



# DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN BRAZIL, COLOMBIA, AND URUGUAY: Can these Platforms Improve Democracy?

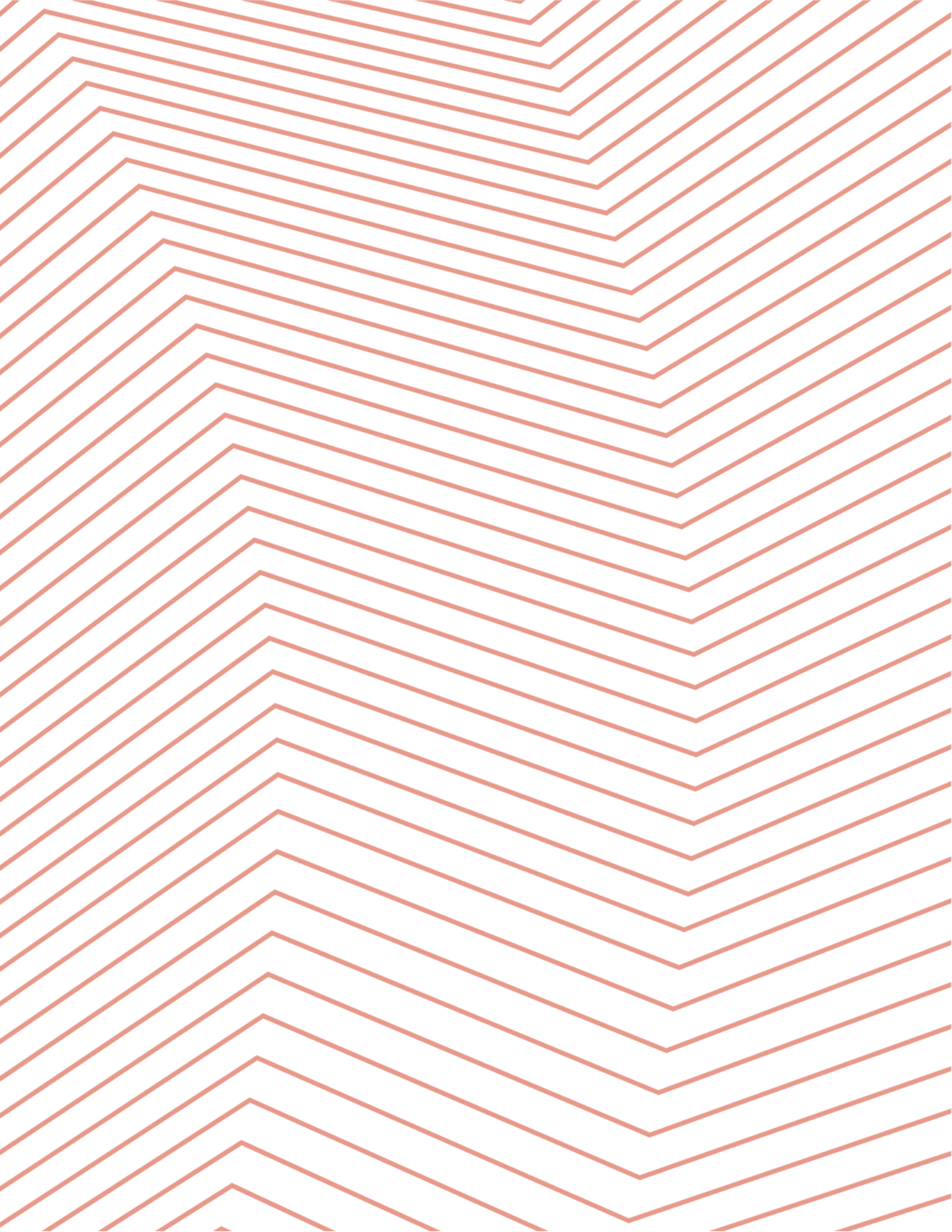
CAPSTONE PROJECT

Elisabeth Rose Leonard | Manrique Sandoval



**OAS** | School of  
GOVERNANCE

**ie**  
SCHOOL OF  
GLOBAL &  
PUBLIC AFFAIRS



# Digital Platforms and Civic Engagement in Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay:

Can these Platforms Improve Democracy?

---

A joint research project between the OAS Department of  
Effective Public Management (OAS/DEPM) and IE School  
for Global and Public Affairs (IE SGPA)

# CREDITS

## **Luis Almagro Lemes**

Secretary General  
Organization of American States (OAS/SG)

## **Ambassador James Lambert**

Secretary for Hemispheric Affairs (OAS/SHA)

## **María Fernanda Trigo**

Director for Department for Effective Public Management (OAS/DEPM)

## **Technical Supervisors**

### **Nina Weisheimeier**

Associate Professor at IE School for Global and Public Affairs(IE SGPA)

### **Silverio Zebral Filho**

Head, Government Innovation Unit (OAS/DEPM)

Academic and Research Head, OAS School of Governance (OAS/SG)

## **IE SGPA Capstone Team**

Elisabeth Rose Leonard

Manrique Sandoval

## **Design**

### **Nicole Levoyer**

OAS/DEPM Consultant

## **Acknowledgments**

The OAS General Secretariat acknowledges the financial support offered by the **Embassy of the State of Qatar in Washington-DC** for the preparation and publication of this report.



**Washington DC, August 2023**

# TABLE OF CONTENT

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>08</b>
<b>I. Digital platforms, civic engagement, and direct democracy forums</b>	<b>09</b>
Participatory budgeting, the case of Porto Alegre	09
Citizens assemblies, Iceland's 2011 Constitutional Council	09
<hr/>	
<b>II. Digital agendas of Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay</b>	<b>11</b>
<hr/>	
<b>III. Is digitization the way forward? The supporting arguments</b>	<b>12</b>
<hr/>	
<b>IV. Six digital platforms in Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay</b>	<b>13</b>
<hr/>	
<b>V. Can these digital platforms improve democracy through civic engagement? The skeptical argument</b>	<b>17</b>

<b>VI. Democracy in Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay</b>	<b>19</b>
<hr/>	
<b>VII. Conclusion and recommendations</b>	<b>23</b>
Recommendations for the OAS	23
<hr/>	
<b>References</b>	<b>25</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>29</b>
Interview number one transcript: Professor David Farrell, Dublin City University, Ireland.	29
Interview number two transcript: Professor Jane Suiter, Dublin City University, Ireland.	30
Interview number three: Professor Eiríkur Bergmann, Bifrost University, Iceland.	32
Interview number four: Professor David Altman, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.	33
Interview number five: Professor Ricardo García Vargas (Venezuela), King Juan Carlos University, Spain.	35

# Digital Platforms and Civic Engagement in Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay:

Can these Platforms Improve Democracy?

---



# INTRODUCTION

Leading organizations involved in the measurement of democracy, such as the V-Dem Institute (2020) and Freedom House (2021), have been sounding the alarm about the state of democracy worldwide. Not only has the number of autocracies increased, but there has been a deterioration of democratic institutions in democratic regimes. A key feature of this process of autocratization is the use of new technologies to influence public discourse and promote political polarization. For example, Brazilian populist leaders have effectively used social media platforms to disparage the opposition and traditional media (da Silva, 2020, Cesarino, 2020). If autocratic-leaning governments have been able to use new technologies to advance their objectives, can democratic governments do the same?

One idea that has become increasingly popular is the use of digital platforms to enhance formal channels of interaction between governments and citizens. Could these platforms be used to support, complement or even improve citizen engagement in democratic systems? And if so, could digital-driven civic engagement strengthen democratic institutions, thus slowing the autocratization trend?

With this in mind, the purpose of this report is to examine the role of digital platforms in Latin American democracies by focusing on three countries in particular: Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay. There are two main reasons for choosing these countries, one related to the digital environments and the other related to the status of democracy. First, Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay have been celebrated for their digital agendas by international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). These praises will be discussed in section II of this report. Second, after looking at the state of democracy in Latin America we chose two countries that are representative of the downward trends that will be addressed in section VI; Brazil represents a country in clear democratic decline and Colombia represents a country in moderate democratic decline. Uruguay will be used as the control component in this research to examine how Brazil and Colombia fare compared with a more stable democracy.

This report will be divided into seven sections. The first will set the stage by describing important democratic definitions that are necessary for understanding the role of digital platforms in democratic systems. The second section will delve into the digital agendas of our three countries to examine the digital environments that these platforms are operating in. The third section will discuss the arguments in favor of digital transformation. The fourth will identify six platforms that are operating in our three countries. Next, we move onto the fifth section, which will discuss the counter arguments against digital transformation, supported by interviews that were conducted with experts in the field of democracy. The sixth section will further engage with the remarks made by the experts using data on the state of democracy of the three countries, respectively. The final section will be our conclusion, which is that digital platforms can be used as an additional tool for civic engagement, but they cannot replace the traditional methods of increasing the involvement of citizens in policy making practices. Along with our conclusion will be a list of recommendations for the Organization of American States (OAS) to engage as an international organization in the process of digital transformation in Latin America.





# I. DIGITAL PLATFORMS, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY FORUM

By **digital platforms** we mean online interfaces that are supported by public institutions, usually in collaboration with private organizations, to develop and facilitate new ways of civic engagement in policy making. **Civic engagement** is understood through the lens of political involvement, as an individual or collective action aimed at addressing issues of public concern through official political mechanisms (Adler and Goggin, 2005). The focus is on the relationship between the government (either national, regional, or local), and ordinary citizens (meaning those who do not hold public office) through official channels of transformative political participation (direct democracy forums: participatory budgeting, citizen's assemblies, mini publics etc.).

**Direct democracy** is an umbrella term that encompasses all democratic processes where citizens decide on policies and laws directly, instead of deciding who would represent them (Matsusaka, 2005). Now let's illustrate what some types of democracy forums look like using examples mentioned above:

## » Participatory budgeting, the case of Porto Alegre:

Starting in 1988, the city of Porto Alegre implemented the first participatory budgeting initiative in the world. The city was divided in 16 (later 17) budgetary regions, where citizens met at neighborhood, regional and thematic assemblies. Through a complicated process, they decided how to invest a pre-allocated budget by proposing small-size infrastructure and public services projects (Pimentel, 2013). Participation grew from less than 1.000 persons in 1.990 up to 40.000 in 1999. Many poorer and less educated citizens were able to influence public spending through civic engagement for the first time. For instance, by 1997 road building in the poorest neighborhoods had increased five-fold, and sewer and water connections reached 98% of the city's population, up from 75% before 1988 (Abers et al, 2018). After 2005, Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting entered a period of decline mainly due to lack of political commitment.

## » Citizens assemblies, Iceland's 2011 Constitutional Council:

The 2008 global recession plunged Iceland into a legitimacy and constitutional crisis. To solve it the country went through a process of constitutional reform that made extensive use of deliberative assemblies that were composed of randomly chosen citizens. This sparked a process of national debate that greatly influenced the national discourse and served a purpose in restabilizing legitimacy (Bergmann, 2016).

While few will argue that these kinds of direct democracy forums can replace representative democracy, they can play an important role as decision-making mechanisms. The basic hypothesis is that, through increased civic engagement, direct democracy can help improve, identify and address local issues, better resource allocation, increase government legitimacy, reduce popular discontent with democratic institutions, and even help nations through crises.

Direct democracy forums have explicit motivational, pedagogical, and behavioral components. If they are to achieve civic engagement, citizens have to "get interested, learn about and feel capable of participating in politics" (Andersen, 2021, p.61). The most successful initiatives are the ones designed to address these three areas, but in general direct democracy forums seek to offer participatory or deliberative mechanisms that are not based in political competition.

