

that if the existing regime maintains the current polarization, divided political elites, and absence of consensus on the rules of the political game, it is difficult to think about regime stability in the medium and long term.

To conclude, it should be pointed out that David Close's work is an excellent analysis of Nicaragua's recent political history, but it is also a guide to interpreting regime changes and, above all, the processes of de-democratization—an issue of great interest in times of posttruth!

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Victor Albert, *The Limits to Citizen Power: Participatory Democracy and the Entanglements of the State*. London: Pluto Press, 2016. Photographs, figures, tables, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index, 224 pp.; hardcover \$99, paperback \$30, ebook \$30.

In this book, Victor Albert provides a front row seat to the concrete manifestations of the old adage, “all politics is local.” Through an ethnographic comparative account of participatory processes in the Brazilian municipality of Santo André, Albert provides a much-needed bottom-up view of participatory democracy. In doing so, the author pushes this literature forward in important ways and poses fundamental questions that should be prioritized in future research.

The author sets out to probe the realities of participatory democracy on the ground, investigating the administrative and political processes, as well as the power relationships, that determine the extent to which citizens can “partake in the governance decisions that come to influence their communities” (3). To address this research question, Albert adopts a comparative research design that, unlike other studies that compare participatory processes across different cities, examines three different participatory institutions in the same municipality. The advantages of such a design are manifold, not the least of which is that it allows the author to hold constant a whole range of factors that could potentially shape the functioning of participatory institutions.

Albert's empirical approach brings an additional benefit, a profoundly rich account of local governance and politics. The author's account makes an important contribution to our understanding of these processes, elucidating the role, interests, and strategies of state actors and street-level bureaucrats in these participatory spaces. Such a view is absent from much of the existing literature on participatory democracy and urban democracy more generally. Albert's fascinating account of the election process—an example of what he calls “ritualization”—is a case in point. The author, in a sense, opens up the “black box” of participatory institutions, providing a rich understanding of the socialization and collective identity formation process such spaces entail. Moreover, the author's ethnographic accounts and interviews offer another important contribution by prioritizing the voices of the protagonists of participatory institutions, from both the state and civil society. It is through these accounts that we come to truly understand the challenges of partici-

patory democracy in practice, including questions of how to prioritize technical expertise compared to lived experience.

Albert's analysis plainly demonstrates the value and necessity of ethnographic accounts of participatory processes. For instance, his descriptions of features such as the layout of meeting spaces, and the diagrams of spatial organization he furnishes throughout the book, are highly indicative of the broader processes he describes. The significance of such characteristics will be at once recognizable and deeply informative to anyone who has attended and studied such participatory spaces. Along the same lines, the seemingly mundane detail of citizens at assemblies thanking the mayor for attending a distant and underserved part of the city offers a clear manifestation of the promise of participatory institutions to bring government closer to the people, but also the superficial and limited nature of this proximity, as evidenced by the way the mayor summarily dismisses requests for basic services, such as running water. Such ethnographic data are rare in studies of participatory institutions, yet they are urgently needed.

The author's bottom-up view of participatory democracy also allows him to explore the gaps and contradictions between the transformative potential—and even revolutionary origins—of participatory institutions as a political project of Santo André's socialist political elite, and the quotidian concerns and practices of ordinary citizens who seek out participatory spaces in search of solutions to urgent everyday problems. Undertaking such a task in the cradle of the Workers' Party is a highly provocative exercise, which takes on new meaning in light of recent political developments in Brazil.

While *The Limits to Citizen Power* makes important contributions, it also has a number of significant methodological, theoretical, and empirical limitations. First, although Albert employs a strong research design, he should do more to justify limiting the site of empirical analysis to public meetings and assemblies. While this choice is, of course, defensible, and indeed, it is impossible to study participatory institutions without it, the author does not do enough conceptually or empirically to lay out for the reader how one ought to think about other necessary components of the process—legislative and political decisionmaking, the bureaucracy, the role of the judiciary, etc.—without which participatory spaces could not function. The book calls out for a more robust analytical framework for considering these different institutions jointly. The author's discussion of temporality and the “back stage” are a good start to building a relational model but need to be pushed further.

Second, as discussed above, a strength of Albert's research design is the within-city comparison of different participatory institutions. The book's second chapter provides clear evidence of the great variation in the functioning of the three participatory councils, which lays bare a real puzzle about the drivers of this variation. However, the author provides little in the way of a systematic analysis that can allow us to truly discern the causes. At one point, he appears to suggest that the answer lies in differences in the level of formality in the meetings of the different participatory councils. Meanwhile, he leaves more promising explanations underexplored. The author tells us, for instance, that there are differences in the institutional origins

of the various councils, with the UDC mandated by federal law, the housing council emerging from local policy debates, and participatory budgeting emerging through a mix of the internal dynamics of the Workers' Party and policy diffusion from the experience in Porto Alegre. Albert provides a good historical account of these processes yet stops far short of explicating how these differences in origins might shape the institutional design and functioning of the different participatory councils. These varied historical origins could form the basis for a strong theory of participatory institutions, a task that will hopefully be taken up in future research.

An additional limitation of the book is its lack of clarity in theorizing the state. The author clearly believes the state to be an important determinant of processes and outcomes of participatory councils. But while this is intuitive, it is complicated by the fact that the author is looking at a single municipal administration, so that many characteristics of the state are held constant across the three cases. Which features of the state, then, are relevant in shaping participatory processes and outcomes, and, crucially, which ones are likely to vary across different participatory councils run by the same administrative apparatus? The author makes frequent reference to "state structures," "strong government power," and "strong government presence," but provides little sense of what these terms mean. Moreover, how are we to know how to measure "government power," and how much is appropriate or too much?

The book is also limited by the near absence of a theory of power. Albert makes various references to "state power" and provides some empirical evidence of its manifestations, but does not define power or how we ought to conceptualize it. He makes cursory references to authors such as Bachrach and Baratz (1962) and Lukes (1974), but offers no conceptual framework and only a thin empirical account of how power operates in these spaces. The interviews featured in chapter 5 provide rich evidence, but here it would also be important to have a more systematic theoretical framework of power on which to base this important discussion. Instead, much of the analysis of power relations is left to the reader. This is a significant omission, as power relations are essential to understanding participatory institutions.

A related shortcoming that also has bearing on questions of power is the lack of analysis of power relationships in society. The author is primarily concerned with state-society relations, but the near omission of discussions of race, class, and geography is puzzling, particularly in the Brazilian context. The author's first meaningful reference to class comes on page 86, and it is in reference to another author's work. This, too, ought to be prioritized in future research on participatory institutions.

Even with these shortcomings, *The Limits to Citizen Power* is an important step forward for the literature on participatory democracy. The author pushes us to disaggregate participatory institutions, analyzing in greater depth variation in institutional origins and design, as well as their everyday praxis. Albert offers a number of methodological and empirical contributions that can be adopted and developed further by future scholars.

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