

# *Participation Under Lula: Between Electoral Politics and Governability*

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## ABSTRACT

This article shows how and why the initial attempts of the Lula administration in Brazil to promote innovative counterhegemonic participatory strategies, such as those put in place by the PT in some of its subnational governments, fell by the wayside. It is argued that the implementation and scope of participatory initiatives under Lula were caught between electoral motivations and the need to secure governability. On the one hand, the need to produce quick results in order to maximize vote-seeking strategies hindered attempts to promote counterhegemonic participation, while Lula and his inner circle opted for policies that would score immediate marks with the poorest sectors or influence public opinion. On the other hand, participation also took a back seat because the PT concentrated most of its energies on reaching agreements with strategic actors, such as opposition parties or powerful economic groups.

A number of scholars have argued that the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT) was not particularly innovative in promoting participatory processes during the administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–10), as PT governments at the subnational level were (Baiochi and Checa 2007; Couto 2009; Feres 2010; Hochstetler and Friedman 2008; Hunter 2010; Leite 2008; Moroni 2009; Samuels 2008). Other observers have found, however, that the Lula administration did make some important efforts to include civil society and listen to its representatives, as proven by the expansion of a number of institutions of participatory governance, such as sectoral policy councils and national conferences (Avritzer 2010; Pogrebinschi 2013; Pogrebinschi and Samuels 2014). Existing works, however, have failed to acknowledge, as this article argues, that participation as a national political agenda is very often embedded in a larger and complex political game in which electoral politics and the need to secure governability play a major role.

By focusing on the first Lula administration (2003–6), this article shows how and why the PT at the national level left aside its initial attempts to promote a particular type of participatory strategy that the party had put in place at the subnational level, which I label as a counterhegemonic participatory strategy. When the party implemented such a strategy at the subnational level, participation had a strategic character, influenced the most relevant policy arenas—most notably the

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public budget—and was used by PT governments to circumvent or neutralize a conservative opposition that contested some of its redistributive agendas. I argue that the implementation and scope of participatory initiatives under Lula were eventually caught between electoral motivations and the need to secure governability, broadly understood as the necessity to accommodate the interests of certain “strategic actors” (Coppedge 2001, 214), such as opposition parties or powerful economic groups with sufficient power resources to generate episodes of crisis and stability in the economic, political, and social spheres. Eventually, by prioritizing electoral strategies and concentrating most of its energies on reaching agreements with strategic actors for governability, the PT at the national level relegated its counterhegemonic participatory strategies to the sidelines.

Unlike a number of PT local government experiences, in which the promotion of broad-based participatory mechanisms was at the center of government action—as in the well-documented case of Porto Alegre (Abers 1996; Avritzer 2009; Baiocchi 2003; Heller 2001) but also in other Brazilian cities—participation in the national sphere did not acquire such a strategic character. In particular, it had no major role in the formulation of the public budget or in the most relevant policy arena of the Lula administration, the largest social program, Bolsa Família (Family Grant), regarded by the presidency as “strategic” (Belchior 2009). In these two cases, the need to produce quick results in order to maximize vote- and office-seeking strategies hindered attempts to promote participation. Instead, Lula and his inner circle opted for policies that would score immediate marks with the poorest sectors or have an impact on public opinion.

Participation in key areas was regarded by several party leaders in public office as an obstacle to efficient and effective government action. As a result, the “hard nucleus” of the party in the federal administration eventually decided that the implementation of some of its most important policies would be more effective if they were centrally planned, under managerial and technocratic rationales that prioritized state action over the engagement of civil society. In addition, the characteristics of Lula’s leadership—how he came to be regarded as the representative of the poor and the excluded—made participatory instruments less necessary in the minds of several party leaders and social activists.

This article begins by briefly examining the literature on participation in Brazil and worldwide and explaining the study’s theoretical contribution. It then proceeds to define the distinctive elements that characterized the PT’s counterhegemonic participatory strategy when it occupied subnational executive public office, relying on Porto Alegre as an ideal type, and offers a general picture of the participatory strategy put in place under Lula. It shows how the PT cast aside its political commitment to democratize the national budget through participatory budgeting. Last, it explores participation in the social policy arena and examines a trajectory that started with the Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) program in 2002 and concluded with the establishment of the conditional cash transfer program Bolsa Família.

## **PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN A BROAD POLITICAL CONTEXT**

The literature on participatory democracy, both in Brazil and worldwide, has devoted great attention to the different types of participatory institutions and their designs, and their capacity to empower citizens, improve governance, or generate democratic outcomes and well-being (see, among others, Avritzer 2002, 2009; Baiocchi 2005; Fung and Wright 2003; Wampler 2007). It has given less attention to the ways that political dynamics shape participatory instruments. Although scholars now acknowledge that “participation is a political issue” that reflects “power relations in wider society” (White 1996, 13, 14), only a few studies—mainly centered on subnational participatory experiences—look at the incentives for a government’s involvement in participatory instruments or explore how participatory institutions are affected by larger politico-institutional dynamics (Wampler 2008; Abers 1996, chaps. 4, 5).

