

## Introduction

### *The Emergence of Democratic Institutional Innovation in Latin America*

In the past decade, Latin America has witnessed an explosion of institutions designed to encourage and channel popular participation in decision-making. In neighborhoods and communities across the region, average citizens are experimenting with innovative ways of deepening democracy. Citizens who have never been politically active and people from traditionally marginalized groups are engaging in participatory processes that are having an impact on their communities. Some are building housing projects using local labor while others are repairing deteriorating infrastructure in their neighborhoods. Parents are having a say in remodeling their children's schools and equipping them with sports facilities and kitchens. Domestic workers who must make the long daily trek from their low-income barrios to the homes of their employers have been involved in creating new bus routes that shorten their daily commutes.

These are a few of the more positive examples of how citizens who have been ignored by decision makers in the past are taking matters into their own hands through the new participatory architecture that is emerging in Latin America. Participatory mechanisms have flourished under left-wing governments that claim a strong ideological commitment to "radical" participatory democracy, while in other countries citizen participation is promoted as a pragmatic means of improving governance rather than as an alternative model of democratic politics. These developments have led some scholars to argue that the center of democratic innovation has

moved from North to South and that we have a great deal to learn by studying these initiatives.

There is considerable variation, however, in terms of how participatory mechanisms function from one neighborhood to the next. In some cases, marginalized residents are achieving improved access to public goods and services and developing a stronger sense of political efficacy. They see a powerful link between citizen participation and more equitable outcomes than those provided by traditional representative institutions. In other cases, the picture is less promising. Residents do not feel empowered and continue to find themselves excluded from the political process. What explains these differences in outcomes? Why do some democratic innovations appear to succeed while others fail? Does the "radical" participatory democracy model implemented by administrations that seek to overturn traditional power structures provide more significant benefits than the more pragmatic experiments aimed at improving governance through limited citizen participation?

This book answers these questions by examining participatory mechanisms in three countries through the eyes of the women and men who devote their time and energy to improving their communities. Why are these participatory innovations important? Liberal democracy is facing a crisis of legitimacy around the world, and particularly in Latin America. According to the 2015 Latinobarometer report, only 39% of Latin Americans were satisfied with the quality of democracy in their country. Perhaps even more troublesome is the low level of support for democracy in Latin America, with nearly half of the region's citizens claiming that democracy is not necessarily the best form of government. Political institutions are failing to meet the aspirations of increasing numbers of citizens. The high level of public dissatisfaction with the current state of democracy has reignited the debate surrounding the most effective means of integrating popular participation into the policy process. Politicians, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), students of democracy and concerned citizens are thinking about innovative ways of deepening democracy. In order to engage in this discussion, we must develop a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of participatory mechanisms.

This book contributes to this important discussion by looking at a particular type of participatory innovation that has emerged across Latin America: local citizens' councils that provide individuals with the opportunity to engage in the decision-making process at the neighborhood level in an institutionalized environment. It compares participatory mechanisms

in three countries with different models of participatory design: Venezuela's radical participatory democracy, which claims to replace liberal representative institutions with grassroots direct democracy at the local level; Chile's pragmatic efforts at expanding participation for the purposes of achieving more efficient governance and enhancing liberal institutions; and Ecuador's hybrid model that demonstrates features of both.

The following chapters enhance our knowledge on citizen participation in several ways. This is one of the first studies to examine participatory mechanisms from both a cross-country and within-country perspective. Most research has focused on either unique case studies or on within-country comparisons. It is the first to study the new "radical" participatory mechanisms in countries such as Venezuela and Ecuador in comparative perspective and to contrast these with different, more "pragmatic" models of participatory design. It also draws on original qualitative evidence and connects the readers to citizens who participate in these institutions. The book takes the reader into the heart of neighborhoods where marginalized citizens are attempting to use these institutions to improve their communities and have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. We will meet citizen participants from across these three countries, learn about the successes and failures they have experienced through their participatory processes, and hear about their hopes and frustrations.

## Methods and Cases

This book uncovers the conditions that make participatory democracy successful across different models of institutional design through a two-level comparison. It compares local participatory mechanisms across three countries (and therefore across three models of institutional design) and also compares three cases within each country. This innovative two-level design allows us to transcend the usual within-country comparison approach to look at the impact of different models of institutional design and government discourse on participatory democracy, as well as the factors that enhance or diminish the capacity of these mechanisms to achieve positive outcomes within and across models of institutional design.

