

Overcoming the Dilemmas of Participatory Democracy: The Participatory Budget Policy in Porto Alegre, Brazil

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After a period of relative disfavor, “participatory policy making” has come back in fashion, prescribed by diverse political groups ranging from the World Bank to socialist parties. For some, the benefits of participation are limited to “instrumental” ones, improving in policy effectiveness, promoting consensus around state actions and gaining access to detailed information about policy context and real needs that only ordinary citizens can provide. But for many proponents, the principal goal of participation is the “empowerment” of those social groups that have typically been ignored by social and economic development policies.

Yet the empirical literature on “state sponsored” participatory policies is largely pessimistic about the capacity of such policies to effectively devolve decision-making power to groups that are traditionally excluded from public decision-making. Three central “problems of participation” are cited. 1) “The implementation problem” has to do with the fact that even when governments genuinely seek to implement participatory decision-making mechanisms that would give greater decision-making control to the less powerful, the more powerful are likely to resist such changes, often debilitating the governments capacity to implement participation. 2) “The inequality problem” has to do with the fact that even if open forums are created in which all participants have a formally equal right to influence decision-making, socio-economic inequalities will tend to prohibit the effective participation of certain groups of people. 3) “The co-optation problem” has to do with the fact that even if such open forums are genuinely representative, inequalities between *government* and *participants* with respect to control over information and resources tend to lead to the manipulation of participatory decisions by government officials.

This paper examines one case of state-sponsored participatory policy in which each of these problems was at least partially overcome.¹ The result was the effective devolution of a significant amount of real decision-making power to ordinary citizens. The Participatory Budget Policy in Porto Alegre is the flagship program of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores*, or Workers' Party (PT), which has governed that regional capital of 1.3 million people since 1989. The policy involves a complex array of neighborhood, regional, thematic and city-wide forums in which over 15,000 people participate each year to discuss how the city government should divvy up its capital expenditure budget. Most of the participants represent poor neighborhoods, many of which had practically no experience with civic organizing prior to the policy.

After a brief presentation of the origins and character of the Budget Policy, this paper examines some of the arguments in favor of participation and discusses the above cited problems in more detail. It then goes on to analyze how each of the three problems were overcome in the Porto Alegre case.

¹ This paper is based on nearly two years of field research in Porto Alegre, involving dozens of in-depth interviews with government officials and community members; the observation of over one hundred community meetings; the elaboration of a sample survey of 622 participants; and extensive analysis of documentation produced by government, NGOs, neighborhood associations and the news media. The present article presents the argument that is made in much more detail in Abers, 2000.

The Partido dos Trabalhadores and the Idea of Participatory Budgeting

The PT is a grassroots-based, democratic-socialist political party that was formed in 1980 when the military regime first allowed the creation of new parties. Built out of a coalition of radical labor unions, urban and rural social movements, and formerly revolutionary Marxist political groups, the PT represented a new type of socialist party. In line with the European Communist Parties, it rejected ties to the Soviet Union and sought a democratic road to socialism that would preserve diversity, civil liberties, and tolerance. A coalition of a variety of social groups, contrary to traditional socialist doctrine, it also sought to include a variety of actors other than the industrial working class into its project for change. Previously in Brazil, the parties that had claimed to defend the interests of the poor and working class were either traditional communist and socialist parties or center-left populist parties. The PT differed dramatically from both these groups. While the socialist parties were tightly organized, vanguardist organizations and the populist parties were characterized by the hierarchical leadership of charismatic politicians, the PT promoted from the outset a bottom-up, participatory organizational structure.

During the first decade of its existence, the PT created a name for itself as an important locus of political opposition in Brazil, articulating the concerns of a wide spectrum of social movements and political groups that demanded social justice for the poor and criticized the corruption and clientelism that was the *status quo* in Brazilian politics. In 1988, the party made its first major electoral inroad, winning 36 municipal governments, including three state capitals, Porto Alegre, Victoria, and most importantly, the huge megalopolis, São Paulo. In the following year, the party's national leader, Luis Inácio "Lula" da Silva lost the country's first direct presidential elections in nearly thirty years by only a small margin, generating massive popular support for the PT, particularly in the more developed south and southeastern regions of the country. Although it lost the presidency, the *prefeituras* (municipal governments) that the party now controlled became important proving grounds in which the PT could test out its ideals.²

The party program for municipal governance incorporated two general themes. On the one hand, the *prefeituras* would seek to "invert government priorities towards the poor," thus transforming a legacy of local policy-making that privileged the rich and middle class with investments and programs and that diverted precious government funds to the private coffers of individual politicians and businesses. On the other hand, the party would promote the participation of the poor, and of the civic associations and social movements representing them, in all aspects of government decision-making.

Both projects turned out to be more than challenging. Many of the PT administrations found that simply gaining control of complex administrative structures and providing basic services to the public with moderate efficiency was difficult enough. Transforming the decision-making structures of highly bureaucratic and hierarchical government machines in cities where traditional elites were powerful and where organizations representing the poor and working class were not would be an extremely difficult task.

