani, “Madrid Cuts Speed Limit and Announces New Rules on Roads,” Eltis, October 31, 2018, <http://www.eltis.org/discover/news/madrid-cuts-speed-limit-and-announces-new-rules-roads>.

21. Sam Jones, “It’s the Only Way Forward’: Madrid Bans Polluting Vehicles from City Centre,” *Guardian*, November 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/nov/30/its-the-only-way-forward-madrid-bans-polluting-vehicles-from-city-centre>.

22. Pablo Soto, interview with Cecilia Nicolini, October 2017.

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foster the use and sharing of open data. Since its rollout in Madrid, the platform has been adopted by administrations in almost 70 countries, and Councilor Soto and his team's work was recognized with an invitation to the UN General Assembly in 2017 to discuss how this innovative tool was being leveraged for civic empowerment.

Decide Madrid allows citizens to participate in a variety of ways. The one that has garnered most attention is the proposal process that gives citizens the opportunity to pitch ideas and to have the local administration respond to their proposals. Any citizen over the age of 16 can submit a proposal, and if the proposal receives support from the equivalent of 1 percent of the city's population aged 16 and above (roughly the equivalent of 27,000 users), city hall is compelled to initiate a process aimed at studying the proposal's feasibility. Another important aspect of the platform is that it enables citizens to force the local government to reconsider earlier decisions. Debates are also facilitated through this platform, helping spur suggestions, and giving the administration a way to gauge public opinion on specific matters, as well as create referendums on specific topics.

Another important use of the platform has been as a vehicle for participatory budgeting, where citizens are able to decide how €100 million (or approximately 2 percent of the city budget) is spent each year. Thirty percent of this total is allocated for citywide projects, and the remaining 70 percent is set aside for projects in the city's twenty-one districts. The latter stream of funding is allocated based on the population of each district and to advance equity in the city, funding is weighted proportional to district-level income per capita. The result, by design, is that lower-income parts of the city receive more funding per resident than higher-income districts.

In implementing the platform, the administration encountered several challenges. Since Decide Madrid was the first high-profile project of Ahora Madrid, it received significant backlash from the opposition, who saw it as undermining the proper role of elected politicians. As one PP councilor noted, "It's a mistake to make consultations or direct participation binding—the responsibility must always stay with the politician." The same councilor went on, "It is even healthy for a government to have a society that isn't interested in politics."²³ Aside from being criticized by the main opposition party,

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23. Percival Manglano, interview with Cecilia Nicolini, October 2017.

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the platform itself has not had the impact on policy that many had hoped for. Since launching, only two proposals have received the necessary 1 percent of favorable votes, with one proposal on transportation later being dismissed because it related to a regional (as opposed to a municipal) competence. Moreover, the platform has yet to be used to force the city government to reconsider an existing decision. That the more direct-democratic elements of Decide Madrid have failed to materialize has been a disappointment to many, including Councilor Soto who had viewed the platform as “a real tool to control the government and keep them accountable.”²⁴ In an effort to improve the platform, the city signed an agreement with New York University’s GovLab in November 2018 to open an urban innovation laboratory in Madrid.²⁵

While thousands of citizens were energized by Ahora Madrid in the short campaign period prior to the 2015 elections, most Madrileños did not take up the online participatory opportunities created by the new administration. Ahora Madrid began to realize that they had to do more than leverage technology to empower citizens. Face-to-face engagement was vital, too. Accordingly, several initiatives were launched to reinvigorate civic participation as a complement to the online platform. This push included activities by the Media Lab Prado Cultural Center; meetings and workshops organized by Councilor Soto; as well as the creation of the G-1000 in March 2017, an initiative that convened more than 1,000 randomly selected citizens to discuss budgeting in Madrid. The city also began the process of creating a new City Observatory (Observatorio de la Ciudad), which would work over the course of a year to develop recommendations on how to improve city government. In February 2019, letters of invitation were sent to 30,000 Madrid households, with the goal of randomly selecting 49 citizens from those who signaled their interest in becoming involved in the observatory. In the end, more than 1,100 residents expressed an interest in joining the City Observatory.²⁶ Additionally, twenty-one neighborhood forums (*foros locales*)

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24. Pablo Soto, interview with Cecilia Nicolini, October 2017.

