

Healthier Democracies Case Study: Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

MULTICHANNEL PARTICIPATION

by *Melisa Ross*

Rio Grande do Sul's Popular Consultations and participatory budgeting are known internationally as the longest-running participatory budgeting processes in the world. Both have attempted to actively involve citizens in decision-making in the Brazilian state, which comprises 497 municipalities, totaling 11.3 million citizens, spread over a geographic area larger than the entire United Kingdom. Both in terms of breadth and participation levels, these institutions have been successful in engaging hundreds of thousands of citizens each year, in-person and online, to determine how to spend the region's investment budget.

A particularly instructive feature of the region's experimentation with large-scale decentralized participation is the evolution of both participatory budgeting and the Popular Consultation across the administrations of competing governments. Rival parties would vow to dismantle the prized participatory vehicles of opposing administrations as they vied for power, sometimes losing momentum on successful engagement in the process. Over time, however, engagement practices came to be seen as a political advantage and the abiding infrastructure for public participation through regional councils have lent stability and longevity to multichannel participation.



CONTEXT

The birthplace of participation

Rio Grande do Sul is Brazil's southernmost state, bordering Uruguay and Argentina, and the country's sixth most populated region with more than 11 million citizens. Its capital city, Porto Alegre, is home to 1.5 million residents and the region's major port and industrial area. It is also the birthplace of [participatory budgeting](#), introduced in 1989 after the first democratic elections by the left-leaning Partido dos Trabalhadores (The Workers' Party, from here onward PT), a political force that emerged during the country's military dictatorship. Participatory budgeting was extremely successful in empowering communities, reducing inequality and redistributing public funds to peripheral neighborhoods,¹ and has also been proven to directly reduce mortality rates, improve health care, and promote the creation of civil society organizations.² Since its inception in Brazil, it has become a global success and has expanded to [over 7,000 cities](#) worldwide.

Citizens had been coming together in several subregions of Rio Grande do Sul to form participatory and deliberative councils since the late 1980s. These were initiated and led by civil society and over time expanded to other regions, forming the basis of what later would become the Regional Development Councils (*Conselhos Regionais de Desenvolvimento*, or COREDE) and the Municipal Development Councils (*Conselhos Municipal de Desenvolvimento*, or COMUDE). During Brazil's redemocratization process, the 1988 National Constitution introduced several mechanisms for citizen participation, such as the Health Councils, as part of one multilevel system. The Constitution of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, enacted in 1989, also determined that the public budget should be developed in consultation with the citizens and distributed evenly across regions.

Fast Facts

BRAZIL
RIO GRANDE DO SUL

POPULATION
11.3 million

GDP
\$205 billion

GEOGRAPHICAL AREA
108,784 mi²

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By the late 1990s, participatory schemes began to expand across the country as effective ways to distribute resources and state revenue from the regional investment budgets, support the decentralization of public budget management and decision-making and improve transparency and trust in the regional government. In this new democratic setting, Popular Consultations, and later statewide participatory budgeting, were established in

¹ Rebecca Neaera Abers, *Inventing Local Democracy: Grassroots Politics in Brazil* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000); Yves Cabannes, "Participatory budgeting: a significant contribution to participatory democracy," *Environment and Urbanization* 16, no. 1 (April 2004): 27–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/095624780401600104>.

² Michael Touchton and Brian Wampler, "Improving Social Well-Being Through New Democratic Institutions," *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no.10 (September 2014): 1442–1469, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414013512601>; Sônia Gonçalves, "The Effects of Participatory Budgeting on Municipal Expenditures and Infant Mortality in Brazil," *World Development* 53 (January 2014): 94–110, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.01.009>.

Rio Grande do Sul to promote “a fairer and equitable distribution of budget resources with broad participation popular, contributing to the reduction of regional imbalances.”³

Since the success of Porto Alegre’s participatory budgeting, many local governments started implementing new and different participatory processes in an attempt to capture and compete with the new institution.⁴ Participation became a buzzword in Brazilian local governance

and parties across the political spectrum started campaigning for elections with programs that included their own new platforms for citizen engagement.⁵

The 1990s saw a race for participation where every political party needed to show that they were in favor of it.

