

Public Participation and Decentralization in Brazil

From radical democracy to participatory democracy

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Abstract

This paper enhances the understanding of Brazil's experience with participatory democracy by shedding light on its radical democratic foundations. It demonstrates that participatory democracy is largely rooted in the radical democratic ideas advanced by the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) in the 1980s and 1990s. These ideas are shown to have emerged from the intertwined struggles for workplace self-management, citizen participation in government, and local governments' autonomy that preceded full-scale democratization. Against this background, the paper argues that public participation and decentralization emerged as two interlinked dimensions of the processes of re-democratization and re-federalization, largely echoing the early PT's municipalist and radical democratic proposals. As such, the paper calls for a more critical assessment of the societal forces and ideas that have shaped the participatory institutions of Brazil's multi-tiered governance system. More broadly, this inquiry engages with the scholarly debate on the interplay between federalism and participatory-deliberative democracy, highlighting the complexity of the theoretical, institutional, and empirical convergence points that define this relationship.

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Keywords

Brazil, Decentralization, Federalism, Radical Democracy, Participatory Democracy

Public Participation and Decentralization in Brazil:

From radical democracy to participatory democracy

Introduction¹

Over the last three decades, Brazil's experience with participatory democracy has been studied by scholars from different backgrounds. The widespread enthusiasm about the potential of democratic innovations has led non-Brazilian scholars to imagine how such innovations could be reproduced elsewhere in the world to ensure public participation in governance, as well as public control and accountability. However, the ideas and experiences that laid the ground for Brazil's move toward participatory democracy are often dismissively overlooked. The aim of this paper is not to offer yet another descriptive account of democratic innovations in Brazil – a topic extensively examined by scholars in Brazil and across the world (Avritzer, 2009; Baiocchi et al., 2011; Wampler, 2015; Goldfrank, 2011; Gret and Sintomer, 2005). Rather, the main objective is to shed light on the radical democratic foundations of Brazil's participatory, multi-tiered governance system by examining the interrelationship between two of its pillars: public participation and decentralization. As I argue throughout the paper, this interrelationship represents a transposition of the radical democratic ideals that informed Brazil's processes of re-democratization and re-federalization in the 1980s.

This paper situates itself in the growing scholarly debate on the interconnections between federalism and participatory-deliberative democracy (Trettel, 2025; Sonnicksen, 2025; Alber and Valdesalici, 2015; Nicolini, 2015).² It builds on the assumption that these two concepts are linked by a “common innate connection” to pluralism, of which both are manifestations (Palermo, 2015, p. 500 and p. 507). Rather than embarking on another institutionalist-legalistic analysis of such interconnections, the paper deals with the theoretical-conceptual dimension of this relationship – what Trettel considers the “most innovative way” of looking at the intersections between participatory-deliberative democracy and federalism (2025, p. 150). To achieve this aim, it reconsiders the influence of the Workers' Party's (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*) radical democratic conception of democracy and federalism on the development of democratic innovations. The paper shows that the institutionalization of democratic innovations owes much to the incorporation of some of the PT's radically participatory and municipalist views into the processes of re-democratization and re-federalization – and, thus, into the constitution-making process. As such, it supports the argument that “political culture” is decisive in making decentralization conducive to “the establishment of participatory institutional structures” (Trettel, 2025, p. 145 and p. 150). Focusing on Brazil, this research seeks to extend the geographic ambit from which the interplay between federalism and participatory-deliberative democracy is examined, counterbalancing the Western-centered focus of existing studies. In addition, this research draws on a substantial body of Portuguese-language bibliographical and documentary sources on the topics of democracy, democratization, and federalism, bridging literature streams from different world regions.

1 I express my gratitude to Frédéric Lépine for his inspiring feedback on the presentation that I delivered at the ‘CIFE Federalism Workshop: Can Federalism Answer the Big Questions of the 21st Century?’ at the Centre international de formation européenne (Nice, France), in January 2024. His critical remarks inspired me to delve into the study of the phenomenology of federalism and its relationship with democracy theory. I extend my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers, as well as my PhD supervisor, Prof. Sabrina Ragone, and co-supervisor, Dr. Elisabeth Alber, for their academic support. Finally, I am grateful to the DiGoP editors for having patiently guided me through the review process.