25. Jordi Pérez Colomé, El ejemplo de Madrid y por qué la participación ciudadana aún no funciona, *El País*, December 10, 2018, https://elpais.com/tecnologia/2018/12/05/actualidad/1544030653_254137.html.

26. “El Observatorio de la Ciudad ya tiene 49 vocales elegidos por sorteo,” *Diario de Madrid*, March 12, 2019, <https://diario.madrid.es/blog/notas-de-prensa/el-observatorio-de-la-ciudad-ya-tiene-49-vocales-elegidos-por-sorteo/>.

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were established to provide citizens with an opportunity to influence policies and programs affecting their communities. In their original proposal, Ahora Madrid wanted these forums to take binding votes that the city administration would have to respect. However, this important element was blocked by the PP when put to a full plenary vote in the council, with the then-leader of the opposition, Esperanza Aguirre, comparing the proposed forums to “new soviet republics.”²⁷ According to the latest available annual report on the neighborhood forums, around 5,000 people were involved in them during the 2018 financial year.²⁸

Madrid Nuevo Norte

No other project within Ahora Madrid’s program was as controversial as *Madrid Nuevo Norte* (formerly known as *Operación Chamartín*). For more than 20 years, progress on this megaproject was stalled by unrelenting pushback from local associations, political action groups, and other activists, and it ground to a halt with the collapse of the real estate market during the Spanish financial crisis. Originally approved in 1993, the project aimed to revitalize a northern neighborhood around the Chamartín railway station by constructing 17,000 homes and over 1 million square meters of new business and office space.

To the surprise of many, after taking office, Mayor Carmena and senior figures within Ahora Madrid decided to take on the controversial Chamartín project and make it a priority for the new administration. In keeping with Ahora Madrid’s electoral platform, they rejected the original plan because of its focus on market-rate housing and large office buildings. They had run on the promise of increasing the supply of affordable housing and ending speculative property investments in the city, which many viewed as playing a contributing role to the financial crisis and the evictions of thousands of families from their home that followed.

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27. Antonia Laborde, “¿Qué son los nuevos foros locales?,” *El País*, March 6, 2017, https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/02/28/madrid/1488294532_972256.html.

28. See page 6: Área de Gobierno de Coordinación Territorial y Cooperación Público-Social, “Informe annual foros locales 2018,” 2018, <https://foroslocales.madrid.es/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/AGCTyCPS-Informe-Anual-FLL-2018.pdf>.

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Breathing life back into the Chamartín project provided Ahora Madrid with the opportunity to pursue a new model of development for the city on a grand scale, one that emphasized affordable housing, small- and medium-sized businesses, public spaces and green areas, cycle paths, and public transportation. After prolonged negotiations, the new administration, national government, and the developer-led agency tasked with delivering the plan signed a preliminary agreement in July 2017 to move forward with the project. However, Mayor Carmena and the Ahora Madrid councilors that made up the executive commission were unable to celebrate for very long. The July agreement generated opposition in some quarters, most notably among some Ahora Madrid councilors.

In October 2017, an opinion piece penned by Ahora Madrid councilor Pablo Carmona appeared in a major national newspaper with the title, “Chamartín, Madrid’s monstrous dream.”²⁹ In the piece, Councilor Carmona—one of three councilors elected on the Ahora Madrid ticket from Ganemos, a left-leaning movement—described why he and other councilors, along with civil society organizations, opposed the new plan for the city’s northern neighborhood. Besides criticizing the project for generating too many market-rate housing units and too little affordable housing, Councilor Carmona used the high-profile piece to criticize his own administration for negotiating in secret and signing the agreement without securing support from all Ahora Madrid councilors.

Despite push-back from within the ranks of the alliance that she led, Mayor Carmena proceeded with the project, signing a final agreement with local and national partners in April 2018 and opening this agreement for public consultation in September of the same year. This final agreement provided for 10,500 new homes (twenty-four percent of which would enjoy some form of affordability protection).³⁰ By the end of this consultation process, the administration had received 3,200 responses—a thirteen-fold increase on the number of comments received for the Plan A program a year earlier. Many of the responses came from environmental organizations and neighborhood associations that had been central to Ahora Madrid’s electoral victory

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29. Pablo Carmona Pascual and Lorena Ruíz-Huerta, “Chamartín, el sueño monstruoso de la City madrileña,” *El Mundo*, October 30, 2017, <http://www.elmundo.es/madrid/2017/10/30/59f62986e2704ef0168b45ab.html>.

