

# Participatory Governance

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## Abstract

Efforts to engage new actors in political decision-making through innovative participatory programs have exploded around the world in the past 25 years. This trend, called participatory governance, involves state-sanctioned institutional processes that allow citizens to exercise voice and vote in public policy decisions that produce real changes in citizens' lives. Billions of dollars are spent supporting these efforts around the world. The concept, which harks back to theorists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill, has only recently become prominent in theories about democracy. After presenting the foundational research on participatory governance, the essay notes that newer research on this issues falls into three areas: (i) the broader impact of these experiments; (ii) new forms of engagement, with a focus on representation, deliberation, and intermediation; and (iii) scaling up and diffusion. The essay concludes with a research agenda for future work on this topic.

## INTRODUCTION

Efforts to engage new actors in political decision-making through innovative participatory programs have exploded around the world in the past 25 years. From participatory budgeting to citizen councils, ordinary citizens are now able to participate in an array of decisions that would have been unimaginable a few decades ago. This trend, called participatory governance, involves state-sanctioned institutional processes that allow citizens to exercise voice and vote in public policy decisions that produce tangible changes in citizens' lives. These processes engage citizens in public venues *throughout* the year, thereby allowing them to be involved in policy formation and selection as well as oversight.

A broad number of examples fall under the rubric of participatory governance—from the “Right to Information” campaigns initiated in Northern India to Indonesia’s World Bank-sponsored Community Driven Development Program to Uganda’s participatory constitution-making process to Brazil’s participatory budgeting. A common thread among these forums is that citizens and/or civil society organizations are actively

engaged in state-sanctioned policymaking arenas in which actual decisions regarding authority and resources are made.

How does participatory governance differ from more well-known alternatives of direct democracy or deliberative democracy? Direct democracy in the context of the United States is mostly associated with state-level recalls and referendums, which allow citizens to express a binary choice with very little opportunity to engage their voice in an ongoing way (Bowler & Donovan, 2002). Modern forms of direct democracy in the United States were crafted to limit the power of party elites and to increase access of excluded groups (Pateman, 2012). They were not designed to allow people to be involved in ongoing policymaking processes. Deliberative institutions, such as deliberative polling, allow citizens to exercise voice but do not necessarily link participants' vote to binding decisions that require government officials to act in specific ways (Fishkin, 1993). Participatory governance institutions, on the other hand, are specifically designed to give interested citizens the right to reshape local policy outcomes in ongoing ways.

Why have these experiments become so prevalent around the world? The explosion of participatory governance is closely linked to what Samuel Huntington called the third wave of democratization. The third wave was accompanied by policies of decentralization in many parts of the world. Both decentralization and the emphasis on participation became an integral part of this third wave, as countries around Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe began to hold regular and free elections. Over time, however, many began to note that institutions associated with representative democracy at the subnational levels were not working as well as initially hoped. Many countries, such as those in Central Asia, seemed to "backslide," or become less democratic. Other countries, such as Nigeria, Bolivia, and Honduras seemed stuck in the same patterns of corruption, clientelism, and elite rule that had dominated politics for decades. As a result, political philosophers, politicians, and activists began to promote the idea of participatory democracy, hoping that these new institutions could solve a myriad of problems.

The adoption of participatory governance is often based on the perception that representative democracy is unable to improve the quality of state performance, educate and empower citizens, and make reasonably good use of scarce public resources (Fung & Wright, 2003; Pateman, 1970). However, participatory governance does not necessarily reflect a rejection of representative democracy; rather, it represents an effort to redesign institutions and improve the quality of democracy, social well-being, and the state.

One of the most interesting developments in participatory governance has been the dissemination of these experiments from the developing world, where they first began to emerge, to the developed world. This has been

especially true with the case of the participatory budget, which began in Porto Alegre, Brazil in the late 1980s. This form of budgeting spread around Latin America first and then took hold in Canada, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Italy. It is estimated that over 1500 participatory budgeting processes take place around the world.<sup>1</sup>

As the next section demonstrates, ideas about participatory governance are not new. They are rooted in debates about the nature of democracy and participation that have been taking place for centuries.