**Participatory and deliberative democracy** can be understood as two forms of direct democracy as they are both aimed at establishing new channels of political participation that go beyond the electoral process. Nonetheless, participatory and deliberative democracy should not be confused with each other. In the examples given above, participatory budgeting is often regarded as an example of participatory democracy, while citizens assemblies tend to emphasize more on the deliberative aspect. Authors like Peteman (2012), and Dacombe and Parvin (2021) have stressed the difference between the two, starting with the way they intend to improve democratic legitimacy. In participatory forums, legitimacy is obtained by extending participation to the most people possible, while in deliberative initiatives legitimacy is obtained through a reasoned deliberation process. In other words, participatory democracy is more interested in extensive forms of engagement and reaching the most people, while deliberative democracy is focused on deep forms of engagement, where a reduced number of citizens have regular face-to-face meetings to debate, explore different perspectives and try to reach a reasoned decision.

As a result, participatory democracy assumes the role of civic engagement is to aggregate, through scalable channels, opinions that have already been formed. For example, many local governments have popular participation initiatives in which citizens or civic organizations will put forward solutions for specific issues, and other citizens will vote on which solution they find the most compelling. In this way the decision-making process is on gathering and informing opinions rather than producing them.

By contrast, deliberative democracy is more interested in forming a collective opinion through a deliberative process. Its focus is not the aggregation of existing positions, but the creation of a new position through open debate. In participatory processes, citizens may or may not develop a sense of collectivity with other participants, since they are usually consulted as a group or represented by civil society organizations. However, in deliberative democracy, individual citizens have to know and understand each other to reach a common decision, which entails a group of participants that is smaller but more involved.

The importance of this difference cannot be overstated. The key characteristic of a deliberative process is that it depends on regular interaction between the participants, in a space where substantive discussion is facilitated. Leading authors like Farrell (2019) and Suiter (2020) have stressed the importance of informational resources and emotional capacity in deliberative initiatives. Both are key in enabling open dialogue, the first will provide accurate and updated information, and the second assumes that through regular interactions citizens will develop the empathy necessary to gauge how decisions affect other citizens.

Digital tools, such as platforms, have been created to move these democratic practices of deliberation and participation to an online environment as a way to increase civic engagement. With these concepts in mind, we now turn to examining the digital agendas of each of the selected countries to examine the democratic digital environments of our three case studies.



## II. DIGITAL AGENDAS OF BRAZIL, COLOMBIA, AND URUGUAY

Since 2001, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) has launched 11 UN E-Government Surveys to review and analyze the development of digitizing governments around the world and ultimately rank their progress. According to their reports, UNDESA argues that establishing digital agendas is a part of the 16th Sustainable Development Goal for 2030, which promotes peaceful, fair, and just societies. The survey argues that digitization allows governments to be more transparent, inclusive, accountable and effective (UN E-Government Survey 2020). Looking specifically at the three countries in this report, the survey ranks the digital development of e-governments in Brazil and Uruguay as “very high” in their E-Government Development Index (EGDI) and Colombia as “high”. Globally, Uruguay is ranked highest at 26 and Brazil and Colombia at 54th and 67th, respectively. This demonstrates that the three countries have made sustained progress in establishing “comprehensive national e-government strategies, the evolution of supportive legal frameworks, and high levels of cooperation with regional and international actors in relevant digital fields” (UN E-Government Survey 2020, p. 47).

Before examining specific digital platforms in Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay, it is important to understand the digital objectives of each country, which begins by discussing their digital agendas, also known as information and communication strategies (ICTs). In the most recent 2020 OECD report on digital transformation in Latin America, the digital agendas of our three countries have been praised for their ambitions to improve digital governance. Brazil’s *Estratégia Brasileira para a Transformação Digital* (Edigital), run by the Ministry of Science, Technology, Innovations and Communications, is focusing on two sets of objectives. The first is increasing ICT infrastructure throughout the country, as well as research and development, innovation, communication, digital education, and improving confidence in the digital environment. The second set is working towards digitizing the economy, citizen’s presence online, and government services (OECD Development Centre, 2020).

Meanwhile, Colombia’s *El Futuro Digital es de Todos* ICT Plan, led by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies, is striving to transform different sectors digitally, increasing digital social inclusion, improving ICT environments, and empowering households and citizens to navigate successfully in said environments (OECD Development Centre, 2020). Lastly, Uruguay’s *Agenda Digital*, spearheaded by the Agency for Electronic Government and Knowledge and Information Society, dependent on the Presidency of the Republic, focusses on inclusion through the development of digital skills, infrastructure investment, the digital economy, connectivity of a smart government, social wellbeing through innovation, and the management of information, particularly relating to the environment and emergency services (OECD Development Centre, 2020).

Due to these policy frameworks already put in place and the sustainable efforts of these three countries, an environment where digital platforms can be created and used has already been established in Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay.



### III. IS DIGITIZATION THE WAY FORWARD? THE SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS

Supporters of digitizing democratic processes, particularly participatory and deliberative mechanisms, assert that doing so is a new way for governments to modernize and increase their efficiency, accessibility and structure of public services. Furthermore, these platforms are argued to be a form of increasing transparency since governments are often working with private companies rather than just public agencies (Digital Future Society, 2019). This is especially true in improving public investment transparency and decreasing public corruption, two issues that Latin America struggles with, according to a discussion paper published by the Inter-American Development Bank in 2018. This is mainly done by increased oversight of the public sector due to information and timelines being more readily available for the private sector and average citizens to examine and comment upon.

Additional arguments in favor of digital transformation is the possibility that citizens are able to give inputs on policy proposals online, which creates a new channel of communication with the public sector (Khan et al, 2018). Digital platforms are one way of not only increasing transparency, but also citizen participation (Ahmed et al, 2020). Some scholars have noted that the increase of citizen participation can be directly linked to the rise of communication technologies (Matsusaka, 2005). Creating new channels for citizens to participate in policy making is also seen as a way to create spaces for marginalized or disadvantaged groups to voice their opinions and concerns through methods that were previously unavailable to them (Kneuer, 2016). With these arguments of support in mind, we move onto examining six digital platforms in our three countries.



## IV. SIX DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN BRAZIL, COLOMBIA, AND URUGUAY

To delve deeper into what types of digital tools are being used in Latin America, we identified six digital platforms (two per Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay) to discuss their objectives and services they provide to citizens. Therefore, these platforms can be linked to the countries' digital agendas of open government. We specifically chose one platform per country launched by the national government, and another launched by a municipal government as a comparison of the different levels of government. All six of the platforms discussed in this report are examples of this new coordination between the public and private sectors. The platforms' names, countries where they operate in, whether they established by a national or municipal government, and website links can be found in Table 1 below:

Platform Name	Country	National or Municipal	Website Link
Participe+	Brazil	Municipal	<a href="https://participemais.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/">https://participemais.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/</a>
e-Democracia	Brazil	National	<a href="http://www.edemocracia.leg.br/">http://www.edemocracia.leg.br/</a>
Bogotá Abierta	Colombia	Municipal	<a href="https://bogotaabierta.co/">https://bogotaabierta.co/</a>
Urna de Cristal	Colombia	National	<a href="https://www.urnadecristal.gov.co/">https://www.urnadecristal.gov.co/</a>
Montevideo Decide	Uruguay	Municipal	<a href="https://decide.montevideo.gub.uy/">https://decide.montevideo.gub.uy/</a>
5to Plan de Acción Nacional de Gobierno Abierto	Uruguay	National	<a href="https://quinto-plan.gobiernoabierto.gub.uy/">https://quinto-plan.gobiernoabierto.gub.uy/</a>

Table 1: Six Digital Platforms in Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay.

Participe+ was created by the city of São Paulo under the 2nd Plano de Ação em Governo Aberto (2nd Action Plan in Open Government) in July 2020 with the objective of increasing collaboration between citizens and the municipal government through three formats: public consultations, participatory budgets, and online polls. According to a recent blog post on the website, over 100.000 people have accessed the website and 20.000 have registered as users (Dias et al, 2021). An example of how Participe+ operates is their citizen budget tab.

Proposals are broken down by city districts and citizens can vote and leave comments with a registered account. The process of submitting proposals works through six steps. Step one involves users submitting proposals to one of the 32 districts, followed by step two when proposals are marked as "prioritized". This occurs when a district receives 15 proposals, allowing for a Municipal Participatory Council to review selected proposals that will move onto the popular voting stage, which is step three, that occurs on the platform. Step four is the feasibility analysis where the Municipal Secretariats analyze how feasible the supported proposals are. Step five and six involves publishing the final results for public hearings, and

finally the implementation of approved proposals. An example of a recent proposal that was posted by a user garnered 110 votes in the district of Lapa discussing whether or not there should be a total reopening of Hospital Sorocabana under direct management of the Unified Health System of São Paulo (SUS) (Participe+, Proposal Code 1865, 2021). The proposal was marked as “prioritized” for the popular voting stage. Having tools such as these available to the citizens of São Paulo has increased participation in citizens budgeting by 500%, an increase from 2.097 in 2019 to 12.354 in 2020 (Diaz et al, 2021).

e-Democracia is a portal, launched in 2009, making it the oldest of the six platforms, established by the lower house of the Brazilian National Congress as a pilot project to allow Brazilians around the country to be involved in the legislation process. The portal became institutionalized in 2013 after its successful pilot run. The portal now uses three digital tools: “Audiências Interativas”, which allows citizens to follow live meetings over the Internet and to interact either in person or virtually; “Wikilegis”, a tool where people can edit and collaborate over normative texts with other users online; and “Expressão”, a forum where users can publish their opinions and solutions to issues and topics for future legislation (e Democracia, n.d.). According to the website, Expressão currently has 1.900 users since its inception. One example of a forum thread using Expressão that gained 458 views was how the federal district government was going to adapt procedures and enact safety measures in public schools as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The original post was commented on by educators and parents stating their opinions (e-Democracia, 2020). However, it is unclear from the portal what happens after a thread receives adequate attention even after reviewing their many e-Democracy support guides.

Bogotá Abierta was formed by the district government in the capital of Colombia as a new channel of participation where registered users can post ideas about challenges that are set by the platform. Citizens are able to rate these challenges and critique or support them. According to their website, the platform has published 18 challenges since its inception in 2016 with over 20.000 citizens participating, according to their “about us” section. Yet on the homepage, the number 69.190 participants and 42.427 Bogotanos are listed. A recent challenge opened up to discussions about how to improve the air quality in Bogotá had received 172 contributions from April 14th to its closing date of June 15th. In comparison, one of their most popular challenges about improving the mobility in the city gained 3.489 contributions from users (Bogotá Abierta, n.d.). Although the date is not given in the challenge details, the challenge had to have been active around April 2016, as some of the comments were posted 1.895 days, which is just over five years ago at the time of this writing. Furthermore, users can also take advantage of “Sube tu idea” where they can upload ideas for policies for others to discuss, make comments, and vote on their relevance and importance (Bogotá Abierta, n.d.). For all its work, the platform won the Indigo Award in 2017 in the category of Digital Innovation for Open Government as the best initiative of digital governments in Latin America by the Inter-American Association of Telecommunications Companies (ASITEL) during the Digital Cities Awards.