30. Gloria Rodríguez-Pina, “La Operación Chamartín se convierte en una batalla entre las izquierdas,” *El País*, February 6, 2019, https://elpais.com/ccaa/2019/02/06/madrid/1549450715_628442.html.

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in 2015. Though a final vote on the Chamartín project, to be taken by the full plenary of councilors, was expected to be held prior to the 2019 local elections, it did not.

MÁS MADRID

As the Chamartín project made clear, the Ahora Madrid alliance that swept to power in 2015 was just that—an alliance. Forged in the crucible of the dislocations and hardships of the Great Recession, it brought together a range of groups that shared an ideological attachment to the left and found common cause in the need for progressive change. However, these same groups had latent disagreements on the scale and pace of change, which became more apparent in the process of governing. These disagreements ultimately resulted in Mayor Carmena announcing in September 2018 that she would form a new alliance to contest the May 2019 municipal election.³¹

The new electoral platform, called Más Madrid (More Madrid), was launched in late November 2018, just a few weeks after all six Podemos councilors effectively resigned from their party and declared their intention to join Mayor Carmena in fighting the 2019 election. The magnitude of the split within Podemos at the local level was confirmed in mid-January when Íñigo Errejón, one of Podemos’s founders, agreed to join Más Madrid and run a joint platform in the Madrid regional election scheduled for the same day as the city race.

Like Ahora Madrid, Más Madrid presented itself more as a movement than a political party, and at the time of its launch, Mayor Carmena described it as made up of “individuals, not parties.”³² The new progressive alliance maintained an open primary system, with gender parity, to elect its candidates in March 2019. The voting system used in 2015 to elect Ahora Madrid candidates was altered, however, to make it more difficult for voters to vote down the slate of candidates that Mayor Carmena wished to

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31. Gloria Rodríguez-Pina, “Carmena se distancia de Podemos y lanza un guiño al PSOE,” *El País*, September 10, 2018, https://elpais.com/politica/2018/09/10/actualidad/1536570170_373840.html.

32. Asier Martiarena, “Más Madrid, la plataforma de Carmena para las elecciones municipales,” *La Vanguardia*, November 22, 2018, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/madrid/20181122/453094625004/mas-madrid-plataforma-carmena-elecciones-municipales.html>.

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join her in the executive commission, were they to win enough seats to form the next municipal government.³³ Just like Ahora Madrid had done in 2015, Más Madrid crowd-funded its 2019 campaign, launching its micro-credit loan system in early May with the aim of raising €400,000 to cover the costs of both the local and regional election campaigns.³⁴ In the end, they were able to raise €242,000.³⁵ A month before the election, Más Madrid published its program for government; but unlike the 2015 Ahora Madrid program, this was not the product of widespread bottom-up participation.³⁶

THE 2019 ELECTION

The May 2019 municipal election occurred just a month after a snap national general election, which saw PSOE returned as the largest party in the Congress of Deputies for the first time since 2008. The local race was also fought in the shadow of electoral gains made by the far right. Following an election held in December 2018, Vox—founded in 2013 and running on an anti-immigrant, anti-feminist agenda—won seats in the assembly of the southern region of Andalusia.³⁷ This was the first time that a far-right party had gained representation at the regional level and it sent shockwaves across the Spanish political establishment. Though falling short of its expected seat haul, Vox won 10 percent of the votes and 24 seats in the 2019 general election. Polling carried out ahead of the Madrid race suggested that Vox was also going to win seats

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33. Fátima Caballero, “Las primarias de Más Madrid elegirán por separado a los cargos de gobierno y al resto de la lista de Carmena y Errejón,” *El Diario*, February 23, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/madrid/participarias-madrid-alternativa-carmena-errejon_1_1682925.html.

34. Fernán González, “Carmena pide más del doble de dinero que en 2015 para hacer su campaña electoral,” *Ok Diario*, May 1, 2019, <https://okdiario.com/espana/carmena-pide-mas-del-doble-dinero-que-2015-hacer-campana-electoral-4056598>.

35. Luca Costantini, “¿Cómo financiará Errejón su campaña electoral para el 10-N?,” *Voz Populi*, September 9, 2019, https://www.vozpopuli.com/politica/como-financiara-Errejon-campana-electoral_o_1284772891.html.

