

Tensions and contradictions in democratic participation in Latin America and Europe

Tensões e contradições da participação democrática na América Latina e na Europa

The debate surrounding the role and intensity of citizen participation in liberal democratic regimes has a long history. Since the end of the Second World War, this debate has intensified due to the need, felt by policymakers and scholars alike, to guarantee the stability of democratic regimes. Accordingly, advocates of limited participation – who argue that humans' individualistic nature would hinder the pursuit of the common good, which can only be safeguarded by legitimately elected representatives (Schumpeter, 1942) – have engaged in a rich dialogue with participatory democrats. The latter see opportunities to expand democracy beyond its institutionalised procedures by creating avenues for citizen involvement in public decision-making processes (Barber, 1984).

Among participatory democrats, a substantive vision of democracy emerged in opposition to its reduction to a mere system of institutional arrangements. In the 1960s and 1970s, amid a renewed desire to participate in 'public affairs' – whether through electoral voting or direct democracy mechanisms such as petitions and referendums – self-organised civil society groups, along with workers' and students' movements, called for more robust forms of democracy (Pateman, 1970). Citizen participation, practised through both conventional and less conventional mechanisms, fuelled debate within the social sciences and bridged empirical concerns with the development of theoretical insights (Dalton, 2008). The concepts and principles underpinning citizen participation in decision-making processes today find their empirical grounding in 'living material', which allows for continuous renewal of the debate.

The proliferation of new forms of dialogue and joint decision-making between democratic institutions and citizens gained traction throughout the 1980s and 1990s, bolstered by progressive and alter-globalist groups that placed Latin America at the forefront. In Brazil, local and supralocal experiments with participatory institutions and innovative social participation practices became



emblematic and continue to serve as global references (Santos, 2002). Among these, participatory budgeting deserves particular attention for demonstrating how calls for greater social justice through citizen participation can meet demands for state reform (Avritzer, 2006). Simultaneously, what emerged as a renewed participatory ethos in Latin America – later disseminated globally – found support in deliberative democracy practices taking root in several Western countries. The so-called deliberative ‘mini-publics’, which aim to enhance the quality of communication and opinion exchange as a complement to the competitive model promoted by representative mechanisms, have attracted increasing interest from policymakers and scholars seeking to bring elected officials closer to citizens (Dryzek, 2000).

Taken together, practices of participation and deliberation have introduced new perspectives on strengthening democracies, with varied implications from city to city, region to region, and country to country. Their spread illustrates attempts to broaden the scope of public decision-making processes, but has also elicited scepticism. In some instances, the decentralisation of power claimed by institutions has proven more apparent than real, with power often remaining in the hands of political and economic elites who attempt to manipulate citizens’ voices (Dagnino, 2004). As a result, even participatory democrats have warned of the risks of co-opting citizens through strategies that reduce public responsibility in favour of the private sector. Thus, the new governance paradigm consolidated over the past two decades continues to raise questions about inclusiveness, particularly concerning the most marginalised groups in society (Hickey and Mohan, 2004). This issue is inextricably linked to the legitimacy – both real and perceived – of citizen participation in light of the shortcomings of electoral representation mechanisms (Warren, 2017).

Today, such practices can vary in both intensity and impact, and must be understood in relation to the historical transformation of liberal democratic regimes and the challenges they currently face. The global context appears to reflect a state of permanent multicrisis, raising concerns about the significant decline in democratic quality across the world, including in countries with more consolidated regimes. The multiplication of crisis fronts and global systemic risks presents an unprecedented scenario in contemporary history, and practices of citizen participation and deliberation must demonstrate their effectiveness more than ever. Populist and xenophobic organisations, as well as far-right ideologies, are threatening the rights won over past decades under the aegis of democracy. The intensification of threats against minorities and vulnerable groups, combined with the rise of authoritarian leaders and an increasingly deregulated model of capitalism, stands in direct opposition to the core principles of democracy.

