

Critical Debates

*Participatory Governance
in Latin America:
Promises and Limitations*

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- Maxwell A. Cameron, Eric Hershberg, and Kenneth E. Sharpe, eds., *New Institutions for Participatory Democracy in Latin America: Voice and Consequence*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Tables, figures, bibliography, index; 263 pp.; hardcover \$105, paperback \$30, ebook \$19.99.
- Françoise Montambeault, *The Politics of Local Participatory Democracy in Latin America: Institutions, Actors, and Interactions*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. Figures, tables, notes, bibliography, index, 288 pp.; hardcover \$65, ebook.
- Patricio Silva and Herwig Cleuren, eds., *Widening Democracy: Citizens and Participatory Schemes in Brazil and Chile*. Leiden: Brill, 2009. Figures, tables, notes, bibliography, index; 379 pp.; hardcover \$87, ebook \$90.
- J. Ricardo Tranjan, *Participatory Democracy in Brazil: Socioeconomic and Political Origins*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2016. Figures, tables, notes, bibliography; 288 pp.; paperback \$35, ebook.
- Brian Wampler, *Activating Democracy in Brazil: Popular Participation, Social Justice, and Interlocking Institutions*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015. Figures, tables, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index; 312 pp.; paperback \$39, ebook \$39.

More than 25 years have passed since the city of Porto Alegre in the southeast of Brazil initiated its now storied participatory budgeting (PB) program. The program, sponsored by what at the time was a relatively obscure leftist party called the Workers' Party (PT), reserved a portion of the municipal budget for allocation by organized groups of citizen activists. Few could have foreseen the result: the program captured the imagination of academics, activists, and policymakers for years to follow. The success of this program and others like it helped to catapult the PT out of obscurity and eventually into the presidential palace.

In PB, these groups saw far more than a novel way to allocate municipal resources. Many saw an entirely new way of doing politics, something desperately needed in Latin America. The region's democracies, when not being toppled by mil-

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itary coups, were notorious for corruption, elitism, and clientelistic practices. Participatory governance initiatives like PB represented a way to disrupt elite-dominated politics by giving the citizenry a direct role in the policymaking process. Supporters of PB also hoped it could act as a sort of training ground for democracy, wherein local participation would give a new generation of activists the skills and confidence necessary to challenge the elitist and clientelistic tendencies that had been a constant feature of Brazilian politics.

These hopes were inspired by theorists such as Rousseau (2002), Mill (2009), Plamenatz (1963), and Pateman (1970), who had long held that direct participation in self-governance could lead citizens to rise above their particularistic interests and embrace a more public-spirited kind of politics. Other theorists (e.g., Barber 1984) argued that participation would nullify the atomizing effects of liberal capitalism and allow citizens to overcome collective action problems. Scholars such as Avritzer (2002), Abers (2000), Baiocchi (2001), and Wampler (Wampler and Avritzer 2004) applied this logic to PB, first in Porto Alegre and later in other cities. Although these scholars disagreed on many issues, there was general agreement that PB could and, in many circumstances, did contribute to the development of an autonomous and capable civil society.

The overwhelming embrace of PB by activists and academics of the left is not surprising, given the historical context in which the Porto Alegre experiment was founded. The 1990s were a time of transition and disruption in the Latin American left. The failure of revolutionary movements across the region and of socialist governments in Chile and Nicaragua, the unfolding collapse of the Soviet Union, and the renewed ascendancy of (neo)liberal capitalism all conspired to erode confidence in and commitment to state socialism. At the same time, the brutality of life under military rule led to a widespread renovation of the left, which developed a new appreciation for political democracy, having previously seen it as little more than a bourgeois affectation. These two factors led much of the Latin American left to turn from state socialism to the deepening of democracy as its primary goal (Roberts 1998). PB, with its popular base, empowerment of civil society, and potential to break the elite's clientelistic control of the poor, was a promising mechanism for achieving democracy's ideal of true popular sovereignty.

More than two decades later, the optimism of academics and activists seems, if not misplaced, then certainly excessive. The proliferation of participatory governance programs across the region has provided a wealth of data to which earlier analysts did not have access, and the results are decidedly more mixed than proponents would have hoped. The recent scandals that have plagued Brazil are only the most obvious evidence of PB's failure to truly transform the national political system. And many of the newer participatory programs enacted in the wake of Porto Alegre have been far less successful in developing and empowering civil society; many have failed to survive. The exuberance of the first generation of PB scholarship can be attributed to an assumption that history has shown to be dubious: that participatory programs at the local level would shape and direct the development of the national sociopolitical environment.