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Thinking about the nature of participation harks back to theorists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill, both of whom argued that active citizen participation is essential for the success of the polity. However, arguments about the importance of broad participation in democratic regimes never dominated mainstream theories. Instead, the predominant theories stressed participation through electoral means, such as voting. Some of this emphasis is linked to an inherent fear of the masses as a potentially destabilizing force in democratization processes. As a result, more contemporary theorists of democracy (e.g., Joseph Shumpeter and Robert Dahl) stress formal and electoral participation and competition.

In the 1960s, activists and scholars began to advocate for a different conceptualization of democracy, based on widespread and direct participation as opposed to the more formal representative channels. New social movements in the United States and Europe demanded entry into the political system. Theorists such as Carole Pateman (1970), Jane Mansbridge (1983), and Ben Barber (1984) began to argue for more participatory forms of democracy. These scholars also demonstrated that these forms could work. Pateman's work documented a successful example of participatory governance in the workplace and Mansbridge's research focused on effective deliberation in town hall meetings. Academic research began to show that democratic systems must find ways to engage its citizens beyond the voting booth to deepen the quality of democracy.

When democratic reforms began sweeping the world during the third wave, these ideas gained prominence in scholarly and practical debates. As noted above, as elections and voting began to take place on a regular basis in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, citizens increasingly expressed disillusionment with the idea and practice of representative democratic channels. Legislative bodies were not always responsive to citizens and elected heads of state were still corrupt. Critics argued that the stress on

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1. For more information see <http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/>.

representative institutions and elections had failed the average citizen in many of these countries. For some, participatory forms of government emerged as a complement to what are now commonly called “democratic deficits.”

The most well-known experience with participatory governance began in the late 1980s in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Officials from the Workers’ Party worked closely with citizens and neighborhood groups to set up participatory budgeting, a policy-making process that would debate and decide local budget priorities. An institutionalized participatory budget process was born. Inspired by this experience, as well as similar innovations in India, Mexico, and the United States, scholars began to focus on the emergence and success of participatory governance in some contexts.

Two books stand out for providing a framework for understanding this concept. Leonardo Avritzer’s *Democracy and the Public Sphere in Latin America* explores the experience of participatory budgeting in Brazil and direct citizen participation in Mexico as a way to promote what he calls “participatory publics.” Focusing on Latin America, Avritzer (2002, p. 9) argues that “democratization can be broadened if public arenas that have given rise to political renewal are transformed into forms of public deliberation.”

In *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Government*, Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright put forth a framework for understanding experiments meant to engage citizens in political decision-making. Coining a term that is now regularly employed, they document forms and explore the implementation of Empowered Participatory Governance. This specific form of participatory governance brings together three principles: (i) a focus on specific, tangible problems; (ii) bottom-up participation which involves ordinary people; and (iii) the use of deliberation in solving problems (Fung & Wright, 2003).

As new experiences with participatory governance emerged around the developing world, scholars continued to document their origins and implementation. Much of the early empirical research documented case studies, including participatory budgeting, citizen councils, and participatory development planning. Many of these case studies focused on participatory budgeting in Brazil (Abers, 2000; Avritzer, 2009; Baiocchi, 2005; Gret and Sintomer, 2005; Heller 2001; Nysten, 2003; Wampler, 2007, 2008). As institutions of participatory governance expanded around the world, scholars began exploring examples in other parts of the world, such as India (Heller, 2001; Isaac & Heller, 2003), Peru (McNulty, 2011), and Bolivia (Faguet, 2012).

As scholarship and experiences grew, researchers began to adopt a comparative design to explore why some participatory institutions worked better than others. For example, Donna Van Cott’s (2008) work on institutional

innovation in local governments in Bolivia and Ecuador documents higher levels of success when the design is flexible and locally driven. She finds that leadership and the party system also help explain different degrees of success. Brian Wampler (2007) researches the spread of participatory budgeting around Brazil to better understand the factors that determine successful outcomes. He finds that mayors' support explain variation in outcomes in Brazil, and the local configuration of civil society can lead to more or less success with participatory budgeting. Wampler (2007, p. 5) writes that "citizens must be able to negotiate among themselves and *vis-à-vis* the government over the distribution of scarce resources while also being willing to publicly pressure government officials over the government's actions or inactions related to participatory budgeting."