Against this backdrop, the democratisation of democracy through citizen participation and deliberation must be examined critically, considering both the current performance of legitimately elected institutions and the role of self-organised civil society and social movements.

The fertile terrain of democracy must continue to be a space for experimentation with new forms of dialogue and contestation, fostering novel articulations between formal and informal actors, so that fundamental rights remain protected and democratic regimes can continue their processes of innovation and reinvention (Elstub and Escobar, 2019).

Within this socio-political framework, we invited researchers committed to a critical analysis of citizen participation – its potential and its contradictions – to contribute to this thematic dossier. All contributors share an interest in understanding how, from both theoretical and practical perspectives, institutions and citizens are rethinking their roles through new forms of dialogue and joint decision-making. Given the breadth of the issues addressed by the authors, it is worth highlighting the rich diversity of methodological approaches that allow for an in-depth reflection on the pressing challenges of our time and open up new avenues for research in this field. Accordingly, the sequence of the ten selected articles follows an underlying logic that unveils different perspectives of formation, disillusionment, and hope in relation to citizen participation.

The first article in the dossier presents a comprehensive view of the Brazilian context, highlighting the phenomenon of non-participation as an epiphenomenon of diffuse scepticism and affective polarisation. Still from a macro perspective of the Brazilian context, the following text analyses the transition from non-participation to online participation, through a conceptual systematisation of its various forms and gradients. The digital dimension is at the centre of the contribution in the third article, which includes an in-depth study of the inclusive capacity of ICTs and their consequences for the exercise of citizenship. Taking into account the spectrum of application of digital tools, the following article discusses the potential and risks of digital cities, paying particular attention to phenomena of social exclusion. The transition to the principles and forms of digital participation in the institutional sphere is addressed in the fifth article through a contribution on volunteering and citizenship, bringing up essential questions to understand the motivations that drive volunteers to participate. This is followed by an analysis of the sphere of municipal councils, highlighting their performance and the difficulties faced in some regions of Brazil. Participatory budgeting is the focus of the seventh article, which proposes a reasoned and comparative reflection on its contribution to territorial justice. Staying on the subject of participatory budgets, the subsequent article shifts its gaze to the European context, with a special focus on Spain, analysing the role of these processes when they involve children and young people. Broadening the focus to include all the ‘democratic innovations’ developed in Europe and Latin America, the penultimate article in the dossier presents a comparative analysis of the role rural areas play in this type of practice. The dossier closes with an article that, in continuity with the reflection on democratic innovations, critically addresses the issues linked to changing the status quo through citizen participation and deliberation, with a special focus on the cases of Spain and Portugal.

Below is a summary of each of the articles included in the dossier.

In the article *Skepticism and polarization: political determinants of non-participation in participatory institutions*, Ligia Helena Hahn Lüchmann, Lucas de Carvalho de Amorim and Julian Borba investigate the political factors that influence non-participation in institutions created to broaden democratic involvement in Brazil. In particular, the authors seek to understand the reasons behind the non-participation of the most disadvantaged social strata in participatory institutions that aim precisely to include different segments of the population in public administration, defining the inclusion of the most vulnerable as one of the main objectives. Using a quantitative approach to data from the study *The Face of Democracy in Brazil*, carried out between 2018 and 2022 based on a representative sample of the Brazilian population, the authors highlight scepticism – derived from citizens' low trust in institutions and low expectations regarding the impact of their participation – alongside ideological polarisation, resulting from the perceived distance between citizens and political groups, and also affective polarisation, stemming from increased disaffection between rival political groups. Thus, in addition to economic and social explanations, the authors argue that non-participation in participatory institutions, especially participatory budgeting, councils and conferences, can be explained by these two factors. However, while scepticism is associated with non-participation in contexts of high distrust in institutions, ideological polarisation is not significantly related to non-participation. On the contrary, the weight of affective polarisation suggests that more affectively polarised individuals are more likely to participate in participatory institutions.