Urna de Cristal was launched by the National Government of Colombia in 2010 as a way for users to gain information about public policy initiatives through the website’s “Fuerza de Tarea Digital” (Urna de Cristal, n.d.). Recognizing that not all citizens have access to the Internet, the digital taskforce is available for people to reach out either through call centers and SMS, or through digital means, such as the website, their social media accounts, and newsletters (Urna de Cristal, n.d.). Furthermore, registered users can also post comments and opinions on topics that the website publishes in forums. An example of this was a forum in 2016 where citizens could voice their opinions, doubts, and give policy ideas for their ideal justice system in Colombia (Urna de Cristal, 2016). There is no official count on the page, but after counting each comment individually, there were a total of 60 people discussing their opinions and ideas. Lastly, another aspect of the website is the ability for citizens to submit questions that will be answered publicly by government officials. However, these questions have to correspond to previously set-up topics. An example that received 116 questions was asking about any concerns that citizens have over the work of the government. As a broad topic, comments ranged from housing programs to the social pension system. The digital taskforce responded to many, but not all of the questions that were asked.

Montevideo Decide, created in 2018, is a platform where registered users can upload, comment on, and rate discussions and policy ideas for the city of Montevideo. There are two levels of users according to their website. “Usuario Nivel 1” allows people with Twitter, Facebook or Google+ accounts to engage and support debates and discussions, as well as propose ideas on the platform. Meanwhile, “Usuario Nivel 2” has the same abilities while adding the benefit of making comments and decisions on queries posted by the

Intendencia de Montevideo. To have this type of level 2 access users must fill out a form distributed by the Agencia de Gobierno Electrónico y Sociedad de la Información y del Conocimiento (AGESIC) (Montevideo Decide, n.d.). In fact, the website has stated that any Montevideo citizen over the age of 16 is able to register on the platform, making Montevideo Decide the only platform of the six to openly state the ages of participants. The cycle of ideas, as put by the website, starts with a user presenting an idea to create discussion. If the idea gains at least 500 votes of support, it then goes onto a feasibility study. After the study the idea goes to a citizen vote and if supported it is then presented as an idea ganadora, or winning idea, which is then brought to the government of Montevideo for implementation. Since 2018, 1.103 ideas have been presented on the platform, over 700.000 visits to the page, over 50.000 registered users, and 34 ideas that have been implemented as a result. 2019 was the year with the highest number of ideas supported (94.617) and ideas voted on (22.000) (Montevideo Decide, 2020). The website posts the progress of these winning ideas and their advancement levels. For example, in 2019 one winning idea was to expand drinking fountains throughout the city. The status of this proposal is ongoing and is at a 60% advancement level (Montevideo Decide, 2020).

The 5to Plan de Acción Nacional de Gobierno Abierto is unique from the other platforms discussed so far in this report as it has a time constraint. From March to July 2021 registered users are able to participate in the creation of the 5th National Open Government Action Plan through four stages. Stage one involves the creation of proposals on any theme pertaining to open government, which are transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and collaboration of technological innovation. At this stage users can also comment on other proposals. Stage two involves the analysis of all proposals and comments by the platform's Open Government Working Group, which is composed of state, civil society, and academia representatives. The purpose of this stage is to examine the feasibility of all of the proposals. In stage three proposals that are deemed feasible are turned into preliminary commitments and go to co-creation workshops with stakeholders in a public consultation, so anyone interested in the policy can make comments or contributions. The purpose of the co-creation workshops is to hammer out the details, goals, and deadlines of the proposals with all interested parties involved. The final stage four occurs after the public consultation takes place, the proposal becomes part of the final 5th Open Government Action Plan, which along with all the process details, will be published online. This final step is supposed to take place in August 2021 (5to Plan de Acción Nacional de Gobierno Abierto, n.d.). Current proposals that can be seen on the platform have been posted by citizen users, civil society associations, and range in topics from mental health to Big Data (5to Plan de Acción Nacional de Gobierno Abierto, n.d.). According to the previous 4th Plan, which lasted from 2018 to 2020, 39 commitments were created with the involvement of 57 public bodies, 23 civil society organizations, 10 academic institutions, 5 multilateral institutions, and 3 private sector organizations (Gobierno Abeito, 2021). Although average citizens were involved in the previous plan, it is unclear on their website and any published reports how many participated.

All digital platforms, except for e-Democracia, were established in the last six years to increase online civic engagement either at a national or municipal level, as well as to inform people on legislation to keep them aware and involved in policy making. As democratic tools, the platforms are part of the core objective of creating open governments. They tackle all policy areas, from urban development and infrastructure to social services and human rights. Except for 5to Plan de Acción Nacional de Gobierno Abierto, which openly stated that the proposals had to be linked to open governance, the platforms were willing to discuss any and all debate topics that registered users found important.

All of the websites produced some type of statistics on their platforms, some more than others. Yet only four of the six platforms (Participe+, e-Democracia, Bogotá Abierta, and Montevideo Decide) openly published how many users have registered accounts. There were also no sections on any of the platforms where users could post reviews of the platforms in general, unless this can be done once officially registered. In this manner, some platforms were more transparent than others on how successful they have been since their inception. With the exception of Uruguay, the municipal platforms had more information, statistics, and had a friendlier interface compared to the national platforms. These platforms are mainly dedicated to consultations and direct democracy forums, particularly participatory budgeting and popular proposals. Furthermore, after contacting each of the platforms multiple times, we were unable

to speak with any representative to gain their insight, which brings into question the openness and transparency that these platforms openly publish as a main objective of their operations.

After reviewing all available data and reports on each of the platforms and noting the differences that have been just discussed, we looked towards the counter arguments against digital platforms, which we obtained through interviews with experts in the field of deliberative and participatory democracies.





## V. CAN THESE DIGITAL PLATFORMS IMPROVE DEMOCRACY THROUGH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT? THE SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT

Compared to the arguments in favor of digital transformation and platforms, the feelings of the experts we interviewed were more skeptical in nature. Two professors from Dublin City University, Professor David Farrell and Professor Jane Suiter, who work mainly on deliberative institutions, such as mini publics and citizens assemblies, noted that due to the COVID-19 pandemic many of the usual processes that are held in person have moved online. Both professors noted that although some participants withdrew from the assemblies once they were shifted online, either due to discomfort of being online or lack of proper Internet access, most participants were equally satisfied with the digital version. Although, as Suiter stated in her interview, “for now the gold standard is likely to remain face to face” (See Appendix). She noted how technology has improved, but it has not caught up with the efficiency of in-person deliberative and participatory processes. Suiter predicts that future processes will follow a hybrid model of combining in-person and virtual communication.

However, since most deliberative forums have gone online only recently to comply with pandemic restrictions, there is still not enough information about how digital assemblies differ from their in-person counterparts. As such, further research is needed in the future to determine the effects of digital platforms on these types of initiatives.

Suiter also brought up in her interview the issue of measuring the effectiveness of these digital platforms. In her interview she gave insight into some of her current work with the OECD which has been to create a set of guidelines for member governments to evaluate digital platforms and e-government strategies in general. Without going into details about the entire report, which Suiter could not do, she listed questions that should be asked when examining the effectiveness of digital processes, such as, “who is setting the question? Is it totally top-down? Is there some bottom-up involvement? Is there some way for the public to make submissions to it? Was it accessible for people with less [technological] skills?” (See Appendix). The report, which is due to be published as early as July 2021, will be insightful for future research on this topic.

Professor Eirikur Bergmann, from Bifrost University in Iceland, Professor Ricardo García Vargas, from Universidad Rey Juan Carlos in Madrid, and Professor David Altman of La Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, were also interviewed due to having worked specifically in Latin America on deliberative institutions, particularly participatory budgeting, direct democracy, and citizens participation. They were even more sceptical than Suiter. In their views, digital platforms are not proper replacements for prolonged face-to-face contact, which is key for the success of the deliberative process. While digital tools can have value on their own, for example, they can be used for spreading information, they are better suited as complementary tools that cannot replace the need for in-person participation in deeper forms of civic engagement. Altman went as far as calling the digitization of direct democratic practices, such as referendums and initiatives as, “quite imperialistic, colonialist” for countries with less Internet infrastructure (See Appendix). All three experts argued in their interviews that digital platforms are limited in their scope; they can serve as forums and places of communication between some citizens, but they cannot and should not replace in-person interactions.

García stated that, despite notable improvement, Internet access in Latin America still varies widely across regions and populations. On average, the digitally-connected tend to be younger, more educated and more urban. In this sense, increasing civic engagement through digital means will not necessarily translate into more inclusive political participation, but rather it could help entrench pre-existing inequalities. For example, they could work well in initiatives that seek youth engagement, but it will hardly be a useful tool if

the goal is to engage remote populations in rural areas.

The evidence supports García's arguments. According to CEPALSTAT (2017), Latin America has been highly successful in expanding average Internet access. In 2010 only 34.700 of every 100.000 Latin Americans had access to the web, while in 2017 that number had increased to 63.220. Most people in Brazil (70%), Colombia (65%) and Uruguay (76%) have some kind of Internet access. However, ECLAC (2021) has warned that while two thirds of Latin Americans have regular access to the Internet, the digital gaps remain in terms of education level, geographical location, age, gender and ethnicity, with more vulnerable groups reporting less access.

In this manner, digital platforms could in fact exacerbate the digital divide between populations, creating more inequality. This is particularly true for senior and rural populations who, as mentioned, might not have access or the skills to use digital services on the Internet. Moreover, digital platforms are unlikely to reach citizens who are not politically active in the first place (Dubow et al, 2017). People on the platforms are those who more likely were politically active prior to becoming digital users.



# VI. DEMOCRACY IN BRAZIL, COLOMBIA AND URUGUAY <sup>1</sup>

After taking into consideration the skeptical arguments against digital transformation and platforms specifically, our next step was to better understand the state of democracy in our three countries to see if democracy had improved or not after the years that the platforms were introduced. To demonstrate these trends in the selected countries, we turn to the V-Dem database (n.d.) to understand the democratic trends in Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay. This database measures democracy through five indices:

- **Electoral democracy:** how free, fair, and inclusive electoral competitions are, including indicators regarding freedom of association, freedom of expression and fair elections. Deals primarily with representative democracy.
- **Liberal democracy:** the protective limits that guards individuals and minorities against the improper use of power. It includes indicators regarding civil liberties, judicial independence and the rule of law. It deals primarily with rights and freedoms.
- **Participatory democracy:** the participation of citizens in political processes, not limited to elections. It includes indicators regarding direct democracy, subnational elected bodies and the independence, structure and influence of civil society organizations. Deals primarily with direct democracy.
- **Deliberative democracy:** to what extent are political decisions reached through open public debate. It includes indicators regarding reasoned justification public policy, respect of counter arguments, and the range of consultation for public policy design and implementation. Deals primarily with direct democracy.
- **Egalitarian democracy:** how material and immaterial inequalities hamper the ability of some social groups to participate in public affairs. It includes indicators regarding equal protection of rights and freedoms, access to power and resource distribution. Deals primarily with rights and freedoms.