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2 I consider participatory and deliberative democracy as mutually reinforcing democracy theories. I align with Elstub in using the notion of participatory-deliberative democracy, which tells “that citizens should govern through deliberation” (2018, p. 198).

This paper's inquiry unfolds in three stages. First, I highlight the strong relationship between the advancement or regression of democracy and the expansion or contraction of citizens' and government levels' participation in decision-making. A sketchy overview of the development of federalism and democracy from 1889 until the present day is therefore provided (section 1). Second, I argue that the institutionalization of citizen participation in local governance – e.g., participatory budgeting and the management councils of public policies (*conselhos gestores de políticas públicas*) – is linked to a re-signification of decentralization; one that positions decentralization as a central dynamic for enabling public participation in policymaking, largely mirroring the PT's views on democratic governance (section 2). In particular, I argue that the early PT's radical democratic agenda congealed the intertwined struggles for (i) workplace democratization, (ii) citizens' participation in government, and (iii) local governments' autonomy, which took place in the 1970s-1990s. Against this background, participatory institutions are shown to be tardive readaptations of the idea of self-management socialism. Third, I argue that this ensemble of struggles and ideas echoes in Brazil's 1988 Constitution due to the PT's participation in the constitution-writing process of 1987-88 and its rise to power at different tiers of government (section 3). With this paper, I eventually posit that Brazil's experience of participatory democracy should be subjected to a larger critical reinterpretation, based on a more comprehensive reassessment of the intellectual and societal forces that paved the way for the pluralization, decentralization, and deconcentration of decision-making processes – and, by extension, to the embedment of participatory institutions into Brazil's multi-tiered governance system.

1 Brazil's road to (participatory) democracy: an historical overview

With the demise of the Braganza House in 1889, Brazil was turned into a federal republic (for an overview of Brazilian pre-republican federal thought see Dolhnikoff, 2005). The Philadelphian-like, hold-together kind of federalism introduced by the 1891 Constitution made the former provinces constituent units of the federation.³ In the period from 1889 to 1930, known as Old Republic (*República Velha*), the scope of federalism was nonetheless warped to serve the interests of state oligarchies, especially those of São Paulo and Minas Gerais. The Revolution of 1930, led by Getúlio Vargas, brought an end to the Old Republic. Vargas garnered the support of those who felt excluded from power, such as less influential states oligarchies, young military officers, veterans of the anti-oligarchic Revolution of 1924, and Brazilian communists. All these actors aimed at dismantling oligarchic federalism, since “federalism and oligarchy were considered by them [1930's insurgents] as twin brothers” (Carvalho, 2002, p. 93).⁴ For reformist circles only centralization could quell oligarchic rule.

Vargas ruled the country from 1930 to 1945, leading Brazil toward modernization and industrialization, and expanding labor and social rights. He laid the basis of *trabalhismo* – an all-Brazilian, nationalistic sort of laborism,⁵ in which unionized workers were identified as “the *par excellence* raw material of Getulist laborism” (Gomes and d'Araújo, 1987, p. 35). During his time in office, Brazil was turned into a unitary decentralized state, although it retained its *de jure* federal status (Abrucio, 2002; Lopreato, 2022).⁶ It was a sort of “nominal federalism” that “despite the paper guarantees [...] did not function in a federalistic way in practice” (Elazar, 1994, p. ix). The overthrow of Vargas in 1945 was followed by the adoption of a pluralistic constitutional charter in 1946, marking the beginning of the so-called Fourth Republic (*Quarta República*), which lasted until 1964. Cooperative federalism was implemented for the first time, while universal suffrage allowed the ascendance of progressive forces.⁷ One of these forces

³ Article 1 of the Constitution of 1891.

⁴ All translations from Portuguese to English are the work of the author.

⁵ Although literally translatable as ‘laborism’, *trabalhismo* is a very context-bounded political ideology. For this reason, I have opted for the use of the original Portuguese version.

⁶ Article 3 of the Constitution of 1937.

⁷ Universal suffrage was extended to illiterate people only with the 1988 Constitution.

was the Brazilian Labor Party (*Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro*; hereinafter PTB), founded by Vargas in 1945.

