

## 1 Introduction

Democracy in Latin America has been challenged in recent years. In 2018 the downgrading of Venezuela and Nicaragua to autocracies led Latinobarómetro to call that an *annus horribilis* (terrible year) for democracy in the region (Lagos, 2018: 1), and the political landscape has only further deteriorated since. At least three other countries have flirted with some form of authoritarianism, namely, Brazil, El Salvador, and Haiti. Bolivia saw a president forced to resign by the military, Peru had three presidents within a single week, Haiti was left without president after the incumbent was murdered, Mexico's president called a national referendum to prosecute his predecessors, and Nicaragua held presidential elections without political competition. At the same time, and despite a deadly pandemic that required social distancing, citizens have taken to the streets in nearly all countries of the region. In Colombia and Nicaragua, they were brutally repressed by the police. In a Guatemala washed by hurricanes, however, their actions led to suspension of a budget that cut health spending. And in Chile, they managed to elect the world's first gender-parity constitutional assembly.

The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 made things even more complicated. It tested the resilience of political institutions and the limits of state capacity, while also deepening long-standing problems such as political instability, economic crisis, and social inequality. Dissatisfaction with democracy has risen to 70 percent, “deepening the crisis of representation” in the region (Latinobarómetro, 2021: 8). Nonetheless, while at the onset of the pandemic scholars were concerned that elections and protests would diminish with the spread of the virus and hence undermine Latin America's main mechanisms of accountability (Murillo, 2020), with some delay almost all planned elections were held, and citizens have protested everywhere evidencing a demand for further democratic legitimacy (Murillo, 2021).

Civil society's role was nonetheless “not simply confined to being the locus of protest,” since civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a critical role in alleviating the impacts of the pandemic and an “explosion of civic activism” was felt also in other arenas (International IDEA, 2021: 34 and 11). Those arenas are institutions, processes, and mechanisms of citizen participation that have spread across Latin America over more than three decades: the so-called democratic innovations.

After most of Latin America transitioned to democracy in the late 1980s, many countries began to experiment with new institutional designs that included citizens and CSOs in the policy cycle. The flagship of what only later became known as “democratic innovations” was participatory budgeting,

introduced in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in late 1989. This process of enabling citizens to set expenditure priorities for local governments quickly spread to hundreds of cities across Latin America. Its success stemmed not only from its initial achievements in terms of inclusion and equality (Abers, 1998) but also from the fact that it demonstrated that citizens can indeed play a role in the policy process and may thereby improve democracy (Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022).

While participatory budgeting became undoubtedly the most well-known democratic innovation created in Latin America since the third wave of democracy landed on the region's shores, it is far from the only one – let alone the most impactful one. Since 1990, the region has undergone a prolific surge in new forms of participation beyond elections, associations, and protests. Thousands of different participatory institutions, processes, and mechanisms have emerged throughout nearly all Latin American countries. In some of them, the adoption of participatory institutions became mandatory, especially at the subnational level (McNulty, 2019). Altogether, democratic innovations have engaged millions of citizens and mobilized thousands of CSOs, in addition to having impacted hundreds of public policies at the national and subnational levels.

Although their relevance for a comprehensive account of democracy in Latin America is undisputable, these institutions, processes, and mechanisms of citizen participation are still little known, especially outside of the countries where they took root. With few notable exceptions, international scholarship has focused mostly on participatory budgeting. Fewer works have been devoted to other institutions such as, for example, housing councils (Donaghy, 2013), water management councils (Abers & Keck, 2013), community-managed schools (Altschuler & Corrales, 2013), national public policy conferences (Pogrebinschi & Samuels, 2014), health councils (Falleti & Cunial, 2018), prior consultations (Falleti & Riofrancos, 2018), planning councils (Mayka, 2019), and development councils (McNulty, 2019). Regardless of the immense contributions made by these and other works, existing research consists mostly of case studies of local-level participatory institutions, which are seldom comparative, and therefore provides just a partial account of democratic experimentation with citizen participation in Latin America.

Without the full picture, many questions remain unanswered, and the roles of these participatory innovations in democracy in Latin America remain understudied. What is innovative about so-called democratic innovations? What kinds of participation do they entail? Why have these participatory innovations evolved in Latin America? What types of democratic innovations exist, and how diverse are they across countries? These are only a few of the many

questions that cannot be answered by case studies of individual, small-scale participatory institutions.