This essay reviews three single-author books and two edited volumes that seek to correct that assumption. These five works, though analyzing different cases and coming from distinct theoretical perspectives, share a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between local participatory governance and national politics. All recognize that participatory governance may influence the sociopolitical environment, as earlier scholarship argued, but that the environment also exerts a powerful influence over participatory governance. Taking these works together, two major questions emerge. First, what conditions must be in place for participatory self-governance programs to be implemented and to function properly? And second, what conditions determine whether functioning participatory programs will help to deepen national democracy, enhance representation, and achieve social justice?

Although each of these works grapples with one (or both) of these questions, each approaches the question from a unique theoretical perspective and uses a unique conceptual schema. With the partial exception of the edited volume by Cameron et al., the books derive their analytical frameworks mostly inductively from the specific case or cases they investigate. As a result, while each book represents a significant contribution to the study of a particular case or cases, its applicability to other cases is somewhat limited. The purpose of this essay is to synthesize potential answers to the two questions. The result is a much less sanguine view of the ability of participatory governance to transform national politics. Many of the hoped-for results of such programs (e.g., vibrant civil society, more responsive representation) turn out to be necessary preconditions for these programs to thrive, although such programs may amplify these factors in turn.

WHERE CAN PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE WORK?

A functioning participatory program is a prerequisite for such a program to exert any influence on the national political system; in this regard, all five works at least touch on the first question listed earlier. However, three of the works focus directly on explaining the circumstances under which participatory governance programs can be successful: Wampler's *Activating Democracy in Brazil*, Tranjan's *Participatory Democracy in Brazil*, and *Widening Democracy*, edited by Silva and Cleuren.

Wampler identifies three types of scholarship on participatory governance in Brazil and Latin America, based on methodology: single program studies, studies comparing cities with a program to those without one, and cross-national and longitudinal studies of participatory governance programs (28). He points out an obvious gap: no studies exist that analyze the interaction of the political environment and participatory governance over time. This focus is critical, because the institutionalization of participatory citizenship, either in the Brazilian Constitution or individual participatory programs, is not sufficient to ensure that the political and social rights inherent in such a citizenship regime will actually be respected. Wampler argues that citizenship requires "activation," which he defines as a process of contestation and cooperation between civil society, political actors, and the state, to be put into practice.

To identify the preconditions for citizens to successfully ensure protection of their rights, Wampler conducts an in-depth qualitative study of multiple participatory programs in a single city, Belo Horizonte, over a ten-year period. Belo Horizonte is a particularly successful case of a city that has developed what Wampler refers to as interlocking institutions, defined as a local political system wherein popular actors and political elites work cooperatively to produce responsive and effective policy. Five factors emerge as critical for the development of such a system. First, the state must have the ability to use its power to provide for its citizens without violating their political and social rights. Second, civil society must be sufficiently organized and developed to effectively petition state institutions and pressure political actors. Third, social organizations must have willing partners in representative institutions (e.g., the mayor, municipal legislatures) that are supportive of participatory programs. Fourth, the municipalities must have significant resources to respond to citizens' demands. Fifth, the formal rules of participatory programs must provide incentives for civil society to organize and engage with the programs collectively and directly (through mechanisms such as direct voting on policy and providing forums for discussion and debate).

Wampler's book provides a compelling and detailed description of participatory governance, not as an *ex nihilo* institutional innovation but as one part of an unfolding struggle, as citizens demand the *de facto* recognition of their *de jure* rights. The process he describes qualifies the hopes of participatory democrats. Several of the hypothesized results of participatory governance turn out to be preconditions for its success. Specifically, Belo Horizonte's vibrant civil society and the long-term prominence of the PT (whose political brand rests partly on encouraging direct participation) allowed participatory institutions to work cooperatively with representative institutions in the city.

Like all works of research, this book is not without limitations. While it is clear that these factors played a critical role in outcomes in Belo Horizonte, whether these are necessary conditions in other contexts is more ambiguous. The choice to focus on a single city that was dominated by a single proparticipation party throughout the period of research makes inference to other cases tricky. Are all five factors necessary in all cases?

Silva and Cleuren's edited volume helps to overcome some of these limitations by comparing Brazil, where participatory programs have become quite common, with Chile, where true participatory governance is practically nonexistent. The editors have collected several essays to help explain why participatory democracy was embraced in Brazil and rejected in Chile. Through a collection of comparative analyses and studies of each case, the editors identify four factors that led to this divergence. The first two factors, support of the representative system and historical memory, concur with Wampler's findings: political actors who control representative institutions must be supportive of citizen involvement in governance for participatory programs to thrive.