In the article *Rethinking electronic participation categories: an analysis of Legislative Assemblies' websites*, Licemar Vieira Melo, Monika Dowbor and Roberta Carnelos Resende analyse the websites of 26 Brazilian Legislative Assemblies with the aim of understanding whether and how these channels extend citizens' political participation beyond voting. Based on a hierarchisation of the various forms of e-participation found in scientific literature – which include levels such as consultation, collaboration and electronic involvement – the authors compile a scale that is applied to the channels of the Legislative Assemblies. By identifying six levels that characterise e-participation, this article contributes to the ongoing debate by proposing two new levels that complement the four already identified in the literature, resulting in the following scale: (1) informative; (2) citizen manifestations; (3) consultative; (4) propositional; (5) collaborative; and (6) decision-making. By highlighting the importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in strengthening digital democracy and e-participation, the authors argue that it will be possible, through this new categorisation, to better reflect on e-participation in the Legislative Branch, as well as on e-participation in Executive Branch initiatives.

The article *Digital citizenship and democracy: an evaluation model for public digital inclusion initiatives*, by Samir Rodrigues Haddad, focuses on the role of digital inclusion programmes in fostering citizenship. The author begins with the assumption that access to, and the ability to use,

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can potentially enable the generalised exercise of the same civil, social and political rights. However, the utopia of an egalitarian digital society clashes with the ongoing fight against real poverty and in many cases contributes to increasing the exclusion of citizens, raising new ethical and moral questions. The author therefore advocates the need for the state to implement public digital inclusion policies that guarantee access to information and knowledge in order to expand the exercise of citizenship. Through a quantitative study carried out on the Telecentros.br programme in Belo Horizonte, the author seeks to construct a conceptual model that allows digital inclusion to be evaluated in relation to its effects on citizen participation. This model is built on statistically significant associations between active and passive digital citizenship, access to and use of ICTs, and use of Telecentres – highlighting the need for the state to support efforts to overcome obstacles to participation in this environment, especially in regard to vulnerable populations.

In the article *Towards democratic futures: public spaces in MIL Cities*, Ângela Carvalhaes Ferrari and Márcio Vieira de Souza investigate the role of Media and Information Literate Cities (MIL Cities) in combating the ‘infodemic’ and the proliferation of false information and disinformation through the development of digital competences and literacy. Media Architecture (MA) is thus considered by the authors to be an approach that can support these objectives by combining architectural and technological elements in urban experiences of civic participation and social inclusion, aggregating multiple channels of interaction that extend through hyperspace. However, algorithmic filtering and the loss of autonomy in these experiences through the control exercised by interactive media can expose or even exacerbate the social inequalities present in the urban context, thereby negatively affecting democratic participation. By analysing various cases that aim to build more democratic urban spaces through the hybridisation of the city between physical and digital dimensions, the authors highlight the opportunity for citizens to be placed at the centre of inclusive projects that guarantee the conditions for them to exercise control over urban and digital spaces.

The article *“Small actions, great results”: relationships between voluntarism and citizenship*, by Patrícia Trindade Caldas and Carlos Eduardo Cavalcante, reflects on the role of volunteering in promoting individual engagement in collective issues and fostering citizenship. The authors’ interest in this topic stems from the potential for broadening citizen participation in local communities – a challenge considered relevant by political leaders given the low level of involvement in public debate. The authors hypothesise that volunteers are more likely to participate when motivated by altruistic reasons and social justice. The study thus aims to understand the relationship between volunteering and citizenship practices through a quantitative approach applied to three population samples – volunteers, non-volunteers, and religious volunteers (due to their representativeness in this sector in Brazil) – in order to contribute to the growing body of research on volunteering and the Third Sector in the country. The authors’ hypothesis is confirmed, highlighting the limited association

between altruistic motivations and environmental practices, as well as the role of selfish motivations in the exercise of citizenship, particularly in the political and social spheres, likely due to the pursuit of personal advantage. These results open up new questions and point to the need for future studies to deepen the understanding of the relationships analysed.