Considering similar institutions in different countries allows us to understand to what extent the design of participatory mechanisms and government commitment to citizen participation matters. It helps to determine which variables produce benefits, which are less relevant and

which are more likely to lead to failure. Comparing institutions based on radical participatory democracy with a case of “liberal” participatory institutions that are similar in functions and objectives but based on more pragmatic principles is useful in testing some of the variables. For example, radical democrats view participation as an alternative to representation, so it is valuable to consider whether participatory institutions that work more closely with government (as one of the conditions) are more or less effective than those that are entirely autonomous.

The cases of Venezuela and Ecuador were selected to provide a strong and informative comparison for a number of reasons. Of the recent attempts at creating institutions to channel participation, the new institutions in these countries are arguably the most directly associated with the principles of radical democracy, including a rejection of neoliberalism and representative democracy (Burbach and Piñero 2007; Ellner 2010; Hawkins 2010 and also see Venezuela 2006, 2009; Ecuador 2010). They are comparable in that they have similar local-level institutions and these have been promoted through a similar ideological framework. In terms of institutional design, they demonstrate (at least on paper) many of the characteristics identified by theorists as essential for participatory democracy to work, including “bottom-up” design, autonomy from state authorities, decision-making powers as opposed to merely consultative prerogatives, deliberative forums for discussion and debate, and links with higher levels of government (MacPherson 1977; Poulantzas 1978; Barber 1984; Cohen 1997; Fung and Wright 2003; Cohen and Rogers 2003).

Chile was selected as a case against which to compare and test the other two. Generally cited in the literature as one of the least participatory countries in Latin America, it is seen as a model of liberal representative democracy in the region (Cameron, Hershberg and Sharpe 2012). There has been a marked shift in discourse from 2000 onward, however. The first administration of President Michelle Bachelet (2006–2010) declared increased citizen participation to be an important goal, although participation in the Chilean context tends to be framed as an instrument for effective governance and policymaking and not as an alternative to representative democracy (Cleuren 2007; Chile 2011). The past few years have seen concrete changes including the adoption of a new national law that recognizes citizen participation as a right and provides stronger legal recognition and support to institutions such as the *juntas de vecinos* (neighbourhood councils) (Chile 2011).

Within-country comparisons allow us to delve even further into understanding why some participatory innovations are more successful

than others and also help to confirm patterns observed at the cross-country level. They allow us to determine whether the same factors that emerge as important in affecting outcomes between participatory design models also turn up when comparing mechanisms in the same country. This allows us to uncover any “universal” factors that are important in the design of participatory mechanisms, and to what extent institutional design and government discourse (radical or pragmatic) on participatory democracy play a role in determining outcomes. It also allows us to consider the impact of local contextual factors on the ability of participatory mechanisms to achieve positive outcomes.

This study employs a subnational comparative case study design that allows for in-depth description and comparisons of instances of citizen participation. This is a useful approach to evaluating the outcomes of participatory processes as it helps the researcher to use a number of qualitative data collection methods designed to develop a detailed understanding of processes, outcomes, and participant experiences (Nabatchi 2012). Subnational comparisons are an efficient way to construct controlled comparisons when the number of cases involved is low and facilitates both within and across-country comparison (Avritzer 2009; Snyder, 2001). The approach is also particularly useful for studying context, which is essential to understanding the conditions under which participatory institutions operate.

To the extent possible, this study has looked at a representative sample of participatory institutions in each country, selecting cases according to a diverse case method to achieve a certain level of variation on a number of important dimensions (Seawright and Gerring 2008; Altschuler and Corrales 2012). Local participatory mechanisms were selected to reflect population distribution as well as a number of other factors: important regional/cultural differences, ethnic representation, political cleavages, socioeconomic factors, and the urban vs. rural divide. In Venezuela, interviews were conducted with participants in communal councils in Caracas (Catia), a semi-rural council in Yagua, Carabobo State, and one in the interior city of Mérida (Belém). In Ecuador, it was important to capture both the highlands and coast as the population is divided more or less evenly between these two regions, which also have represented the primary political and cultural divisions in the country. Cases include a local assembly outside of Quito (Llano Chico), a rural assembly from the northern highlands (San Gabriel), and one from an urban district in the mid-sized coastal city of Manta (Tarqui). Regional differences have not been as historically significant in Chile but socioeconomic divisions run deep.