Stephanie McNulty's (2011) work on Peruvian participatory institutions echoes Wampler and Van Cott's emphasis on the importance of committed leadership and a collaborative civil society sector. In Peru, as part of a 2002 decentralization reform several participatory institutions were designed at the national level and implemented around the country. McNulty's within case comparison signals that in many cases, elected officials ignored or manipulated the mandate. If there was no civil society sector pushing the reform, these institutions did not take hold. Only in cases where both political leaders and civil society organizations worked together in what McNulty calls a "virtuous cycle of participation" did the institution succeed.

Thus, the later wave of empirical research focuses on explaining how well these institutions function in different contexts. A consensus has emerged that several factors help us understand varied levels of success with participatory governance. They are: (i) the role of political parties; (ii) the role of civil society organizations; (iii) intergovernmental relations; (iv) rules and design of the participatory institution; (v) resources; and (vi) leadership and political will (Wampler & McNulty, 2011). This research has improved these processes in several places around the world.

### CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

As these institutions and programs proliferate across the globe, researchers have an incredible opportunity to expand the sites, topics, and methodological approaches used to analyze the internal processes associated with participatory governance as well as the impacts generated. The diversity of sites is astounding. Chicago, Albania, Sevilla, rural Indonesia, Porto Alegre, the Philippines, China, India, are among the many places where participatory governance programs are being implemented. Much of the newer research falls into three areas: (i) the broader impact of these experiments; (ii) new

forms of engagement, with a focus on representation, deliberation, and intermediation; and (iii) scaling up and diffusion.

#### BROADER IMPACT

Under the context of scarce resources, researchers are leading efforts to help policy makers and political activists better understand if the allocation of precious time, expertise, and money to support participatory democracy is worthwhile. Scholars are now beginning to answer the question: what is the broader impact of participatory governance? For example, the Institute of Development Studies conducted research for more than 20 years on participatory programs across the globe. This allowed John Gaventa and a research team to conduct a systematic analysis of their impact. Their evaluation focuses on four areas: the “construction of citizenship, strengthened practices of participation, the building of responsive and accountable states, or more inclusive and cohesive societies” (Gaventa & Barrett, 2010). They find: “(o)f almost 830 outcomes in 100 cases studied, some 75% were positive” (Gaventa & Barrett, 2010, p. 56). While the authors recognize some negative results, overall, impact was positive.

Mansuri and Rao (2013) also conducted an extensive review of more than 500 World Bank publications regarding Bank programs that include some sort of participation (e.g., community-driven development, “demand-side governance,” or decentralization). They find that “community involvement seems to modestly improve resource sustainability and infrastructure quality” (p. 6). However, they argue that there “is little evidence that induced participation builds long-lasting cohesion, even at the community level” (p. 9). Overall, Mansuri and Rao find modest empirical support that would continue to justify large investments of time, energy, and financial resources into participatory governance.

A recent study by Baiocchi, Heller, and Silva (2011) compares five Brazilian cities that undertake participatory budgeting to five Brazilian cities that do not. This approach is among the first to systematically compare cities with and without one particular type of participatory program. The “paired case comparison” enables them to assess whether the adoption of this particular participatory process produced any meaningful change. They find strong and compelling evidence that the presence of participatory budgeting empowers civil society, increases state-society interactions, and alters the types of public policies implemented by the government. Quite simply, adopting participatory budgeting does have a positive impact when compared to those cities that do not adopt this process.