The article *Challenges of citizen participation: on the institutional profile of Brazilian municipal councils*, by Pompilio Locks and Adilson Giovanini, focuses on municipal councils in Brazil and assesses the factors that influence changes and continuity in their institutional design. Councils are institutions linked to the executive branch with the aim of broadening the participation and representation of organised civil society. By comparing data for the years 2009, 2019, 2020 and 2021, the authors seek to verify the geographical distribution of observed changes, giving the study an innovative character in that it identifies persistence and shifts in patterns of territorial inequality in council participation. The application of a quantitative methodology based on descriptive and inferential statistics, using the Municipal Basic Information Survey (IBGE/Munic) and the Municipal Councils Institutional Profile Indicator (IPICM), reveals a considerable increase in councils between 2009 and 2021, particularly in the areas of health, education and social assistance. In other areas, such as human rights and racial equality, the expansion of municipal councils has been more uneven. The distribution across the country also varies, with greater institutionalisation in the South and Southeast, while the North and Northeast face greater challenges. The study thus suggests avenues for future research, particularly concerning strategies to reduce inequalities in access to participation, with special attention to vulnerable groups negatively affected in this area.

In the article *The relationship between Participatory Budgeting and territorial justice: a theoretical and practical contribution*, Rodrigo Sartori Bogo analyses the relationship between Participatory Budgeting (PB) and territorial justice, considering the multidimensional – social, political, institutional and spatial – and multiscale processes that have developed over recent decades in Brazil and influenced this innovative practice internationally. Inspired by the Porto Alegre model, PB has undergone significant transformations driven by key actors and agents, including political entities and international organisations aiming to promote social justice by reorienting public spending priorities. The author particularly emphasises the implications of these transformations for territorial justice, drawing on case studies in Araraquara (Brazil) and Vallejo (USA). The qualitative comparative study of the relationship between PB and territory – understood as political space – focuses on two cities with similar socio-territorial characteristics that have adopted deliberative PB models. The importance of institutional design emerges as an explanatory factor for significant differences: while Araraquara has a more structured, regionalised PB with greater territorial impact, Vallejo suffers from financial limitations and a lack of regionalisation, which reduce its capacity to promote territorial justice.

In the article *Advancing the democratic participatory experiences of young people: participatory budgets*, María Ángeles Abellán-López and Gonzalo Pardo-Beneyto study the implementation of Participatory Budgets (PBs) for children and adolescents in municipalities of the Valencian Community in Spain. The involvement of young citizens in allocating public resources is seen as a tool for civic education and democratic socialisation. Using a qualitative approach, the authors highlight the different contextual strategies for institutionalising PBs in municipalities, as well as their regulation within various political-administrative agendas – often through consolidated international programmes and in conjunction with local councils. Improving public policy through more accurate diagnoses of the problems experienced by young people and optimising the allocation of resources are among the most common objectives, sometimes complemented by others related to the creation of participatory, educational and empowering spaces. However, educational and democratic socialisation elements often take a back seat – sometimes due to political or technical actors who deprioritise these aims in work with young people. This ‘adult-centric’ bias and generalised tokenism also limit the effectiveness of youth influence in decision-making, relegating PBs to technocratic exercises that prioritise administrative efficiency.

In the article *The Rural in democratic innovations: a comparative proposal between Latin America and Europe*, José Duarte Ribeiro and João Moniz analyse how democratic innovations (DIs) occur in rural areas of Europe and Latin America. The authors aim to broaden understanding of the role of institutions and processes promoting citizen participation in different geographical contexts by comparing publicly available case databases. By incorporating aims of democratic equality and pluralism, DIs can contribute in various ways to addressing rural challenges. The authors show that in the European context, DIs tend to focus on strengthening local governance and sustainability, while in Latin America, DIs take a more emancipatory approach centred on civil, social and territorial rights. European cases highlight rural development through local governance, environmental sustainability and policy planning, whereas Latin American initiatives address development as a space of struggle – especially concerning food sovereignty, rights, and justice. Moreover, European DIs emphasise deliberative processes and the early stages of the policy cycle, while Latin American experiences show a more balanced approach across all stages, with stronger focus on implementation and outcomes.