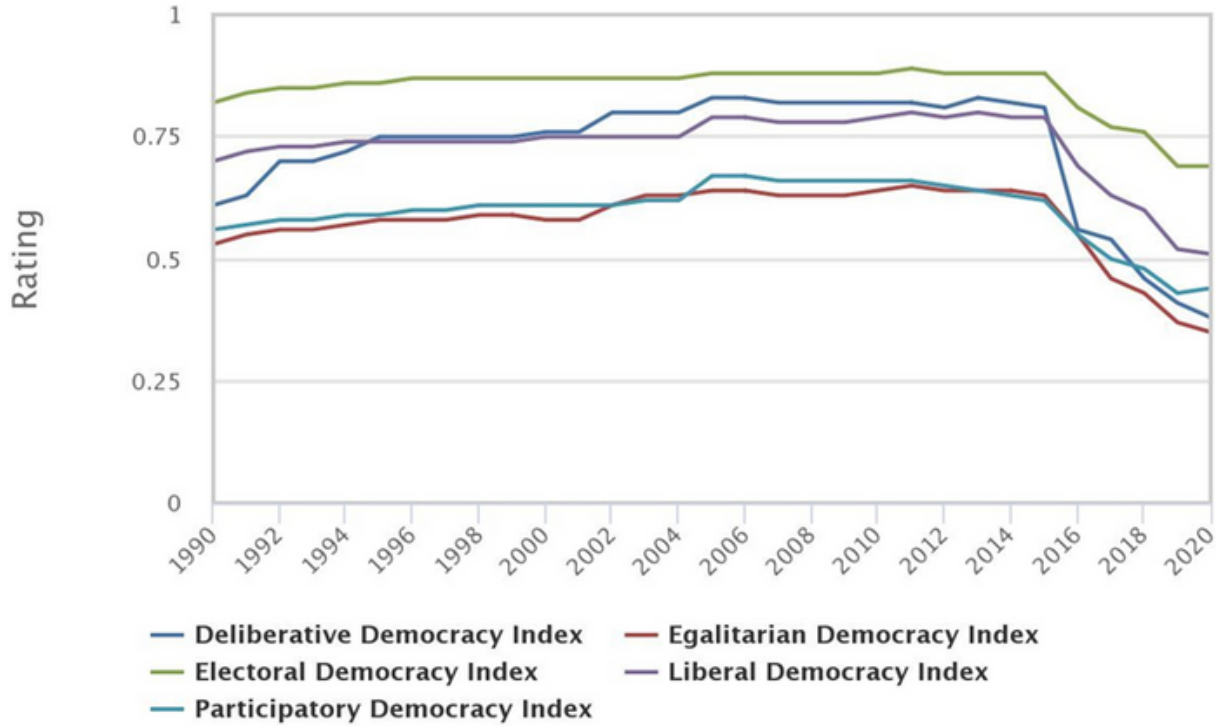
Using model estimates the data set allows us to measure all five indices from a 0 to 1 scale, with 0 representing complete autocracy and 1 complete democracy:

Table 2. V-Dem indices by country. 2020 (2015)					
	Electoral	Liberal	Participatory	Deliberative	Egalitarian
<b>Brazil</b>	0.69 (0.88)	0.51 (0.79)	0.44 (0.62)	0.38 (0.81)	0.35 (0.63)
<b>Colombia</b>	0.61 (0.67)	0.45 (0.54)	0.40 (0.44)	0.38 (0.56)	0.26 (0.37)
<b>Uruguay</b>	0.86 (0.89)	0.80 (0.81)	0.70 (0.75)	0.75 (0.83)	0.74 (n/d)

Data source: V-Dem database (n.d.)

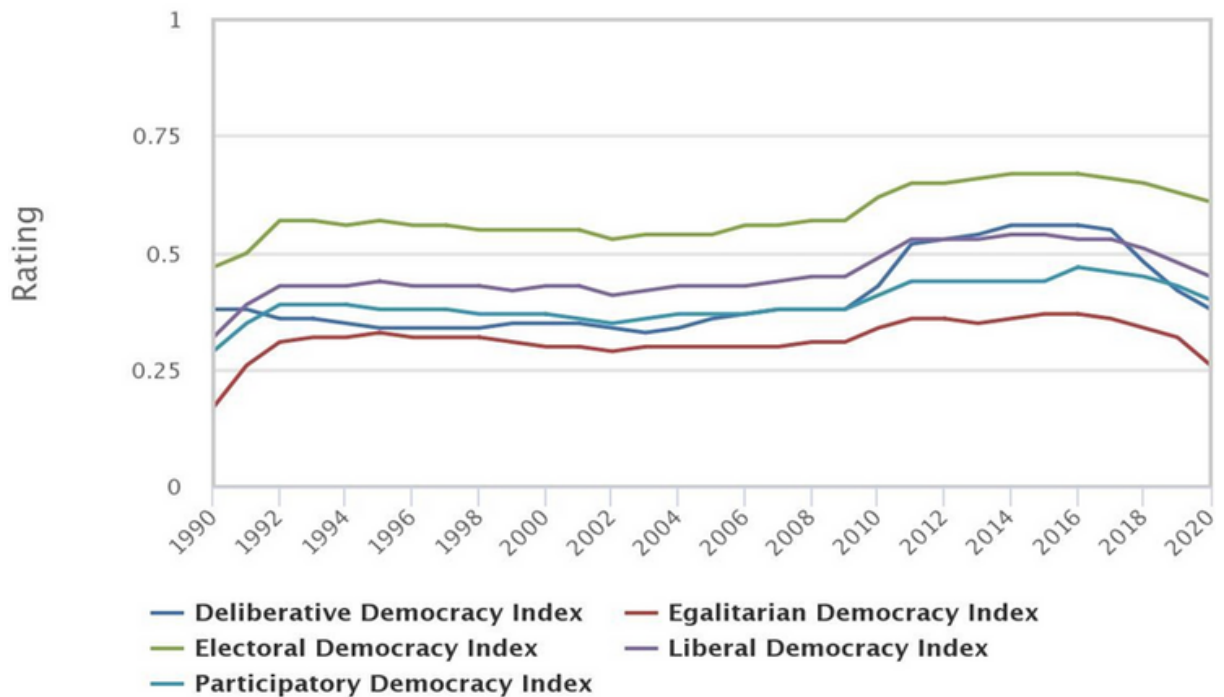
<sup>1</sup> Some contributions of this section were taken from our literature review.

### Brazil

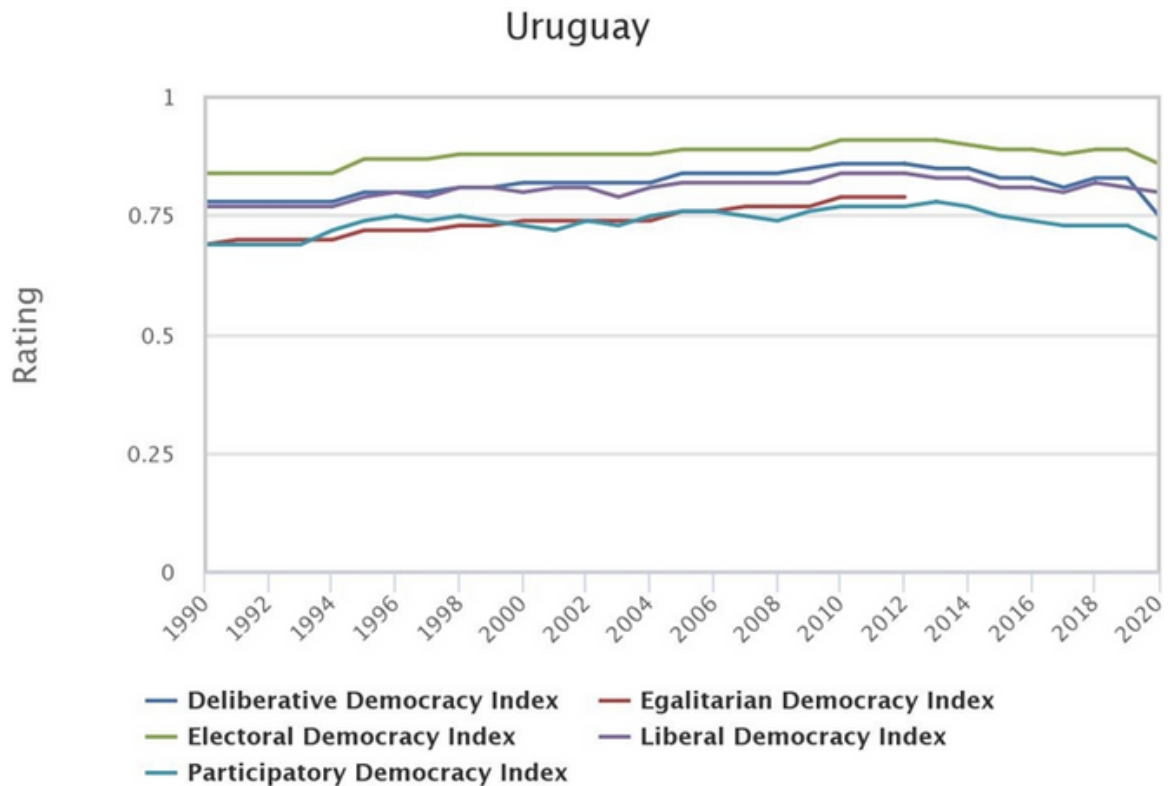


Highcharts.com | V-Dem data version 11.0

### Colombia



Highcharts.com | V-Dem data version 11.0



As shown by the data, Brazil and Colombia have seen a recent decline in democratic indices. Uruguay's indices are going down, but not significantly taking into account confidence ratings. After an 11-year period of stagnation that started in 2005, Brazil saw a sharp decline in all five indices starting in 2016, especially in the egalitarian aspect. There is a strong consensus that Brazil is a prime example of a country falling victim to the autocratization process (V-Dem, 2020; FreedomHouse, 2021; The Economist, 2020).

Colombia's case is not as straightforward. The country experienced incremental improvement in all five indices during the first half of this decade and moderate drops in the later half. While Colombia has one of the longest democratic traditions in the region, decades of uninterrupted low-intensity warfare have compromised its territorial unity and the legitimacy of its democratic institutions. Nonetheless, Colombians managed to lead a successful peace process; they focused on democratic representation as a path towards conflict resolution that does not involve armed struggle. And yet, the implementation of post-conflict policies has been lackluster (Grasa, 2020) in a time where long-lasting divisions, related to unequal access to economic opportunities and political power, are fostering high levels of social unrest. Colombia is a country in fluctuation, without a clear tendency towards autocratization or democratization.

Uruguay's indices have remained comparatively high. Since the return of democracy in 1984, Uruguay has consolidated its democratic institutions, holding regular, free, fair, and competitive elections, with peaceful transitions of power between rival parties. Additionally, the country has also slowly improved or remained stable in terms of civil liberties and the rule of law. So far, Uruguay has not been noticeably affected by the current wave of autocratization on the continent.

Why is this democratic backsliding occurring in two of our three countries and Latin America overall? The reasons vary from country to country, but some trends have become evident. One critical reason that reports have mentioned are the high rates of socio-economic inequalities. Latin America is the most unequal region in the world, according to reports, such as The Global State of Democracy, composed by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). High rates of inequality create power imbalances between groups of people, which affects the political sphere. These difficulties lead to democratic fragility, which is deadly to the health of democratic systems. When looking at The

World Bank Data on the Gini Index of our three countries, the 2019 ratings were 53.4 for Brazil, 51.3 for Colombia, and 39.7 for Uruguay, which supports the notion that higher rates of socio-economic inequality have a relationship with the state of democracy.

After reviewing the data from V-Dem Institute and looking into each country more in depth, we can see that there is a hierarchy of democracy aspects common to all three countries: electoral democracy ranks highest in every case, by large margins in Brazil and Colombia. Liberal democracy comes second, followed by the participatory and deliberative indices. Egalitarian democracy comes last in both Brazil and Colombia and there is no recent data for Uruguay. From this fact we can surmise two main takeaways:

First, Brazil and Colombia have very similar levels of participatory and deliberative democracy, with both of them presenting a downward trend in the last five years. Overall, they both score low compared to a full democracy, such as Uruguay. The creation of most of these platforms coincide with this downward trend, while Uruguay has remained relatively stable. A future line of study should analyze if direct democracy forums have aided Uruguay in averting autocratization, and if Brazilian and Colombian direct democracy forums have contributed or ameliorate the autocratization trend, but so far, we can surmise that low levels (compared to Uruguay) of participatory and deliberative democracy (as in Brazil and Colombia) will not suffice to stop the deterioration of democratic governance, even when digitization efforts have been made.