As Silva and Cleuren point out, divergent historical trajectories led the parties of the center-left in the two countries to develop very different attitudes toward

grassroots politics. The editors argue in their introduction that the Brazilian PT was unencumbered by the historical memory of the preauthoritarian past and was thus free to embrace participatory innovation (8–9). This is highly debatable; as Tranjan's book points out, the history of controlled incorporation of unions under Getúlio Vargas and his successors led the new unionism movement, which eventually formed the PT, to embrace participatory democracy as a way to circumvent state control of worker organizations. Regardless, Silva and Cleuren correctly argue that history did not predispose the PT to fear citizens' direct involvement in politics. Meanwhile, Chile's center-left parties had the collapse of democracy under Salvador Allende firmly burned into their memories, and they blamed that collapse on the excessive politicization of society. As a result, when democracy was restored, the Chilean partisan left had little appetite for encouraging the development of grassroots civil society (see Silva and Cleuren, chap. 3, by Paul Posner).

The third factor cited by Silva and Cleuren also comports with Wampler's analysis: the importance of state capacity and resource availability. However, while Wampler emphasizes the need for sufficient resources and capacity to respond to citizen demands, Silva and Cleuren show that from a participatory perspective, one can have too much of a good thing. Joe Foweraker argues that the Chilean state's efficiency in providing goods and services dampened demand for innovative approaches to governance, as Chileans were mostly satisfied with their regime's performance (chap. 2). Patricio Navia makes a similar argument in his chapter on Michele Bachelet's abortive attempt to implement a more participatory style (chap. 14).

Fourth, the editors note that neoliberalism in Chile has created a consumerist view of citizenship that mitigates against participatory initiatives in favor of traditional representative modes of democracy (pp. 9–10). Participatory theorists such as Barber (1984) have argued that democratic participation can ameliorate such atomization, but as the editors astutely note, such atomization militates against the adoption of these programs in the first place.

On its own, *Widening Democracy* makes only a limited contribution to our understanding of participatory governance outside Chile and Brazil because its hypothesized variables are inextricably tied to its particular cases of interest. It also lacks the analytical focus of the other edited volume reviewed here; several chapters (chaps. 5 and 13 particularly) seem outside the scope of the analytical question stated in the editors' introduction. Several others (including many of the Brazil-specific chapters) cover ground that is already well trodden, further reducing the book's contribution. However, when taken in tandem with *Activating Democracy in Brazil*, several factors emerge as crucial for participatory programs to be founded and to survive.

First, a fairly vibrant civil society is extremely helpful for establishing an effective participatory governance program. At a minimum, social organizations must be on board with participatory modes of interaction with the state (see William Nylen in Silva and Cleuren, chap. 8). Second, the state must devolve significant resources to local authorities in order for participatory programs to allow for effective demandmaking by citizens and municipal responses to those demands (Posner, chap. 3; Wampler 2015, 52). Another factor, and perhaps the most critical, is the

presence of sympathetic political elites. None of the works reviewed here cites a single case in which a successful participatory initiative was enacted in the face of an elite that opposed participatory democracy. PB in Brazil has been successful in large part because of the PT's commitment to such programs. This raises the question, what circumstances lead political actors to embrace participatory democracy?

Explaining why political leaders (e.g., mayors, party militants) turn to participatory mechanisms is the principal goal of Tranjan's book. He argues that socio-economic and institutional factors combined to incentivize the PT to fight for radical participatory governance in the 1970s and then to temper those demands in subsequent years. This process of moderation eventually resulted in the more limited forms of participatory governance, such as PB, which become prominent in the 1990s and 2000s. Tranjan points to two primary factors that drove this historical process. The first is rapid industrialization, which weakened the power of the traditional political elites (especially the landed aristocracy) and created openings for new political coalitions to emerge. This factor, while certainly important, is less interesting in a broadly comparative essay such as this, because many Latin American states experienced rapid industrialization in the twentieth century without any corresponding participatory innovations.

The second and arguably more crucial factor is the reaction of various political movements to controlled incorporation and authoritarian repression. Tranjan focuses on three movements to develop his argument: the *autênticos* faction of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), the ecclesiastical base communities (ECB) of the Catholic Church, and the new unionism movement, which eventually produced the PT. Each of these embraced participatory modes of politics partly as a way to circumvent the control of elites in the organization in which they were embedded.

The PMDB was the officially sanctioned opposition party in the military dictatorship; the *autênticos* were militants who wanted the party more forcefully to confront the military dictatorship. Tranjan recounts how a group of *autênticos* led by Dirceu Carneiro, in opposition to a more collaboration-oriented PMDB mayor, initiated various participatory initiatives in order to "mobilize subaltern groups with the goal of furthering democratization" (chap. 3). These initiatives had considerable success, but quickly withered after Carneiro and his team were voted out of office in favor of a candidate tied to the city's traditional elite.

