

Latin America: democracy beyond representation*

by Thamy Pogrebinski

Francesc Badia: Thank you, Thamy, for having us. Let's start with the idea behind the LATINNO Project.

Thamy Pogrebinski: The idea behind the LATINNO Project is to call attention to the vast experimentation that has been happening in Latin America over the last two decades. There is a lot of talk about democratic innovation and participatory government in Latin America, and the only example is always the participatory budget in Porto Alegre. Perhaps one or two more participatory processes have been studied recently, but still after so many years it is always the participatory budgeting in Brazil the main example of participatory governance. With the LATINNO Project I want to show that there is much more going on in Latin America, not only the participatory budget and not only Brazil or Porto Alegre. So, the idea was providing such information, providing data on different innovations that exist across eighteen countries in Latin America. My decision to collect this data and open it immediately seeks to allow more research on all those innovations and on all those countries. It has also a practical aim, which is enabling policy makers, civil society organizations, governments and international organizations alike to get information on what exists and to compare what works and what does not work, and see how things can work in different ways and how democracy has been experimented in different contexts and different settings. This concern to enable comparisons and assessments is one aspect that distinguishes LATINNO from other projects that map innovations: we do not simply map innovations, we try to make a large number of them comparable and measurable. We do not crowdsource information, all cases from our database are assessed and coded by a rigorously trained team of research assistants following a specific analytical framework, codebook, procedure and method that we have evolved. In sum, the idea behind LATINNO was to build this dataset which will be online and accessible to all, but also to provide understanding and knowledge about this vast experimentation with innovative ways of doing politics. That's why LATINNO is not only the dataset, it is not only about mapping innovations. It is a research project, mainly. Besides the dataset we have other outcomes, like the first democratic innovations index and our own publications containing our findings.

Francesc: There are three concepts at LATINNO that you may want to go through. The first one is democratic innovations, and how you define democratic innovation, what you see as really innovative. The second concept is how the quality of democracy is measured, and how do you categorize it: voting, participating, the deliberation processes, the level of representation? And the third concept has to do with the pragmatic approach through which this research has been developed, especially when defining what's political experimentation, and how it is characteristic of democracy in Latin America. Let's start with the first concept, democratic innovation. How do you understand it?

Thamy: I would say I have a concept of democratic innovations which is broader than the one used in the academia, but more specific than the one used by practitioners and activists. In academic debates, democratic innovations are usually defined as being new institutional designs that aim at expanding citizen participation in political decision-making. What is at stake in this definition is having more citizens participating, namely expanding the number of citizens involved in decision making. I see two limitations here, one is the underlying assumption that just by increasing the number of citizens engaged democracy will be improved. The second is that such engagement should necessarily take place at the decision-making level. On the theoretical level I think it is complicated to think on participation as an end in itself, assuming that participation per se improves democracy; and on the empirical level the actual experiments do involve citizens in other stages of the policy process, not only decision making, and they are still innovative and democratic. Based on this theoretical consideration and empirical observation, I define democratic innovations as institutions and practices whose end is enhancing at least one of the dimensions of the quality of democracy by means of citizen participation in at least one of the stages of the policy process. So, in my conceptualization, which has oriented how cases in the LATINNO project has been searched, citizen participation is not an end in itself; it is a means to achieve a larger end, an

improvement in democracy, in one of the dimensions of what we call the quality of democracy. Those means of participation are diverse, they may involve deliberation, e-participation, direct voting, and forms of citizen representation. Of course, citizen participation is also something that improves democracy, especially if citizen participation involves political inclusion, namely the participation of those who are underrepresented. That's why I take political inclusion as one of the ends citizen participation in democratic innovations can achieve, among others. So, an innovation is not democratic simply because it allows citizens to participate or because it expands the number of citizens that participate. It is democratic because it is a means of participation, a tool through which citizens themselves can do something for democracy. And this can be done not only at the decision-making stage. Citizens can provide inputs to policy makers and set the policy agenda, they can participate in the formulation of the policy, they can have a role in the very implementation of policies, and they can also evaluate, that is monitor policies that have already been decided and implemented. This is how I broaden the concept, by considering all stages of the policy process as being relevant for citizen participation and not only decision-making. If one only looks for processes where citizens take decisions, we miss a lot of what is going on in terms of democratic experimentation. Political decisions have been taken differently by decision-makers because citizens set agendas or monitor policies, that's the change one must look at to understand how participation is something that outgrows representation without exactly competing with it.

Francesc: Absolutely. The second concept we can discuss is what you define as quality of democracy, or democratic quality, which is multidimensional. Democracy it is not only about voting, but also about participating, including the deliberation process, key to the quality of democracy. Here, we should also talk about representation, and how, within the limits of representation, some processes may trigger innovation overcoming the existing gap between those in power and the citizenship. It is also important to discuss the limits of representation.