Finally, in the article *Changing the status quo through democratic innovations? Three paradoxes from the Iberian Peninsula*, Roberto Falanga and Ernesto Ganuza explore the transformative potential of democratic innovations (DIs) in Portugal and Spain. Despite high democratic governance indices, both countries have seen increasing electoral abstention. The authors focus on two DIs – participatory budgets (PBs) and citizens’ assemblies (CAs) – and identify three paradoxes through literature analysis. First, there is the paradox of electoral politics: although

DIs are expected to transform the political landscape, they remain highly dependent on electoral cycles and political will. Second, there is the paradox of public policy transformation: DIs are often treated as neutral tools, distancing them from political debate and reducing their impact. Lastly, a third paradox arises from the increasingly standardised nature of experimentation with DIs, which prioritises technique over outcome, despite the need to assess collaboration between citizens and institutions. These paradoxes suggest that DIs must be understood as part of representative democracy, while acknowledging their limitations and inherent challenges.

This issue of *Cadernos Metrópole* also includes seven articles that contribute to articulating and deepening some of the issues discussed in the articles selected to be part of the thematic dossier.

In the article *Climate crisis, art, and landscape. Case study: El Pescado stream basin, Argentina*, Daniela Vanesa Rotger, Cecilia Giusso and Noelia Vallejo explore the relationship between art and nature as a tool to strengthen resilience in the face of the climate crisis. Resilience is understood as a dynamic process in which the environment and individuals interact to adapt communities in adverse contexts. In this study, the concept of landscape takes centre stage, given the need to conserve its attributes in the face of the intense process of urban sprawl in environmentally fragile areas. The authors analyse the southeast of La Plata in particular through a mixed approach using videos, collages and a short film with human and non-human protagonists, highlighting how artistic expressions can raise awareness in society of the interactions between urbanisation and the environment. In this way, art is treated as a tool for making visible what is hidden and tangible what is intangible, communicating the importance of environmental conservation against the degradation and stigmatisation of certain contexts, while simultaneously strengthening community resilience.

The article *Between freedoms and (in)subordinations: experiences of female urban cycle delivery workers*, by Luiza Fleury de Freitas and Leandro Cardoso, focuses on the influence of power relations on the experiences of cyclo-delivery workers in Belo Horizonte and São Paulo. The study addresses the precariousness to which these women are subjected in their work, which is embedded in a social reality that negatively affects their mental and physical well-being, as well as their dignity, while also showing their capacity for resistance. Using an approach that integrates issues related to mobility, gender and labour, the authors reflect on the challenges of urban planning through semi-structured interviews with a sample of female cycle couriers. The text highlights the economic constraints and physical toll of this work model, as well as aspects of psychological coercion, while also emphasising the transformative potential arising from a sense of empowerment, freedom and autonomy – particularly through the friendly relationships created among cycle couriers. Although the difficulties and potential benefits of cyclo-delivery cannot be explained by gender alone, the authors conclude that they are intensified by this differentiating factor.

The article *Transport projects and urban conflict: resistance to formal planning in Fortaleza*, by Rebeca Froés de Assis, Isabela Ribeiro de Castro and Clarissa F. Sampaio Freitas, looks at popular resistance against transport projects that impact the Trilhos Communities in Fortaleza. The study is based on literature that critically addresses neoliberal dynamics in urban contexts and the role that the state plays in formulating and regulating public policies, with emphasis on the appeal to inclusionary practices in urban planning that end up reproducing the hegemonic power of capital, thus preventing real social transformation. Through the concept of conflictual planning, which manifests itself in insurgent practices, the authors discuss how the intentional use of participatory discourse in processes that exclude vulnerable communities from spatial production can be contested through demonstrations, articulation with social movements, participation in public hearings, and the production of media materials, as in the case under analysis. The conclusion is that popular urban struggles have achieved a significant presence of non-hegemonic groups and fostered rapprochement between communities and academic and government institutions, helping to reduce the number of evictions and influence changes to the original projects.