Several studies demonstrate the impact of participatory programs on social well-being (Boulding & Wampler, 2010; Donaghy, 2013; World Bank,

2008). Mike Touchton and Brian Wampler (2014) have developed an original database of 250 Brazilian cities with more than 100,000 residents. Using matching and cross-sectional time series analysis they find that municipalities adopting participatory budgeting spend more on health care, education and sanitation and experience a decline in infant mortality. The effects grow stronger over time, which signals that the improvements in the quality of life were not due to the initial introduction of social programs but were the result of an institutionalization of new policy and governance practices. In addition, they also found the effects were stronger when the Brazil's Workers' Party administered the program, suggesting that political party association with participatory budgeting leads to stronger effects. Thus, much of this newer research is documenting positive impacts from participatory governance.

#### NEW FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Participatory governance induces citizens, civil society organizations, and public officials to engage in new forms of political and social engagement. Based on these experiences, researchers and theorists are recasting debates on deliberative democracy, representation, state-society relations, and state building.

Some cutting-edge research draws from the concerns of deliberative democrats to better understand how the specific rules of participatory governance affect deliberation, participation, and decision-making. Unlike deliberative democracy, most participatory governance programs use a combination of deliberative and majoritarian voting practices. Although deliberation is an integral part of participatory governance—it allows citizens to hold public officials accountable, raise contentious issues, and advocate for their agenda—what distinguishes most participatory governance programs from the deliberative formats is the acute need of citizens and governments to find real, working solutions to pressing social and political problems (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Fung, 2003; Mansbridge, 2012; Warren, 1996).

Deliberative democrats are concerned with the quality, fairness and equality of deliberative processes. This concern led Ben Olken (2010) to conduct a field experiment in 49 Indonesian villages to assess the effects of voting rules and participation. He compares an open, public voting system (participants vote by raising their hands in public) to a closed, secret ballot. Olken finds that the closed system generated greater satisfaction than the open voting system. Furthermore, in “women only projects,” the closed system produces projects that were more likely to be implemented in the poorest sections of the village. Olken demonstrates that changes in voting rules have a strong

effect on the voting choices of participants, especially the poorest and most politically marginalized. Given these findings, it is increasingly important to ask how the rules governing participatory governance institutions can be adapted to overcome social inequalities.

In the scholarly and practitioner communities, a rich debate is also emerging about the changing nature of representation. Participatory governance alters how citizens are represented in the political arena. Participatory institutions are often situated within the broader context of representative democracy, which means that there are now complementary forms of representation occurring across the spectrum of democratic institutions. Important research is documenting the nature and effects of these changes. For example, Urbinati and Warren (2008) explore new forms of “authorization,” whereby non-electoral mechanisms are used to authorize leaders to act on behalf of their followers. Adrian Lavalley and his research team in São Paulo explore on how participatory governance is producing new forms of intermediations between state and society (see Houtzager & Lavalley, 2009, for example). These authors show that the introduction of participatory governance institutions alters how citizens mobilize as well as how they engage the state.

Finally, participatory governance programs also expand the number of access points into the state, thereby broadening the state’s surface area (Heller & Evans, 2010). The creation of new participatory venues changes how the state functions. Citizens gain access to new information, are able to make use of public forums, and are included in policy networks. Changing how citizens engage the state creates the possibility of changing how the state exercises its authority. It appears that altering internal state processes as well as state officials’ activities is a vital part of increasing the impact of participatory institutions.

Although most participatory governance programs are housed in democratic environments, there are a growing number of programs emerging in authoritarian contexts. Baogang He (2011) demonstrates that local-level governments in China are using aspects of participatory governance as part of a process of incorporating citizens’ interests into local decision-making processes. The input appears to be “feedback” rather than actual decision-making. This case highlights how authoritarian governments can use participatory governance as a means to strengthen their hold on power rather than extending authority to citizens.

#### DIFFUSION AND SCALING UP

Participatory governance programs are spreading across the globe and are increasingly being scaled up beyond the local level of government. One of the most important diffusion processes is the development of a



South-to-the-North and South-to-the South flow of information and ideas, thus reversing the long standing trend of North-to-South diffusion of ideas and knowledge. The South–north diffusion has largely been initiated by Brazil. Importantly, and evident in the discussion above, participatory governance spread outward from Brazil and India across South America (Goldfrank, 2011; McNulty, 2011; Van Cott, 2008), Europe (Allegretti & Herzberg, 2007), as well as into Africa and Asia (Ganuza & Baiocchi, 2012; Sintomer, Herzberg, Röcke, & Allegretti, 2012). However, we still do not fully understand the diffusion mechanisms.

