Participation Meets Politics: Political Shifts and the Longevity of Participatory Governance Institutions

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Citizen participation in policy making and project implementation should play a pivotal role in urban resilience, sustainability, and development across cities that vary by demographic and economic characteristics. In the past decade, a number of scholars set out to demonstrate that participatory governance institutions (PGIs), which formalize the authority of citizens and government officials to jointly make decisions, significantly impact the direction of public policy and the subsequent outcomes for citizens (Donaghy 2013; Touchton, Sugiyama, and Wampler 2017). Theoretically, the addition of diverse voices into policy making should change the shape of public policies, particularly when civil-society actors representing low-income and marginalized groups have the power to make substantive decisions (e.g., budgeting expenditures and project regulations). In Latin America, PGIs exist across all levels of government—sometimes mandated by federal law—and increasingly take on a range of policy issues including health, social assistance, housing, sports, urban planning, and budgeting, among many others. Touchton, Sugiyama, and Wampler (2017) found that participatory policy councils across Brazil are associated with improvements in infant-mortality rates and other measures of well-being, and my previous research found an increase in low-income housing programs associated with the presence of municipal-housing councils (Donaghy 2013). Other researchers documented the importance of information sharing and opportunities for civil-society advocacy resulting from the existence of these institutions (e.g., Mayka 2019). In cities—where civil society plays a vital role in bringing together residents from within and across neighborhoods in which fewer traditional social bonds exist—PGIs act as invaluable tools for transparency of government activities and accountability to diverse populations.

However, as national governments around the world shift to the Right, many scholars and activists are concerned that the presence and power of PGIs may be under threat. The concern stems from the traditional association of participatory governance with the Left in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, where the majority of policy councils were mandated by Workers' Party (*Partidos dos Trabalhadores* [PT]) officials and supported by ideologically leftist social movements since democratization in the 1980s. Questions remain, however, as to how exactly political shifts impact the implementation of PGIs. Does a shift to the Right at any or all levels of government predict the demise of PGIs, or are there reasons for optimism regarding their long-term prospects?

This short article presents reasons for optimism regarding the longevity of PGIs despite the shift to the Right among elected officials and it proposes the case of the Municipal Housing Council in São Paulo as demonstrative of the possibilities for long-term institutional sustainability. Following corruption scandals that enveloped the PT in Brazil and the election of conservative Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency, questions arose about the future of PGIs in a country now without ideological support from the top. In fact, in April 2019, Bolsonaro issued a decree eliminating dozens of federally mandated participatory councils, including the national-level Council of the Cities. For the moment, the future of PGIs appears especially bleak, but I argue that there are reasons for optimism for the longevity of participatory governance at the local level.

MECHANISMS FOR INSTITUTIONAL LONGEVITY

Participatory governance, particularly at the city level, has the potential to withstand shifts in the ideology of the executive across federal, state, and local institutions based on the following factors:

1. *All politics are not national.* Shifts to the Right at the national level may decrease the viability of federal-level PGIs or PGIs mandated by the federal government for implementation at the state or municipal level. However, particularly in a federal system such as Brazil, city administrators still have leeway in deciding the governance structure at the local level; with or without support from the top, mayors and agency directors may decide to continue participatory processes at the behest of their constituents. PGIs that address issues of urban development and planning have particular relevance at the municipal rather than national level and may continue to be politically popular at the local level.

2. *The motivations of city administrators are never as straightforward as theory would predict.* PGIs should play a different role than "politics," in which moneyed interests traditionally dominate the discourse and decisions of policy making. Inevitably, however, politics do creep into PGIs composed

of elected officials, government bureaucrats, and civil-society organizations, including private-sector associations. In US urban political theory, rational-choice institutionalists predict that city officials enact participatory processes only when they advance the efficiency of planning or the legitimacy of the organization (Hall and Taylor 1996). As Molotch (1976) argued, government officials motivated by the quest for growth and revenues would have no need

relationship with the state enables open communication and trust; importantly, this type of relationship may be possible even when civil society and the administration in power are not natural ideological allies (Donaghy 2018). Even in the absence of this relationship, Mayka (2019) found that in Colombia, civil-society leaders were able to take over the process of PGIs when the state did not want to be involved.

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to form coalitions with civil society through participatory institutions as they seek alliances with business. However, as urban development is increasingly fueled by "eds and meds" rather than corporate headquarters, more recent scholars acknowledge the importance of civil society to restructure economic growth and opportunities (Stone 2018; Stone et al. 2015). Based on both strands of literature—institutionalism and urban politics—government officials may recognize the benefits in opening up decision making if they see that incorporating citizens in the process has long-term economic benefits that accrue from improving the employment and educational opportunities for all residents. In essence, the will of the executive to support PGIs may not be as straightforward as party affiliation or ideological positioning but in fact may reflect the necessity of coalition building for developing sound policies.