The PTB projected itself as the direct recipient of Vargas's legacy, blending anti-imperialistic nationalism, non-Marxist socialism, and non-revolutionary syndicalism (Gomes, 1994). *Trabalhismo* further veered towards the left under the leadership of João Goulart⁸ and the influence of Leonel Brizola.⁹ As the most voted candidate for the vice presidency in the presidential elections of 1955 and 1960, Goulart joined the governments of Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-61) and Jânio Quadros (January-August 1961). With Quadros's resignation in 1961, constitutional provisions required Goulart to take the presidential post; a contingency that conservative sectors of Brazilian society strongly opposed. A political compromise was reached between Goulart's supporters and their opponents through the adoption of parliamentarianism and the restriction of Goulart's powers.¹⁰ Though deprived of effective executive powers, Goulart advocated for the so-called 'basic reforms' (*reformas de base*), which included a redistributive agrarian reform, extended labor protections to rural workers, and universal suffrage, as well as educational, tributary, and urban reforms in favor of the lower strata. This drew the PTB closer to some segments of the Brazilian Communist Party (*Partido Comunista Brasileiro*). These two political actors, along with some MPs, inter-union organizations, left-wing parties of various sizes, rural workers leagues, low-ranked officers, and student associations united into the Popular Mobilization Front (*Frente de Mobilização Popular*) (Ferreira, 2004). To thwart any reformist or revolutionary plan, a military coup took place on 31 March 1964.

With seventeen extra-legal decrees, known as 'institutional acts', the decisions of the military junta could erode Brazil's liberal-democratic constitutional order. Institutional Act no. 3 of 5 February 1966 severely curtailed constituent states' autonomous powers and subnational democracy.¹¹ The Constitution of 1967 completed the transition from democracy to a bureaucratic-military dictatorship (1964-1985). The latter concentrated power via politico-administrative and financial centralization, substituting federalism with a unionist-authoritarian system (Abrucio, 2002). This turned Brazil into "an extreme case of centralized federalism, almost indistinguishable from a unitary polity" (Almeida, 2005, p. 29).

For two decades, pluralism was undermined in both its sociopolitical and territorial-institutional forms, through the abolition of multipartyism,¹² the restriction of trade union rights,¹³ and *de facto* de-federalization. The latter was inherently linked to the erosion of democracy, as proved by the correlation between authoritarian rule and the downturn of federalism throughout Brazilian history. Although the authoritarianism-centralization and democracy-decentralization *continua* should not be overstated (Schlegel, 2002), re-democratization and re-federalization proceeded as two inextricably linked phenomena in the 1980-1990s (Souza, 2005). The former process boosted the latter, while both promoted social, political, and territorial pluralism. Eventually, re-democratization and the return to cooperative federalism were pursued via the pluralization of decision-making fora and, thus, through political-administrative decentralization and the institutionalization of democratic innovations.

2 Radical democracy before participatory democracy

Reconstructing Brazil's trajectory from authoritarianism to democracy is essential to understanding participatory democracy emerged. Its development is inextricable from the experiences of local-level

⁸ Goulart led the PTB from 1952 to 1964 and was Minister of Labor during the years 1953-54 of the Vargas administration.

⁹ Brizola was governor of Rio Grande do Sul from 1959 to 1963.

¹⁰ Constitutional Amendment no. 4 of 2 September 1961.

¹¹ See also Constitutional Amendment no. 8 of 14 April 1970.

¹² Article 18 of Institutional Act no. 2 of 27 October 1965 and Article 5(II) of Institutional Act no. 5 of 13 December 1968.

¹³ Article 16(II) of Institutional Act no. 2 of 27 October 1965.

democratization that predated full-scale democratization (Tranjan, 2015). Popular councils (*conselhos populares*) were the earliest participatory instances to be – more or less – spontaneously experimented with at the municipal and sub-municipal levels. They emerged as grassroots, assembly-based settings committed to identify and address citizens' priorities across a range of policy areas, including healthcare, social assistance, and housing. The most vocal proponent of popular councils was the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*; hereinafter PT) (Baiocchi, 2003), which became one of the main actors in the process of re-democratization. Law no. 6767 of 20 December 1979 marked the return to multipartyism as part of the regime-led gradual transition to democracy.