Second, compared to a full democracy like Uruguay, both egalitarian and liberal democracy have declined sharply in Brazil and remained low in Colombia. Both the experts consulted for this project and many other leading authors (Parvin, 2020; Dacome, 2021; Dacombe and Parvin, 2021) coincide in understanding a deficit of political rights and civic freedoms as the Achilles heel of direct democracy forums. The main selling point of digital participatory and deliberative democracy initiatives is that they are useful for increasing civic engagement, but if that increment is not inclusive then those forums will only serve to reproduce entrenched inequalities.

An example of this mechanism is the participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, as described in the first section of this report, which was hailed as a success during its first decades of implementation precisely because it was effective in involving vulnerable groups in policy making. Hamilton (2014) found that, during the prime days of Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting, less wealthy and less educated citizens participated more than their richer counterparts. Crucially, they had different motivations for participating: the well-educated had intrinsic motivations, where they draw value from the process itself, while less educated people tended to have instrumental motivations, meaning they participated if they perceived they could enact change on public affairs. A lack of inclusive civic engagement will seriously undermine the transformative potential of direct democracy forums, which in turn will affect participation.



## VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As our research has shown, digital platforms can be used as accessory tools in participatory and deliberative forums, but their implementation is not without challenges and risks, and the benefits they could provide fall short of the promises of digital enthusiasts that think these types of platforms can usher a revolution in democratic governance. In some instances, they could be useful in enabling new ways of participation, but they can hardly be considered as a major driver for civic engagement. In this manner, it is unrealistic to state that current digital- driven civicengagement strengthens democratic institutions.

Digital platforms can be useful in performing two main tasks: as a way of spreading information and as a tool for connecting people that are far away from one another. In a best- case scenario, they will supplement democratic institutions by facilitating the flow of information between participants that otherwise could not be easily reached. However, certain democratic institutions, especially those that rely on deliberative activities, demand a deeper form of engagement based on regular in-person, face-to-face interactions that are impossible to faithfully replicate in an online environment. Even when cameras are used, in- person interactions will convey more information than online meetings, for example, through non-verbal communication, and they are also less restrictive than their digital counterparts, since they could provide the space for more informal interactions between participants, for instance,during breaks or when entering and leaving the building.

Furthermore, while many regions in Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay can boast about the ambition of their digital agendas, Internet access and digital skills are still lackluster among senior populations, less educated citizens, and many rural communities. If this trend continues, the use of digital platforms as a tool for increasing civic engagement could backfire as vulnerable groups are excluded from participating because they lack Internet access, are not comfortable with the platforms, or do not have a quality connection to use them.

Moreover, participation requires motivation, but the facilities digital platforms can provide do not necessarily translate into increased motivation. The most important motivational factor that drives participation in disenfranchised citizens is the instrumental value of their contribution (Hamilton, 2014). In other words, if they perceive that their engagement is having an impact they will be motivated to keep participating, which could in turn institutionalize new mechanisms of democratic governance. However, just digitizing democratic practices will not guarantee that citizens will perceive their participation as useful or impactful.

### **Recommendations for the OAS:**

Although digital platforms are not a main driver of civic engagement in Latin America, the OAS should not disregard them entirely. As discussed in this report, their long-term effects on democratic practices are still unknown as they are a new phenomenon. Yet there are still actions that the OAS can take to support member states in their transitions into the digital era:

- » The OAS should continue to support the digital agendas of Latin American countries with a particular focus on increasing Internet infrastructure to rural parts of the continent. We do not know what future innovation will come from these digital agendas, and the OAS needs to play an overarching role of supporting such practices in all Latin American countries, not just the more successful cases discussed in this report. The OAS can help decrease the digital divide between Latin American countries by providing guidance, support, and methods of communication between member states on topics pertaining to digitizing public services and other themes that are more specific, such as digital platforms for civic

engagement. This could be done by establishing a platform where successful methods, and specifically democratic tools, such as digital platforms, can be made available to all member states to see. The Department for Effective Public Management already is a part of the OAS and has created a GEALC network to allow for cooperation for disseminating information between member states on e-government practices. A “platform of platforms” could be added to the already existing mechanisms of the GEALC network.

- » The OAS should celebrate and acknowledge member states and specific organizations and platforms who are working towards inclusive civic engagement in their countries either through digital or non-digital means. One method that the OAS is already practicing this is the “Inter-American Award for Innovation in Effective Public Management”. This award should continue and even be expanded to reach as many successful cases as possible in Latin America. Much of the literature we have seen researching this topic has focused on Europe and the United States. Latin America needs clear, OAS-recognized examples from the continent so that other Latin American states can have a more relatable country that can set more relevant precedence of how to successfully use digital tools for public management.
- » Lastly, although digital platforms can be a tool for democratic practices, they cannot be a main driver of increasing civic engagement in Latin America. As such, the OAS should encourage other means of increasing civic engagement, particularly in civic education. These programs should be developed for individuals of all ages, including school children and adults, so that individuals are more aware of how their governments operate and what they can do as citizens to influence policy making. One format could be on the OAS website where citizens could learn about their home countries through an interactive map that is engaging for all age groups. However, these programs should not be exclusive to online platforms in order to reach even the most remote communities.





# REFERENCES

5to Plan de Acción Nacional de Gobierno Abierto. (n.d.). Propuestas. UruguayPresidencia. From [https://quinto-plan.gobiernoabierto.gub.uy/proposals?is\\_proposal=true&order=hot\\_score&page=1](https://quinto-plan.gobiernoabierto.gub.uy/proposals?is_proposal=true&order=hot_score&page=1)

5to Plan de Acción Nacional de Gobierno Abierto. (n.d.). Uruguay Presidencia. From <https://quinto-plan.gobiernoabierto.gub.uy/>

Abers, R., I. Brandão, R. King, and D. Votto. (2018). "Porto Alegre: participatory budgeting and the challenge of sustaining transformational change." World Resources Report Case Study. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute. <https://www.wri.org/wri-citiesforall/publication/porto-alegre-participatory-budgeting-and-challenge-sustaining>

Adler, R & Goggin, J. (2005). What do we mean by "civic engagement"? Journal of Transformative Education. 3. 236-253. 10.1177/1541344605276792. <https://www.unomaha.edu/international-studies-and-programs/files/docs/adler-goggin-civic-engagement.pdf>

Ahmed, S., Cho, J., Jaidka, K., Eichstaedt, J., & Ungar, L. (2020). The Internet and participation inequality: a multilevel examination of 108 countries. International Journal Of Communication, 14, 22. From <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/11314/3008>

Andersen, K. (2021). Generational gaps in political media use and civic engagement: from Baby Boomers to Generation Z (Ser. Routledge studies in media, communication, and politics). Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781003111498>

Bergmann, Eirikur. (2016). Participatory Constitutional Deliberation in the Wake of Crisis: The Case of Iceland. In book: Constitutional Deliberative Democracy in Europe. Chapter:2. ECPR. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/310602024\\_Participatory\\_Constitutional\\_Deliberation\\_in\\_the\\_Wake\\_of\\_Crisis\\_The\\_Case\\_of\\_Iceland](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/310602024_Participatory_Constitutional_Deliberation_in_the_Wake_of_Crisis_The_Case_of_Iceland)

Bogotá Abierta. (n.d.). ¿Cuál es tu compromiso para mejorar la calidad del aire de Bogotá?. Bogotá Abierta. From <https://bogotaabierta.co/reto/cual-es-tu-compromiso-para-mejorar-la-calidad-del-aire>

Bogotá Abierta. (n.d.). Bogotá Abierta - Plataforma de co-creación ciudadana en Colombia. (n.d.). From, <https://bogotaabierta.co/>

CEPALSTAT. 2017. Objetivos de desarrollo sostenible. Indicador 17.8.1 Proporción de personas que utilizan Internet por cada 100 mil habitantes. [https://cepalstat-prod.cepal.org/cepalstat/web\\_cepalstat/buscador.asp?idioma=e&string\\_busqueda=internet](https://cepalstat-prod.cepal.org/cepalstat/web_cepalstat/buscador.asp?idioma=e&string_busqueda=internet)

Cesarino, L. (2020). How social media affords populist politics: remarks on liminality Based on the Brazilian case. Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada v. 59, n. 1. <https://www.scielo.br/j/tla/a/Jbzm34pcQh78Wq4TpLdrQfP/?lang=en&format=pdf>

da Silva, Y. M. (2020). Bolsonaro and social media: a critical discourse analysis of the Brazilian President's populist communication on Twitter. Master's thesis for the Programme in Social Sciences, Digital Media and Society Specialization. Uppsala University. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1448385/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Dacombe, R (2021). Doing democracy differently: how can participatory democracy take hold in deprived areas? <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00344893.2019.1682647>

Dacombe, R & Parvin, P (2021) Participatory democracy in an age of inequality, representation, 57:2, 145-157, DOI: 10.1080/00344893.2021.1933151

Dias, L., & Góes, H. (2021). Fortalecendo a participação social durante a pandemia: o caso de São Paulo, Brasil. Participe+. From [https://participemais.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/open\\_gov/articles/1](https://participemais.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/open_gov/articles/1)

Digital Future Society. 2019. Leveraging GovTech for citizen participation: innovative policymaking for the digital era. From [https://digitalfuturesociety.com/app/uploads/2019/10/111019\\_Leveraging\\_GovTech\\_for\\_citizen\\_participation\\_digital-1.pdf](https://digitalfuturesociety.com/app/uploads/2019/10/111019_Leveraging_GovTech_for_citizen_participation_digital-1.pdf)

DOI: 10.1257/0895330054048713

Dubow, T., Devaux, A., & Manville, C. (2017). How can digital technology encourage greater engagement in civil society? RAND Europe. From [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE253/RAND\\_PE253.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE253/RAND_PE253.pdf)

e-Democracia. (2020). Realidades e desafios da educação no DF em tempos de pandemia. e-Democracia. From <https://edemocracia.cl.df.leg.br/expressao/t/realidades-e-desafios-da-educacao-no-df-em-tempos-de-pandemia/107>

e-Democracia. (n.d.). e-Democracia. From <http://www.edemocracia.leg.br/>

ECLAC. 2021. Construir un futuro mejor, acciones para fortalecer la Agenda 2030 para el desarrollo sostenible: cuarto informe sobre el progreso y los desafíos regionales de la Agenda 2030 para el desarrollo sostenible en América Latina y el Caribe. [https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/46682/S2100125\\_es.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/46682/S2100125_es.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y)

Ellner, S., Bentancur, N, & Busquets, J. (2019). The governing left in Uruguay (2005–2015): a participatory democratic experiment. *Latin American perspectives*, 46(1), 137–151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X18807488>

Farrell, D. M., & Suiter, J. (2019). Reimagining democracy: Lessons in deliberative democracy from the Irish front line. Cornell Selectsan imprint of Cornell University Press.

Freedom House. 2021. Freedom in the World 2021: democracy under siege. [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021\\_World\\_02252021\\_FINAL-web-upload.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021_World_02252021_FINAL-web-upload.pdf)

Gobierno Abierto. (2021). Guía para apoyar la participación informada en el proceso de cocreación del 5to Plan de Acción Nacional. Agencia de Gobierno Electrónico y Sociedad de la Información y del Conocimiento. From <https://www.gub.uy/agencia-gobierno-electronico-sociedad-informacion-conocimiento/comunicacion/noticias/hay-tiempo-participa-del-5to-plan-accion-gobierno-abierto>

Hamilton, M. E. (2014). Is participatory democracy the answer? Participatory budgeting and development in Brazilian municipalities (dissertation). University of California, San Diego.