In the article *Active city: considerations on the healthy city*, Douglas Gallo discusses the relationship between urban mobility and health based on the intense and accelerated process of urbanisation and growth in Brazilian cities since the mid-20th century. In this context, the importance of comprehensive, intersectoral urban planning that promotes health and quality of life is highlighted, with a focus on analysing active mobility (urban walking and cycling). Through interviews with subjects living in different Brazilian states (Amapá, Mato Grosso, Paraíba, Paraná and São Paulo), the study reflects on the design of cities and their consequences for public health. As well as proposing alternatives to the road-based model, the article discusses the role of green spaces in humanising cities. The author argues that reconfiguring urban design in favour of more active mobility, necessarily supported by public policies, has the potential to promote greater urban health.

In the article *From entrepreneurialism to utopias: heterotopic appropriation of Rio de Janeiro after mega-events*, Natasha Bantim analyses how Rio de Janeiro's urban spaces were appropriated following mega-events such as the 2016 Olympics. Such events and the urban projects that arise from them are generally seen as opportunities for host cities to reinforce their presence on the global urban map. Using Henri Lefebvre's concepts of isotopias, heterotopias and utopias, the author argues that, in the post-Olympic context of Rio de Janeiro, different appropriations can be observed resulting from interactions, strategies, successes and defeats within the urban space, which point to the heterogeneity of the city project. In particular, the author highlights how the prioritisation of attracting capital and selling a globalised image of the city has led to the emergence

of resistance actions, such as popular mobilisations against forced evictions and the privatisation of public spaces. The diversity emerging from this analysis points to a utopian project for a new city rooted in the ideology of the right to the city.

The article *Between rings and radials: logistics and inequality in the São Paulo Metropolitan Region*, by Aldo Garcia Júnior and Sidney Piochi Bernardini, critically discusses the territorial transformations caused by the expansion of logistics on the outskirts of the São Paulo Metropolitan Region (RMSP) between 1998 and 2020. Logistics plays a key role in the global dynamics of systems and infrastructures aimed at ensuring and intensifying the circulation of capital. The urbanisation of this region has been strongly impacted by the growth of logistics condominiums; and in view of this phenomenon, the authors seek to elucidate the expansion of logistics in terms of land use, identifying the main agents involved in this production, such as global corporations, the financial sector and state support. Considering that many of these condominiums have been installed in environmentally protected areas and in regions of high social vulnerability, there has been a worsening of inequalities between local populations, as well as a reinforcement of contradictions between the new and the old, where what is highly technological borders on what is highly precarious.

Finally, in the article *Dichotomies in democratic participation: conformation and disillusionment in Brazilian urban planning*, Jeane Aparecida Rombi de Godoy, Sandra Medina Benini and Angelo Palmisano analyse the contradictions of democratic participation in urban planning in Brazil, highlighting discourses of inclusion and exclusionary practices. To this end, sources related to urban planning and citizen participation processes were analysed, including academic studies, official documents and relevant legislation, with a focus on selected cases such as the *Porto Maravilha* Project and the *Minha Casa Minha Vida* Programme, alongside other experiences, such as Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre and New York. The authors argue that, although Brazilian legislation reinforces citizen participation, many processes serve to legitimise decisions already made by political and economic elites, limiting the inclusion of affected communities. Given that exclusion leads to frustration and political alienation, discouraging citizens from engaging in democratic processes, the authors propose ideas for transforming democratic participation through the articulation of social movements, urban planning professionals and public institutions, with the aim of redistributing power to promote greater social justice.

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