Some of the PT's participatory proposals – such as popular councils – had already been implemented during the party's first experiences in local government in the early 1980s. PT-ruled municipalities became the testing ground to pursue the party's two core objectives, namely 'to govern with popular participation' and 'to reverse the priorities' – which meant (i) enabling the lower strata to participate in government and (ii) putting their interests at the core of public policies.¹⁴ Popular participation in government was the cornerstone of the PT's program and was "associated with the dimension of justice and economic transformation" (Bezerra, 2019, p. 6). By advocating for the establishment of popular councils as new hubs of decision-making, the PT resumed some of the theses of council communism – the early 20th century "theory of working-class struggle and revolution based on the principle of self-emancipation of the working class" (Muldoon, 2019, p. 339). Council communism, which had been endorsed by an ensemble of influential unorthodox Marxists such as Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Pannekoek, Lukács, and Gramsci, became a reference for anti-authoritarian Marxists across the world over the 20th century (Muldoon and Kets, 2019; van der Linden, 2004). The influence of council ideas on the PT has been deemed central to the formulation of the party's participatory proposals, but it has not yet been thoroughly assessed by any study (see Abers, 2000).

The PT-sponsored councilism was configured as the societal transposition of the self-managing and self-governing practices of factory councils (*comissões de fábrica*) in São Paulo's ABC industrial region (Antunes, 1981),¹⁵ grassroots Catholic organizations (*Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*), and social movements such as the Health Movement of Eastern São Paulo (*Movimento de Saúde da Zona Leste*) (Coutinho, 2004). The convergence of these actors into the PT explains how the council discourse became part of the early PT's body of ideological references (Keck, 2010). The function of popular councils was, nonetheless, widely disputed within the PT. Some viewed popular councils as counter-hegemonic tools within a revolutionary process centered on workers' emancipation, while social movements regarded them as non-revolutionary civic "spaces of articulation" and "self-organization" (Bezerra, 2019, p. 7). This theoretical-ideological ambiguity characterized the PT until the late 1990s, when the party abandoned its revolutionary undertones in order to gain support beyond the working class. Olívio Dutra – mayor of Porto Alegre (1989-93) and governor of Rio Grande do Sul (1999-2003) – described the PT's radical understanding and use of participatory mechanisms as follows (2002, p. 12; see also Faria, 2006):

[We] are fully aware that this revolutionary process is situated in the context of an exacerbated struggle between two distinct projects. Traditional elites know perfectly that this practice [participatory budgeting] gives real substance to democracy, putting an end to privileges, clientelism, and ultimately, the power of capital over society as a whole. It is, therefore, a political struggle with a clear class content (or a bloc of classes) that will continue to unfold for a long time to come.

[...]

Besides deepening and radicalizing democracy, it [participatory budgeting] also represents a vigorous socialist impulse – if we look at socialism as a process in which direct and participatory democracy is an essential element, because it enables the strengthening of critical consciousness and solidaristic ties among the exploited and

¹⁴ In Portuguese: 'governar com participação popular' e 'inversão de prioridades'.

¹⁵ ABC is an acronym used to refer to the cities of Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo, and São Caetano do Sul, at the administrative margins of São Paulo municipality; later, with the addition of Diadema, the industrial region became known as ABCD.

oppressed, paving the way to the public appropriation of the State and the construction of a new society.

Like the PT, other rising socialist parties in Latin America had attached radical meanings to participatory mechanisms by the late 1990s. By forswearing the revolutionary dictates of orthodox Marxism-Leninism, these parties had indeed revised their approach to democracy, imagining new ways to pursue their egalitarian and redistributive goals within legal limits. The redefinition of the Latin American left's programmatic strategy signaled a major shift: "socialism was no longer seen as inevitable but as an open-ended process to be constructed, and democracy was no longer seen as a way station along the path to true socialism" (Goldfrank, 2007, pp. 94-95). Participatory institutions encapsulated this strategic evolution.