In Boa Esperança, a progressive PMDB mayor, Amaro Covre, encouraged the development of civil society via participatory initiatives over two mandates in the 1970s. In doing so he relied heavily on Catholic ECBs, social organizations that embraced liberation theology's emphasis on the importance of political activism among the poor. Tranjan also describes the development of participatory governance in Diadema, a municipality in São Paulo, under the PT. The PT emerged from the new unionism movement. This movement was a reaction to the controlled incorporation of workers' organizations under Getúlio Vargas, in which unions were allowed to operate and given some voice in politics, but under tight controls designed to ensure their loyalty to the government.

Tranjan argues that once competitive politics were restored during the 1980s, the political incentives for sponsoring participatory programs changed. Circumvention of formal political institutions was no longer such a pressing goal once the military relinquished control; successful engagement with electoral politics became critical for movement success. As a result, the PT (which by that point was the main actor favoring participation still standing), began to focus on building participatory forums that could work with, rather than overcome, representative institutions.

Tranjan's historical account, aside from some distracting forays into Brazil's distant past, provides a compelling analysis of how mayors, partisans, and grassroots Catholic activists responded to controlled incorporation and military rule by sponsoring radical participatory programs, then moderated their demands once cooperation with, rather than opposition to, existing political institutions became necessary. The book also compliments Wampler's argument that participatory governance should be viewed as part of a political process of interaction with the broader political environment. This procedural view further enforces the notion that whatever impact participatory governance may have on the quality or responsiveness of representative democracy, the existence of such programs depends in large part on the largess of representatives.

CAN PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE DEEPEN DEMOCRACY?

The remaining two works reviewed here attempt to explain why participatory governance helps to deepen democracy in some contexts but not in others. *New Institutions for Participatory Democracy in Latin America*, edited by Cameron et al., uses Hirschman's concept of voice, or the ability of citizens to formulate and press demands in their interactions with state institutions, to identify several criteria to evaluate the impact of participatory institutions on voice. These include whether participatory programs give equal access to all citizens (inclusion); whether they work with (as in Wampler's interlocking institutions) or against representative institutions (representation); their ability to pressure the state to accede to citizen demands (responsiveness); the extent to which the programs undermine clientelistic practices (disrupting clientelism); and whether the programs make it easier or harder to punish political elites for their actions (accountability).

This is a useful schema for analyzing the impact of participatory democracy on the quality of the broader democratic system, and this volume makes a major contribution because, unlike all the other works described here, it analyzes programs initiated under different types of political systems, from full democracies to populist regimes. However, the book does not develop a full causal story; there is no framework for explaining why some programs may contribute to inclusion, responsiveness, and so on.

Montambeault's *Politics of Local Participatory Democracy in Latin America* fills this gap, and thus can provide greater insight on the individual chapters in the

Cameron volume. Montambeault argues that participatory democracy programs can contribute to the quality and depth of democracy, but only in some circumstances. She posits that the combination of collective mobilization patterns and the relative autonomy of participants in self-governance programs determines whether or not these programs can transform the elitist, top-down, and clientelistic state-society relationships that are typical in Latin American democracies. Montambeault then specifies several factors that influence mobilization patterns and autonomy, using two cities in Mexico and two cities in Brazil (one of which, Recife, is treated as two cases because of a change in partisan control of the city administration from the PMDB to the PT) to support her conclusions.

Mobilization patterns are determined primarily by the institutional design of the participatory programs. Montambeault cites many of the same institutional features that Wampler does, especially whether programs mobilize citizens as individuals with particularistic demands or as members of civil society organizations fighting for community interests. This is perhaps the area in which participatory programs can have the most powerful impact on state-society relations: they can encourage citizens to engage with the state as either individual or collective actors.

Whether participation is autonomous or controlled depends on three factors. The first is the level of political competition in a municipality, both between parties and within them. While competition may be the basis of a healthy representative democracy, it provides negative incentives for political elites to attempt to capture participatory venues and instead converts them into dependent networks reminiscent of clientelism. Montambeault focuses on intramunicipal political competition, but her argument can be fruitfully extended to political conflict at the national level. For example, she provides insights into why participatory institutions sponsored by populist governments fail to enhance representation and accountability and instead tend to reinforce national hegemony. Gisela Zaremborg's innovative network analysis of municipal development councils (in Cameron et al., chap. 2), which includes populist contexts in Venezuela and Nicaragua, and Michael McCarthy's chapter on Venezuela (Cameron et al., chap. 6) show that participatory organizations can be used to bypass parallel institutions (e.g., municipal mayors and legislatures) that are controlled by opposition actors, reinforcing ties between the populist leader and that leader's supporters.