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SYSTEMS & PROCESSES

Setting up the first statewide participatory budgeting infrastructure (1999–2002)



COMMITMENTS

During Rio Grande do Sul’s regional election period in 1998, the incumbent government of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB)’s Antônio Britto created the Popular Consultation as part of a strategy to challenge the PT’s electoral

platform. It was established by law in 1998 and mandated that “the Regional Executive will promote, annually, the direct Popular Consultation to the population for the allocation of part of the state budget for services and investments on selected programs to be included in the state budget proposal, for the purpose of meeting priorities of municipal and regional interest.”⁶ For every yearly budget cycle, an amount equivalent to 1 percent of the region’s investment budget was to be allocated to projects selected by citizens, through a process of citizens’ proposals prioritized by popular vote and organized by the COREDE and the COMUDE. The first Popular Consultation took place that same year, submitting a budget of

100 million Brazilian reais (~\$89 million) to popular vote. Assemblies were organized by the COREDE to identify priorities, and 379,205 citizens participated in the voting stage (5.7 percent of the regional electorate).

But the PT won the 1998 elections with candidate Olívio Dutra’s campaign promising to scale up participatory budgeting and implement it for the first time at the state level.

In the classic model of participatory budgeting, the government organizes local assemblies that are open to all residents of a specific neighborhood, city area or locality. In these assemblies, participants can put forward ideas on how to improve the area, which are then voted on and prioritized. Those present also elect citizen delegates among themselves to represent their communities during the implementation process.

Statewide participatory budgeting followed that same Porto Alegre model. Through municipal assemblies and the election of delegates, participants discussed and

³ Law 11.179/98 passed June 25, 1998, <http://www.al.rs.gov.br/FileRepository/repLegisComp/Lei%20n%C2%BA%2011.179.pdf>.

⁴ Brian Wampler, “When Does Participatory Democracy Deepen the Quality of Democracy? Lessons from Brazil,” *Comparative Politics* 41, no. 1 (October 2008): 61–81, <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041508X12911362383679>.

⁵ Tarson Núñez (Associate Researcher of Political Science, Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul), interviewed by the author, June 14, 2021.

⁶ Article 1 of Law 11.179/98.

decided how to spend the state's investment budget. The regional government first organized local assemblies in each city in each of the state's departments. In these assemblies, initial ideas for projects were discussed and two local delegates were elected in each neighborhood of each city to participate in a council with delegates from the other cities. All delegates had the same voice and deliberative power and were given the responsibility of implementing the selected proposals. The president of the local COMUDE held a seat on the Participatory Budgeting Council. The council was also in charge of coordinating with the local authorities with regard to planning, communication and oversight with and in the communities.

After the assemblies, the most supported ideas were included in a regional participatory budgeting ballot and submitted to a voting process open to all residents. The vote was partly carried out by the municipalities and by local civil society organizations connected to the COREDE and voluntary groups. In some cities, public servants in the police and fire departments sometimes used their trucks as mobile polling stations.

The council then met in plenary sessions where the state government presented estimates of available funds and expenditure plans for the following year, and the thematic priorities and demands for works and services from the ballots were ranked in each policy area. Thematic plenaries composed of selected delegates then analyzed those priorities and selected representatives among themselves to take part of the State Participatory Budgeting Board. The board would then debate and decide, on the basis of the recommendations by the government and the thematic plenaries, on the investment plan for the next year's investment plan to be sent to the Legislative Assembly.

After receiving the first budget proposal, the Legislative Assembly also conducted a participatory analysis and consultation on the bill. The Finance and Planning Commission held 22 local meetings across the state in which some 7,500 people participated, submitting 501 amendments to the bill. The 1999 Participatory Budget resulted in prioritizing investments in the areas of agriculture,

health and education. This was translated into a budget of R\$8.8 billion (~\$7.8 billion), the fourth largest regional budget in Brazil.

The first statewide participatory budget was implemented by means of executive orders. The PT did not have an absolute majority in the regional Legislative Assembly to pass the participatory budgeting scheme as legislation, so an executive-led strategy was the only option to comply with this electoral pledge. Yet, the Popular Consultation Law was still active, so that the participatory budgeting needed to be merged with the consultation to be operational and COREDE and COMUDE were included in the process.