Beyond local-level, non-institutionalized participatory experiences, the PT's participation in the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) marked the first institutional stage in the process of participatory democracy-building. In the NCA, the PT's aspirations clashed with the dominant position of the so-called Big Center (*Centrão*) – a cluster of parties lacking any ideological orientation and often accused of clientelism. Progressive parties' representatives numbered only 50 out of the 559 members of the NCA – 16 of whom belonged to the PT.¹⁶ Within the NCA, the PT formed a combative minority that was forced to forgo its radical constitutional project. On behalf of the PT, the jurist Fábio Konder Comparato had indeed elaborated the constitutional draft 'Change Brazil! A Constitution for democratic development' (*Muda Brasil! Uma Constituição para o desenvolvimento democrático*). According to this document, popular sovereignty would manifest "through popular participation [sic] in the exercise of public functions", overcoming the liberal division between state and civil society (1986, p. 18). This radical interpretation of popular sovereignty was linked to the Marxist-inspired developmentalist idea of planning (*planejamento*), which stood for the "planned process of global transformation of the country's socio-economic structures" (ibid., p. 25). After having been submitted to the national directory of the PT, Comparato's draft was integrated with more participatory provisions, which explicitly referred to the establishment of popular councils and envisioned public control, participation, and management in the areas of health, education, labor, transportation, and welfare.

As reported in the PT's national meeting resolutions from 1985 to 1988, the party's main objective within the NCA was democratizing the constituent process and channeling the demand for "real popular participation" into the NCA, by promoting "popular councils and other measures for the decentralization and de-concentration of political power" (PT, 2023a [1986], p. 319). For the PT, the NCA was not meant to be a "panacea", nor an instrument to substitute "popular mobilization and centralize workers' struggle" (PT, 2023a [1985], p. 227). The party's objective remained the "construction of socialism" – as opposed to the goals of the Democratic Alliance (*Aliança Democrática*) and the former pro-regime faction within the NCA (ibid., p. 227). The PT believed that the constitutional charter had to make possible "popular participation through popular councils, corresponding to the different levels of government" (Garcia, 2011 [1987], p. 141). Interestingly, this radically participatory form of government resonated with the idea of "a federal structure of councils" exercising political and economic functions in a system of socialist self-management (Muldoon, 2018, p. 3); or, in other words, a reinterpreted version of council communism.

The party's strategy for the general elections of 1986 – which also elected the members of the NCA – was centered on the achievement of "effective popular participation, including through Popular Councils [sic]" (PT, 2023a [1986], p. 268). The "strategic objective" of the PT was the "construction of a socialist society" (PT, 2023a [1987], p. 373); an effort that the party tied to the "fundamental forms of organization that arise from the daily struggle within the bourgeois society", such as the "self-organization of workers, the forms of struggle for workers' control in the factories [...] and popular control in the neighborhoods" (ibid., 374). However, given its minoritized position within the NCA, the

¹⁶ The other 34 members of this progressive minority were affiliated to the following parties: Democratic Labor Party (26), Communist Party of Brazil (3), Brazilian Communist Party (3), Brazilian Socialist Party (2).

PT's constitutional project was rejected. Nevertheless, some of the party's proposals inspired the adoption of various constitutional provisions concerning citizen participation in public policymaking, across different policy areas (see section 4). Throughout the 1990s, the PT *de facto* underwent a definitive process of de-radicalization. The party's main concern became rising to power at the local level to create the conditions for citizen participation in public decision-making (Bittar, 1992). Popular councils lost their revolutionary connotations, becoming little more than tools for democratizing decision-making within public administration, in accordance with democratically elected authorities. Radical conceptions of democracy were still popular among some factions within the PT but lost ground to the less conflictual vocabulary of participatory democracy and governance.

While the PT catalyzed the claims for participation at the political level, it must also be noted that self-management socialist theses loomed large in the writings of Brazilian critical social theorists in the second half of the 20th century, such as Maurício Tragtenberg and Fernando C. Prestes Motta. Building on the work of classical social anarchist and unorthodox Marxist thinkers – from Proudhon to Luxemburg and other council communists – both Tragtenberg and Motta advocated for the adoption of self-management governance models in public administration and all organizational settings, both public and private (Motta, 1981 and 1984; Tragtenberg, 1980, and 1981). They thereby laid the groundwork for the theorization of new paradigms of democratization based on the need to deconcentrate decision-making, such as societal public administration (*administração pública societal*) and social management (*gestão social*) (Paula, 2005; Tenório, 2005 and 2013). Similarly, Brazilian political economists' concern with democratizing production relations through workers' participation in decision-making and profit-sharing led to a renewed interest in unorthodox Marxist or pre-Marxian utopian socialist ideas of economic cooperation and self-management. This, in turn, inspired the development of the concept of solidarity economy (*economia solidária*) (Singer, 2002). While reconnecting to the self-management ideal, these concepts aligned with the PT's shift to a non-radical, but still participatory, idea of public governance.