The second factor is a familiar one: the strength of civil society. Montambeault, concurring with Wampler, finds that a well-developed network of civil society organizations (such as that mobilized by the PT in Belo Horizonte) makes it more difficult for political elites to use participatory forums to their own advantage. An important element of civil society health that does not arise in any study reviewed here except those in Cameron et al. is the issue of inclusion. Todd Eisenstadt and Jennifer Yelle (in Cameron et al., chap. 8), in an analysis of customary law elections, point out that devolving power to local participatory bodies may risk amplifying patterns of exclusion that exist in those communities; the authors find that women and those living in outlying areas have little voice in such circumstances. A chapter on "demodiversity" and "plurinational democracy" in Bolivia (José Luis Exeni

Rodríguez in Cameron et al., chap. 9) deals with similar issues, although Bolivia seems to achieve a better balance between inclusion and respect for the autonomy of indigenous traditions.

The third factor Montambeault cites is conceptions of the meaning of “participation” prevalent among political elites, bureaucrats, and citizens themselves. Combined with the evidence in the other works reviewed here, the attitudes of elites and officials seem particularly crucial. These views form another dimension of the repeated contention that actors in traditional political and administrative roles must be supportive of (or at least not antagonistic to) empowering citizens. This is particularly problematic in populist contexts, where participatory programs are often seen as a tool for administering the policy of the central government (Zaremburg) or as a mechanism for mobilizing citizens to defend the populist leader during elections or periods of crisis (Rhodes-Purdy 2015).

Alicia Lissidini’s chapter 7 in Cameron et al., comparing direct democracy mechanisms in Uruguay and Venezuela, demonstrates this point further. In Uruguay, such mechanisms are used to check the legislature and the executive from transgressing the interests of citizens (e.g., by enacting privatizations and other neoliberal reforms). By contrast, direct democracy in Venezuela was used almost exclusively to protect and enhance the authority of Hugo Chávez through enacting a new constitution, removing term limits, and changing union leadership election rules in order to increase *chavista* influence on workers’ organizations. In other words, in Uruguay, direct democracy is an instrument of public policy; in Venezuela, it serves as yet another battleground between the Bolivarian movement and its opponents.

WHAT DO PARTICIPATORY PROGRAMS NEED TO SUCCEED?

Three factors, all the studies reviewed here agree, are crucial for the implementation and survival of participatory programs, and for allowing such programs to serve their intended role as mechanisms for enhancing the quality and depth of democracy. Broad support for such programs must exist throughout the representative system and the public administration through some combination of ideology, party brands, and the brute logic of electoral competition. Without such support, elites will probably attempt to capture and control such programs for their own purposes. A vibrant and inclusive civil society makes participatory forums more resistant to elite capture. And the chapters on nations under populist governments in Cameron et al. point to a third factor: the acceptance of pluralism in both civil society and the state. If disadvantaged minorities (e.g., women, rural residents) are excluded from civil society, or if supporters of certain political parties or movements are viewed as illegitimate by the state, participatory governance will only reinforce existing power structures and patterns of exclusion. Such an outcome is hardly what participatory democrats would hope for.

Taken together, what do these works conclude about the emancipatory potential of participatory governance, what several authors call the empowerment hypoth-

esis? The inevitable conclusion puts a damper on the ambitions of the early wave of scholarship on this topic. Participatory institutions themselves have only a modest impact on how citizens organize to petition the state. As Wampler, Tranjan, and the studies in *Widening Democracy* demonstrate, the predicted effects of participatory governance, especially civil society development and representatives' responsiveness, are in fact preconditions for the successful deployment of participatory opportunities. Even if such programs can be enacted in the absence of such factors, Montambeault and the studies in Cameron et al. demonstrate that participatory governance in such contexts will probably fail to contribute to democratic quality. Indeed, under populist governments, such programs can actually serve to legitimate and reinforce autocratic politics.

This is not a call to abandon participatory governance. Quite the contrary; Wampler, Montambeault, and several of the chapters in the edited volumes demonstrate that these programs can contribute significantly to democratic depth when they form part of a system of "interlocking institutions," cooperating with more traditional representative institutions to empower citizens and produce socially just policies. However the (as it turns out) "irrational exuberance" evident in some early scholarship on these programs must give way to caution. Participatory governance should not be pushed in sociopolitical environments where the conditions for its survival and success are absent.

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