Porto Alegre was one of the few cities where the PT emerged at the end of the 1989-1992 term with not only the capacity to win re-election in 1993, but also with a major participatory policy that genuinely involved the poor in government decision-making. The government gained so much popular support and was so adept at confronting political backlash from threatened traditional elites that it was able to reelect itself not once, but twice, and is today comfortably in its third term in Porto Alegre. While such political success often comes at the expense of participatory policy, in Porto Alegre participation became one of the hallmarks of the PT administration and one of the

² For discussions of the origins and history of the PT, see Gadotti & Pereira (1989); Keck (1992); Meneguello (1989); Sader & Silverstein (1991)

keys to its subsequent electoral victories. Although over the years, the *prefeitura* instituted a great number of participatory programs, councils and conferences, the most powerful forum of citizen involvement in the city was the Participatory Budget Policy.

The idea of citizen participation in budget decisions had its roots not only in PT ideological debates, but also in the practices of urban neighborhood movements throughout Brazil. For decades, neighborhood movements in Brazilian cities had struggled against local and state governments that largely ignored their needs for basic infrastructure. Instead government funds were spent on highly visible and electorally profitable "big projects" such as bridges, soccer stadiums, and major roads. Kickbacks ate up huge portions of such projects, which were often used to divert public money into private coffers. Middle-class neighborhoods concentrated in the downtown regions were well-served with paved streets, running water, sewers, storm drains, schools, health care and public transportation. Poor neighborhoods farther away from the center largely went without such basic resources. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, as social movements of all kinds boomed throughout Brazil, massive protests demanding basic urban infrastructure and services in poor neighborhoods were increasingly common in Brazilian cities. In several regions of Porto Alegre, neighborhood organizations joined up into coalitions that organized large protests and carried on lengthy debates on how government decision-making needed to change. One of the results of this organizing was the proposal that the government not only attend the specific demands of the most organized neighborhoods, but also that it give civic groups more generalized control over the allocation of capital expenditures throughout the city

By implementing a policy that created forums of public debate on how municipal infrastructure and services were allocated, the PT administration not only keyed into the most central needs of poor urban residents, but also it challenged long standing political traditions. Like most Brazilian cities, Porto Alegre had long been dominated by traditional and populist elites who were accustomed to benefiting personally from the way that municipal revenues were used. Clientelism -- a political system based on the exchange of favors between elected officials and their supporters -- depended on control of public coffers and the ability to selectively distribute funds to those who mobilized political support. Some recent authors have argued that overcoming clientelism is the most difficult and resistant political problem in Brazil today: even the bureaucratic-authoritarian military regime that sought to rationalize government policy-making and to eliminate corruption was unable to abolish the political system of *troca de favores* (favor exchange) (Hagopian, 1996).

Although clientelism functions at all levels of governing, neighborhood associations have historically played an important role in the clientelist politics of Brazil's large cities, where city assemblyman and municipal officials often hold power on the basis of case-by-case negotiations with neighborhood leaders. These *cabos eleitorais* (vote getters) mobilize their neighborhoods' votes in exchange for promises ranging from petty gifts and government employment for association officials to local infrastructure and services for the community as a whole. Creating a public discussion about city expenditures to which all were invited and from which all had an equal right to benefit dramatically challenged this system.³

Yet doing so was quite risky. On the one side, there were local elites with powerful regional and national allies who lost out with the rise of the PT in Porto Alegre. These elites controlled important municipal services, such as public transportation and construction companies as well as the local media. On the other side, there was an emerging party that came to office on a protest vote with only a plurality of ballots. The neighborhood-based social movements that demanded participatory policy were entering into a period of declining activism in the late 1980s. Combative,

³ For descriptions of the workings of clientelist neighborhood associations see Gay (1990), Kowarick & Bonduki (1988) and Banck (1986).

participatory neighborhood associations remained strong only in a few regions of the city, and even there they did not have the mobilizing power that they once had. The majority of poor neighborhoods were only represented by traditional associations whose leaders profited personally from the clientelist system while shunning the broad-based participation of residents.

In this context, one could imagine a number of possible scenarios undermining participatory policy. If the poor dominated the forums and public spending thus came to prioritize poor neighborhoods on the periphery of the city, the elite reaction could have been so strong that media bashing and business strikes would jeopardize re-election. Or, since the middle class and the wealthy have much more time and capacity to organize than the poor and since grassroots social movements were on the decline in Porto Alegre, participatory forums could have been dominated by the same elite groups that always controlled the distribution of state resources. If the *prefeitura* somehow closed participatory forums to all civic groups that failed to fit into the PT's participatory, activist, "preference for the poor" ideology, then the democratic nature of the policy would have been questioned. Even then, large areas of the city where such groups were not active would still have remained excluded from the policy. After examining these problems in more detail, the remainder of this article will discuss how the PT administration navigated these difficult dilemmas.