I tackle these questions by providing a comprehensive account of democratic experimentation with citizen participation in Latin America over thirty years. I present the first large-N cross-country study of democratic innovations to date. It draws on my own original dataset that comprises 3,744 institutions, processes, and mechanisms of citizen participation implemented at both national and subnational levels in 18 countries in the region between 1990 and 2020 (Pogrebinschi, 2021a). The Innovations for Democracy in Latin America (LATINNO) dataset, whose methodology will be presented in the next section, is the first systematic endeavor to map, measure, and compare a large number of democratic innovations across Latin America.

I make three contributions to comparative politics and democratic theory. First, I introduce a pragmatist, problem-driven approach to democratic innovations, which challenges the conventional understanding that such innovations are primarily designed to increase citizen participation in decision-making. Countering this common understanding, I claim that citizen participation is not an end in itself and that democratic innovations are not merely designed to increase it. Instead, I argue that citizen participation is a *means* to achieve an end, namely the enhancement of democracy. Relying on the LATINNO data, I contend that democratic innovations that have evolved in Latin America in the last thirty years have not been designed simply to increase the number of citizens who participate in policy processes. Their purpose has rather been to enhance democracy by addressing specific problems that hinder it, and to do so *by means of* citizen participation.

Grounded in the data and pragmatism's assumption that "problem-solving refers to collective processes in which the settings of ends and the devising of means are inextricably intertwined" (Frega, 2019: 19), I argue that the democratic innovations that evolved in Latin America between 1990 and 2020 disclose four primary *means* of citizen participation, namely deliberation, citizen representation, digital engagement, and direct voting. I claim that those means of participation in democratic innovations combine with different *ends* according to the problem(s) they seek to address. Based on an examination of the design of democratic innovations and their stated aims, I contend that those *ends* are accountability, responsiveness, rule of law, social equality, and political inclusion.

While those five ends of democratic innovations have been inferred from the 3,744 cases in the LATINNO dataset, they reflect some known dimensions of measurements of the quality of democracy, or what Morlino (2011) calls "democratic qualities." I claim that democratic innovations aim to enhance

democracy by seeking to enhance at least one of its five dimensions or “qualities.” The five ends serve thus as criteria against which further studies may assess the impact of democratic innovations on the quality of democracy. I conceptualize the means and ends as “data containers” (Sartori, 2009 [1975]), that is, defined and categorized empirical facts. Hence, the ends do not reflect a set of functions or normative values. Instead, my pragmatic approach relies on the empirical reciprocal determination of means of citizen participation and ends of democratic innovations. Drawing on the data, I show that democratic innovations have been designed over the last thirty years combining the four means and five ends with one another depending on the problems each specific design has explicitly intended to address. I identify the most frequent problems related to each of the five ends, suggesting that they can be related to three known challenges faced by democracy in Latin America: deficits of representation, (un)rule of law, and inequality.

Second, I propose the first typology of democratic innovations based on a large-N dataset of cases evolved at both national and subnational levels across eighteen countries for a period of thirty years. Previous attempts to classify democratic innovations relied on literature review or on a small number of case studies originating mostly from the global North (Smith, 2009; Geissel, 2013; Elstub & Escobar, 2019). Drawing on 3,744 cases from Latin America, my typology uses the four means of participation (deliberation, citizen representation, digital engagement, and direct voting) as categorical variables that enable the differentiation of 20 subtypes of democratic innovations. Typologies are crucial for comparative research, as well as for rigorous concept formation and measurement (Collier & Levitsky, 2009). Classifying democratic innovations based on their designs is essential for making them comparable and for enabling conceptual clarity, that is, refining the concept of democratic innovation by increasing analytical differentiation. Moreover, the twenty subtypes of democratic innovations devised in my typology reflect “a menu of institutional alternatives” that can “serve to guide and discipline efforts to improve the quality of democratic governance” (Fung, 2012: 614). The diversity of institutional designs that I present in this Element can hopefully contribute to altering the diagnosis that the field of democratic innovations has been built predominantly around studies of participatory budgeting (Ryan, 2021).

I also seek to analytically refine the concept of democratic innovations, proposing a definition that is based on both a large-N set of cases and on empirical evidence from the global South, that is, from Latin America. I take issue with the specialized literature to claim that democratic innovations are not restricted to participatory institutions. Instead, I argue that there are three kinds of democratic innovations, namely institutions, processes, and mechanisms.