3. *Bureaucrats play a pivotal role.* As Abers (2019) argued, activist bureaucrats—or public-sector workers who seek to proactively pursue and defend contentious issues—can significantly shape the direction and implementation of the policies they champion. Continuing this argument, bureaucrats also may play a role in carrying out the work of PGIs even without executive support. Although the executive may choose to restrict funding or decision-making powers, bureaucrats still can use PGIs to transmit critical information as well as act as conduits for promoting the interests of civil society within their agencies.

4. *A strong civil society still matters.* Under any circumstances, a mobilized civil society committed to the longevity of the institution is necessary to keep pushing the administration to make it a priority. In the case of Belo Horizonte, Wampler (2015) found that an engaged, dense civil society that involves great numbers of the poor, that is concerned with a broader focus on the rights of citizenship, and that has a stake in delivering public services matters for the operation of the participatory-citizenship regime. In the same city, Montambeault (2016) also documented the autonomy of civil society as pivotal to democratic cooperation rather than enabling a clientelistic or co-opted relationship between civil society and the state. A strong

5. *PGIs become entrenched institutions.* As Rich, Mayka, and Montero (2019) concluded, it is not possible to return to the status quo because these institutions have been developed and people have become accustomed to them. When civil society has been the impetus for the creation of the institution, organizations already have begun to learn the rules of the game and are invested in its success. This process of learning within the institution regarding the norms of engagement, the policy positions of various members, and the language of program budgeting and finance enables civil society to negotiate, understand what is possible from the side of the state, and know when to push for its demands. State officials also gain a greater respect and understanding for civil society and are more willing to cede control of resources and the agenda. Institutional learning, therefore, is critical to managing expectations and conflicts that naturally arise across members. This negotiation over time becomes routinized, making PGIs difficult to dismantle.

SÃO PAULO

The case of São Paulo offers an example for how PGIs may evolve under the direction of ideologically disparate administrations. As the largest city in Brazil, São Paulo has had numerous municipal-level participatory councils, some of which have persisted over time, including the Municipal Council for Housing (*Conselho Muncipal de Habitação* [CMH]), and some of which have faded away, including the participatory-budgeting process. The CMH—mandated by the federal government for municipalities receiving funds through the National Fund for Housing for about 15 years—actually began operations in 2002 at the demand of housing movements allied with the PT. From its beginning, the CMH responded to local rather than national politics. Housing movements had been critical to the election of PT Mayor Marta Suplicy, and many officials and staff of the Secretariat for Housing during the administration came from NGOs and social movements dedicated to housing provision in the city.

The administration created the CMH with a tripartite, deliberative structure, with equal representation among

housing movements, civil-society associations, and public officials. Members from the housing movements are elected every two years in a citywide election, whereas associations nominate members from within their own ranks for each two-year term and public officials serve according to their positions within the government. All members have the ability to propose agenda items, enter into debate, and vote on budgetary and programmatic directives.

According to the Secretariat for Housing in São Paulo, the city contains 1,710 registered *favelas* (i.e., informal communities located within or on the outskirts of a large city); approximately 2,500 irregular settlements without access to basic services; and 2,334 tenements (*cortiços*) in the central region (HabitaSampa 2018). The scale of the challenges requires an appropriately vast response from the city to improve housing, services, and infrastructure. In addition, degradation in the city's center and evolving plans for redevelopment create intense conflict among for-profit developers, social movements, and government officials for which spaces for voice, negotiation, and power on all sides are vital to progress (Coslovsky 2015).

The issues in São Paulo are complex as is the corresponding policy network of stakeholders. As Marques (2013) explained, São Paulo is dominated by the coalition that is formed between real-estate developers and government officials. When the administration is from the PT, power in the network shifts to allow for influence from the party's base, which includes the largest movements for housing in the city. Even then, however, the real-estate sector maintains a significant hold on whomever is in power as the city strives to be known globally as a thriving financial hub, capable of attracting international investment.

The evolution of the CMH has been marked by the steadiness of social-movement participation mixed with distinct periods of conflict between the administration in power and the movements. The movements that have been involved from the beginning, led by the Union of Housing Movements (*União dos Movimentos da Moradia* [UMM]), have continuously demanded that the Secretariat for Housing hold meetings, provide data, and allow for deliberation within the Municipal Housing Council. Over time, there has been an increase in the number of votes, resolutions, and decrees—even after the most recent mayoral PT administration left office in 2017 (*Secretaria Municipal de Habitação* 2019).