The Problems of Participation

Proposals for direct citizen participation in government decision-making have a long history in both political theory and policy practice. One frequently used argument for participation is what Goulet (1989) calls the "instrumental" approach: involving citizens in policy-making and implementation will make for the more effective achievement of policy goals. Civic associations are good at monitoring the everyday activities of government and business, promoting cooperation among disparate groups, and accessing and articulating certain types of "local" information and knowledge. The participation of beneficiaries will also increase their sense of ownership of projects, thus insuring that they continue to invest in them over time, maintaining infrastructure improvements, for example, long after government investments have been made (Cohen & Rogers, 1992; Oakley, 1991; White, 1982).

Yet the argument for participation goes beyond its potential for promoting good, efficient public decision-making. Modern political theory has long examined citizen participation in governing from the perspective of *empowerment*. That is, participation is not only a matter of transferring public responsibilities to civic groups, but also about increasing citizen control over the state and of improving the capacity of ordinary people to understand and decide about issues affecting their lives more generally. On the one hand, direct democratic forums are spaces where traditionally excluded groups can gain access to the state, making decisions affecting their lives that would normally be made by their representative. It thereby increases the *control* citizens have over government. At the same time, participation contributes to the political *development* of individuals. Participatory forums provide an environment in which people can gain skills, knowledge, and organizing capabilities that help them both to control the state more effectively and to respond to problems themselves without the state's interference.⁴ Many authors further argue that participation not only promotes individual development, but also fosters social consciousness and political community. As people discuss their position on particular issues with others, they step out of their

⁴ For more on the developmental role of participation in this sense, see Pateman (1970:45-66); Macpherson (1977); Gould (1988); and Held (1987). These issues are also explored in more detail in Chapters Seven, Nine and Ten.

narrow understanding of their own self-interests, into a perspective that takes collective needs and interests into account as well.⁵

While political theorists have thus spent much energy imagining participatory systems of decision-making that would empower the "excluded," a substantial empirical literature on participatory experiments has suggested that even when policy makers intend to create public forums giving real decision-making power to those who are traditionally excluded from government decision-making, a number of obstacles often prevent participatory policies from actually empowering the those groups. Much of this literature on practical experiences with participation comes out of the Poverty Programs created in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, about which there was a great deal of academic analysis and debate. A more disparate set of case studies has also been conducted in European and Third World contexts. Taken as a whole, these studies identify three general "problems of participation" that frequently impede the creation of participatory policies which, according to the above definition, empower the hitherto excluded.

The first set of problems can be generally labeled *implementation problems*. Often, reformist groups within governments call for participatory programs, in many cases with "empowerment" objectives in mind. But more often than not, these groups are not capable of implementing their ideals either because they cannot mobilize the administration in the direction of participatory policy or because they fear the political backlash that may result. There are three types of implementation problems. First, the bureaucratic necessities of reaching goals rapidly and of measuring success in terms of time and money efficiencies rarely fit within the lengthy time periods needed to mobilize participants. The "uniform norms and standards" (Wolfe, 1982:102) required for bureaucratic operations do not match well with the flexibility necessary for participatory programs.

Second, the implementation of any policy usually must be negotiated within a government structure where a number of groups have influence over government action. City planners design participatory policies, but the agencies that implement them refuse to relinquish power to citizen forums. Agency heads support participation, but public employees resist it. The efforts of an executive branch might be undermined by a legislature refusing to release funds for such purposes.

Third, handing over real power to groups representing the poor raises opposition from powerful groups outside government. Business groups accustomed to influencing how public resources are allocated or how economic activities are regulated often have the capacity to undermine the electoral or administrative viability of a government administration. They can threaten to relocate or to boycott the government, refusing to take part in competitive bidding. Since the media are controlled by business groups, the ability to influence electoral outcomes is great. Forced to negotiate with business groups for the sake of electoral survival, many well meaning participatory governments end up overruling the decisions made by citizen forums.⁶

The second major group of problems identified in studies of participatory experiments can be called the *inequality problems*. Even when governments do give citizen forums real decision-making power, disadvantaged social groups are less likely to participate. People with low incomes

⁵ These issues are discussed in more detail in Chapter Nine. For arguments on how participation raises "collective sensibilities," see Bachrach (1975), Barber (1984), Graham (1986), and Warren (1992).

⁶ The literature on "failed" attempts at implementing participation is quite large. For a survey of Third World experiences where state-sponsored attempts at participation were undermined by these problems, see Stiefel and Wolfe (1994). For a sample of accounts in a variety of contexts, see also Boggs (1986:139-169); Cabral and Moura (1996); Couto (1995); Gilbert and Ward (1984); Cunill (1991, 1996); Goulet (1989); Hall (1988); Kahn (1986:145-193); Wolfe (1982); Marris and Rein (1982).

