

## Book Review

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Thamy Pogrebinschi. *Innovating Democracy? The Means and Ends of Citizen Participation in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Tables, figures, bibliography, 104 pp.; paperback and ebook \$22.

As academic attention to Latin American experiments in citizen participation advanced in the twenty-first century, scholars frequently lamented what appeared to be an accumulation of individual case studies without systematic comparisons of a large number of cases. Some researchers responded by comparing a single innovation—participatory budgeting or public policy or planning councils—across dozens or even thousands of municipalities. Others built websites like Participedia, housing hundreds of examples from across the globe. In 2015, Thamy Pogrebinschi began working on possibly the most ambitious response: a single dataset of all types of “democratic innovation” in Latin America in the last 30 years. Now, after a half-dozen chapters, articles, and reports on the resulting LATINNO dataset, she has published the definitive work on the project.

Like the dataset itself, the book is impressive. It does an excellent job of displaying the wide variety of different types of citizen participation beyond regularly scheduled elections, or, using her definition of democratic innovations, the “institutions, processes, and mechanisms whose end it is to enhance democracy by means of citizen participation in at least one stage of the policy cycle” (5). Pogrebinschi packs a lot into a slim volume. She covers 3,744 cases of democratic innovation, including participation through four primary means across 20 sub-types and four policy cycle stages at the national and subnational levels, addressing five democratic goals related to three major challenges in 18 countries during the 30 years from 1990 to 2020. She also notes the dataset’s 43 variables used to code each innovation’s context, design, and impact. This publicly available dataset and the typologies that Pogrebinschi constructs are valuable contributions for an expanding field of inquiry.

Befitting an approach that prioritizes “the diversity of institutional designs” (10), the longest sections of the book describe the many types of democratic innovation and present figures displaying the number of innovations over time and across countries. These figures show, for example, a rise in the number of innovations in the 2000s and relative decline after 2014 except in the case of innovations via digital engagement. The main typology is based first on the four means of citizen participation—

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deliberation, citizen representation, digital engagement, and direct voting—and secondarily on “additional properties that allow specification and analytical differentiation” such that the resulting sub-types are neither “Wittgensteinian conceptual families nor Weberian ideal types but Sartorian ‘data containers’” (41). In constructing her typology and making coding decisions, Pogrebinschi diverges from much of the mainstream participatory institutions literature in three ways. She includes processes and mechanisms in addition to institutions, acknowledges civil society-led as well as state-led innovations, and incorporates cases that involve any part of the policy cycle from agenda-setting and policy formulation to implementation and assessment.

Moreover, with *Innovating Democracy?*, Pogrebinschi aims to present a “pragmatist, problem-driven approach” that, unlike some conventional perspectives, discards the notion that increasing citizen participation in decision-making is the primary goal or end in itself of recent innovations (3). Instead, citizen participation is a means towards the goal of enhancing democracy. Specifically, given Latin American democracies’ challenges of representational deficits, lack of rule of law, and inequality, the innovations in the region aim to improve accountability, responsiveness, rule of law, social equality, and political inclusion. The section towards the end of the book that ties together the challenges, goals, and types of innovation makes an excellent case for the “problem-driven nature of democratic innovations” (65).

This latter section also examines the impact of such innovations. While there is reliable evidence for most of the cases regarding whether they achieved their immediate practical aims (77 percent of them did develop a policy or provide recommendations, for instance), for a little over half of the cases there is no such evidence regarding whether they had an impact on their democratic ends (like enhancing accountability, social equality, or political inclusion). Acknowledging the missing values and the “possible bias toward positive results,” Pogrebinschi argues that, of the 48 percent of cases with reliable evidence, democratic innovations had a positive impact or a partially positive impact in 97 percent of them (76–77). With appropriate caution, she concludes that: “The data certainly do not imply that democratic innovations successfully solved broad public problems and therewith increased the quality of democracy in given countries. Yet, it indicates that democratic innovations may have an impact on democratic qualities when they fully achieve their ends” (79).