The trajectory of the CMH, however, also includes the breakdown of the institution during the period 2011–2013. For about two years, the Municipal Housing Council shut down due to a conflict between the housing movements and the administration of center-right Mayor Gilberto Kassab. The dispute formally centered on the rules for electing representatives from the movements. Before the 2011 election for movement representatives, the administration changed the electoral rules to mandate that anyone who wanted to vote in the election must register in advance using the internet (Avanci 2011). The movements claimed that both of these requirements violated the right of citizens to vote (i.e., the internet is not available to everyone). The administration also reduced the number of polling places, adding to the movements' claim that the government was purposefully limiting the mandate of universal voting for CMH representatives. The government further declared that the movement representatives would be elected as one ticket ("*chapa*") rather than through proportional composition.

This last point further confirmed to movements from the Left that the administration sought solely to limit their power within the CMH (Barbosa 2012). Conflict also stemmed from claims from the housing movements to the Left that many of the representatives elected in the previous term (i.e., 2009–2011) were merely puppets of the government. Luiz Kohara, a civil-society member of the CMH, commented that even though members had control over approving the budget during this period, they were not privy to what happened with the funds after the vote (Kohara 2011). In the early years of the CMH, Kohara and other representatives from civil society and the housing movements believed that they had achieved important successes. However, in 2010–2011, Kohara and other movement leaders from the Left felt the loss of CMH's legitimacy when many of the newly elected movement members sided solely with the government. As Cornwall (2008, 278) eloquently made the case: "Being involved in a process is not equivalent to having a voice." Kohara (2011) explained that this is how the main housing movements in the city felt in that period.

With the election of PT Mayor Fernando Haddad in 2012, the housing movements were optimistic that the conflict over the CMH elections could be resolved and the institution would resume operation. To their disappointment, the first Secretary of Housing appointed by Haddad was from a party to the Right, associated with a former corrupt government of the 1990s. However, the CMH in fact held regular elections in 2013 and began anew. From 2013 to 2016, coherency across the federal administration of PT President Dilma Rousseff and the municipal administration also enabled cooperation in housing policy and the direction of resources.

However, perhaps what is of most interest recently is the continued strength of the CMH under the more conservative administration of Brazilian Social Democratic Party Mayors João Doria (2017–2018) and Bruno Covas (2018–present). In a meeting at the end of December 2018, I witnessed renewed strength of the housing movements and civil-society actors but also recognition by the government of the legitimacy of the process and the capacity of all actors to engage in professional debate. During this meeting, Secretariat for Housing bureaucrats presented a pilot project to revive the centrally located housing program initiated under PT Mayor Suplicy. The project prioritizes homeless citizens of the city and would include social services similar to the US "housing-first" model. The project plan was met with critical questions from CMH members but ultimately moved forward.

The evolution of the CMH has not been a straight path toward shared power across stakeholders, and neither has it ever functioned according to a utopian vision of inclusive governance. However, after more than 15 years in existence,

it plays a critical role in devising and implementing housing programs in the city and ensuring transparency and accountability from the city government.

CONCLUSIONS

How does the case of São Paulo reflect these arguments about longevity? First, the trajectory of this municipal-level institution does not follow a straight line from the ideology of national-level governments. Second, the case demonstrates that the actions of the municipal administration matter but are not based strictly on political ideology or affiliation. An ideological move to the Right can have significant repercussions for PGIs, as demonstrated by the closure of the CMH from 2011 to 2013. However, after four years (2013–2017) of a PT administration, a new mayor from the Right did not immediately challenge the participatory process. The CMH was firmly ensconced in the policy-making infrastructure for housing, and operations continued under the more conservative government. Here, a relatively supportive housing secretary ensured the continuation of the Municipal Housing Council, even though the mayor's party would have suggested otherwise. Furthermore, although the party of the executive matters for creating an environment of mutual trust, bureaucrats also directly contribute to the direction of participatory governance. Third, the case of São Paulo displays the critical role of civil society in institutional longevity. Throughout the life of the CMH, the commitment of the UMM and other leftist movements to the cause also ensured its continuation. As other scholars clearly found, a mobilized civil society is a necessary but perhaps not sufficient condition for implementation of PGIs. As Brazil moves forward under President Bolsonaro, it is with the increased energy of the Left acting in opposition. That energy must extend beyond street protests to these formalized institutions if they are to persist. Entrenchment of the CMH appears secure but requires vigilance on the part of civil society to remain a productive institution. ∎

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