

Innovating Democracy in Latin America*

by Thamy Pogrebinski

Latin America's countries have been consistently scoring badly in assessments of quality of democracy. Many years of authoritarianism and political instability have led citizens to distrust their institutions and have made scholars doubt democracy's ability to reinvent itself. The international scholarship and the media have long echoed what opinion polls and democracy indexes have confirmed: democracies in Latin America have been unable to become fully consolidated because they are flawed by clientelism, corruption, and populism, not to mention poverty, crime and inflation.

This shadowed scenario and the pessimism associated with it have, however, for a long time hindered that constructive questions were asked and that their answers were sought in the right places. How can political trust be rebuilt? How does one strengthen democratic institutions after long periods of authoritarian rule? How can governments become more accountable and responsive in countries with long traditions of political instability? How can the rule of law be enforced where crime and corruption are permanent problems? How can democracy ensure political inclusion and social equality in countries where poverty and hunger are still a reality?

One may never have new and different answers to these questions if one keeps looking for democracy in the same places and if one insists on labelling only a limited set of institutions as "democratic", which no longer effectively represent citizens nor truly translate their will. Where elections are perceived as a civic burden, parliaments are unable to express citizens' voices and parties fail to connect government and society it is necessary to rethink and reform these institutions. Moreover, it is necessary to create new institutions and search for answers in new places. It is necessary to innovate.

When one looks beyond the usual places, one will see that state and civil society in Latin America have found common spaces of social and political experimentation, thus defying democracies of a mere representative character. Be it through joint work or independently, but frequently converging, State and Society have begun to design and create new forms of doing politics, in which citizens play a central role in the reconstruction of democracies and their institutions. Citizens are involved in co-government processes and move on to participate in agenda setting, formulating, implementing and evaluating public policies.

These processes of political experimentation have increasingly developed since the 1990s in many countries in the region, in some of them following up democratic transitions. Either by turning to the left or staying within the right side of the political spectrum, many Latin-American governments, both at the local and national level, have allowed for inner transformations in their institutions so as to include citizen participation or create new institutional designs in which citizens are the protagonists. These institutional changes or the creation of new institutions, these spaces and political practices that engage citizens in the construction of democracy, are named "democratic innovations".

However, enthusiasm regarding innovations, which has become a trendy word in Latin America, should not feed an excessive optimism. The expansion of citizen participation is a positive step in itself, but it is necessary to further question: which effect have these initiatives had upon the qualities of democracy? How do these new institutional designs coexist with or even expand representative democracy? How does innovation affect representation? Which institutional designs allow for a broader and more effective participation of Latin-American citizens in processes of formulation and implementation of public policies? How can innovations be replicated in different countries? And why have some cases succeeded while others have failed?

The LATINNO – Innovations for Democracy in Latin America Project, based at the Democracy and Democratization Department of the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, aims precisely at offering answers to such questions. It has collected and assessed 2400 different cases of democratic

innovations implemented in 18 countries of Latin America from 1990 to 2016. The LATINNO Project aims at making democratic innovations measurable and comparable, allowing for assessments of their actual role and impact on democracy in Latin America. This broad compilation of data – which can be consulted in English, Spanish and Portuguese at the web platform www.latinno.net – does not only enable academics to gain access to a wide empirical basis for establishing and revisiting existing theoretical frameworks on participation and democracy in Latin America, but also allows activists, politicians, organized civil society and international organizations to evaluate and to compare different innovations in the region, as well as to improve and replicate them.

It is expected, moreover, that the 2,400 cases of political experimentation unveiled in two and a half years of research show that democracy in Latin America is not exhausted in traditional institutions of representation and participation, such as parliaments and elections. Above all, this rich collection of new forms of participation and representation should finally enable new institutions and policy practices to be evaluated and compared, in order to be included in traditional national and international indicators of the quality of democracy. Only in this way can a comprehensive perspective on democracy in Latin America be known and effectively evaluated.

Preliminary results of the LATINNO Project show, among other things, that since the 1990's and especially since the 2000's democratic innovations have been consistently increasing in the region. Countries as different as Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru have each over a hundred of active new institutional designs for citizen participation and have engaged millions of people. Although such increase is well perceptible within countries that took the left turn, the political orientation of parties is not a condition to the creation of innovations: both left-leaning and right-leaning parties have implemented new spaces and mechanisms of citizen participation. These take place not only at the local level but also and especially at the national level. Although the State plays a major role in their implementation, civil society organizations have been increasingly expanding their chances to have their initiatives implemented, especially when they associate to the State in creating new forms and spaces for political participation.

The LATINNO data also shows that participation is open to individual citizens and groups, which only in a smaller number of cases need to join a civil society organization or to expect an invitation from the government in order to take part in the new spaces. Citizens participate in diverse ways in these new institutions, but most and foremost through deliberation. This indicates that voicing preferences and debating alternatives may become a usual way of doing politics in Latin America, and deliberation may eventually play a role as important as casting a vote in the ballot box.

Latin America has always been a region of deep contradictions. It should not be a surprise that such intense democratic experimentation takes place in countries where democracy seems so fragile and political institutions so unstable. Innovation requires adaptation and transformation, and in this regard instability and malleability may turn out to be sources of deeper institutional changes. Innovation also requires discontinuity – something that the changing political tides in the region will allow democracy to test for itself in the coming years.

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