Providing an overview of the radical democratic foundations of Brazilian-designed participatory democracy in the limits of an article inevitably involves some degree of simplification. However, it allows me to argue that participatory democracy embodied elements of self-management socialism within the framework of post-1988 Brazil's liberal democratic constitutional order. The participatory provisions of the 1988 Constitution laid the legal bedrock for the creation of participatory institutions, such as participatory budgeting and the management council of public policies. Indeed, as argued so far, these participatory institutions were designed "at least originally with the council tradition in mind" (Lederman, 2018, p. 161). This throughline blatantly emerged in the PT's endorsement of a participatory and decentralist approach to democracy, which – through the party's involvement in the NCA – informed both the trajectory and outcomes of the intertwined processes of re-democratization and re-federalization.

3 The participatory and decentralist tendencies of Brazilian democracy

Besides being the foremost product of Brazil's transition to democracy, the Constitution of 1988 laid the framework for the establishment of participatory and decentralized governance system. The principle of popular sovereignty, according to which "[a]ll power emanates from the people, who exercise it by means of elected representatives or directly" (Article 1), underpins all provisions on public participation. The first constitutional reference to participation concerns urban and rural workers, who shall be granted "participation in the profits" and "in the management of the company" (Article 7(XI)). Article 10 envisages the participation of workers and employers in the "collegial bodies of government bodies" that deal with their interests. Through these provisions, the 1988 Constitution granted – at least in

principle – a somewhat vague recognition of workers’ self-management experiences. This outcome was the result of the advocacy efforts by left-wing parties – above all the PT – within the NCA,¹⁷ trade unions, and the so-called “workers lobby”, the Inter-Parliamentary Advisory Department (Costa, 2016).

The 1988 Constitution also laid the normative foundation for the establishment of collegial bodies for the participation of citizens or public service users in the decision-making processes across several public policy areas. The law, as stipulated in Article 37(para. 3), shall regulate “the direct and indirect forms of user participation in the government bodies and associated entities [public administration]”. According to Article 187, the agricultural policy is to be carried out with the participation of rural workers states. Article 193 compels state authorities to ensure “the participation of society in the “formulation [...] monitoring, control and evaluations process” of social policies. Social welfare, according to Article 194(VII), must be organized through a quadripartite management system, with “the participation of workers, employees, retirees, and the government [representatives] in the collegiate bodies”, substantiating the “democratic and decentralized character of administration”. Similarly, public health services and actions are integrated into a regionalized network that must pursue the “participation of the community” (Article 198(III)). Government actions in the area of social assistance must also be organized based on the “participation of the population [...] in the formulation of policies and in the control of actions taken at all levels” (Article 204(II)). Education shall be provided based on the principle of “democratic administration” (Article 206(VI)). The national cultural system shall be organized in a “decentralized and participative manner”, as a “collaborative regime”, whereby federal entities and society engage in “a process of joint management and promotion of cultural policies that is “democratic and permanent” (Article 216-A). The national culture system is also grounded in a “democratized decision-making processes, with social participation and control” (Article 216-A(X)). In addition to these rather general provisions, Law no. 8142 of 28 December 1990 ‘On the Participation of the Community in the Management of the Unified Health System’, Law no. 8742 of 7 December 1993 ‘On Social Assistance’, and Law no. 8069 of 13 July 1990 ‘On the Statute of Children and Teenagers, and Other Provisions’ mandated the institutionalization of collegial-based participatory mechanisms in the areas of health, social assistance, and children and teenagers. Moreover, the 1988 Constitution set the framework for the large-scale implementation of participatory budgeting, envisioning the “cooperation of representative associations” in municipal planning (Article 29(XII)). It thus granted constitutional relevance to the already existing council-based participatory initiatives in local public budgeting. Article 44 of the Charter of Municipal Government (*Estatuto da Cidade*), introduced by Law no. 10.257 of 10 July 2001, made “participatory budgeting governance” a mandatory condition for the adoption of the pluriannual municipal planning (see Avritzer, 2010).