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. (2019). The global state of democracy 2019: Addressing the ills, revising the promise. From <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2019.31>

Khan, T., Baron, A., Vieyra, J, C. (2018). Digital technologies for transparency in public investment. The Inter-American Development Bank. From [https://publications.iadb.org/publications/english/document/Digital\\_Technologies\\_for\\_Transparency\\_in\\_Public\\_Investment\\_New\\_Tools\\_to\\_Empower\\_Citizens\\_and\\_Governments.pdf](https://publications.iadb.org/publications/english/document/Digital_Technologies_for_Transparency_in_Public_Investment_New_Tools_to_Empower_Citizens_and_Governments.pdf)

Latinobarómetro (n.d.). Latinobarometro database. From <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp>

Lázaro, M; Trimble, M; Umpiérrez, A; Vázquez, A & Pereira, G (2013). Juiciosciudadanos en Uruguay: dos experiencias de participación pública deliberativa en ciencia y tecnología. Universidad de la República. [https://www.csic.edu.uy/sites/csic/files/juiciosciudadanos\\_libro.pdf](https://www.csic.edu.uy/sites/csic/files/juiciosciudadanos_libro.pdf)

Matsusaka, John, G. (2005). "Direct Democracy Works." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 19 (2): 185-206.

Mayka, L. R. (2013). Bringing the public into policymaking: National participatory institutions in Latin America (Dissertation. Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science, University of California).

Montevideo Decides. (2020). Avance de ideas ciclos 2018 y 2019. Intendencia de Montevideo. From [https://decide.montevideo.gub.uy/avance\\_ideas](https://decide.montevideo.gub.uy/avance_ideas)

Montevideo Decides. (2020). Estadísticas. Intendencia de Montevideo. From [https://decide.montevideo.gub.uy/est\\_2020](https://decide.montevideo.gub.uy/est_2020)

Montevideo Decides. (n.d.). Intendencia de Montevideo. From <https://decide.montevideo.gub.uy/>

OECD Development Centre. 2020. Latin American Outlook 2020: Digital transformation for building back better. From <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/2f8d4fc8-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/2f8d4fc8-en#chap-4>

Participe+ (2021). Reabertura total do Hospital Sorocabana com gestão direta e 100% SUS (Proposal 1865). From <https://participemais.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/budgets/2/investments/2381>

Parvin, P. (2020). The participatory paradox: an egalitarian critique of participatory democracy. *Representation*, 57, 263 - 285. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Participatory-Paradox%3A-An-Egalitarian-Critique-Parvin/d2ba30110eb34f72464b4963fe71654d0ca62627>

Pateman, C. (2012). Participatory democracy revisited. *Perspectives on Politics*, 10(1), 7–19. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592711004877>

Pimentel Walker, A. P. (2013). Face-to-face citizenship: The effects, ethics, and aesthetics of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil (dissertation). University of California, San Diego

Ramírez, A. (2015). Approximation to the constitutional regulation of the participatory democracy in Colombia and Spain. *Compared Study*. *Civilizar*, 15(28), 21–3. <https://doaj.org/article/2a5c248f4d7a451a9fb081bf645694e9>

Schenoni, L. and Manwaring, S (2019). US hegemony and regime change in Latin America. In: *Democratization*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. 26(2), pp. 269-287. [https://kops.uni-konstanz.de/bitstream/handle/123456789/52153/Schenoni\\_2-1fiekuhevswv3.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://kops.uni-konstanz.de/bitstream/handle/123456789/52153/Schenoni_2-1fiekuhevswv3.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

Suárez, Mariano (2015). Los estudios sobre presupuesto participativo en Argentina, Chile, Perú y Uruguay: un estado de situación sobre el problema de las desigualdades sociales en los procesos. In *Pensar la Democracia Participativa*, compilado por Mariano Suárez. Universidad de la República.

Suiter, J., Muradova, L., Gastil, J., & Farrell, D. M. (2020). Scaling up deliberation: testing the potential of mini-publics to enhance the deliberative capacity of citizens. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 26(3), 253–272. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12405>

The Economist Intelligence Unit. 2020. Democracy Index 2020: In sickness and in health. <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2020. E-Government survey 2020: digital government in the decade of action for sustainable development. From [https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/Portals/egovkb/Documents/un/2020-Survey/2020%20UN%20E-Government%20Survey%20\(Full%20Report\).pdf](https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/Portals/egovkb/Documents/un/2020-Survey/2020%20UN%20E-Government%20Survey%20(Full%20Report).pdf)

Urna de Cristal. (2016). ¿Para ti, cómo sería el sistema de justicia ideal en Colombia? ¿Qué propuestas tienes? ¿Tienes dudas?. Urna de Cristal. From [https://www.urnadecristal.gov.co/plan\\_decenal\\_justicia](https://www.urnadecristal.gov.co/plan_decenal_justicia)

Urna de Cristal. (2021). ¿Quieres proponer temas de conversación, tienes inquietudes o propuestas sobre la labor de gobierno?. Urna de Cristal. From <https://www.urnadecristal.gov.co/acuerdo-y-tematica/Urna-te-escucha>

Urna de Cristal.(n.d.). Urna de Cristal. From <https://www.urnadecristal.gov.co/>

V-Dem Institute. (n.d.). V-Dem Institute online graphing. From <https://www.v-dem.net/en/online-graphing/>

V-Dem Institute. 2020. Autocratization surges – resistance grows: Democracy Report 2020. [https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer\\_public/de/39/de39af54-0bc5-4421-89ae-fb20dcc53dba/democracy\\_report.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/de/39/de39af54-0bc5-4421-89ae-fb20dcc53dba/democracy_report.pdf)



## APPENDIX

### **Interview number one transcript: Professor David Farrell, Dublin City University, Ireland.**

**Leonard:** Our first question is we know in your work you've talked about how deliberative institutions, such as mini-publics, typically lead to higher civic engagement for the participating citizens but aren't necessarily scalable for the wider citizenry. So, in your opinion could digitizing the face-to-face part of mini-publics be a solution to this problem?

**Farrell:** Yeah, that's a very interesting question. I mean by digitizing I assume you're talking in a sort of sense of things like chat rooms and people who are typing... it's not verbal communication online.

**Sandoval:** It can also be video, right, like what we're doing right now on Zoom.

**Farrell:** Okay, because well then if you're including that then you know we now have because of COVID real world examples and the most recent citizens assemblies in France, in the UK climate assembly, two Scottish citizens assemblies and the Irish citizen assembly, these the ones I know about these five there could be well others all of them were forced to go online because of COVID and in four of the five cases they started as you know regular citizens assemblies meeting in person and then COVID broke midway through so they all converted midway through to going online. But in the case of the most recent of these the second Scottish citizen assembly on climate, which was started during the COVID pandemic, they were always online so they selected their citizens in the regular way was 100 to 110 or whatever the number was in each case a bit more thinking the French and but they mostly were on Zoom and so in a sense the groundwork has been done and the evidence that is emerging from these recent cases shows that citizens the members were pretty much just as satisfied with the online version as they were of the in person version. So, it seems to work, now that still deals with a very small number so there is that bigger picture you started with on the generalizability and the region beyond the citizens assembly but that's the first point I'll say in terms of my initial remarks. But the second one is to suggest if you haven't already done it you might want to talk to the folk who organized the G1000 in Belgium in 2011 I was there as a witness with a few others and you know this was a decade ago but already the idea if you may know I don't know was to get 1000 Belgians into one huge hole 700 and something turned up on the day but they wanted to have what they call G-offs and G-homes were the possibility for people in their bedroom or wherever to have their laptop on their lap to engage virtually with what was going on in the hall so it was quite primitive because it was ten years ago but already they were experimenting with ways of trying to reach out beyond the immediate members of the citizens assembly.

**Sandoval:** Yes absolutely. The other question we have for you is, just to clarify, do you think that in person face to face engagement is necessary for mini-publics to have a positive effect on deliberative democracy and therefore civic engagement because we were really worried about the part where you talk about emotional capacity. When I read that I was like OK because I have a psychology background, and this is the type of thing we do in therapy right through this emotional connection is that you start opening your mind to different types of analysis. So, I gathered that this is really important that face to face connection and we wanted to know your take on that.

**Farrell:** Yeah it's a really core question and in a sense it will be nothing to know in due course about that second Scottish citizens assembly to see if this had any impact on the sort of the outcomes that you expect from the deliberation, but from what I'm hearing secondhand it seems OK in this regard, but we know from the other four examples that I'm aware of that the fact that they started in person seemed to be the crucial thing because then you had... because it's not just what goes on within the hall during the deliberative

event it's what goes on all around. It's becoming familiar you know, I would get to know you guys a lot better if we were going for coffee after this meeting and then we could shoot the breeze and catch up a little bit and then maybe have a further meeting and then we get more comfortable working with each other, you know what I mean. That's one of the key features about deliberative mini-publics, it's this sort of sense of becoming aware of that other person you're going to have a deliberation with at the following session because you had a coffee with the person and you understand a bit more about where they come from and the question is whether you'll get the same thing having the round table in a zoom meeting and it seems to be working, so whether it needs that initial face to face or whether you could still achieve that by having had enough of these small zoom sessions I guess we need a bit more time to learn that for certain. Of course, you still dealing with the problem that you know as I'm sure you know a deliberative process is quite different from a participatory process because a deliberative process is focused on what's going on with that small core group whereas participatory process can be a much bigger group and you're not picking who's coming into the room it's in who decides to turn up and so you got a different kind of dynamic.

**Leonard:** As said, institutional design is very important, but can these types of initiatives serve to strengthen institutions? In other words, what comes first: strong institutions or citizen participation?

**Farrell:** It's a difficult one to know. I mean a lot of this... because we're dealing with something that's relatively new, I mean as you may know from the OECD report that was published last year on the deliberative wave we are literally still on the crest of that wave. So, you only have to go back ten years and there were delivered mini-publics but they were very small in number, just look at the citizens assemblies. You know Ireland was third in the world in 2012. Well now I've lost count as to how many there are now and so we're still learning how to do them, still learning about the range of variations and of course we still have a lot to learn about their outcomes. So, it's too early for me to answer. If you were to ask me the question to what extent has the operation of three citizens assemblies in Ireland had and the impact on people's attitudes towards democracy and the strengthening of democratic institutions, I don't know I really have no idea. It probably will be generations before we might know and so I think they would be the same thing in spaces in Latin America because it's going to take longer.

### **Interview number two transcript: Professor Jane Suiter, Dublin City University, Ireland.**

**Leonard:** In a lot of your work, you talk about the pros and cons of some of these new deliberative digital platforms. So, in your opinion do you think this is the future of deliberative democracy?

**Suiter:** I think that for now the gold standard is likely to remain face to face. I think the technology hasn't gotten there sufficiently, but I think that COVID is really... advanced it and you know just the amount of development into different platforms and even into Zoom and so on is so much better now than it used to be. That it's definitely something that's going to run alongside it. So, for example we're doing some work on how the next Irish citizens assembly might work and we're trying to think about how we would... Well it won't go back to being 100% face to face again but there will be face to face events where people can build community and then there will be online learning, so it'll be more of a hybrid model I think going forward.