In early 2000, a federal deputy representing the state of Rio Grande do Sul, linked to the prior government's PMDB party, promoted legal action to prevent the continuity of statewide participatory budgeting. The court granted a liminal measure that impeded Dutra's government from providing public funds and infrastructure for the organization of local assemblies that were part of the participatory process. In response, delegates elected during the prior participatory budgeting cycle (1999), municipal mayors, citizens' associations and social movements coordinated efforts to organize local assemblies with their own resources. Several of the major labor organizations in Brazil led the formation of local assemblies.

These and other social movements and citizen groups also created a collective network named Gaúcho Forum in Defense of Popular Participation to protest the curtailing regional participatory budgeting. The fact that citizens and civil society appropriated the process and continued it through independent organizing and without financial support from the state government became an indication of participatory budgeting's success.⁷ Over 200,000 citizens were estimated to have participated in local assemblies that year.

By 2001, Dutra's government and the PT had won the case in court and the state government was able to conduct participatory budgeting with government funds again. The world's first statewide participatory budgeting ran for Dutra's four-year mandate, but was discontinued

⁷ Ubiratan de Souza, "Orçamento Participativo Experiência do Rio Grande do Sul," in *El ajuste estructural en América Latina. Costos sociales y alternativas*, edited by Emir Sader (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2000): 285–6.

once the PT was voted out of office in 2002; the new PMDB incumbent Germano Rigotto reverted to the original institutional design of the Popular Consultation for the following four years.

The Popular Consultation and citizens' councils (2003–2010)

The Popular Consultation is a deliberation and polling mechanism aimed at allowing citizens to propose and decide on concrete projects to be funded by the regional investment budget. The proposals must be related to an issue within the jurisdiction of the state government and benefit more than a single community or department.

Civic engagement in the Popular Consultation can take place through two channels: citizens can participate in the municipal COMUDE or in the departmental COREDE; or they can attend the assemblies organized by the COREDE and the regional government during the deliberative phase of the consultation. The COREDE directly collaborate with the government in the implementation of the Popular Consultation, promote it in the local media and across civil society networks. They are also involved in the implementation and oversight of investments in the selected projects.⁸

The COREDE were first created and self-convened by citizens and civil society organizations at the local level in some of Rio Grande do Sul's departments. In 1994, they were formalized by law as citizen-led councils for the promotion of sustainable regional development to improve efficiency in public spending, help distribute the state's wealth in a more equitable manner and improve the population's quality of life. Their broader goal was to identify actions to encourage the population to stay in the region and to improve both economic development and the preservation of the environment. The law first mandated 21 of these citizen bodies, but their number increased progressively as new administrative subdivisions were created. As of 2021, there were 28 COREDE in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.⁹

With financial and technical support from the state government, COREDE are responsible for organizing thematic and sectoral discussion forums in their own districts and departments and coordinating the regional assemblies as part of the Popular Consultation process. In the thematic debate forums, citizens, scholars and sometimes political representatives and public servants are invited to discuss relevant issues for regional development. Participants can also come from the business and private sector, and from unions.

The Popular Consultation operates in three stages:

1. Citizens meet in forums organized by the local COREDE in each of the 28 departments to define the most relevant investment projects according to the needs and demands of each region. They are open to any resident.
2. At the end of each forum, a list with projects for investment is agreed upon. This list will become the ballot submitted to popular vote.
3. The COREDE then organize an open voting stage in each department. Residents cast their votes to prioritize the projects for investment they consider most relevant. The project that receives the most votes in each department is selected for implementation within the next year and is included in the yearly budget submitted to the Legislative Assembly.

Examples of investments funded through the consultation include reforming and embellishing local public schools and buying new cars and ambulances for local police and hospitals. The most requested investments are usually directed toward supporting regional agriculture.¹⁰

⁸ Bruna Blos (Director of the Department of Regional Articulation and Participation, Rio Grande do Sul), interviewed by the author, October 14, 2021.

⁹ Lucas Carvalho, "A colaboração dos conselhos regionais de desenvolvimento para a realização da consulta popular: uma análise configuracional de desempenho" (dissertation, São Paulo: INSPER, 2021), 37.

¹⁰ Blos, Interview, October 2021.

Establishing a state system of popular participation (2011–2014)

In 2011, the PT won the regional elections again and Governor Tarso Genro reinstated state-level participatory budgeting. This time, however, participatory budgeting was inscribed in a robust multiplatform approach integrating different channels for citizen participation. This participatory system was named the *Sistema Estadual de Participação Popular e Cidadã* (State System of Popular Citizen Participation, also known as SISPARCI; Sistema hereafter) and incorporated participatory budgeting (once again merged with Popular Consultation), but also added online voting options and citizen representation and monitoring councils.