generally have less free time to attend assemblies and less spare change to ease the burden of travel to assembly places and time off from work. Those who lack formal education may have limited capacity for understanding complex policy issues. They certainly will have a disadvantage in arguments or debates with technically qualified participants. Women are doubly constrained by domestic responsibilities that reduce their free time, by the lack of child care, which limits their ability to leave their homes, and by social norms prohibiting political activism. To make things worse, members of all disadvantaged groups -- women, the poor, racial and ethnic minorities -- often do not have the self-confidence to voice their opinions in public spaces, even if they do find the time and money to attend. In this context, elite groups often dominate participatory forums. Better off groups are not only more likely to be present at assemblies, but also can manipulate information in ways that may convince less well-off representatives to support their views even when it is not in their interest to do so. The inequality problem appears even within socially uniform groups, however, since those individuals with more experience in political mobilization are likely to have greater efficacy in open participatory forums. Many authors thus suggest that participatory systems can simply reproduce the elitism and inequalities of representative systems. Worse, they can create new elites made up of "professional participants" while most people continue excluded from decision-making.⁷

The third group of obstacles to empowering participation can be called *co-optation problems*. As already noted, most participatory programs do not provide for "citizen control" of government. Many authors have argued that their purpose is instead to create a veneer of public legitimacy and popular support around policy-making and to demobilize potentially destabilizing civic leaders. Even where representatives of the poor and of other groups traditionally excluded from government decision-making are included in participatory forums, that inclusion can be a means of controlling those groups, rather than giving them power. Citizen forums can draw potentially combative civic leaders into a government controlled sphere. The result can be the demobilization of independent community organizations, as potential "trouble-makers" are kept busy working on the projects that government determines are "safe."⁸

As if each of these three problems were not enough on their own, taken together they present a series of dilemmas for those who wish to formulate empowering participatory policy, because counteracting each one of them can aggravate the others. Figure 1 schematically represents these policy dilemmas. In the first place, political strategies that seek to *implement* participatory projects while making concessions to groups within and outside the government administration can have implications for both the *inequality* and the *co-optation* problems. As the left side of the triangle suggests, governments often give more space in participatory forums to the groups they ally with for the sake of protecting political coalitions. This aggravates the inequality problem, giving special privileges to groups who are already powerful enough to elicit compromise from reformist governments. As the right side of the triangle indicates, governments sometimes seek to gain control over the civic associations that participate, in order to prevent them from making decisions that might bring on the wrath of powerful elites. This would certainly lead to co-optation.

⁷ Empirical research on the inequality problem can be found in Mansbridge (1980), Marris and Rein (1982), Oliver (1984), Verba and Nie (1972), Agger (1979), Thomas (1985), Berry et al. (1993), Coit (1978), Jackson and Shade (1973), Hutcheson (1984). Some authors that discuss the inequality problem from a political theory perspective are Mansbridge (1980), Gutmann (1980), Phillips (1991), Young (1990), Sartori (1987) and Cohen and Rogers (1992).

⁸ Some of the authors that criticize participatory programs for co-opting citizen groups are Goodman, (1971); Coit, (1978); Gittel (1983); Piven (1970); and Selznick (1949).

Figure 1
The Dilemmas of Participation

As the bottom of the triangle suggests, efforts to resolve the co-optation and inequality problems can also be contradictory. On the one hand, giving autonomous civic groups absolute power in decision-making forums, in order to avoid co-optation, can reproduce existing inequalities in organizational strength if those civic groups represent some parcels of the population more than others. On the other hand, government interventions in the participatory process in the attempt to resolve the inequality problem can lead to co-optation. If the government makes special efforts to encourage civic groups to form in areas where they are weak, those efforts may lead to an undue control over how participants organize. Rules to ensure minority representation limit the decision-making power of the majority. Any student of democratic theory will note that these contradictions have profound roots, reflecting the tensions between social inequality and political liberty that have been central issues in modern political thought.

All this suggests that creating an empowering participatory policy requires more than just a good theory or a good policy design. Institutionalizing participation in contexts where a small elite has traditionally controlled government requires transforming the state in ways that harm the powerful and benefit the powerless. This means both that the balance of power must change and that a broadly distributed, highly representative, autonomously organized civil society capable of form to take on participatory responsibilities. But in most places, reaching both of these objectives seems close to impossible in the foreseeable future. How then to get there from here? Some have argued that if they are to genuinely empower the excluded, participatory policies should not be initiated from above, but must result from bottom up demands by social movements that have organized without the interference of the state. From this perspective, there is no place for state-initiated participatory policy, since the state necessarily represents elites. But this implies that where civic organizations are not strong enough to force new governing patterns on the state, traditional modes of decision-making must prevail. State actors can play no role in changing traditional governing structures and in helping civic organizations representing the "hitherto excluded" gain power.

My research on Porto Alegre argues against this view, suggesting that it *is* possible, under certain conditions, to promote empowerment "from above." Doing so, however, requires navigating all of the difficult dilemmas described above and necessarily leads to further contradictions and complications. By examining each of the three "problems of participation" in turn, I seek to explain (with qualifications) how in the case of Porto Alegre a state-initiated policy did succeed in empowering disadvantaged groups. It created public forums characterized by "citizen control," fostered participation in those forums of economically disadvantaged and historically unmobilized groups, and to a large extent, created an environment in which those groups mobilized autonomously, even to the point of challenging the goals of the very government actors that created participatory spaces in the first place.