It is the argument of this article that participatory initiatives at the national level need to be assessed as part of a larger and complex political game, highly influenced by two factors: electoral politics and the need to secure governability. In relation to the first aspect, the study analyzes how electoral pressures may frustrate the scope of participatory initiatives. We already know, from studies based on subnational experiences, that electoral cycles have forced politicians to leave participatory initiatives aside in order to implement programs capable of producing visible results before elections take place, as well as to opt for policies capable of providing a greater electoral appeal and immediate impact, particularly among the lower middle class (Houtzager 2008, 56–58; Houtzager and Dowbor 2010; Schönleitner 2006; Wampler 2008).

Houtzager (2008, 56–58) shows, for instance, how the government of Marta Suplicy in São Paulo implemented a Minimum-Income Guarantee Program, the immediate precursor to Bolsa Família, which was mostly government-led and in which civil society had no significant participation.<sup>1</sup> Another interesting piece of evidence of how electoral politics interact with participatory strategies is Wampler’s 2008 work on participatory budgeting in several Brazilian cities. His research shows that one of the factors that explains variations in the quality of PB among different Brazilian cities is whether mayors and their coalitions believe that participatory instruments will provide a net gain in votes.

Regarding the second aspect, this article shows how governability affects participatory instruments and contributes to the literature by placing at center stage the link between participation and governability, present in Latin American political debates (Camou 2001; Coppedge 2001, 1994; Mayorga and Córdova 2007; Tomassini 1993). The notion of governability is useful to understand how and why the scope of participatory institutions largely depends on the challenges and constraints that political parties in general, and progressive parties in particular, face when they reach national executive office.

Few scholars have directly examined the interaction between participation and governability. One exception is the work of Abers (2000, chaps. 4, 5), in which she

explains how participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre helped the administration to “increase governability” and “build political support” among civil society organizations, business groups, and most notably, political parties in the opposition. Indirectly, Wampler (2008, 69) also analyzes how, in Brazilian cities, mayoral-legislative relations are “largely tangential to participatory outcomes” because the margins for maneuver to promote participatory initiatives decrease when mayors do not enjoy stable majorities, and thus have to limit the amount of resources they can dedicate to such initiatives.

Both electoral pressures and logics of governability influence participatory instruments at two levels, subnational and national. But these elements also play a particularly important role in shaping participatory institutions in the national sphere. There is an evident change of scale, more is at stake in electoral contexts, and major interests are at risk because national executives have to accommodate a wide range of strategic actors with sufficient power to generate episodes of crisis and stability in the economic, political, and social arenas.

## **FROM COUNTERHEGEMONIC TO MAINSTREAM PARTICIPATION**

The promotion of broad-based participatory mechanisms was one of the most distinctive characteristics of PT administrations at the subnational level (Abers 1996; Avritzer 2009; Baiocchi 2003; Heller 2001). The most important instrument put in place in Porto Alegre, the so-called participatory budget (PB), was a mechanism by which budgetary decisions were made by common citizens and civil society organizations in local assemblies.<sup>2</sup>

In the PB process, which was later replicated in a number of municipalities, citizens were able to deliberate on the distribution of public goods and acquire real influence in the allocation of budgetary resources, particularly for investment. The promotion of broad-based and innovative participatory mechanisms did not result only from an ideological commitment. In Porto Alegre, the ideal type for this study, participation was also part of a counterhegemonic strategy by which the PT was able to build political support and overcome its limitations within formal institutions in which it was in a minority position.

Such a strategy was not counterhegemonic in the sense of seeking an overthrow of the “dominant bloc” or promoting an assault on the privileged sectors. Neither was it a disruptive strategy aimed at provoking destabilization, as the notion of “radical” or “insurgent” planning suggests (Miraftab 2009). Instead, it was a reformist strategy that relied heavily on citizens and civil society to mobilize extra institutional support in order to alter the balance of forces in formal representative institutions without undermining them. This strategy, aimed at securing governability through alternative means, was particularly important because in the highly fragmented Brazilian political system, the party of the executive hardly ever secures a majority in legislative chambers. By promoting counterhegemonic participation, however, the PT found a formula to promote some of its initiatives of

socioeconomic redistribution, expand urban infrastructure, and simultaneously avoid political gridlock.