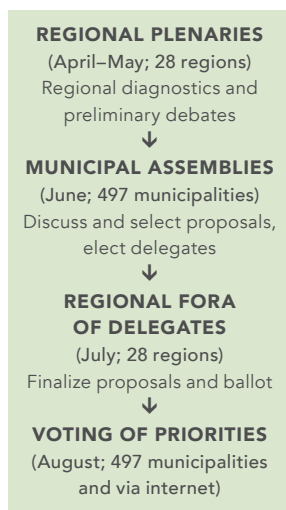


Figure 1. Schematization of the Participatory Budgeting Process, adapted from Legard and Goldfrank, “The Systemic Turn,” 172.

With the implementation of the Sistema, COREDE continued to collaborate with the regional government in the participatory budgeting process, going back to the government-organized assemblies instead of regional forums. The second state-wide participatory budgeting also combined the existing structure of regional and municipal assemblies and the Regional Council, with an online and offline voting stage. The innovation of the second process was to allow voting of proposals for prioritization (previously conducted in-person through the point assignment system) both in person

and via an online voting platform. In some municipalities, public offices and mobile stations with computers were set up during the voting stage to facilitate access for citizens to cast their votes.

Due to uneven demographic participation in the first participatory budgeting process, in 2011 government officials led an intensive effort to engage citizens in the new process. Their strategy included the use of social networks (mainly Facebook and Twitter), sending buses to several municipalities to catch citizens’ attention in the streets on election days, and mobilizing local government agents in each department.

Offline and Online Votes for Budget Priorities (2011–2014)

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014
Offline votes	998,145	907,146	967,610	1,059,842
Online votes	135,996	119,603	157,549	255,751
% of votes online	12.0%	11.6%	14.0%	19.4%

Figure 2. Online and Offline Votes for Budget Priorities, adapted from Legard and Goldfrank, “The Systemic Turn,” 178 with data from SEPLAG.

Citizen participation increased substantially to over 1 million voters and the participatory budget stayed at R\$165 million (~\$147 million) during his four-year mandate. Nevertheless, debts in budget execution increased considerably during this time, as only around 35 percent of the allocated funds each year were executed by the end of 2015.

Other instances for consultation with civil society were created within the Sistema, such as the Economic and Social Development Council (*Conselho de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social*, or CDES), composed of 90 citizens and that directly advised the governor on policy issues submitted to it for debate. The council was convened by the regional government, but its members were exclusively representatives from civil society. In this sense, the CDES shared features and faculties with the COREDE, but operated at the regional level instead of representing each of Rio Grande do Sul’s subregions.

Another innovation was the Digital Cabinet of Rio Grande do Sul, created in 2011 as a channel for participation and dialogue between the state government and its citizens. The platform was online from 2011–2014, and more than 200,000 citizens used it during that period. The portal included several direct communication channels between the government and citizens: *Governador Responde* (Governor Answers), through which people could send questions directly to the governor and the most voted question was answered directly in a video at the end of each month; *Governador Escuta* (Governor Listens), a livestream of public hearings with a chat where citizens could also send inquiries; *Governador Pergunta* (Governor Asks), a tool to send and prioritize suggestions online; *De Olho nas Obras* (Keeping an Eye on the Works), a citizen monitoring tool for publicly funded infrastructure works; and *Dialogos em Rede* (Networked Dialogues), online and in-person debates over digital culture and e-participation.

In the context of the mass protests in many cities across Brazil in June 2013, the Digital Cabinet organized an extraordinary consultation to collect suggestions and proposals on political reform, one of the main demands of protesters. From over 2,800 citizen contributions, 242 ideas were selected. After 181,000 votes, ten proposals were identified and included in a draft bill submitted to the National Congress.¹¹

Overall, the experience was considered an exemplary model of digital civic engagement. It influenced the digital platform [Networked Dialogues](#) implemented at the national level for online deliberation during the presidency of PT's Dilma Rousseff. The Sistema's digital participation tools and the Digital Cabinet were awarded four national innovation prizes, the Bank Beneficiary Feedback Award from the World Bank and the UN Public Service Award.