Two cases were selected from the greater Santiago area (medium-income Maipú and low-income La Pintana) and one from Valdivia in southern Chile (semi-urban Cayumapú).

The research was conducted over a nine-month period, from September 2012 to May 2013, with follow-up visits in July–August 2014 and June–July 2015. As mentioned earlier, one of the goals of this research was to study participatory mechanisms from the perspective of the citizens themselves. Answering the research questions posed in this book required a thorough understanding of citizens' lived experiences. It was also necessary to develop a clear picture of their goals, the participatory processes, outcomes and state-society interactions in order to fully comprehend the "chains of sovereignty" between citizens, participatory mechanisms and state actors (Baiocchi, Heller and Silva 2011).

Data includes semi-structured interviews and documents produced by the participatory mechanisms and by relevant local and central government departments. A total of 222 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Citizens engaged in participatory mechanisms accounted for 136 of these (49 Venezuela, 46 Ecuador, 41 Chile). These interviews focused on the tangible benefits of participation, the processes to achieve these outcomes and on the conditions under which the participatory mechanisms operate.

Another 86 interviews were conducted with government officials, opposition actors and academics. Government authorities generally fall into two categories: (1) Senior and mid-level officials in departments and agencies responsible for implementing participatory policies or with oversight of participatory institutions, and (2) Local (generally municipal) officials from the communes and parishes in which the cases studied are located.

This research was complemented by studying various types of documents produced by the local participatory mechanisms themselves, and by local and central government departments. Examples of documents analyzed include: documents produced by each participatory mechanism, project proposals and planning documents, evaluation reports, budget documents showing money received, community oversight reports, and documents produced by agencies charged with supporting and funding public participation initiatives and training.

There are a number of challenges that must be acknowledged. Given that the book looks at public goods (infrastructure development) before and after the existence of participatory mechanisms in each locale, there was to some extent a need to rely on the memory and perceptions of participants and public officials with respect to the role that participation

played in achieving any tangible benefits. Participants were asked about what their participatory mechanisms had achieved. While participant perceptions are routinely used to measure the outcomes of participatory processes, critics have pointed to the problems associated with interpreting such data and have argued that satisfaction is not necessarily indicative of “good” policy (Abelson and Gauvin 2006). To some extent, this problem was offset by the fact there was considerable consensus in most cases around this question, and the researcher only recorded a project as a benefit of participation when a clear majority of participants identified it and tied it to the efforts of their citizens’ council. Triangulation was also used whenever possible. In addition to asking participants, local officials and a number of nonparticipants or former participants were asked the same questions to determine if they also attributed a given infrastructure project to the local citizens’ council or to some other factor(s). Wherever possible, the researcher used available documentation (project plans, budget information) to back up the information provided by informants (i.e., do municipal planning or budget documents also attribute given projects to the participatory mechanism?).

Establishing causal links between participation in these institutions and particular outcomes remains a challenge due to various spurious variables, the time-lag between processes and outcomes and the impact of intervening events over time. Determining the counterfactual is also problematic as it is not possible to demonstrate what the outcomes would have been without the participatory process. While there are obvious difficulties in demonstrating causal links between participation and outcomes, the methods employed in a case study design can produce “most likely” correlations between processes and outcomes (Barrett, Wyman and Coelho, 2012). Researchers and practitioners who study public participation argue that case studies relying on qualitative data can make strong “logical links” between a participatory experience and policy impacts, although these are based on “most likely associations” rather than on direct causal links (Nabatchi, 2012; Barrett, Wyman and Coelho, 2012).