I also oppose the view that democratic innovations are state-sanctioned institutions, and rather I claim that civil society and international organizations (as well as private stakeholders) are also promoters of democratic innovations. Moreover, I call into question the assumption, present in established definitions (Smith, 2009), that democratic innovations are designed to increase citizen participation in decision-making processes. Alternatively, I claim that there are four moments of innovation and that citizen participation, regardless of whether it results in a political decision, can take place in all four stages of the policy cycle, namely agenda-setting, policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Taking these empirical aspects into account, I define democratic innovations as institutions, processes, and mechanisms whose end it is to enhance democracy by means of citizen participation in at least one stage of the policy cycle.

Third, I offer a comparative account of democratic experimentation with citizen participation in Latin America from 1990 to 2020. I argue that five aspects facilitated the creation of democratic innovations in the region, namely democratization, constitutionalization, decentralization, the left turn, and digitalization. I do not claim that these are the causes of or necessary conditions for the implementation of democratic innovations. Rather, these aspects indicate a favorable context specifically found in Latin America throughout the three decades studied in which democratic innovations grew in the region. The analysis of cases created each year across eighteen countries over the thirty years discloses, among other things, a trend I discuss in the conclusion of this Element: since the end of the left turn around 2015, deliberation promoted by governments has decreased in Latin America, while digital engagement advanced by civil society indicates a new path for democratic innovation in the region.

While the large-N cross-country study presented in this Element fills a gap in a field dominated by case studies of few democratic innovations which are seldom of a comparative nature, large-N comparative research is not free of shortcomings. This becomes clear in the analysis of impact that I present in Section 5. While a categorization of means and ends of 3,744 democratic innovations in 18 countries is only feasible through a documentary analysis of their designs and stated goals, the assessment of innovations' impact (e.g., the extent to which their ends are achieved) is limited by lack of available qualitative evidence, which results in many missing pieces of information.

The pragmatist approach to democratic innovations introduced in this Element builds on concepts originated from pragmatist philosophy, in particular John Dewey. A problem-solving approach grounded in the interaction of means and ends is one of the basic tenets of Dewey's thought. Scholars who applied

pragmatism to democracy converge on the centrality of an experimental process of institutional innovation aimed at solving problems (Knight & Johnson, 2011; Frega, 2019) and pursuing what Dewey called “ends-in-view” (1938), which would “push people to develop creative strategies for problem solving” (Ansell, 2011: 84), “motivate democratic reform efforts” (Fung, 2012: 611), and ultimately lead to “radical reform as a species of transformative politics” (Unger, 1998:18).

Democratic experimentalism, however, entails not only institutional innovation as problem solving aimed at achieving desirable consequences, but also underscores fallibility and revisability as important aspects of democracy. This makes pragmatism an even more suitable perspective to analyze democratic innovations, especially in Latin America. Latin America’s democratic experimentalism, or what I earlier called the region’s pragmatic democracy (Pogrebinschi, 2013; Pogrebinschi, 2018), illustrates well both a continuous process of experimentation with institutional designs and its inherent tentative and fallible nature. While thousands of democratic innovations have been designed in the region to address various important public problems, they have many times failed to solve those very problems. Likewise, the democratic ends purportedly pursued by democratic innovations may sometimes prove to be just a window-dressing strategy. Nonetheless, this does not imply that the institutions, processes, and mechanisms of citizen participation are any less valuable for democracy – especially in a region where the main institutions of representative democracy are themselves routinely deemed flawed or defective.

This Element is organized in six sections, including this introduction. Section 2 presents the data on which this Element draws, painting the empirical landscape that supports the claims made throughout. After explaining the methodology behind the data, I discuss five aspects that played a role on the experimentation with democratic innovations in Latin America between 1990 and 2020. Section 3 presents the concept of democratic innovation that lies at the core of the analysis contained in this Element. It engages with the specialized scholarship and relies on empirical data in order to argue that citizen participation is a means of innovation, and not its end. Section 4 proposes a typology of democratic innovations based on the four means of participation – deliberation, citizen representation, digital engagement, and direct voting – that have evolved in Latin America since 1990. I briefly introduce each of the twenty subtypes of democratic innovations that can be distinguished across the region. Section 5 expands on the problem-driven nature of democratic innovations, relating the problems that innovations seek to address with five interrelated ends: accountability, responsiveness, rule of law, social equality, and political inclusion. This section also depicts how means and ends combine to address

concrete problems and presents data on the impact of democratic innovations. The sixth and final section claims that regardless of their inability to hinder recent democratic backslides in Latin America, democratic innovations, as the utmost expression of the region's democratic experimentalism, have been crucial in calling attention to new ways of addressing public problems through citizen participation. It also points out recent trends in the data that reveal possible directions that democratic innovation might take in the future.