The privileged location of the Digital Cabinet was decisive in its success. It was managed by a division within the governor's cabinet and the responsible team included professionals from different fields, such as journalists, web designers, video producers, political appointees and programmers. Many of them were already part of a growing community of activists in favor of the freedom of information, privacy policies and the use of free and open-source software. The team took advantage of their executive position within the governor's office to influence other administrative divisions. They centralized citizen input and its processing to then distribute it more effectively to other administrative divisions, accelerating decision-making because the input already had a seal of approval from the governor. Moreover, their work in raising awareness and training public servants was essential to helping to overcome potential resistance to the new digital means of participation. Public servants showed less resistance as time passed and as the cabinet received external recognition and support from the population. In an August 2014 online survey, 97 percent of government officials who responded reported being aware of the Digital Cabinet and 77 percent said it had a positive impact on the government's work.

The open design of the platform was another distinct advantage because it allowed enough room for changes and additions. The team was able to progressively incorporate different modules to fulfill new functions in addition to those originally included in the platform design, allowing adaptation to demands and ideas from users. The simplicity of the mechanism for participation, where citizens could either submit contributions or show support for existing contributions, and the clean design of the website helped ensure high participation with no major visual and usability barriers for first-time users.

The statewide participatory budgeting, the Popular Consultation, the Digital Cabinet and other components of the Sistema were created and institutionalized by the state government via legislation. Yet, after the June 2013 mass protests and the corruption scandal known as *Operação Lava Jato* (Operation Car Wash) that resulted in the impeachment of then-president Dilma Rousseff in 2016, participatory institutions began to decline across Brazil, and many processes implemented and supported by PT governments were suspended following the impeachment.

Digital Popular Consultation (2014–2021)

In 2014, the PMDB was victorious once more in regional elections, and again it reverted participatory budgeting to the original Popular Consultation format. This time, Popular Consultation started expanding the channels for participation in the voting stage, and by 2016, in-person voting had been phased out. Systems were put in place to enable voting both via ballots and via SMS. In 2018, a [website](#) was created for the digital voting stage of the Popular Consultation. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the consultation was held entirely online using video conferencing platforms for the first time; and starting in 2021, the complete process of the Popular Consultation has been digitalized through the digital platform and smartphone application [Colab.re](#).

Citizens can submit their proposals directly on the app, adding descriptions, geolocalization and pictures. They are then published to the app's feed, where users can

¹¹ Camilo Aggio and Rafael Cardoso Sampaio, "A democracia digital do gabinete do governador: o perfil e os limites de um modelo consultivo de participação," in *Cultura, política e ativismo nas redes digitais* (São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2014), 225.

express their support. By the end of the proposal stage, each COREDE are responsible for consolidating proposals and preparing the ballot for the digital voting stage.

Currently, different departments of the regional government are involved in the implementation of the Popular Consultation. The Planning Secretariat is responsible for regional development planning and the organization

of Popular Consultations is under their jurisdiction. The regional budget is planned a year in advance; each year, projects selected in the consultation are sent to the responsible departments or government areas to be included in their requested budgets for the following year. Yet, many of these offices are led by political appointees and change name and position within the regional executive administration with each new government.

OUTCOMES

Engagement under changing political tides

Rio Grande do Sul stands out in Brazil due to its mobilized citizenry, its high level of engagement both in-person and online, and its multiple organized stances of intermediation such as councils and monitoring bodies. Government-led experiments with statewide participation have garnered large support and have positively impacted the region's infrastructure and development. Still, not all participation opportunities have had the same degree of success.

While participatory budgeting at a state level has proven that public participation can be effective without slowing down or overly complicating the bureaucratic process, engaging in the first statewide, in-person participatory budgeting was onerous for citizens. They needed to have time and resources to attend the local assemblies, which could last for hours. In the second participatory budgeting initiative, citizens could refrain from participating in the assemblies altogether while still being available to vote for proposals at the later voting stage, online or offline.¹²

One remarkable difference between the 1999 state-level participatory budgeting and the Sistema's budgeting, is less involvement by social movements in the Sistema

process. In the first state-level process, social movements were overly present, in part as a reaction to the political opposition and judicial conflict.

