

Uses of time and their relationship to political participation: a proposal for redistribution

Policy Brief

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In Barcelona, as in so many other cities, everyday life revolves around a scarce and unevenly distributed resource: time. Those who have time can stay informed, attend meetings, and get involved in community or political processes. Those who don't—because they provide care, work long hours, or juggle both—are pushed to the margins of democratic life.

The research led by Platoniq, with support from the Barcelona City Council, set out to put numbers, voices, and nuance to this intuition. Through our own survey with more than 300 responses, interviews with experts in participation and gender, and triangulation with the European Time Use Survey (HETUS), a clear story emerged: time poverty is one of the main barriers to civic participation.

A project led by
Platoniq Foundation

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Uses of time and their relationship with political participation from an intersectional perspective

Time management is a crucial factor in promoting political participation, especially in a diverse and dynamic city like Barcelona. The use of time directly influences the degree of citizen involvement in political, social and cultural processes. An intersectional approach to the study of time allows us to recognise how different factors such as gender, social class, ethnicity, age and working conditions affect individuals' ability to actively participate in politics. This gap in access to political participation can deepen existing inequalities, limiting inclusive democracy.

Time is one of the most valuable and, at the same time, most unevenly distributed resources in our societies. How we use it, how much we devote to work, care, rest or participation, determines not only our quality of life, but also our opportunities to influence the common good.

In this area, the European Time Use Survey (HETUS) is the main reference: with its harmonised methodology across Europe, it provides an accurate understanding of how time is distributed in different countries and how these inequalities influence the ability to participate. Its data show, for example, that in Spain women devote more than twice as many hours as men to unpaid care work, that the population has less free time than the European average, and that community participation barely reaches 7–10 minutes per day.

"Most of my time is spent at work. I have little time for rest and minimal time for leisure," said one participant.

Against this structural backdrop, the exploratory survey conducted by Platoniq with funding from Barcelona City Council provides a situated and complementary perspective. Through more than 300 citizen responses and interviews with experts, the study investigates how lack of time and care burdens condition democratic participation, which time slots and modalities are most accessible, and what institutional support—work-life balance, care spaces, asynchronous modalities—could promote more inclusive participation. In dialogue with HETUS, these results not only confirm structural inequalities in the use of time, but also reveal how they are experienced in everyday practice and what specific demands citizens are making to overcome them.

1. Distribution of daily time

The Platoniq survey shows that a significant proportion of people devote between 3 and 6 hours a day to unpaid care work, with a clear concentration among women. This finding is supported by data from HETUS, which offers a structural picture: in Spain, women spend an average of 4 hours and 7 minutes a day on unpaid domestic and care work, while men spend 1 hour and 55 minutes. In other words, women spend more than twice as much time on these tasks, confirming a persistent gender inequality in the social organisation of time.

In terms of paid work, the survey reveals great variability, from reduced working hours to long hours of employment. HETUS clarifies this: men spend an average of 4 hours and 54 minutes per day on paid work, compared to 3 hours and 13 minutes for women. When both types of work are combined, the result is revealing: women accumulate more than 7 hours of total work (paid + unpaid) per day, while men accumulate around 6.5 hours. This difference explains why women more frequently report feeling a lack of time and why their availability to participate in civic processes is more limited.

With regard to rest and sleep, the Platoniq survey shows that most participants sleep between 5 and 7 hours a day, which is below international recommendations.

HETUS confirms this deficit: the average in Spain is around 8 hours and 30 minutes per day, but with significant variations by age and gender. Women, for example, tend to sleep less when they are in stages of intensive parenting and caregiving, while men maintain a somewhat more stable pattern. This difference reveals how the pressure of caregiving also affects the quality of rest.

Finally, both the exploratory survey and HETUS agree that citizen and community participation occupies a marginal place in the distribution of time. According to HETUS, in Spain, an average of just 7 minutes per day is spent on volunteering, community life or political participation, compared to several hours spent on work and caregiving. This data coincides with the Platoniq survey, in which the vast majority of respondents say they spend less than an hour a day on these activities.