Porto Alegre: Overcoming the Problems of Participation

The Problem of Implementation

This problem is perhaps the most important, for if it is not resolved, participatory policy will not be carried out at all. The reforms that the PT sought to implement in Porto Alegre were certainly radical ones. By opening up the city budget to public discussion, the Participatory Budget profoundly challenged a legacy in which the distribution of state resources had occurred through a closed system of clientelistic favor exchange and technocratic obscurity. Changes of this degree are usually difficult to administer, in the practical sense, since their unprecedented nature requires fundamental transformations in bureaucratic functioning. They also raise the opposition of those who benefited from the previous system. But in Porto Alegre, the Participatory Budget seemed to easily gain the support of a variety of political groups in the city, at the same time that it actually *helped* the government gain control of the city government bureaucracy.

It is important to consider a number of political conditions in place when the PT administration first came to office in Porto Alegre. One set of conditions had to do with the increasing autonomy of local government in Brazil. The critical factor here was the 1988 Federal Constitution which significantly increased transfers to municipalities as well as local taxation powers. This was beneficial, on the one hand, to clientelist traditions, since local bosses succeeded in gaining increasing control over municipal funds (Hagopian, 1996). But growing local autonomy also contained the seeds of change. Where alternative political groups such as the PT could come to the mayor's office, they had a substantial amount of financial and operational autonomy with which to carry out their policies. In Porto Alegre, these possibilities were diminished, however, by the fact that the new administration came to office to find the *prefeitura* completely bankrupt, a consequence of the disorganized administration of the preceding government.

Another set of conditions had to do with the organization of civil society. The 1980s was a period in which booming "combative" neighborhood movements challenged the back room deal-making of the clientelist system. "Combative" neighborhood organizations distinguished themselves from traditional "clientelist" associations by promoting broad-based resident participation, by their discourse of solidarity, equality and basic rights, and by refusing to be co-opted by state actors and party politicians. Although such organizations were on the rise in the late 1970s and early 1980s, by the end of the decade the cycle of protest was waning. In Porto Alegre, "combative" neighborhood groups had been very active in the formation of the PT. But by 1989, when the PT administration came to office, those movements were a weakening force both within the local party hierarchy and in city politics more generally⁹.

Given the PT's inexperience with governing, the widespread opposition of powerful local elites, and the financial fragility with which the administration began, the conditions in 1989 seemed to dictate against the new government's ability to radically transform decision-making traditions. Indeed, many other PT municipal governments that were elected in the same year under similar conditions were barely able to establish basic governability within the four year term. Given the low level of influence of neighborhood organizations within the party, it also seemed unlikely that the administration would have turned over the bulk of participatory power to neighborhood-based groups. Neighborhood groups were among the weakest forces within the new administration, which was dominated by other influences within the party such as labor unions and radical political organizations, each of which wanted to have a say in the new government.

⁹ For a selection of the many studies of the boom in protest based neighborhood movements from the late 1970s on, see Boschi (1987), Castells (1983), Kowarick, (1985), Cardoso (1983); Jacobi (1989); Scherer-Warren (1993); Mainwaring (1989); Mamarella (1993) and Telles (1987). For the only detailed discussion of neighborhood associations in Porto Alegre, see Baierle (1993).

The story of how, under these conditions, the Porto Alegre PT not only implemented participatory policy but also made the empowerment of neighborhood groups the hallmark of its administration, is a complex one which I have recounted in more detail elsewhere.¹⁰ One major step was a massive financial restructuring through which, over the course of a few years, the *prefeitura* regained spending power. Once this occurred, the Participatory Budget Policy could become the administration's central policy priority because it both helped the PT establish governability and contributed to the party's long term political survival in office for a number of reasons.

First, by involving both citizen participation and the distribution of resources to the poor, the policy fulfilled the two major proposals of the PT's political program ("popular participation" and "inverting priorities toward the poor") and thereby satisfied supporters from within the party that the administration was pursuing its radical goals.

Second, the policy helped streamline and coordinate government actions, channeling all major spending decisions through one forum of elected citizen representatives that had tremendous political legitimacy. That legitimacy helped the mayor's office to pressure groups within the government that may have otherwise resisted new policy directions to supply it with information about their actions and to follow its dictates. It also helped counter the resistance of the City Assembly to the government's proposals.

Third, by increasing contracts for construction companies, the budget policy gained the support of an elite group that helped counterbalance the objections of other economic elites to tax increases and other policy changes.

Fourth, with its dual role of attacking a historic sphere of corruption and promoting democratization and social justice, the policy garnered the support of a growing progressive middle class in the city that was increasingly frustrated with political scandals and back-room decision-making.

Fifth, by mobilizing large numbers of neighborhood residents throughout the city, the policy created a grassroots support base. Since neighborhood participants pressured the City Assembly to pass revenue raising tax laws and to vote for the administration annual budget, this support base contributed to the success of the budget policy itself. Less directly, an army of highly mobilized and politically satisfied neighborhood groups could also be expected to provide more general backing for the PT at election time.