The World Bank—the largest single funder of participatory governance programs across the globe—has been a key conduit for the spread of the ideas from South-to-South (Goldfrank, 2012; Shah, 2007). Employing the term “demand-side” governance to categorize the direct participation of citizens in policymaking process, World Bank promotion is also controversial. Analysts debate whether the World Bank has “co-opted” participatory governance to push forward neo-liberal economic reforms or whether there is true commitment to empower individuals.

Ben Goldfrank’s insightful analysis of the internal dynamics of the World Bank reveals an additional layer to this debate (2012). Goldfrank argues that a few social scientists working within the World Bank promote the idea of “demand-side” governance to economists and engineers, who comprise the majority of decision-makers within the Bank. Thus, participatory governance reforms are included in World Bank projects but remain at the margins rather than the heart of what the institution does. Goldfrank’s work suggests that the World Bank incorporates some basic aspects of participation but that it has not altered its basic governance approach.

Finally, participatory governance processes are increasingly being scaled up beyond the local level. The early wave of programs has its roots at the local level, such as Porto Alegre and Kerala. Many worry that this focus is too narrow—that “Thinking Globally, Acting Locally” might limit the impact of the programs. Over the past decade, many national-level governments have mandated citizen participation directly into budgetary and policy-making affairs nation-wide. A diverse set of countries including South Korea, Brazil, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, and Bolivia have passed legislation to include participatory institutions in local and intermediate levels of governments around the country.

## FUTURE TRENDS

As public officials, civil society organizations, and citizens increasingly turn to participatory governance as a means to solve a variety of social and political problems, this is an exciting time to conduct research on this topic. The

goal of future research should be to develop better practices and policies that guide these experiences as they continue to emerge and evolve around the world.

Future work should focus on three lines of research. First, scholars need to continue to research examples of participatory governance with an eye towards the increasing number of cases in both industrialized nations and authoritarian regimes. The fact that more and more *developed* countries are adapting these experiences suggests that these efforts resonate in countries around the world, regardless of their levels of economic development. Furthermore, as participatory governance emerges in authoritarian regimes, such as China, it will be important to understand the motivations behind these kinds programs as well as the unique implementation environment. We should expect more examples of participatory governance to emerge in a variety of contexts around the world and start to ask questions about why and how.

Second, the next wave of research on these experiments needs to continue in order to even more systematically examine their *impact*. As the previous section demonstrates, after more than twenty years of implementation of these programs, we continue to have only a very preliminary understanding of the range and intensity of their effects. This new line of inquiry is of vital importance because billions of dollars are being spent on these projects (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). We need more extensive evidence to demonstrate whether participatory governance programs are producing the outcomes desired by their proponents. People are investing their precious time, energy, and resources in the hope that participatory institutions will improve the quality of ordinary people's lives. Future work in this area might also use Archon Fung's (2006) "democracy cube," which is a tool to help policy makers make decisions about the intensity and breadth of participation.

Third, new research also needs to focus on cross-country comparisons that generate information about a broader number of cases. Most of the existing knowledge about participatory governance is based on case studies about one country or one kind of participatory institution. To date, there have not been any cross-regional, cross-national studies that include multiple types of participatory institutions.

Challenges for this research agenda exist. Undertaking extensive research on additional countries and cases of participatory governance demand time and money. Grant making institutions and universities will need to buy into the need for this kind of policy relevant research. Furthermore, to develop solid cross-country comparative work on a variety of forms, scholars from around the world will need to coordinate regularly to advance the research. Finally, researching participatory governance in authoritarian contexts may pose a different set of challenges as information about the process may not be

readily available. Even given these issues, we are confident that future work will address these important questions.

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