## 2 The Empirical Landscape

Democratic innovations have been expanding in Latin America since the end of the twentieth century. During the 1990s, they were pushed by democratization, constitutional lawmaking, and decentralization processes. With the new century, the left turn was the main trigger of democratic innovation, with left-leaning political parties unleashing a new wave of institutions, processes, and mechanisms that sought to include citizens in policymaking. After 2010, but especially since 2015, as most left governments lost power, digitalization has increasingly played a crucial role, strengthening civil society and potentially starting a new era of democratic innovation in Latin America, one in which the state no longer holds the reins in the expansion of citizen participation.

This section presents the empirical landscape on which this Element is grounded. It traces the expansion of democratic innovations in Latin America between 1990 and 2020, while arguing that five overlapping aspects have created a favorable context to citizen participation. Building such a narrative, which is not linear for all eighteen countries, allows me to introduce the data upon which my overall analysis is based. I start by explaining the methodology behind the LATINNO dataset.

### 2.1 Comparing Democratic Innovations

I designed the LATINNO dataset with the intention of compiling measurable and comparable data on democratic innovations in Latin America, which could provide empirical answers to contemporary debates on political theory and comparative politics regarding the role of citizen participation in democracy. The dataset is the main result of an almost six-year research project (2015–2021), which involved thirty-two research assistants under my coordination.<sup>1</sup> It comprises 3,744 democratic innovations implemented between 1990 and 2020 in 18 countries, namely Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa

<sup>1</sup> All data can be browsed in the project's website ([www.latinno.net](http://www.latinno.net)), and the full dataset is available at the SowiDataNet/datorium data repository (<https://doi.org/10.7802/2278>). See Pogrebinschi 2021a.

Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Panama, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.<sup>2</sup>

The LATINNO dataset was built considering single cases of democratic innovations as the independent variable. It relied on a specific concept of democratic innovation and my pragmatist analytical framework, both of which will be discussed in later sections. Democratic innovations were defined according to three criteria, all of which had to be matched for an innovation to be considered democratic and hence included as a case in the dataset:

- (1) Citizen Participation: Democratic innovations must involve citizen engagement, which can take any form that fits the definition of one (or more) of four means of participation, namely, deliberation, citizen representation, direct voting, and digital engagement.
- (2) Democracy Enhancement: Democratic innovations must be designed with the aim to enhance democracy, addressing one (or more) of five ends, namely accountability, responsiveness, rule of law, social equality, and political inclusion.
- (3) Impact on Policy Cycle: Democratic innovations must be designed in such a way as to enable citizens and/or civil society organizations (CSOs) to engage in one (or more) stages of the policy cycle, namely: agenda setting, formulation, implementation, and evaluation.

The LATINNO dataset was built after a pilot project during which an initial collection of about 350 cases from six countries enabled the refinement of both the dataset's analytical unit (democratic innovations) and framework (means of participation and ends of innovations). As it shall become clearer in Section 4, I understand those concepts as "data containers" (Sartori, 2009 [1975]), that is, refined empirical facts that have been quantitatively and qualitatively defined and categorized. Although I departed from democratic theory (scholarship on participation, deliberation, and democratic innovations) and comparative politics (literature on quality of democracy and Latin America's politics and society) to frame the working concepts and analytical framework, it was only after this pilot stage that, based on the initial empirical evidence collected, I refined the definitions that oriented the search and identification of cases (in particular, those of means and ends), as well as the variables that compose the codebook (see Pogrebinschi, 2021b). As more data for a larger number of countries were collected throughout the three stages of the project (see Pogrebinschi, 2021c:15), I continued to further refine concepts and update variables until

<sup>2</sup> The initial idea was to include all twenty independent countries of Latin America, but research in Cuba and Haiti has proven difficult, and the absence of enough and reliable data for those two countries implied leaving them aside to ensure the general comparability of the dataset.

after the first version of the dataset was released in mid-2017. This continuous work – from concepts to empirical evidence and back – aimed to improve the accuracy and hence the validity of the data, as well as ensure that the dataset’s analytical framework was grounded in empirical evidence and not in normative concepts.