Overall, a comparison of the two sources clearly shows that time poverty and its unequal distribution by gender and stage of life are determining factors in the possibilities for democratic participation. While caregiving takes up most of the available time, civic involvement is relegated to a residual space, highlighting the need to rethink public policies from a temporal justice perspective.

2. Participation experience

The results of the Platoniq survey and the HETUS data paint a complementary picture of the citizen participation experience in Spain, and particularly in Barcelona. On the one hand, the survey reveals a boom in digital and local forms of participation, with citizens getting involved in online platforms, neighbourhood initiatives and community activities. On the other hand, HETUS confirms that the amount of time structurally devoted to community life, volunteering and political participation in Spain is very low compared to other European countries: barely 7–10 minutes per day on average, compared to 15–20 minutes in northern countries.

A combined reading of both sources suggests that the development of new forms of digital participation is a response to the scarcity of free time and the historical weakness of the associative fabric in Spain. While HETUS shows that Spanish citizens have less free time—less than five hours a day, compared to more than six in France or Germany—the Platoniq survey highlights that, in this context, digital technology offers a flexible and accessible way to maintain a certain level of civic engagement.

However, both sources agree that participation remains at an intermediate level, with moderate satisfaction and little influence on the daily organisation of time. This precarious balance shows that, without institutional changes to strengthen both the community and digital dimensions, participation will continue to be a residual practice, marked by the tension between the desire to get involved and the structural limitations of time.

In short, the intersection between Platoniq and HETUS leads to the conclusion that citizens do participate, but they do so on a fragile and adaptive basis: they take advantage of the digital and community spaces available, although their time commitment is minimal and their satisfaction limited. The challenge is to consolidate this participation, transforming what is currently residual into an everyday right with more motivating experiences and a greater real impact on the common good.

3. Motivations and barriers

A joint reading of the Platoniq survey and HETUS data reveals a citizenry that combines strong motivations with structural obstacles that are difficult to overcome. On the one hand, our own survey reveals that the main reasons for getting involved in civic life are the desire to improve the immediate environment and the willingness to exercise civil rights. These motivations express both a commitment to the community and a political understanding of participation, confirming that there is a latent interest in being part of the common good.

On the other hand, the barriers identified—lack of time and mistrust of institutions—are supported and explained by the HETUS data. The European survey shows that, in Spain, the 25-44 age group bears the greatest time pressure: women work up to 9 hours a day (paid + unpaid), while men work around 8.5 hours. This inequality in the use of time explains why lack of availability appears as the main obstacle to participation in the Platoniq survey.

At the same time, institutional mistrust, although not captured by HETUS, intensifies when it overlaps with these structural limitations. Citizens not only perceive that they lack time, but also doubt that their efforts have a real impact on decisions. The combination of these two barriers creates a circle of disincentive: even with strong motivations, material and political conditions reduce participation to a marginal practice.

Overall, the contrast between the two surveys reveals a fragile balance: there are strong community and democratic motivations, but these are confronted with a context of structural time poverty and a deficit of institutional trust. Overcoming this tension requires not only addressing individual motivations, but also redesigning public policies to redistribute time and ensure participatory processes with greater legitimacy and real impact.

4. Quality and impact of participation

The Platoniq survey shows that citizens perceive participatory processes as being of average quality (3/5), with insufficient deliberation time and uncertain impact: while some people believe that their contributions have an impact, others feel that they are merely consultations. This perception is not only understood from a political perspective, but also from a structural one, and this is where the HETUS data helps to shed light on the situation.

According to HETUS, the population in Spain has less than 5 hours of free time per day, compared to more than 6 hours in northern European countries. Furthermore, when paid and unpaid work are added together, women accumulate an average of 7.5 hours of work per day, compared to 6.5 hours for men. This imbalance leaves a large part of the population—especially women—with fragmented time and limited energy to engage in deliberative processes that require continuity, calm and reflection.