## Arguments

The following chapters demonstrate that popular participation can have an important impact on communities and on individual citizens under the right circumstances. Participatory mechanisms have produced significant

tangible outcomes at the local level, such as more equitable access to public goods and services. Some cases also generate promising spillover effects, such as more positive perceptions of democracy and enhanced sense of political efficacy among participants. While these outcomes are observable to some extent in most of the participatory mechanisms studied in this book, there is significant variation between the three countries and among the nine cases. The mere existence of citizen participation mechanisms in a given community does not guarantee positive outcomes. A number of characteristics have an impact on the capacity of participatory mechanisms to produce positive outcomes. These include: quality of deliberation (can everyone participate or are the participatory mechanisms dominated by certain groups?); inclusiveness (do the mechanisms really include the formerly excluded or simply act as another forum for the middle sectors to promote their interests?), and high levels of participation and engagement (proportion of the community that participates regularly and how committed they are to participation). Both among and within the three countries, these characteristics are observable in those cases that produce better outcomes and practically absent in the mechanisms that do not fare as well.

Effective working relationships between participatory mechanisms and local authorities are also key, particularly when the formal decision-making powers of the participatory mechanisms are limited, as in Ecuador and Chile. Full devolution of decision-making and implementation powers is mostly associated with the radical Venezuelan model. This does produce positive tangible outcomes, but participants working within the pragmatic model with comparatively limited formal powers can find ways of getting what they want by using their mechanisms to develop effective (even if not always cordial) relationships with local officials, or to persuade them.

The "radical" model, with its promises of deepening the quality of democracy, has both strengths and weaknesses. State discourse on participatory democracy does not necessarily have a significant impact on the ability of participatory mechanisms to produce positive outcomes. Citizens are more likely to achieve tangible outcomes, however, when the discourse behind participatory mechanisms aligns with the reality of how they function. In both Venezuela and Chile, participatory discourse produced by the state along with the relevant enabling legislation align to a significant degree with how the mechanisms actually work. This shapes participants' expectations and strategies in engaging with their participatory institutions. In Ecuador, there is a notable disconnect between state discourse and



legislation on the one hand, and how the institutions function in reality, on the other. This produces tension between participants and local authorities as citizens' expectations of what their participatory mechanisms should do are not realized in their day-to-day operation. This tension damages the relationship between participants and local authorities, thus further reducing the role of the former in decision making and implementation.

State discourse and institutional design can also have negative (intended or unintended) consequences. Participatory institutions can provide significant opportunities for actors—particularly those from traditionally marginalized sectors—to engage in meaningful decision making to an extent that is rarely seen elsewhere, including in more developed democracies. They allow these actors to exercise a degree of agency that was denied to them under traditional political structures. The danger is that design of these institutions creates relationships with the state that may simultaneously promote more inclusive decision making while establishing parameters around democratic participation. Civil society organizations (as well as individuals) may only effectively exercise this newfound agency through state-sanctioned channels. The intention of “radical” participatory mechanisms may be to strengthen civil society and citizenship as agency, but the design of these mechanisms may tip the balance toward controlled inclusion. Furthermore, the benefits of institutionalized citizen participation are limited to influence in decision making at the local level. This is the case across the three countries and is observed in both the radical and pragmatic models. While we can see examples of civil society engaging in the political process independent of local government in some cases, in none of the cases does this extend to regional or national levels.

With these important caveats in mind, participatory mechanisms produce the most positive outcomes when they are inclusive, demonstrate a high quality of internal deliberation, foster a significant level of sustained engagement, and either enjoy a real devolution of decision-making powers or develop effective working relationships with local officials.

### Organization of the Book

Chapter 2 provides the relevant theoretical and analytical framework to understand participatory theory, the benefits that participation are supposed to produce, and how we can evaluate them, as well as the gaps in our knowledge that the book addresses. Chapter 3 provides the relevant

historical and political context surrounding the emergence of participatory institutions in the three countries and outlines the two models that have emerged.

Part II draws on interviews with citizen participants and public officials as well as document analysis to tell the story of these models of citizen participation. In chapter 4, the reader meets participants from Venezuelan communal councils, the prototype for the “radical” participatory democracy model in Latin America. Chapter 5 looks at Ecuador’s local citizens’ assemblies, while chapter 6 introduces the reader to Chile’s neighbourhood councils. The final chapter concludes by discussing the broader implications of this study’s findings for our understanding of participatory democracy. These include the strengths that have been identified in the book as well as some worrying trends. The chapter ends with what all of this can teach us about the effective design of participatory institutions.