Alongside public participation, decentralization is a distinctive feature of post-1988 Brazilian democratic governance system. The commitment to ending the military-backed centralist authoritarian regime led many within the NCA – especially the PT – to view decentralization as equivalent to democratization (Franzese and Abrucio, 2009, p. 31), and as an essential step toward the restauration of federalism (Souza, 2005). It was in this spirit that Article 1 of the 1988 Constitution made municipalities constituent units of the federation, granting local governments increased political, administrative, and financial autonomous powers (Souza and Grin, 2021; Souza, 2016). From 1988 onwards, decentralization became “synonymous with municipalization of public policies”, being a tangible output of the intertwined processes of re-federalization and re-democratization (Souza and Grin, 2021, p. 89). Municipal autonomy enabled local governments to express their capacity of “self-government, self-organization, law-making, and self-administration” (Resende, 2008, p. 14). The downscaling of decision-making manifested not only through the empowerment of local governments but also through the creation of institutions of civic engagement in local governance (Arretche, 1996). Under the constitutional framework of 1988, a “concerted form of cooperative federalism and participatory decentralization”

¹⁷ The PT, the PDT, two communist parties and the progressive wing of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (*Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro*).

opened the way to the devolution of decision-making powers to local governments, organized civil society, local communities and ordinary citizens (Nogueira, 1997, p. 19).

Although a product of Brazil's constituent process, the governance patterns illustrated by the 1988 Constitution retrieves several elements of the PT's participatory and municipalist conception of democracy and federalism. Since its foundation, the PT consistently treated decentralization and public participation as closely interlinked concepts, turning the municipalities it governed into laboratories of subnational participatory democracy. For the PT, embedding popular participation in the new constitutional framework required the multiplication of decision-making *fora*; hence its vocal support for decentralization and re-federalization. References to decentralization are recurrent in the resolutions adopted by the party's national meetings during the 1980s and 1990s. Its "mobilization" within the NCA was oriented toward the "radical democratization of the State [*sic*] and society", which entailed achieving "popular control" over the government through "decentralizing and decondensing state power" (PT, 2023a [1986], p. 331). Political-administrative decentralization was conceived as the pathway to advance urban and rural reforms and boost the localization of popular power (PT, 2023a [1989], p. 514). Like public accountability, transparency, and responsiveness, public participation was considered unachievable through "ultra-centralized administrations" (PT, 2023a [1990], p. 569). For the PT, the prerequisites of citizen participation in government were the "decentralization of the power of the State [*sic*]" and the creation of neighborhood-level "spaces of participation", with specific competences and resources (*ibid.*). Participation was considered "a style of play politics, which can only develop in a participatory and decentralized state" (*ibid.*, p. 570). As such, decentralization was part of the party's effort to offer an alternative to both real socialism and social democracy; one in which socialism is "synonymous with radicalization of democracy" and where politics is centered on "crowd-sourced initiatives" (PT, 2023a [1991], pp. 606-607). The variant of socialism preached by the PT was "humanistic and democratic" and deeply committed to the "decentralization of power" (*ibid.*, p. 607). It is no wonder that the PT called for a redefinition of the federal fiscal arrangement to allocate more resources to lower levels of government (PT, 2023b [1999], p. 63).

As argued so far, the "*a priori* decentralist" federalist and radical democratic views of the PT found great correspondence in the governance fabric outlined by the Constitution of 1988 (King, 1982, p. 51). By anchoring public participation within the multi-tiered governance system of Brazil's municipalist federal framework, the Constitution of 1988 evidently drew from the radical democratic precepts of the early PT. As I illustrate, decentralization and public participation constituted key elements of the party's radical democratic program and harkened back to the bottom-up efforts of democratizing state-society and productive relations that preceded full-scale re-democratization. Against the background of the transition to democracy, decentralization functioned as a power-deconcentrating force within re-federalization, multiplying decision-making settings and enhancing democratization across all tiers of government. The constitutional charter anchored the PT's claims for citizen participation in government within a stable constitutional form. These claims were accommodated through the empowerment of local governments and the creation of institutions for the engagement of non-governmental actors and citizens in decision-making, shaping an increasingly inclusive and participatory governance system.