In sum, the Participatory Budget Policy helped the PT build an *alternative political coalition* of groups supporting competent, non-corrupt, socially-just and democratic governing in Porto Alegre. That coalition proved powerful enough to bring the PT back into the Mayor's office for three terms in a row. In this sense, the implementation problems predicted by the literature were almost inverted in Porto Alegre. The Participatory Budget was not a political burden that created obstacles for the administration. It was a *asset* that, once implemented, helped the PT to thrive in office.

¹⁰ See Abers (2000).

The Problems of Inequality and Co-optation

Once the implementation problem is resolved, the second two problems of participation come into play. With respect to the *problem of inequality*, a 1995 survey I helped carry out among participants in the big regional assemblies showed that the average family income of participants was significantly below the average family income of Porto Alegre as a whole. These results were confirmed in a 1998 survey of participants (Fedozzi, Pozzobon and Abers, 1995; Silva, Pozzobon, Baierle and Amaro, 1999). My own qualitative research of participatory processes in two regions of the city also showed that that participants in the Budget Policy were largely poor people from poor neighborhoods who did not have much experience with collective organizing prior to the budget policy. Rather than a rigidification of participatory "elites", the neighborhoods that participated most energetically in the regional forums varied over time as historically organized neighborhoods disappeared from view while neighborhoods where no urban social movement had previously been active began to participate in local politics for the first time. All this contradicts the expectation that openly participatory forums would be dominated by the better off, the better educated, and the most organized.¹¹

What caused this surprising mobilization of the poor and unorganized? My argument is that the state actors implementing the policy were able to change the "cost-benefit" calculation of collective action for poor, less organized people, lowering the costs of joining up and increasing expectations of benefits. One crucial reason for this was that the policy specifically targeted poor people's needs, focusing initially on the basic infrastructure that was most lacking in the poorest neighborhoods of the city and thereby giving privileged space to the issues immediately seen by poor people as their own. At the same time, since the investments made were highly visible, they had a "demonstration effect" that drew people into the budget forums in the hopes of obtaining the same benefits they saw other neighborhoods receiving. This integration was reinforced by the efforts of community organizers hired by the administration who made contact with residents in neighborhoods that did not participate initially, helping them to organize. As a result of all this, a massive mobilization process occurred, through which thousands of people joined the budget assemblies each year for the first time. After a few years of the policy, innumerable neighborhood groups that had never been previously organized were participating and winning projects in Regional Budget Forums throughout the city.

This countered the *inequality problem* in two ways. First, those few regions of the city that had strong legacies of civic organization were *not* the ones that dominated participation over time. The regions that had built "combative" neighborhood coalitions during the 1980s were indeed the first ones to benefit from the policy. But within several years, new civic groups had emerged throughout the city and those regions that had historically been characterized by closed, clientelist associations were now sending the largest numbers to the budget assemblies. While many observers have argued that participation can exacerbate differences in organizational capacities, in Porto Alegre, inequalities in neighborhood organization were actually *reduced* by the budget policy. Second, since the policy targeted basic capital improvements and since government organizers made specific efforts to draw needy neighborhoods into the process, these newly organized civic groups overwhelmingly represented the poor, while the middle class participated much less intensely. The result is that poor areas were the main recipients of expenditures as many impoverished shanty-towns were transformed into "respectable" neighborhoods in the years after the PT came to office. The budget policy thus also reduced the inequalities in neighborhood infrastructure that dramatically characterize most Brazilian cities.

The budget policy not only promoted the mobilization of poor neighborhood residents, but also the *organization* of civic groups that were capable of resisting government control of the

¹¹ An analysis of more recent survey data by Baiocchi (2000) confirms these results.

participatory process (or *co-optation*). In the regions that I studied, the participatory budget policy fostered two processes which helped civic organizations gain political capacity. On the one hand, as each neighborhood mobilized residents to discuss budget priorities and to compete with other neighborhoods to obtain investments, new associations emerged. Because of the requirements of participation, which demanded that neighborhoods mobilize numbers in order to compete for demands, these associations tended to involve the participation of a large number of neighborhood residents. In many cases, stagnant, formal associations that were closed to more general participation were forced to open up their doors, hold internal elections or in many cases were supplanted altogether by new associations capable of mobilizing larger numbers of residents.