Thamy: I see the concept of quality of democracy also somehow in a broader way than that which is used by the scholarship and the indices that measure the quality of democracy. But I also try to frame this concept vis-à-vis democratic innovations, using an analytical framework that enables them to be assessed and which will hopefully contribute to the measurement of the quality of democracy, because those thousands of new institutional designs do matter for democracy and must be considered in such measurements. I do identify five dimensions of quality of democracy that can be activated by innovations, that is, through citizen participation: accountability, responsiveness, rule of law, political inclusion and social equality. Citizens can enhance the quality of democracy by participating in these new spaces, mechanisms, practices in such ways as to bring about more social equality, or more political inclusion, or both. When citizens get together, discuss and voice their demands, when they identify problems in their cities and report them in apps, when they make policy recommendations online or offline, they may increase responsiveness or accountability, because innovations increase the chances that the government hears those demands, it gives governments more opportunities beyond elections to know what citizens expect. At the LATINNO Project we look at how innovations are designed to impact on one or more of these five the dimensions of the quality of democracy. We also look at the different means of participation that can activate those five dimensions, or democratic qualities, and expect that different combinations of means and ends may improve democracy.

Francesc: Now, let's talk about the limits of representation.

Thamy: There is a lot of discussion on how representation is in crisis, how democracy is in crisis, but to call it crisis reveals our inability to see that actually democracy has changed. We do have to accept that and move on, understand that maybe democracy doesn't mean anymore what it meant once. The institutions that lead us to think of democracy as being representative are still there and might be still there for a long long time. We cannot get rid of parliaments, the judicial power, and the executive power, they may never be substituted for innovations, but innovations change the way they work. Many innovations started to be developed within representative institutions or as a devolution of power from them, but also and especially, they surround them and have an impact on them as they allow citizens to set their agendas, provide inputs for policies, change the way they

take decisions and implement those decisions. It is important that we look at those changes, those institutional changes. And that's our aim at the LATINNO Project, we built this database to call attention to those new democratic forms and practices, those experimentations with democracy, those changes in old institutions. Our database comprises 2,400 different institutional designs in eighteen countries. Those are all cases where citizens participate in one of the stages of the policy process aiming at improving democracy, that is, aiming at enhancing accountability, or responsiveness, or political inclusion, or social equality, or the rule of law. Those new institutional designs, or changes on how old institutions work, this is what makes processes of citizen participation innovations. And all this goes beyond representation even if it takes place within representative democracy and within representative institutions. We might not be able to see this change now, and that's why there is so much talk about the crisis of representation instead of talk about the changes of representation and of democracy itself. We're experiencing something in recent years that we may only recognize and be able to name in the future. There is a heritage of recent governments in Latin America, especially those associated with the left turn, that has to do with a new way of doing politics through participation, new ways of setting priorities, taking decisions, implementing and evaluating them. So participation is not the opposite of representation, it is something that changes representation from the inside. It is not a surprise that, as the LATINNO data shows, about one third of democratic innovations in Latin America involve a form of citizen representation. Citizen representing citizens, talking in the name of others, but also doing for others, sometimes with other citizens, sometimes together with the government, this is a trend, it is a change in the very concept of representation, something that shows how it is expanded through participation instead of competing or conflicting with it.

Francesc: My last point is about experimentation. The Project often mentions how experimentation is a characteristic of Latin American democracies. Yet, what is specifically characteristic of this experimentation? What are the conditions that trigger experimentation, and why is Latin America more experimental than other political spaces? What are your findings?

Thamy: First I'll start with why Latin America is more experimental. Latin America has newer, younger democracies. The age of institutions makes them more flexible somehow, they can adapt better to new circumstances. Underlying that there are some conditions in Latin America that seem to favor this political experimentation, like the re-democratization, which has re-empowered citizens and civil society organizations through their fight against authoritarianism. With the democratization process comes the constitutionalization process. New constitutions are written and they protect against authoritarianism by guaranteeing citizen participation. This is the case of Brazil, for example. In addition to that, regardless of authoritarian background there are countries that have enacted lots of new legislation that favor citizen participation and institutionalize new institutional designs. Several laws in different countries in the region try to include citizens in the political process and mandate new institutions or institutional changes to accomplish that. Colombia is one of these countries. A third general condition is decentralization. Virtually all Latin American countries have undergone decentralization processes. So, they have devolved power to the municipalities, and empowered the local level, where several innovations have been tried out. New political parties, or opposition parties that were shadowed during authoritarian periods that started to do politics in a different way, first at the local level, later at the national level, especially after the left turn and the turn of the century. However, more important than being left or right, center left or center right, the LATINNO data shows that regardless of ideological orientation, political parties do have a role in changing democracy through innovations when they are in the government. Finally, another condition is the cultural and ethnical diversity of Latin America. There are, for example, traditions of deliberation that came from civil society as it opposed authoritarianism, and also from indigenous communities, and these practices were incorporated into new institutions. So, historically those would be the conditions. But then practically, empirically, what we see are several attempts to try to do democracy through different means. We have these different means of doing policy, through deliberation, citizen participation, e-participation, direct voting, and we combine all of that in different ways depending on the problems that we have to address, the ends we want to achieve. This is democratic experimentation.

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