Under Genro's Sistema, the relationship between social movements and participatory budgeting changed. Civil society organizations traditionally allied with the PT were less actively involved and mobilized their members to participate to a much lesser extent. They were now also engaged in sectoral councils, regional dialogues and oversight bodies, thus diversifying their opportunities to influence policymaking and decentering the participatory budget as their main communication channel with the government.

This form of "venue shopping" points toward another significant development: social and political actors seek different channels (or venues) to pursue their goals not only due to thematic affinity, but also to send messages to allies and opposition, and to the public. Social movements and civil society organizations might have chosen to engage less in participatory budgeting because other channels for participation provided better opportunities to pursue their strategic goals. This shows that Sistema "did not create, but rather formalized and tried to integrate, the multiplicity of extra-parliamentary mechanisms

¹² Sveinung Legard and Benjamin Goldfrank, "The Systemic Turn and Participatory Budgeting: The Case of Rio Grande do Sul," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 53, no. 1 (February 2021): 171, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X20000954>.

involving social-movement representation in Rio Grande do Sul.”¹³

Unifying and diversifying institutions



Both phases of statewide participatory budgeting managed the complexity stemming from increased scale in different ways. During the first process, the government adopted a unification approach, consolidating local assemblies and the Regional Council as the central institution for citizens and social movements to channel their concerns and preferences. The second process enacted a diversification approach: different channels and institutions, both online and offline, catered to different issues, target groups and political decision-making levels. These approaches illustrate strategic decisions, responses to the political circumstances in the region and, in Brazil, newly available technological advances.¹⁴

Diversification allowed the government to engage more citizens without losing quality of participation and deliberation. Online platforms engaged new segments of the population that would not have mobilized through other means and was effective in increasing the number of voters. The diversification approach also seems to have privileged some groups of participants. Social movements migrated to the other spaces, leaving the budgeting assemblies open for more organized and established groups to push forward their sectoral demands. The multiplicity of channels for participation dispersed social mobilization and support, leaving some of those channels “vulnerable to domination by groups with the most resources, time and organizational capacity.”¹⁵

The Popular Consultation, in turn, survived changing political tides over time because it was formalized and embedded in the law. It was able to sustain participation and support among citizens thanks to the COREDE. Regardless of which party won the regional elections,

the consultation and the involvement of COREDE in the process of investment budgeting remained mandatory.

Still, some research points to the fact that the Popular Consultation “balances the decision-making process in favor of the policy taker.”¹⁶ Since the funds allocated through consultation have been progressively reduced over the years, the involvement of citizens and COREDE can be seen as a direct and indirect legitimation of government decision-making in budget matters. It is a direct legitimation because the citizens propose and vote for the projects; and indirectly, it validates resource allocation and constraints.

Online and offline engagement

In terms of turnout and participation, both the early stages of online voting for statewide participatory budgeting and the electronic vote included in Popular Consultations show that online voters represent a specific segment of the population that has been sustained over time and increased proportionally to the total number of voters. This is consistent with research suggesting that online voting motivates citizens who would otherwise not participate, but it does not deter in-person participants or alter voters’ motivations.

The factor that does, in fact, have an impact seems to be the amount of resources available for participatory budgeting and consultation. The resources allocated seem to directly impact the total number of voters in each edition of the consultation, and a reduction of funds negatively affects voter turnout each year.

Overall, the COREDE emerge as the true beneficiaries of participatory democracy in Rio Grande do Sul. Thanks to the formalization of these civil society forums and of Popular Consultation, they have taken a central role in participatory processes independent of government change. When the PT was in power, it was constrained to include COREDE in the structure of participatory

¹³ Legard and Goldfrank, “The Systemic Turn,” 181.

¹⁴ Ibid., 165.

¹⁵ Ibid., 163.

¹⁶ Davide Carbonai, Alfredo Alejandro Gugliano, and Sergio Camiz Sapienza, “The state participatory budgeting in Rio Grande do Sul,” *PACO Partecipazione e Conflitto*. Salento, It. 10, no. 1 (2017): 8–24.

budgeting; when the PMDB was in power, it reinstated Popular Consultation with COREDE as the main organizers and promoters of the process. Recognition in legislation and support by government funding for COREDE

regular operations have ensured that these citizen councils continue to operate to date, after almost 30 years of active engagement in budgetary decision-making in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

LESSONS

Multichannel participation works

The largest challenge to statewide participation in Rio Grande do Sul seems to have been the region's large geographic area and population, which demanded time-consuming organization efforts to achieve a truly decentralized and inclusive consultation of all citizens under equitable conditions.