**Sandoval:** But right now, you're doing face to face or Zoom?

**Suiter:** On Zoom, so it's still the kind of small group of 100 people and they would come into the room and then we put them into breakout rooms for the face-to-face discussion so it's still 8 or so people discussing over Zoom and then you know they use some other platforms for different things and that's pretty much how the UK ones went as well. Now obviously there's some other platforms, like we worked with one where we tried to have some COVID discussion, so it wasn't an official citizens assembly. It was an online platform to try and build argumentation and things around that. But the problem is those larger ones tend to be... the tech isn't really there yet to have randomly selected citizens on them, they're mostly self-selected people who choose to opt into them.

**Sandoval:** Yeah, we were wondering how to build emotional capacity on these platforms, as empathy as you have said in your work is an important factor in these types of deliberations.

**Suiter:** So, there's research going on into that. The initial thing is that if you can have it face to face the way we're talking now, so in small breakout rooms, and if you have you know a facilitator in those rooms to make sure that one person isn't dominating and so on than it can come close to approximating you know sitting in the hotel ballroom with a small group of people and there isn't the same feeling it takes a while for them to kind of build up trust in one another longer than it takes to build up trust in one another face to face. But it does happen and that's why there's kind of hope that this kind of hybrid environment might be one that as this works going forward, it seems to be this, like in the Irish one the first meeting was face to face, but quite a few people dropped out when it went online and I think they were probably people who were more nervous about being online, sometimes some of the older people and more rural people maybe with worse broadband and things so it definitely had an impact. Now they had to be replaced with other older and rural people, but for the people who then whose first meeting was online it took them longer to feel that kind of familiarity and comfort with their fellow participants than with the ones who met face to face for the first time.

**Leonard:** In one of your most recent pieces, you talk about how to have good online platforms you must have strong institutions. So, one of our questions from researching in Latin America is what comes first: strong institutions or strong citizen participation?

**Suiter:** Well, there's two important things about the participation and the kind of interaction with the institutions, so one is who decides what is the question and what's going to be discussed and does that come from an institution. The second thing... What then happens to the deliberation, what happens to the output of the assembly afterwards and is it going to the people with the decision, what sort of commitment do they make to it. If you look at the French dialogue on climate for example Macron said that he was going to do an offer and that he was going to implement all of their proposals, but it was just left to Macron because the semi-presidential system in France it didn't go to the parliament so it wasn't properly debated and a lot of the participants in that felt very let down because they felt they were doing something that Macron was going to actually make changes to climate legislation. And then of course Macron was lobbied by agricultural and fossil fuel companies afterwards and he wrote he didn't implement a lot of the proposals. In Ireland the kind of institutional commitment is the government says that the report will be debated by the parliament and in some of them in climate change and abortion for example then went to a special committee of the parliament to debate the report, so that was a very strong connection back into the representative system. That institutional commitment then allowed something to happen with this. So, I think it's not necessarily the strong institutions it's more about the strength of the commitment of existing institutions to actually deliberate on to debate and possibly to implement some of the recommendations from the kind of citizens participation.

**Sandoval:** We were also interested in how you measure the effectiveness of these kinds of initiatives. You have spoken about a policy impact tool. Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

**Suiter:** Actually, at the moment the OECD is working on some guidelines that they're going to provide to all member governments on how to evaluate. So that will be very interesting. I think it comes out in July. I'm part of the working group. So basically, the first way to evaluate is to first of all is to look at the resolution and how it's set up, so the thing that I was saying in the beginning. Who is setting the question? Is it totally top-down, is there some bottom-up involvement, is there some way for the public to make submissions to it? Does it have a sufficient budget? Those kinds of things. And the second thing then is to look at the recruitment process so are people randomly selected? Then there is a debate about how they should be represented. So, a lot of assemblies would be representative of you know gender, region, age, for example. But then there is not a debate on whether or not to overrepresent some groups, like they did in Chile recently with indigenous groups. You know and in Canada they would also do that for First Nations people in New Zealand for Maori people and so on in Scotland the young were overrepresented because it was about climate. Then in some of the British models in the UK for example they also select on attitudes to the question, so they wanted people who were balanced on whether Scotland should have independence or not. Then the main bulk of it is actually is on the deliberative process that looks at the quality of it. Did people feel heard that they feel respected and that they feel like anybody was trying to dominate? Was the material going into them balanced? Whether a variety of experts... Could they ask enough questions and

then you have to look at the online process? You know, how easy was it? Was it accessible for people with less skills? How much support was there for the online parts and then were people open to... when they started giving their opinions were they starting to use evidence on the basis of their opinions rather than just top of the head kind of opinions? So those are kind of the main ways that we're kind of coming to some sort of international agreement on how to evaluate.

### **Interview number three: Professor Eiríkur Bergmann, Bifrost University, Iceland.**

**Sandoval:** Let's start by asking what is your experience in Latin America?

**Bergmann:** I worked with the former Brazilian administration, under Dilma Rouseff, on several projects in participatory budgeting mainly, in the Porto Alegre style. I'm also now on an advisory board around the Chilean Constitutional Assembly that is ongoing at the moment in Chile, and looks to be very promising, what they're doing there. So these are the two projects that I have been working on in Latin America, around participatory democracy. But in Europe I have been working on many, and you know, there is this ongoing cross-network project combining all of the experiences of constitutional deliberative forums around the world.

**Leonard:** Do you think that deliberative democracy could be a way to solve the legitimacy crisis that is affecting many countries in Latin America right now, especially in Colombia and Chile?

**Bergmann:** I mean, it won't solve any legitimacy crisis but it can help in underpinning, sort of, this fragile democracies and what I have always seen is that this deliberative citizens forums, they can serve to in a way, complement democratic systems instead of replacing components of it, and I've never seen this citizens assemblies as replacing representative democracy, but they can support the democratic structures in these countries quite significantly, and if they're well structured, they can underpin greater legitimacy, as a sort of addition, augmenting the democratic system as an addition. I think that is vitally important to understand. This is an additional building block onto the democratic structure, not one to replace it.

**Leonard:** Right, because I was reading what you wrote about the case of Iceland, and you seem to think this an important example of how to use deliberative democracy in a moment of crisis, in the case of Iceland there was a financial crisis, but still, what can Latin America learn from that example?

**Bergmann:** Well, there is a Latin American tradition as well quite a lot of these projects that have been operating around the world derive from the participatory budgeting style in Porto Alegre in South Brazil, it spread from there, over the last forty years now, it's more than forty years since they started this in Latin America. Therefore, they can even claim that this is theirs, this is not something that is being imported from the West, in a way, so rather these are authentic operations in the region itself, and to a significant extent, originated in the region itself, and that is also important for legitimacy. This is something that has been developed on site.

**Sandoval:** Absolutely, I think the most important question here is: do you think that you need to have strong institutions for these initiatives to work, or rather can you strengthen institutions through citizen participation?

**Bergmann:** No, I mean, I don't see this as excluding certain types of regimes, certain types of structures, so it doesn't really depend on the strength of structures themselves. I mean, it can be used in weak systems, as well as stronger systems, and oftentimes is very hard to implement this sort of operations in very established governmental structures, because there is a resistance to change, there are restrictive measures built into them pushing away challenging ideas to the system. But at the same time, in weaker systems the implementation phase can be extremely difficult, for example in implementing the decisions in these forums. But one does not really exclude the other I think.



**Leonard:** In the European experience there is a concern for the scalability of these initiatives, do you think that digitizing them could be a way of increasing their effectiveness? Or do you think that the face-to-face aspect is indispensable?

**Bergmann:** Digital participation is fine, could be a good instrument, for example, direct democracy, something like that, but that is really different from these deliberative forums. When you are talking about deliberative democracy, even a randomly selected forum of ordinary citizens can be very representative of large populations if they are selected properly so it doesn't really matter what the size of the population is, it could be representative. Then you need these people to be present in one room where they deliberate and talk to each other, and come to join decisions to deliberation, and is extremely difficult to do that only, but that does not mean that online forums don't hold value in themselves, because they do, but they won't replace the other forums, and these two should not be seen as mutually exclusive alternatives, these are different tools and both can be applied, but to different situations.

**Sandoval:** Yeah, that's what I was going to ask because with the pandemic there have been deliberative processes in Scotland and Ireland, and I imagine elsewhere, that have gone completely online, so, the jury is out, could they work? Could digital to face-to-face interactions be enough to make that deliberative process happen? You seem to be sceptical about that.

**Bergemann:** I can't see digital forums replacing this on-site citizen panels where you meet people, present in the same room for extended periods of time, getting to know each other, building trust, and then comment to an agreement without preconceived notions going into the meeting, and that is what is needed in citizen's panels. It's the idea of extended time spent together in a single location that is really the beauty of these panels. But as we did in Iceland we also built in a lot of online participation, and that serves a different purpose, it holds additional value on itself, but it does not replace in-presence interaction.

#### **Interview number four: Professor David Altman, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.**

**Sandoval:** Our first question for you is that your work focuses on direct democracy initiatives so in your opinion what effects could digital technologies, such as these platforms, have on these initiatives and how can digital technologies change direct democracy?

**Altman:** Well, that's a tough question and very broad in some ways. Digital platforms might help. They are just a technological tool as the print paper, you know, it's eventually... We're going to go through that but I'm personally I'm not really confident that this will be a breaking point in our democratic processes. Even Europe, even in the most developed countries they are not going that way and that's... There is a reason why and I think in many instances there are certain organizations that push because they have interest in this of course on advancing digital platforms on a veil of progressiveness and the technological cutting edge forgetting all the rest of democracy, so that's my first reaction I'm not really confident on that.

**Sandoval:** Can you talk a little bit more on why you're skeptical? What are the elements that are not letting democracy go fully digital? Why is that not a good idea?

**Altman:** First of all, digital tools help us too, maybe gather... They provide another arena to discuss and exchange ideas, but they are not very well suited for resolving problems. Also, I'm... I mean what expectation can we have in Paraguay or Bolivia or Suriname where more than 80% of the population does not have the minimal digital tools. There are virtual... There is a huge gap. I mean guys, this is something that you live in a rich environment can think of because you all have your smartphones your computers you are literate you can read and write you're finishing a master's degree and your GDP per capita is over \$30,000 dollars a year. But think in a situation where large parts of your population live under \$500 this is extremely conservative and this is quite... It's not personal of course but in a way it's quite imperialistic, colonialist. I would say so I'm not saying that we don't have to exploit and be helped by technological platforms, on the contrary. I think it's wonderful they provide wonderful opportunities for very controlled groups of people but for a society under these circumstances when you don't know whether the ballots, the old-fashioned paper ballot box is providing good results? And why is in Zurich, for instance, probably one of the most developed, the most digital city in the world, came back from digital voting? Because it does not provide the minimal guarantees that we need for democracy to work. There is a very obvious Achilles heel

in digital platforms: you can't rebuild patterns. Democracy... one of the most important things of democracy is to be able to challenge results. And you have to be convinced and show with the evidence that the winner was the winner and that's basically the reason why Zurich went back from digital to paper. Because if there was a minimal challenge to the election results, whatever the results were, who has the power to reveal and to show data and the evidence no this is the winner not this one right? So, that's a very huge, serious problem that digital platforms have. And the papers, the papers are guarded at a bank or whatever, say in a safe place, and you can recount them as many times as you want. With digital you can't do that without huge amounts of suspects, huge amounts of doubts and democracy, I mean, we don't need more doubts.

**Leonard:** If digital technologies aren't the way to increase participation and civic engagement in Uruguay or other Latin American countries in general, what other options are there?