A joint reading of both surveys leads to the conclusion that dissatisfaction with the quality and impact of participation is not only due to the institutional design of the processes, but also to the material conditions of everyday life. Participatory processes compete with busy schedules and a lack of rest, which means that they are experienced as additional activities rather than practices integrated into everyday democratic life.

In short, Platoniq provides the voice of citizens who are calling for more time, better quality and greater impact, while HETUS provides the statistical basis that explains why these deficits are so persistent: a time-use structure in which work and care absorb almost all the available margin. Together, both sources show that without temporal justice there will be no democratic quality.

5. Institutional evaluation

The Platoniq survey reveals that citizens rate institutional efforts to promote participation at an intermediate level (3/5). It acknowledges progress, but insists that there is still a long way to go to ensure truly inclusive and effective processes. The most frequently repeated proposals point in three clear directions: making schedules more flexible, enabling online and asynchronous modalities, and offering spaces for work-life balance and care.

HETUS data helps to explain why these measures are so strongly supported. In Spain, women spend an average of more than four hours a day on unpaid care work, twice as much as men.

In households with children, this figure skyrockets, drastically reducing the amount of free time available. Added to this is the fact that the Spanish population generally has less free time per day (less than five hours) than the European average. This combination of factors explains why a large part of the population perceives participation as an extra effort that is difficult to reconcile with everyday life.

The joint reading shows that citizens' demands are not just specific aspirations, but direct responses to structural inequalities in the social organisation of time. Making schedules more flexible is not a matter of convenience, but a condition of access for those who work long or irregular shifts. Incorporating asynchronous modalities responds to the fragmentation of available free time, while enabling spaces for reconciliation is essential for people with care responsibilities—especially women—to participate on an equal footing.

In short, Platoniq provides the voice of citizens who demand processes adapted to real life, while HETUS confirms that these demands are based on objective and persistent inequalities in the use of time. Both sources converge on a clear message: democratic participation can only be inclusive if institutions design processes that are sensitive to time poverty and gender gaps in care.

Recommendations on public policy

Inspired by the manifesto "Tick-tock Europe: championing the Right to time!" promoted by the Time Use Initiative, a network comprising 20 organisations representing municipalities, cities and regions in Italy, Spain, Austria, France, Germany, Belgium and Greece, the aim of these proposals is to promote cooperation between citizens, towns and cities on time policies, to encourage their implementation and to ensure the recognition of the right to time as a citizen's right.

1 Flexible institutional hours

HETUS data shows that the Spanish population has less free time than the European average, with very busy days that combine paid and unpaid work. In this context, the Platoniq survey reveals that many people consider the schedules of participatory processes to be inaccessible, especially those with family responsibilities or long work shifts. To this end, it is proposed to include reconciliation spaces (temporary nurseries, financial support for childcare) as a standard requirement for organising municipal, regional or national deliberative processes.

2 Asynchronous and digital modalities

Platoniq puts forward a clear demand: the possibility of participating asynchronously or online, which would allow for greater reach and overcome barriers of time and mobility. HETUS supports this based on its structural diagnosis: free time in Spain is fragmented, with many people having only a few scattered minutes a day between obligations.

3 Reconciliation and care spaces

HETUS is categorical: women in Spain devote more than twice as much time as men to unpaid care work. Platoniq confirms that this overload makes participation much more difficult for mothers, fathers and carers. Creating spaces for work-life balance and care around participatory processes—daycare centres in civic centres, accompaniment services, logistical support for activities—is not an optional extra, but a requirement for democratic equality. Ensuring that no one has to choose between caring and participating is one of the keys to fairly redistributing access to the right to influence the common good.

4 Structural redistribution of time and compensation

Public policies must go beyond specific measures: they need to move towards a structural redesign of time, with reforms that promote shared responsibility for care, a reduction in working hours and recognition of the social value of free time. Without this redistribution, any participatory effort will continue to come up against structural limits that are difficult to overcome.