The second challenge was posed by the instability of the government structures responsible for implementing participation and lack of sufficient staffing and training. For instance, Rio Grande do Sul's Planning Secretariat (the office in charge of implementing the Popular Consultation) is led by a political appointee, which means that there is no continuity between mandates. The secretariat staff thus needs to prepare public servants as often as citizens for each new consultation process. This also challenges the COREDE representatives who participate in the implementation and monitoring process, who need to work with different contact persons for every new project and/or budget cycle.

No public servants are exclusively dedicated to the implementation of the Popular Consultation; it is the staff of the Planning Secretariat who take on the responsibility on top of their regular duties.¹⁷ The increased workload and the lack of sufficient preparation across government areas can create challenges when interdepartmental or inter-area collaboration is needed, as public servants aren't always aware of the existence of the consultation.

TIMELINE

KEY EVENTS

- 1988** Brazil's new constitution includes citizen participation
- 1989** First participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre
Rio Grande do Sul's new constitution includes citizen participation in budgetary decisions and sectoral councils
- 1994** Formalization of 21 first Regional Development Councils (COREDE)
- 1998** Popular Consultation established by law
22nd COREDE
- 1999** First statewide participatory budgeting
- 2000** Judicial conflict: participatory budgeting organized without public funding
- 2003** Popular Consultation reinstated
- 2004** 23rd and 24th COREDE
- 2006** 25th and 26th COREDE
- 2008** 27th and 28th COREDE
- 2011** Digital Cabinet is created
- 2012** State system of popular citizen participation
Online voting is included in the statewide participatory budgeting
- 2014** COREDE launch 2015–2030 development plans
- 2015** Popular Consultation reinstated
- 2018** Online voting option added to Popular Consultation
- 2021** Colab.re app digitalizes Popular Consultation

¹⁷ Bloss, Interview, October 2021.

In spite of these challenges, the case of Rio Grande do Sul shows that multichannel participation attracts more participants than single channel processes or institutions. It is also potentially more resilient, as a variety of forms for participation increases the chances for engagement and for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups to voice their concerns. Each channel, in turn, can become more efficient through the active sharing of knowledge and resources across channels, and participants have more freedom to choose which issues they wish to address.¹⁸

Future designers of multichannel democracies must pay attention to avoiding the displacement of participants across and within channels, which can lead to the consolidation of power by better organized and overrepresented groups. Governments must also pay attention to balancing high-cost participation (such as in deliberative channels) with low-cost participation (such as vote-casting and online polling).

Online voting has proven to be a complementary tool to in-person voting, and not a replacement for it; it does not “capture” in-person voters and encourages the participation of citizens who wouldn’t have engaged otherwise. But it also does not automatically increase participant numbers, which seems to be linked both to available resources and the potential impact of voting choices on actual decision-making and investments.

On behalf of citizens, there is evidence that a highly organized civil society can sustain participation over time if supported by the local government in spite of party and government change, budget reductions and financial difficulties. But trust between private and public collaborators is essential in government-civil society partnerships. This is evident in the cooperation of COREDE with the PT governments and their participatory budgeting processes, and in the sustainability of the consultation over the years due to the regular and close collaboration with the regional government in all stages of its design, implementation and evaluation.¹⁹

A well-organized, citizen-led council, group or forum can achieve high performance even without high organizational capacity if there is a permanent communication infrastructure and responsiveness from the government. Active, institutionally engaged citizen groups can further add to the visibility of government projects and investments in their communities if they are engaged not only in the decision-making stage, but also in the implementation (i.e., inauguration of infrastructure). This kind of full-cycle engagement also recognizes the voluntary work of citizens, which in turn motivates them to continue the collaboration.

Support for this research was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.

¹⁸ Paolo Spada and Giovanni Allegretti, “When Democratic Innovations Integrate Multiple and Diverse Channels of Social Dialogue: Opportunities and Challenges,” in *Using New Media for Citizen Engagement and Participation*, edited by Marco Adria (Information Science Reference, 2020): 35–59.

¹⁹ Carvalho, “A colaboração,” 126.

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