On the other hand, these associations began to form alliances with other neighborhood groups in order to defend their demands at the regional level. In the context of the budget policy, cooperation among neighborhoods was “rational”, since no single neighborhood could obtain investments without gaining the support of others. Where regional coalitions did not already exist, the Regional Budget Forums often became the locus of inter-neighborhood organizing. As time went by, both the new associations and the new regional coalitions often became spaces in which residents articulated not only the specific investments dealt with in the Budget policy, but larger issues, such as economic development projects for the region as a whole. Interestingly, however, this regional based co-operation did not supplant the competitive character of the budget forums, where each neighborhood sought to obtain its particular investment priorities. Instead, neighborhood residents found that in order to win investments, they had to make alliances with others. Through the participatory process itself, they also began to expand their sense of “self interest”, learning about how larger scale problems affected their lives. But in order to make larger scale gains from which all neighborhoods would benefit, they had to cooperate with other groups.¹²

These processes did not occur on their own, but were many ways were encouraged by the PT administration. On the one hand, the rules of the budget policy required that forums be open to all who wanted to participate and gave proportional representation to minority groups. This helped promote the inclusion of new neighborhood organizations (or even unaffiliated individuals) into the budget process and gave voice to those alliances of neighborhoods that could not achieve majority status. On the other hand, the everyday work of government employed community organizers played an essential role in promoting mobilization and organization. Most of these community workers were themselves longtime neighborhood activists, well schooled in the skills of organizing. In the effort to promote the budget policy, they often played a critical role in mobilizing neighborhoods that did were not participating in the budget process, visiting neighborhoods, identifying “potential leaders”, holding meetings, providing information about the potential gains of participating in the budget policy as well as sharing more sophisticated skills of mobilizing and organizing. In many ways, they played the role that “external agents” – priests, students, liberal professionals, and the like – have always played in helping very poor neighborhoods organize.¹³

These processes had interesting consequences for both the *inequality* and *co-optation* problems. On the one hand, individuals who came to the Regional Budget Forums with the intention of defending localized projects for their own areas learned about other neighborhoods, gaining both a broadened respect for the needs of others. They also gained a broadened understanding of their own interests, which they increasingly saw as related to the interests of a larger group. This developing solidarity had implications for the *inequality* problem because it encouraged participants to give priority to the needs of extremely impoverished neighborhoods, even when those neighborhoods could not mobilize enough delegates to vote through improvements

¹² See Abers (1998; 2000) for detailed examples of how these processes occurred at the regional level.

¹³ See Cardoso (1983); Jacobi (1989); Scherer-Warren (1993); Mainwaring (1989) and Mamarella (1993) for how external agents have historically played a role in urban social movements in Brazil.

on their own. Nevertheless, the solidarity that developed in the budget forums did not replace people's initial concern for their own particular needs. Just as competition and cooperation co-existed, self-regarding and other-regarding motives combined in the Budget Forums. The result was that those forums generally came to decisions that favored both the most needy and the most mobilized.

Over time, the decision-making processes within the budget forums became increasingly sophisticated. As they gained experience, participants began to engage in complex discussions not only about the distribution of capital improvements, but also about the *rules* that should guide that distribution. Once again, government-employed community-organizers played an important role here. They helped participants become aware that the distribution of investments would be more fair and legitimate if they agreed on general rules. They also helped emerging leaders to coordinate difficult discussions of such rules with the many less experienced participants that were attending assemblies. The resulting debates were important for the inequality problem, because in most cases participants decided to systematically insure that the poorest neighborhoods received benefits by using criteria favoring needy areas. But they were also important for a more general development of political consciousness, since through these discussions participants had the opportunity not only to make demands on the state but also to think about the principals that they believed should guide public resource allocation.

The development of cooperative ties, of solidarity and of political consciousness also had important implications for the *co-optation* problem. On the one hand, the ties binding participants of the budget policy gave the Regional Budget Forums the organizational strength that they needed to challenge the government when it rejected their priorities. On the other hand, the experience of participation that they gained as they built those ties gave people knowledge and skills that would help them analyze government claims critically and articulate responses to them. Once again, my analysis of co-optation in the budget policy challenges commonly perceived dichotomies, this time between co-optation and movement autonomy. Not only did regional participants work closely with state actors and were highly supportive of the administration, but also the forums they worked in were actually *created* by the state itself. Yet, where participants gained mobilizational and organizational capacities, this close relationship did not prevent participants from resisting state-control of their decisions. Of course, where such organizations did not develop – which was the case in some regions of the city – the budget participants had less capacity to challenge government control.

Interconnections

As noted earlier, an empowering participatory policy is particularly difficult to develop because not only does each of the problems of participation exist on its own, but also solutions to each one of them can exacerbate the others. Contrary to the generally pessimistic literature on participatory experiments, this study has suggested that there are ways that the solutions to the problems of participation can, however, be mutually reinforcing. Figure 2 schematically shows how the PT administration's response to each of the problems helped mitigate the others.

Two factors had critical impact on the (at least partial) resolution of all three problems. In the first place, the policy *mobilized* large numbers. In the second place, the government pursued an *alternative political strategy* that garnered support around the ideas of citizen participation, investment in poor areas, and government transparency.

Figure 2
Overcoming the Dilemmas of Participation

The left side of the triangle indicates how the administration's solution to the *implementation* problem also helped resolve the *inequality* problem. The literature on left-wing parties in power suggests that they are often forced to forfeit efforts to benefit the excluded, making concessions instead to those groups that are most powerful in order to maintain political support. In Porto Alegre, this could have meant handing over the budget process to the "participation" of the social groups that were best organized, thereby reproducing political inequalities for the sake of political survival. Instead, the administration pursued an alternative strategy of gaining political backing that, in part, involved the *mobilization* of new civic groups in poor neighborhoods, thereby reducing political inequalities among neighborhoods.

