

Digital Innovation in Latin America: How Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Peru have been experimenting with e-Participation

By Thamy Pogrebinski

Latin America has always been a region of deep contradictions, and this is especially true when one considers its politics and democracy. Despite its authoritarian past that continues to show through in some political practices and institutions, the region has experimented with democracy in very innovative ways in recent years. Likewise, whereas the region still suffers from deep social inequality and is not yet free from poverty and hunger, Latin America is the world's third largest regional online market and its internet penetration rate is above the world's average, half of which is due to intense smartphone usage.

It is not surprising then that one of the preeminent areas of democratic innovation in Latin America today is associated with the use of information and communications technology (ICT), and that decreasing levels of digital exclusion have been enabling higher levels of political inclusion. Since 2011, as countries began joining the Open Government Partnership and committed to open data and e-government, alongside more transparency and responsiveness, civil society organizations have been surfing through a multitude of policies to expand internet access that governments have been putting in place. Even if digital inequality varies across countries and within different areas of those countries, innovations based on ICT-tools have been growing all over the region, helping to connect citizens not only among themselves and their governments, but also with politics and democracy.

Innovations that enable e-participation rely on ICT-tools to engage citizens on the several stages of the policy process, from agenda-setting to policy evaluation, including formulating and implementing political decisions. Latin America is a laboratory of new forms of e-participation and digital institutional designs. A growing number of citizens have been collaborating *with* governments and *for* governments given the increased number of opportunities to participate in politics just by typing on computers and touching the screens of smartphones. Digital participatory innovations enable citizens to engage in activities as different as crowdsourcing suggestions for new legislation, submitting inputs for new policies, reporting on insufficient service delivery, geo-localizing urban problems, monitoring crimes, tracking institutional performance, and deliberating on creative solutions to political problems and innovative ideas to improve democracy.

The LATINNO Project at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, which investigates democratic innovations that have evolved in eighteen countries across Latin America since 1990, has just completed a study of new digital institutional designs that promote e-participation aimed at improving democracy. The research has focused on Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Peru – countries with different political and social backgrounds, as well as varied population sizes and level of internet connectivity. The findings not only disclose common patterns among these countries, but also indicate trends that may reveal how digital democracy may evolve in the region in the coming years.

Taken together, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Peru have created 206 innovations for e-participation between 2000 and 2016, 141 of which are still active in 2017. Brazil and Mexico are the countries with the highest number of digital innovations (73 and 71, respectively),

followed by Colombia (32) and Peru (30). Given that Brazil and Mexico are both large countries with large populations, one could expect their number of digital innovations to be higher. However, Colombia and Peru have quite high numbers of democratic innovations that do not involve e-participation, meaning that those countries have been incorporating ICT-tools of participation to a lesser extent.

The number of innovations created in 2015 is five times higher than the number implemented in 2010 (the year after which about 90% of all cases have been initiated). Although most new digital spaces for e-participation are recent and new technologies quickly become old, the innovations have overall been demonstrating a reasonable sustainability. Interestingly, political events like elections or changes in government seem to, respectively, hinder or trigger the new forms of e-participation.

Such fluctuations may be associated to the fact that governments are the major initiators of digital innovations, and alone account for about a half of all e-participation initiatives in the four countries. However, civil society organizations have been increasingly implementing their initiatives as they partner with governments, as well as with international and private organizations. Interestingly, civil society organizations are more often the initiators of digital innovations than of those that depend on offline means of participation, indicating that ICT-tools prompt civil society organizations to initiate and develop participatory processes. Digital innovations are also suitable venues for fostering co-governance: in more than half of the cases studied, governments and citizens come together in the policy process regardless of who has initiated or developed the innovation.

Surprisingly enough, ICT-based innovations are as much present at the national level as they are at the local level, indicating that the new technologies may contribute to scale up participation and possibly impact on democracy at the macro level. A very small number of digital innovations have been so far implemented at the regional level, and this is an area that requires further development given the decentralized nature of most Latin-American countries.

Digital innovations do effectively allow citizen participation, meaning that citizens can participate as individuals and do not need to join groups and organizations in order to engage in the initiatives. The different initiatives engage a varied number of participants, and this results from their institutional design features and should not be taken alone as a measure of success. Almost 2/3 of the cases have engaged more than 1,000 participants, indicating that digital innovations do mobilize in average more citizens than typical face-to-face deliberative arenas.

The research has also shown some challenges digital innovations face. Their ability to engender decisions, for example is quite low. Decisions are reached in just one third of cases and just a tiny amount of these should be most probably implemented because they are binding. The level of formalization of digital innovations is also pretty low. Less than half of innovations identified are formalized either by legislation or state policies, but this can be explained by their institutional design: ICT-based designs can hardly be institutionalized given their own nature.

Ultimately, for digital innovations to have a real impact on democracy, several improvements must still be made, at least as far as Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Peru are concerned. The level of formalization, as well as the ability of digital innovations to engender decisions (and especially binding decisions) must be increased. A lower degree of institutionalization may lead

to lower impact, or at least may explain why the LATINNO research has found that the innovations with higher impact on the quality of democracy are those that have been initiated, organized or supported by governments. As the tides in Latin American politics have recently been changing fast, overcoming state dependence may be crucial for digital innovations to transform democracy by engaging more citizens in the political process.

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