36. “Programa Autonómico de Más Madrid,” <https://programa.masmadrid.org/noticia/programa-autonomico-de-mas-madrid>.

37. “Vox, an anti-immigrant, anti-feminist party, wins seats in Andalusia,” *Economist*, December 8, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/12/08/vox-an-anti-immigrant-anti-feminist-party-wins-seats-in-andalusia>.

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in the national capital.³⁸ After votes were counted, and with 68 percent of registered voters turning out (down just one point from the 2015 election), Vox ended up with four council seats, having received almost 125,000 votes.

Más Madrid received 505,000 votes, the largest of any party. Twelve of the twenty Ahora Madrid councilors elected in 2015 were reelected on the Más Madrid ticket, joined by seven new councilors. Five of the Ahora Madrid councilors, including Mayor Carmena's outspoken critic, Pablo Carmona, ran as candidates for the United Left-Madrid party (Izquierda Unida-Madrid). It received almost 43,000 votes, but falling short of the five-percent threshold, none of the more radical left candidates were reelected. The nineteen seats that Más Madrid won fell ten short of the number required to hold a council majority. PSOE, the only other left-leaning party with representation on the council, won eight seats. As a result, the two groups of councilors did not have enough council votes to reelect Carmena as the city's mayor. Instead, the post was taken up by José Luis Martínez-Almeida, from the PP. Though the PP had only won fifteen seats in the election, and the center-right Ciudadanos had won eleven, the two were able to form a minority coalition government thanks to the support of the four Vox councilors. As promised, having not won reelection as the city's mayor, Carmena resigned from the council.³⁹

AHORA MADRID'S LEGACY

The right's return to power in Madrid resulted in important changes being made to several of Ahora Madrid's signature projects. In some areas though it is possible to observe continuity, such as with the *Madrid Nuevo Norte* project, which—just six weeks after the new administration took office—received unanimous support from all parties and, following regional approval in March 2020, is due to break ground in early 2021.⁴⁰ By

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38. Fernando Asunción, "Vox sigue imparabile en Madrid: superaría a Ciudadanos y al PSOE en las municipales, según un nuevo sondeo," *Voz Populi*, April 15, 2019, https://www.vozpopuli.com/politica/encuesta-elecciones-municipales-madrid-vox-carmena-pp_o_1235577403.html.

39. "Carmena renuncia a su acta de concejal," *El País*, June 17, 2019, https://elpais.com/ccaa/2019/06/17/madrid/1560756832_931934.html.

40. Marta Belver, "Así será el mayor desarrollo urbanístico de España: 10.500 viviendas y tres rascacielos con oficinas," *El Mundo*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.elmundo.es/madrid/2019/07/29/5d3f4270fdddfao3d8b4598>

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contrast, the new administration courted controversy, soon after taking the reins of government, by introducing a moratorium on fining motorists who flouted the driving ban in the Madrid Central low-emissions zone. In response, thousands of Madrileños took to the streets to protest.⁴¹ And a week after fines were stopped, a local court ruling forced the government to rescind the moratorium.⁴² However, in July 2020, it became uncertain whether the Madrid Central traffic restrictions would continue as the Madrid regional high court ruled that the original law creating the low-emissions zone was approved without an economic impact report and a public disclosure process.⁴³

Ahora Madrid's participatory innovations have also been changed, and weakened, since the 2019 municipal elections. The Decide Madrid platform continues to work as an online space for residents to submit and debate proposals, with 469,000 registered users.⁴⁴ Arguably the platform's main use under the previous administration was as the vehicle for bringing citizens together to decide how to allocate an annual €100 million in spending. This is no longer the case. The new administration announced that there would be no participatory budgeting process in 2020. Instead, €51 million was set aside to complete projects selected in prior rounds of the city's participatory budgeting process.⁴⁵

The neighborhood forums and City Observatory were two final elements of Ahora Madrid's agenda of democratic renewal. Both were created to provide citizens with