My definition of democratic innovations as *institutions, processes, and mechanisms whose end it is to enhance democracy by means of citizen participation in at least one stage of the policy cycle* has thus resulted from the very process of construction of the dataset. It was only after the first version of the dataset was completed that it became clear from the empirical evidence collected, for example, that democratic innovations were of three distinct kinds, namely, institutions, processes, and mechanisms. The framing of such evidence-based classification led to the posterior insertion of a new variable (kind of innovation) in the codebook and the recoding of all cases to include this additional information. Another example of this method of going back and forth between concepts and data was the inclusion of rule of law as the fifth end of innovations. It was only after the accumulation of a significant number of potential cases whose design aimed at engaging citizens in matters of, for example, law enforcement, conflict resolution, peace processes, public security, and protection of human rights, that I decided to include this category in the codebook and have the respective body of empirical evidence coded and integrated into the dataset.

In order to ensure comparability across cases, all three criteria comprised in the concept of democratic innovations had to be simultaneously present in each case included in the dataset. Hence, evidence of participatory practices that did not match the other two criteria (democracy enhancement and impact on policy cycle) was discarded. This implied leaving out of the dataset several initiatives (for example, hundreds of CSO projects devoted to developing citizens’ political skills or to empower groups) simply because they lacked an institutional design potentially able to impact the policy cycle or had no clear goal to improve democracy. Likewise, initiatives explicitly designed to enhance democracy and have an impact on public policies were discarded if there was no actual citizen participation involved. That happened to some initiatives carried out only by the staff of a CSO, without actual engagement of the citizenry.

The choice of criteria for case selection also ensured the “democratic” character of innovations included in the dataset. The aim was not to collect all kinds of participatory experiences (i.e., those that simply include citizens), but rather only those that by design explicitly sought to enhance democracy by improving at least one of the five ends. According with these criteria, the dataset includes innovations implemented in countries that were downgraded to

dictatorships (such as Nicaragua and Venezuela in 2018). The specialized scholarship has demonstrated how democratic innovations in authoritarian countries may strengthen authoritarian rule or serve as a leading edge of democratization (He & Warren, 2011). Keeping track of those cases is relevant for this reason, and also to understand the role of civil society in opposing authoritarianism through participatory innovations.

The LATINNO dataset aims to reveal and underscore the diversity of institutional designs of democratic innovations across Latin America, instead of compiling a full inventory of every place where the same democratic innovation has been implemented within all eighteen countries. Given that several participatory institutions have been adopted across thousands of municipalities within a single country (for instance, health councils in Brazil and development councils in Guatemala) or hundreds of times within a single city (for instance, community councils in Caracas, Venezuela), it would be impossible to retrieve information for each existing case, much less to cover so many countries (eighteen) over a long period of time (thirty years). Thus, I chose to prioritize the diversity of institutional designs, and only differentiate similar cases within single countries when the rules according to which an institution, process, or mechanism was organized were indeed different.

Hence, the dataset does not include, for example, local health councils implemented in each of Brazil's 5,570 cities as separate cases in the aggregate data, but as a single instance in the Brazil subdataset. As for participatory institutions with similar institutional designs but relevant differences in their conception and organization (for instance, Brazil's national public policy conferences on diverse policy areas), cases have been coded separately. Individual coding has also been done for similar participatory institutions (such as referenda, plebiscites, or popular recalls) that have not been adopted or implemented too many times within single countries. The number of replications of a given democratic innovation within a country was assigned in a specific variable.

Each democratic innovation included in the dataset has been carefully described and coded for forty-three variables designed to understand the innovation's context, institutional design, and impact. These variables were initially developed in the pilot stage of the project based on their theoretical interest and were gradually adjusted to better reflect the empirical data. *Context variables* capture the place and moment in which democratic innovations were first created, their duration, the political parties involved, and their ideological orientation. *Institutional design variables* reflect formal features of democratic innovations, such as who created them, the type of participants and how they were selected, the level and scope of implementation, the extent to which they