Veteran participationistas will likely find the final section of the book to be the most compelling. Whereas the first five sections sometimes (necessarily) read like a textbook, the conclusion asks and partially answers pointed questions about why the participatory boom faded, why it failed to prevent democratic backsliding in parts of the region, and whether the eruption of mass protest signaled the innovations’ failure to channel citizen voices. Deriving lessons from Brazil, where President Bolsonaro purposely dismantled several participatory institutions, Pogrebinschi argues that the lack of formal decision-making impact and low levels of civil society involvement weaken democratic innovations and, in turn, their limited effectiveness likely discouraged politicians and social movement leaders from defending them. Interestingly, the book ends on the relatively hopeful note that COVID did not

spell the end of democratic innovation in the region. Instead, the pandemic largely reinforced existing trends of increased civil society-led and digital innovations.

Together, *Innovating Democracy?* and the LATINNO dataset represent a major achievement that will be valuable for researchers for a long time. Nonetheless, inevitably, not all scholars will agree with some of the conceptual and methodological decisions involved. Regarding the conceptual move from participatory institutions to “democratic innovations,” many scholars prefer a more open-ended or multi-faceted approach as to the objectives of those implementing the very same means of participation. To give a recent instance, using the same cases that one finds in the LATINNO dataset, Lindsay Mayka and Jared Abbott (2023) conceive of participatory institutions as having diverse political goals, one of which may be deepening democracy while others may be demobilizing civil society, reinforcing clientelism, or blocking policy reforms. This kind of conception facilitates both positive *and* negative findings, the latter of which Pogrebinschi assumes away, claiming that even when purported democratic goals are merely window dressing, the resulting innovations remain “valuable for democracy” (6). The more multi-faceted conception also avoids the tricky terrain of including “democratic innovations” in some countries that Pogrebinschi acknowledges were “downgraded to dictatorships (such as Nicaragua and Venezuela in 2018)” (10).

As to methodological choices, assigning a value of 1 to each innovation regardless of how long it lasted or regularized it became, how many participants were involved, whether it was national, provincial, or local, and, crucially, whether it was reproduced in hundreds or thousands of cities or not stood out as noteworthy. In practical terms, what this means is that, for example, Peru’s participatory budgeting institution—which operates annually in over 1000 subnational governments in the country since 2003, influences millions of dollars in local spending, and regularly involves over 100,000 participants—is given the same value as a two-day hackathon mechanism in 2015 that involved 100 Limeños and yielded two apps. Despite one of these innovations being vastly more significant than the other, each has the same value in the book. On the LATINNO website, one can find the variables indicating many of these distinctions, yet in the figures comparing countries and types of participation in the book, the differences in importance disappear: together these count as two of Peru’s 253 democratic innovations. For this reason, and because population size and number of municipal and provincial governments are not controlled for, the counting exercises in the book meant to show diversity in institutional design may be misleading. Not surprisingly given the counting rules, the four largest countries by population—all federal with thousands of city governments—have the most innovations. Perhaps also not surprisingly for a project that started in 2015, there are hundreds more innovations listed in the 2000s than in the pre-Internet 1990s. Does this reflect reality or is it that retrievable information for thousands of municipalities in the 1990s wasn’t readily available?

These questions should not detract from scholarly interest in this work. Instead, they should encourage engagement with the book’s arguments, the LATINNO dataset, and, I would suggest, Pogrebinschi’s other interesting publications drawing from it that highlight additional findings. For example, in a prior report on the dataset,

she is considerably more critical about these innovations, underscoring their limitations by noting how nearly half of them restrict the kinds of participants allowed and involve 50 participants at most (Pogrebinschi 2021). Such findings invite further systematic comparisons of Latin America's wave of democratic innovations.

Benjamin Goldfrank   
Seton Hall University

## REFERENCES

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