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- .html; Ignacio S. Calleja, "Madrid Nuevo Norte: las grandes infraestructuras quedarán acordadas en el primer trimestre de 2021," ABC Madrid, August 3, 2020, https://www.abc.es/espana/madrid/abci-madrid-nuevo-norte-grandes-infraestructuras-que daran-acordadas-primer-trimestre-2021-202008030053_noticia.html.
41. "Madrid Central' protest: Thousands oppose suspension of anti-pollution plan," BBC News, June 30, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48814970>.
42. Feargus O'Sullivan, "In Madrid, a Car Ban Proves Stronger Than Partisan Politics," Bloomberg News, July 24, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-24/madrid-will-keep-its-car-ban-after-all>.
43. Miguel Ángel Medina, "Court strikes down Madrid Central low-emission zone over legal technicalities," *El País*, July 28, 2020, <https://english.elpais.com/politics/2020-07-28/court-strikes-down-madrid-central-low-emission-zone-over-legal-technicalities.html>.
44. Ángela Beato, "La transformación de Decide Madrid, la plataforma de participación ciudadana," *Madridiario*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.madridiario.es/la-transformacion-de-decide-madrid-la-plataforma-de-participacion-ciudadana>.
45. Sofía Pérez Mendoza, "Madrid no convocará presupuestos participativos en 2020 pero ejecutará algunos proyectos pendientes de Carmena," *El Diario*, December 10, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/madrid/ayuntamiento-madrid-convocara-presupuestos-participativos_1_1194988.html.

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meaningful access points into the governing process, allowing them to voice their needs and concerns but also to shape the content and direction of policymaking in the city. While the local forums had been running for two years before the new administration took over, the City Observatory had met just twice, with a further six meetings scheduled to take place over the next nine months. The new administration moved quickly to make their mark on the two institutions. Within a fortnight of taking office, the government indicated that the neighborhood forums would be suspended.⁴⁶ Then, a few weeks later it announced that the forums could continue in their present form until formally reconstituted (which occurred in early 2020).⁴⁷ At the same time, however, that the new administration reversed its decision to do away with the neighborhood forums, it made public that it would not renew the €690,000 budget used to employ and support the work of a network of community development officers connected with the neighborhood forums.⁴⁸ Though untested given that it had barely got off the ground by the time Almeida was sworn in as mayor in June 2019, the City Observatory enjoyed important formal powers. Members were mandated to evaluate public policies, drawing on expert advice and support from career officials, among others. They also had the power to call on the city to launch formal consultation processes based on proposals submitted to the Decide Madrid platform.

For the new administration, these powers went too far. Observatory members cried foul when their September meeting, the first scheduled to take place after the alternation in government, was canceled.⁴⁹ In November, a PSOE proposal to renew the Observatory after the mandate of the Observatory's first cohort ended was voted

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46. Mario Escribano and Fátima Caballero, "El Gobierno de Almeida suspende los Foros Locales y comienza una batalla contra los movimientos vecinales," *El Diario*, June 24, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/madrid/gobierno-almeida-foros-locales-madrid_1_1484074.html.

47. Maite Morales "Los Foros Locales se mantienen en funciones hasta su nueva constitución," *Hortaleza Periódico Vecinal*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.periodicohortaleza.org/los-foros-locales-se-mantienen-en-funciones-hasta-su-nueva-constitucion>.

48. Sofía Pérez Mendoza, "Madrid no convocará presupuestos participativos en 2020 pero ejecutará algunos proyectos pendientes de Carmena," *El Diario*, December 10, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/madrid/ayuntamiento-madrid-convocara-presupuestos-participativos_1_1194988.html.

49. Sofía Pérez Mendoza, "El Gobierno de Almeida acaba con un órgano innovador de participación ciudadana creado por Carmena," *El Diario*, October 2, 2019, https://www.eldiario.es/madrid/gobierno-almeida-ciudadanos-fiscalizan-ayuntamiento_1_1333036.html.

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down by all three of the council’s right-leaning parties; and, in February 2020, these same parties—with their majority of council seats—voted to fundamentally overhaul the Observatory. While retaining the same name, the Observatory would no longer include citizens. Instead, it would be comprised exclusively of councilors and public officials, evaluating the work of city authorities. In this new framework, the voices of citizens would only be heard based on the results of opinion polls, complaints, and suggestion processes.⁵⁰

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50. “El Observatorio de la Ciudad de Madrid se renovará para fomentar la transparencia y conocer la opinión ciudadana,” *Vivir Ediciones*, February 17, 2020, <https://vivirediciones.es/observatorio-ciudad-renovara-fomentar-transparencia-conocer-opinion-ciudadana>.



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