



Participatory Governance and Social Protest in Brazil

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In the past decade, Brazil caught the attention of both financial and political observers worldwide. Economists noted Brazil's position as a member of the emerging markets group known as the BRIC, and political commentators focused on the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, known popularly as Lula, a founding member of the Workers Party (PT), as President, as well as on the proliferation of participatory governance institutions. The growth and implementation of participatory budgeting in the 1990s, and the extension of institutionalized venues of participation such as Policy Management Councils, and national conferences, consolidated Brazil's international reputation as a laboratory of participatory democracy. Basking in the glow of this international attention, the country hosted mega sporting events like the XV Pan American Games in 2007, the Confederations Cup in June 2013, the World Cup in June 2014, and it will host the Olympics in 2016.

The huge public protests that filled the streets of several Brazilian cities –twelve capitals and midsize cities– in late June, 2013 revealed a darker side of this bright portrayal of Brazil. An estimated one million people protested the expenditures for the mega events while key social services –public transport, education, health and housing– as well as social security, were facing serious problems and budget cuts. Although the protests were fragmented and lacked clear leadership, they all produced similar demands. All the protests denounced government corruption, demanded more democracy, more political accountability and, as surprising as it may seem, more participation.

The protests were sparked by the 20-cent increase in the price of bus fare in São Paulo, which led to a broader criticism of the lack of transparency in public budgets, the lack of debate on policy choice, the absence of effective participation in politics, and the deficits of political representation. The

voices on the streets said “this is not about twenty cents, but about rights” or “Japan, we exchanged our football for your education,” or even “we do not want stadiums, but quality public health.” Other slogans challenged clientist politics and the corruption of political class, which appears to have legal impunity. At the same time, other demands called for an end to police brutality and the non-criminalization of social movements, as well as for the impeachment of Dilma, the sitting President of Brazil.

It did not take long for scholars to diagnose the positive international image of Brazil as a successful emergent country, with governmental programs of social inclusion and strong commitment to participation, as a mirage. The street protests alone would have revealed that the citizens do not share this vision. Some authors explained the explosive protests as the result of a closure of the political system, which, in the name of governability and holding on to power gave rise to the logic of alliances between all political parties, regardless of ideological orientation. Thus, from 2009 Lula and the PT overcame the tension inherent in politics by cobbling together political coalitions with the conservative sectors. Other interpretations pointed to a republican deficit in urban governance to the extent that political parties represent themselves rather than society as a whole, and reject any proposed reforms that would limit their privileges.

Because these were the biggest protests in twenty years and because for the first time the PT was not among protestors, but was in the difficult position of the challenged incumbent, some observers pointed to the shortcomings and even the failure of participatory institutions. While it's true that those institutions have internal issues as effective venues of participation, the diagnoses were more emphatic, suggesting its failure: a lack of meaningful relations between

the demands and expectations of the citizenry and local participatory institutions.

Findings of “Chance2Sustain – Urban Chances, City Growth and the Sustainability Challenge”, funded by the European Commission – EU, allow us to suggest that the protest does not imply such a lack of meaningful relations. Citizens are present in both participatory institutions and protests, although they may not be the same citizens. Thus this can be understood in a more nuanced and precise way as matter of recruitment.

Examining the fit or lack thereof, between local electoral politics, participatory governance institutions, and citizen participation in three major cities: Guarulhos, Salvador and Rio de Janeiro, we found that in the city where participatory institutions are more vital and affective (Guarulhos), there is a clear selection bias favoring the citizens organized into associations aligned with social-partisan networks. Conversely, the lack of fit between associations, electoral politics, and participatory institutions in Salvador and Rio, results in weak institutions. Participatory Budgeting and Councils either cannot be implemented or function at sub-optimal levels.

More precisely, our findings suggest that citizens connected to participatory institutions through socio-partisan networks can be distinguished from the mobilized groups whose voices were heard in the streets in June 2013. The June protests were led by a variety of social groups that are not involved in socio-partisan networks, neither in participatory channels. They clearly held anti-political parties ideas. On the other hand, the organizations of the social movement that started the protests demanding free bus passes (called Movement of Free Waiver – Movimento Passe Livre) could not make its demands through

Participatory Budgeting or a Transport Municipal Council because these channels were not functioning in São Paulo. Moreover, large numbers of youth and middle class people joined the protests, especially after the strong and disproportional police repression. This sector of the population tends to be outside the matrix of electoral politics, associational grassroots partisan networks and participatory institutions founded a source of the strength of the latter in Guarulhos. Since this age group was not part of the generation that organized in support of the democratic transition, they lack biographical resonance with the parties and politicians that took part in the struggles for democratization. They take regular elections for granted and see none of the major political parties as particularly committed to deepening democracy or fighting corruption. The unexpected success of the protests led to longer lists of demands and the participation of an increasing number of social groups – including people and groups from different social and economic backgrounds – under an anti state and anti political parties umbrella.

Although in the light of our findings, the June protests like most emergent social movements, might still seem surprising, they are not counterintuitive, nor can they be seen as a paradox of Brazilian participatory governance. Rather, they seem to reveal which social groups are excluded from the matrix of participatory institutions, associations, and partisan social networks, although it is clearly unrealistic and even sociologically naive to expect a seamless fit between any institution and society, as sociological theory has been emphasizing social differentiation for more than a hundred years. Participatory institutions even with their selection bias, do include underrepresented voices, even when protests in the street tell us that other voice need to be heard.

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Chance2Sustain examines how governments and citizens in cities with differing patterns of economic growth and socio-spatial inequality make use of participatory (or integrated) spatial knowledge management to direct urban governance towards more sustainable development.

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