Conclusions

After more than three and a half decades since Brazil's return to democracy, identifying the foundations of participatory democracy and the driving forces behind the institutionalization of public participation in the country's governance system remains an ongoing effort. In this paper, I align with economist Ricardo Tranjan's (2015, p. 216) in considering Brazil's participatory democracy-building process as the outcome of "a series of incremental steps toward broader political participation taking place throughout the twentieth century". I argue that a *long durée* approach to the study of participatory democracy in Brazil should take precedence over research oriented toward its replication elsewhere in the world.

Participatory institutions – such as participatory budgeting and the management councils of public policies – are indeed the product of a broad ensemble of radical democratic ideas and experiences that predated the nationwide, state-driven transition to democracy. As I argue in this paper, this ensemble includes experiences of workplace self-management and neighborhood-level popular self-government, which represent both the antecedents of PT-backed popular councils and institutionalized collegial-based participatory institutions. No research taking Brazil as a reference should therefore neglect the radical democratic heritage that participatory institutions embody.

This paper's inquiry into the ideational roots of present-day participatory institutions supports the argument that each institutional phenomenon should be studied in relation to the political ideas specific to the territory and culture from which it originated. Greater attention should also be paid to the organizational paradigms that shape each country's governance system. It is only through such efforts of historicization and contextualization that one can pin down the societal forces and ideas that turned Brazil into a laboratory – and, consequently, a reference – for democratic innovations. With Brazil being one of the world's largest and most populous federal democracies, this inquiry ultimately aims to bring more critical perspectives into the debate on the convergence points between federal and participatory-deliberative democracy theories. Despite its advances, the study of such convergences remains in an embryonic stage and can be enriched with empirical evidence from the Global South. Framing Brazil's participatory institutions as tangible manifestations of its conjoint processes of re-democratization and re-federalization corroborates the argument that such institutions are forms of “non-governmental autonomy” or “decentralization of authority [...] that increase the expression of pluralism and diversity” (Alessi and Trettel, 2025, p. 2). The decentralist tendencies of post-1988 Brazil's federal democracy turned it into the most “suitable framework for the institutionalization of participatory democracy” (Sonnicksen, 2025, p. 113). In turn, the institutionalization of citizen participation in public policymaking strengthened the downscaling and pluralization of decision-making processes, enhancing the participatory and decentralized character of its multi-tiered governance system – and, by extension, the republican spirit of federal governance itself.

More broadly, reconsidering participatory institutions as the progeny of radical democratic ideas and experiences has important implications for the study of participatory democracy in Brazil. It contributes to debunking misconceptions and challenging misinterpretations that, across various disciplines, have tended to de-historicize or deculturize Brazil's experience with participatory democracy. Reconsidering the influence of radical democratic ideas and practices on Brazil's road toward participatory democracy calls for a more accurate understanding of the ideational continuity between contemporary participatory governance institutions and self-management – the core organizational tenet of unorthodox Marxism and classical social anarchism. As I argue throughout the paper, this continuity is exemplified by the PT's conceptual and strategic overlap between decentralist and radical democratic views on federalism and democracy, as well as by the inseparability of federal restructuring and participatory democracy-building. Accordingly, considering participatory institutions as outcomes of the intertwined processes of re-democratization and re-federalization requires scholars to recognize the said line of continuity when analyzing the relationship between federalism and participatory-deliberative democracy in Brazil, as well as in other contexts.

Ultimately, shedding further light on the historical-philosophical foundations of Brazil's experience with participatory democracy can enhance scholarly understanding of the complexities inherent in Brazilian democracy. It highlights the need for a more critical assessment of the forces that, case by case, shape the development of participatory institutional designs and governance patterns. In doing so, it prompts federalism and participatory-deliberative democracy scholarships to better assess the meanings and scopes ascribed to federalization and democratization processes – and, by extension, to federalism and democracy – across different cultures, regions, intellectual histories, and political traditions.

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