**Altman:** I mean democracy... you have to fight with democracy, and you have... there is a huge amount of things to be done it depends on how you understand democracy. But if you understand our society as a mix of different groups with different interests that they sometimes make coalitions, sometimes they fight among themselves and they try to have some sort of majorities and their processes to decide which way we should go we should improve those mechanisms. It's done slowly, it's done in human terms for decades. I don't know, civic education, citizen education involvement but also again it depends how you understand participation if participation for you it's an objective by itself... OK I don't know you can force people to somehow have a say. We have what is called obligatory voting in many parts of Latin America. We have something that is called obligatory voting which is a pathetic term because nobody can force you to vote. The most that a government, a state can make in a democracy is to make you go to a place, but you don't have to vote, you can vote nil you can vote blank, you can I don't know but you are not forced to vote. Only North Korea people are forced to vote, right? So, there are some ways to make politics less oligarchic, less centered in a subset of society and there are ways to force politicians to broaden their scope in terms of who to pay attention to. And there are several ways, the problem is that if there was one solution... of course all our democracies would be the same, which is not the case, which helps us to prove that there is not only one solution and there are absolutely different solutions. There is no one way to think of democracy and there is no one principle that should rank, for instance participation. I mean participation, it's important very important, participation actually if we go to the classics in the literature of political science we see democracies as a combination of participation and competition, and we can't understand democracy without participation some sort of participation but also competition and then you know there is no one silver bullet here so it's from my perspective one of the reasons one of the ways we should increase in general terms is providing the tools for citizens to change the state of affairs regardless of what the authorities want. Through popular initiatives through referendums against laws and things like that, but this expectation that having the opportunity... I won't spend the only two hours I have free all day discussing with my neighbors about the future of the street no way. I have only two hours to spend with my kids playing, I'm going to cook and that's it then the rest I have to work so they expect that we have a craving for more participation is naïve... is somehow unreal I would say.

**Sandoval:** So, what comes first: strong institutions or high citizen participation? Can you change those institutions with high citizen participation or rather is it that culture of strong institutions is what will make people participate in those democratic initiatives?

**Altman:** Look, the fact that citizens participate doesn't mean that our decisions are correct or no matter with higher normative standards. Just take a look at the votes that the Swiss took last weekend or in February or I mean sometimes people, societies make huge mistakes deciding the fact that the people participate it doesn't mean that whatever they do with that participation is good or bad normatively speaking. We can go to several times in human history where there were huge amounts of participation, and probably sincere participation, doing terrible things. It doesn't mean that I expect people want to participate more, I mean that's an assumption that you have

mentioned. I can mention also Chile and Chile is collapsing is mutating to another type of institutional architecture with huge amount of participation at least from some segments of society but Chile is exactly equally divided between those who are in the street constantly, despite COVID, and those who don't want anything to say or don't want to make any movement. I mean you can't divide so clearly that with more participation you're going to improve institutions because human history is full of examples that that's not the case, but also not necessarily good institutions make more participatory societies. Again, you want to see more participation why? Maybe people are happy just living their lives but participation per say why it's good? Even equality, why is it good? I'm not saying that it is not good, I'm saying... I'm trying to check your point, I mean equalities are relative term it's a quality in comparison with certain benchmark. We can go back to digital platforms maybe the digital platforms here help somehow for coordinated demonstrations but that's it. They're very limited in scope very limited. That's it but then you have to read all the uses autocratic governments can make of these platforms as well, not only we take advantage of them but also autocrats take advantage of them. And somehow, they have more knowledge and more means more money more power to control these platforms that this idea that we citizens are going to challenge the power through digital platforms. There are huge amounts of weaknesses despite all of the romanticism that we might have with all these ideas of new sort of ways of engagement with platforms. On how to exploit these platforms on your behalf and that's why we invented, I mean that's why democracies we have the secret balance. I mean because it was the only way to avoid the powerful to see what you were voting. Of course, there's some ways to you know to bypass that in some countries or not but it's quite hard if other things work fine so my point is that you have to be really aware that any institution any platform open doors for everyone the good guys and the bad guys. And sometimes in order to reach a point you make huge mistakes. In Latin America you have all the scope you have countries with very good coverage of Internet but even those are countries that they're not relying on their democracy or increasing their democratic quality through digital platforms. They've done it through other ways you need political parties you need territorial work going to the supermarket I don't know whatever you want to go and then you have extremely poor countries. But even in the countries where you still have a healthy party system let's say would Uruguay or somehow Costa Rica with relatively good Internet access democracy doesn't rely on Internet or digital platforms. I mean digital agendas sound cool, progressive, good. The high-tech industry and everything. But democracy in Uruguay is not played in the digital platforms whatsoever despite the fact that leaders from all the political spectrum say yeah this is important, which it is important, I'm not saying that it's not important, they're probably sincere. I mean they say yeah let's try that, but our democracy should not depend on that. I mean there are some things that we won't exchange.

### **Interview number five: Professor Ricardo García Vargas (Venezuela), King Juan Carlos University, Spain.**

**Sandoval:** Lo primero que queríamos hablar es que cómo han afectado las nuevas tecnologías a la democracia de América Latina y sobre todo con las crisis de legitimidad que estamos viendo en países como Colombia. Nos interesa saber si esas nuevas tecnologías han ayudado o pueden ayudar a fortalecer las instituciones democráticas.

**García:** Perfecto, bueno, partimos de una idea, las tecnologías como cualquier herramienta tiene un doble atributo, uno positivo y uno negativo. El positivo tiene que ver con las consecuencias y el impacto que pueden generar sobre el bienestar de las personas, y el negativo tiene que ver con el impacto perjudicial que pueda afectar cuestiones de interés y de valor para las personas. Podemos asociar al desarrollo tecnológico al impacto positivo que tiene en términos de conexión de comunicación de intercambio de ideas y de conocimiento, para los procesos de maduración de ideas, son un espacio creativo en términos de innovación. Pero también, desde una perspectiva negativa puede ser el hecho que pueden utilizar para magnificar determinadas situaciones que no se corresponden con la realidad, generando desinformación, se pueden utilizar también como herramientas para la polarización y el enfrentamiento.

Con respecto a la democracia, podemos ver también ese doble atributo. El impacto positivo viene dado por la posibilidad de fomentar valores cívicos y establecer mecanismo que conecten por ejemplo al liderazgo público con los ciudadanos, y para generar espacios creativos para generar ideas que mejoren los servicios públicos. También para mejorar el funcionamiento de las instituciones públicas y por tanto el fortalecimiento de la democracia. Pero también podemos hablar del lado oscuro, las democracias también pueden contribuir con los autoritarismos, por ejemplo, las tecnologías pueden ir desplazando el valor que

tienen las personas en la sociedad, que pueden generar situaciones de descontento. Además, las tecnologías favorecen la centralización de la concentración y el análisis de los datos para tomar decisiones concretas acerca de políticas públicas, en un país de tendencia autoritaria el uso de los datos puede ser una herramienta extraordinaria de dominación y control. También, el uso indiscriminado de las tecnologías genera brechas y desigualdades, desde una perspectiva, por ejemplo, generacional o territorial.

Ahora, ¿qué pasa en América Latina? Tenemos una situación muy compleja porque es una región que a pesar de haber vivido un proceso de bonanza y crecimiento económico, que además se tradujo en una reducción considerable de los índices de pobreza extrema, y un crecimiento considerable de la clase media, AL es una región que enfrenta un desafío muy importante en términos de desigualdad social y gestión de los ciclos económicos, que son caracterizados por cambios constantes, momentos de bonanza y momentos de crisis. En un marco de estas características, si además añadimos la pandemia, y cómo la pandemia ha generado un quere en el funcionamiento de las instituciones, la tecnología viene a jugar un papel muy importante, tanto positiva como negativamente. Puede facilitar el desarrollo de políticas y servicios públicos acercando las instituciones a los ciudadanos, pero también pueden generar más desigualdades basadas en la tecnología, ¿quién tiene acceso a ella? Y si la convertimos en el elemento clave en la prestación de servicios estaremos generando proceso de discriminación.

**Leonard:** Desde ese punto de vista, ¿tendríamos que extender primero esas nuevas tecnologías, antes de usarlas para mejorar la democracia, con el fin de no generar discriminación?

**García:** Hay un elemento que debe desarrollarse, y es las infraestructuras que son fundamentales en el desarrollo del territorio y la región, para garantizar el acceso no solo de la tecnología sino también de bienes y servicios públicos. Un segundo componente que es fundamental es generar un entorno favorable para que aquellas personas que tengan limitaciones de acceso puedan acceder a ella, en esto las políticas de parte del estado pueden ser fundamentales, ¿tendríamos que esperar al desarrollo de esas estructuras y políticas? No necesariamente, porque se pueden desarrollar políticas y servicios que conecten el uso de las tecnologías con mecanismos de participación ciudadana. Además, tenemos una ventaja muy importante y es el uso del móvil, que nos da conectividad, y el uso del móvil se ha masificado, no solo en AL sino el resto el mundo. Por lo tanto, el uso del móvil y las aplicaciones puede ser una alternativa interesante para promover la participación. En cualquier caso, merece la pena desarrollarlo de manera conjunta, y merece la pena de pensar siempre en el uso de la tecnología, pero también en alternativas para aquellos que no tienen acceso a ellas. No podemos convertir la tecnología en el elemento central de las políticas, no puede ser el elemento central, debido a la realidad social y económica. Debe considerarse una herramienta que favorezca la promoción de los valores democráticos, la participación y la efectividad de las instituciones y servicios públicos, pero no debe ser el motor principal.

**Sandoval:** Otra pregunta que nos planteamos es si se pueden mejorar las instituciones democráticas a través del incremento de la participación ciudadana, o si más bien se necesitan instituciones sólidas para poder aumentar la participación.

**García:** Yo creo que AL tiene una experiencia extraordinaria en términos de participación, cambio e innovación sociales. Un ejemplo clásico son los presupuestos participativos, que se desarrollan a Brasil a finales de la década de los 80 y durante la década de los 90 se extiende por todo Brasil y después se exporta al resto del mundo, se da un proceso de internacionalización, y nació en AL. Hay muchas ciudades que son vibrantes en este sentido, con, por ejemplo, la creación de centros de innovación social y urbana, la generación de movimientos sociales y organizaciones cívicas, vecinales y de jóvenes, por ejemplo. Si analizas por ejemplo la transformación de Medellín, la participación ha tenido un papel extraordinario, pero también en Ciudad de México y Lima. Entonces la pregunta es, ¿qué queremos? ¿Qué la participación sea de arriba hacia abajo? ¿promovida por las instituciones? ¿o queremos que la participación y los cambios se den de abajo hacia arriba? Si abogamos por el primer modelo, necesitamos

instituciones fuertes, que sean capaces de crear mecanismos de participación y convertir la participación en acciones concretas. Pero si abogamos por el segundo, estamos hablando de que es necesario tener capital social, es decir es necesario contar con redes y organizaciones, un mundo cívico fuerte. ¿Entonces al final cuál es la decisión? La decisión va a depender del contexto, desde mi punto de vista, para poder terminar el grado de fortaleza de las instituciones y de la red de participación cívica, y midiendo estas dos dimensiones se podrá tomar una decisión de cuáles es el modelo que tenemos que adoptar.

# Digital Platforms and Civic Engagement in Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay:

Can these Platforms Improve Democracy?

---



# **DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN BRAZIL, COLOMBIA, AND URUGUAY: Can these Platforms Improve Democracy?**



**OAS** | School of  
GOVERNANCE

**ie**  
SCHOOL OF  
GLOBAL &  
PUBLIC AFFAIRS