The right side of the triangle shows two reasons that the budget policy was implemented without exacerbating *co-optation*. Some studies of participation note that even when a government creates participatory forums, it often attempts to reduce the organizational capacity of participants for fear that otherwise, they will contest its broader priorities. But in Porto Alegre, both the mobilization of poor neighborhoods and attending the demands they were most likely to make were themselves central priorities of the administration. Furthermore, the Regional Budget Forums became the locus of an emerging political consciousness. These groups had the will and capacity to defend their demands, even when government agencies used complex technical arguments against them. In sum, the political strategy of the administration led it to encourage rather than fear the organization of civic groups that were capable of resisting *co-optation*.

At the same time, the fact that the government placed the Budget Policy within broader efforts to build the image of an alternative government dedicated to democracy and social justice would be seen by some authors as a sign that the administration sought not to empower civic groups but to use them to create a veneer of political legitimacy for its own projects. Certainly, the Porto Alegre administration's legitimacy stood in part on the fact that it had opened decision-making to participation. But this ultimately helped participants pressure administration officials to change the policies that they questioned. No doubt, the government always sought to convince participants that its positions were correct. But controlling the details of policy-making was less important than maintaining a strong grassroots support-base and an image that it was responsive to citizen demands. This gave participants a certain amount of bargaining power, since the threat to make public government efforts to supplant their preferences would be taken seriously.

The bottom of the triangle shows how the administration managed to address both inequality and *co-optation* at the same time. To avoid *co-opting* neighborhood participants, the administration could have engaged in a policy of total non-intervention, simply handing over control to pre-existing organizations (as some of the historically organized neighborhoods in the city would have preferred). Yet this would have solidified the inequalities that existed in Porto Alegre between regions that had strong civic organizations and those that did not. Instead, the administration created its own forums for participation and made direct efforts to encourage previously unorganized groups to join them. But these efforts did not lead to *co-optation*, as some authors would expect. The forums turned out to be enabling environments in which new groups developed over time which, like the combative organizations existing before the policy was implemented, were capable of resisting *co-optation*.

In sum, although the Participatory Budget was the cause and effect of very complex political processes in Porto Alegre, two aspects of the policy were clearly most central for overcoming the dilemmas of participation: its central role in a broader political strategy of the government and its mobilizing power. A policy that provided neighborhood-based capital investments to those who participated naturally keyed into the basic needs that poor people identified as their own and promised to resolve those needs in a relatively short period of time. This promise led to the massive mobilization of poor neighborhoods throughout the city. The effect was threefold: 1) the capacity of the policy to mobilize was fruitful for an administration seeking to

develop political support; 2) it helped incorporate the "hitherto excluded" into the participatory process; and 3) it triggered the organization of new civic groups that vociferously defended their demands even when the same state that had invited them to participate questioned their priorities.

The power of mobilization described here is a lesson to those who would seek to promote participatory democracy. As political theorists from John Stuart Mill to Carole Pateman have noted, citizen participation is likely to be most effective if it begins at a level close to the everyday lives of participants. The fact that the budget policy focused on localized, immediate needs was perceived by some observers in Porto Alegre -- both within the administration and within the city's social movements -- as a limitation, that distracted participants from broader-based discussions of larger, more long term policy issues. Indeed, my research suggests that there were limitations to this approach. Often, people who organized in the effort to resolve immediate needs demobilized once those needs were fulfilled. It took many years for the Regional Budget Forums to initiate serious discussions of broader-based issues such as economic development and city planning and only a small portion of regional budget participants went on to join broader policy-making groups such as the Thematic Forums. But I would suggest that, although it is a slow and difficult process, the only way of drawing most people, for whom the costs of participation are high, into such discussions is indeed by "starting small". Where policy-makers can engage people in public discussion around issues of immediate needs, they can set off a process of social learning in which democratic capacities can flourish. Such social learning certainly occurred in Porto Alegre.

But choosing an issue that mobilizes the poor is not enough. Essential for the long-term success of participatory policy was the fact that the Porto Alegre government made it "the hallmark of the administration". Other cities where the PT came to office have promoted the Participatory Budget without doing so. For example, in the PT administration of the Federal District of Brasília (1995-1998) the Participatory Budget, the group that coordinated the policy lacked basic resources and personnel and there was little consensus within the administration about the importance of the policy. As in Porto Alegre, it had a huge mobilization effect, involving thousands of people in regional assemblies. But, relatively unknown to the population in general, it had little broader political stamina. While in Porto Alegre, by the first re-election campaign, all major candidates defended the Participatory Budget, in the Federal District, not even the participants mobilized in favor of a continuation of the policy (Mendes, 1999). The failure of the government to prioritize participatory policy likely contributed to its failure to win re-election. That is, mobilization is not enough: participation must fit into a broader political strategy if it is to have lasting impact on political life.

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