In order to make this redistribution possible, there are calls for financial or employment compensation (paid leave, allowances, transport) for those who participate in citizens' juries, deliberative assemblies or direct consultations, or who organise and coordinate them. There are also calls for paid compensation for public and private sector workers for their participation, with a minimum of 4 to 8 hours per month, which can be accumulated.

5 Strengthening the real impact of participation

The Platoniq survey reflects divided perceptions: many people feel that their contributions do not have a real impact on decisions. This disincentive is compounded by the lack of time reported by HETUS, creating a double barrier: limited availability and low expectations of impact. Strengthening participation therefore requires not only opening more channels, but also ensuring that the results are binding or clearly influential in public policy. This would restore citizens' certainty that their time is well spent, making participation a meaningful practice rather than an unrewarded extra effort.

Experiences in mental health centres where professionals and doctors do not resemble you can isolate you. It feels like being in crisis is the only way to be heard.
Peer legislative theatre facilitator

6 Creation of a citizen licence

Without an official recognition system in place today, many citizens value their experience in deliberative mini-publics (in terms of knowledge acquired on the subject, as well as experience in collective intelligence tools, teamwork and oral fluency) in their job search, their activist activities and even reinvest it in a career in political representation. This would therefore be a specific recognition of deliberative experience, supported by various forums and reports: the creation of a commitment pathway that values it in the employee's professional career (Appel d'Amiens), recognition of the experience acquired (Chatham House, Bernasconi report) that could be linked to the citizen commitment account.

About the research

The research was designed as a three-stage process, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques and comparing the results with European data.

First stage: the survey itself

A digital questionnaire was developed on the OpenSpaces platform (based on Decidim) and was open between March and June 2024. The reference universe was all persons over the age of 16 residing in Barcelona. The non-probabilistic sample was disseminated through Platoniq's channels, partner networks and mailing lists. A total of 352 responses were obtained, of which 323 were valid. Although the response rate was low and no weighting was applied, the survey was intended as an initial exploration to identify trends and issues.

The questionnaire collected sociodemographic variables and explored three main areas in depth:

- Use of time (paid work, unpaid care work and commuting).
- Political participation (frequency and forms).
- Perceived barriers and facilitators, from lack of time and care responsibilities to interest in asynchronous formats or spaces that promote work-life balance.
- An open-ended question was also included to gather qualitative input.

Second phase: interviews with experts

The exploratory nature of the survey was complemented by the experience of 12 specialists in participatory democracy and gender and time issues. These were academics, activists and municipal technical staff. Through semi-structured interviews, the interpretation of the data and the identification of less visible dynamics were explored. These interviews were then analysed using thematic coding techniques, which allowed patterns and nuances to be distilled.

Third phase: triangulation with European data

Finally, to reinforce and contextualise the findings, the Harmonised European Time Use Surveys (HETUS) were used. In this case, the data available for Spain was taken, focusing on the distribution of paid and unpaid working hours, broken down by sex and age. This comparison provided a broader view, placing the local exploratory results within national and European trends.

Triangulation with HETUS

The results confirm the trends identified in the interviews and in the HETUS survey: time poverty, linked to work and caregiving, is a key barrier to participation. Although the sample size is small, our own survey provides valuable insights into the age groups and genders that are particularly affected, and the measures most in demand to facilitate democratic engagement.

Future lines of research

As a result of research on Deep Time and Participation, the paper "Democracy Takes Time: Intersectional Temporalities in Participation and Deliberation" was presented at the European Consortium for Political Research General Conference 2025.

The conceptual framework developed in the article, which focuses on temporal justice, the plurality of democratic rhythms, and the need to overcome the limitations of institutional presentism, reinforces the relevance of expanding the survey and enriching its methodologies. In dialogue with other experiences of democratic innovation presented at the conference, the study consolidates its contribution in two complementary directions: as a situated empirical exploration, providing evidence on how time poverty is experienced in everyday participation, and as a methodological experiment, capable of inspiring more inclusive designs that are sensitive to temporal inequalities and attentive to the diversity of social profiles.

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