Strictly speaking, the approval of the budget is a legal prerogative of the legislative branch at each level of the Brazilian federation. At the municipal level, for instance, the mayor submits a budget proposal that the city assembly is free to approve, change, or even reject. However, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1998, 467) observes, because the executive's proposal was "sanctioned by the participatory budgeting institutions" it became "a *fait accompli* for the legislative body" due to the "political risk" that deputies perceived in voting against the "will of the citizens and the communities." Indeed, by the time the annual budget was sent to the *Câmara Municipal* (Municipal Chamber) for approval, city councilors did not find it easy to oppose, because strong popular pressure, exercised mostly by neighborhood leaders, accompanied the whole process.

PB is a particularly interesting mechanism because without undermining formal representative democracy, it helped to circumvent and "neutralize" a source of opposition in the municipal chamber that could be used to block its initiatives by "stamping the budget with popular approval" (Schneider and Goldfrank 2002, 14; see also Moroni 2009; Doctor 2007; Pinto 2004; Ramos 2004). Very often, once the budgetary proposal arrived at the city assembly for approval, it had already been legitimated by a sizable citizen participation. Approval, in such a context, became a simple formality (Sousa Santos 1998, 502–5). Even the number of modifications (or earmarks) city councilors introduced in the budget bill decreased significantly (Hahn 2002). Ramos (2003, 262–63) explains that this occurred in great part because legislators did not want to act against a participatory process that enjoyed great social acceptance, as they feared the electoral consequences.

By 2004, most PT governments had implemented participatory budgeting mechanisms (Wampler 2007), including large and important state capitals such as São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, and Recife. Several cities, even those governed by other parties, incorporated some version of PB.<sup>3</sup> But the way this instrument was put in place had different characteristics and did not always reach the same scope. Porto Alegre was one of the few cases in which the resources related to investment that were discussed in the PB process amounted to 100 percent. Nevertheless, in many other cities, it became a legitimate and influential instrument that councilors could not ignore (Hernández 2005, 40; Ramos 2004, 251).

When the PT came to occupy national executive office, many analysts expected that it would rely on counterhegemonic participatory mechanisms similar to PB in order to mitigate, at least in part, its minority status in the legislative branch (where the party controlled only 17.7 percent of the seats in the lower house and 17.3 percent in the senate). Participatory instruments, however, were far from playing such a role. In contrast to several PT subnational experiences in which participation helped to circumvent or neutralize opposition in the legislative branch (Couto 2009; Doctor 2007; Pinto 2004; Ramos 2004, 262–66; Schneider and Goldfrank 2002; Sousa Santos 2002), no participatory instrument served this purpose in the national sphere.

Most studies on participation during the Lula administration tend to be critical and to highlight the absence of innovation in participatory institutions and their lack of meaningful influence (Baiocchi and Checa 2007; Couto 2009; Hochstetler and Friedman 2008, 21–22; Leite 2008; Moroni 2009). In fairness, the Lula government did make important efforts to include civil society, mainly by listening to many of its representatives and their claims. The PT administration created several institutions of participatory governance, expanding significantly the number of Sectoral Public Policy Councils (SPPCs) and, more important, National Public Policy Conferences (NPPCs) (Leite 2008, chap. 4; Pogrebinschi and Santos 2010, 75). According to official data, during the course of two terms, the government created 13 councils and held 73 NPPCs, which mobilized more than 5 million people at the municipal, local, and national levels (PR, Secretaria de Comunicação Social 2010, 7). Both scholarly work and government-sponsored studies show how, in these spaces, civil society organizations were able to define several policy agendas (Pogrebinschi 2013; Pogrebinschi and Samuels 2014; Pogrebinschi and Santos 2010, 53–82). These experiences cannot be underestimated, as there are no other precedents of national-level participatory processes capable of engaging such a massive number of citizens “deliberating on issues beyond their local interests” (Pogrebinschi 2013, 238).

However, authors are not mistaken when they argue that councils and conferences impress more for their quantity than their quality (Grzybowski 2004; Leite 2008; Moroni 2009). The schemes the Lula administration put in place were not particularly new, as they were part of the decentralized participatory system created after the enactment of the new constitution in 1988. NPPCs predate the PT’s founding in 1980 (Pogrebinschi 2011, 9; Shankland and Cornwall 2007), and by the time Lula assumed public office, they were already part of “the country’s democratic fabric” (Shankland 2010, 49).

Together with SPPCs, national conferences were part of the same efforts that had oriented participatory policies in Brazil over the three previous decades. Undoubtedly, many of these institutions were important conquests of Brazilian civil society, and they did contribute to state democratization, mainly by giving voice to previously excluded minority groups (Pogrebinschi 2011, 9; Shankland and Cornwall 2007). However, the literature shows that councils and conferences also present a number of limitations. They have limited decisionmaking power and are highly dependent on the will of high-ranking officials to implement their recommendations (Couto 2009); they hardly ever discuss budgetary decisions and never touch on key issues, such as macroeconomic policy (Teixeira 2005).

Although research shows that the recommendations of NPPCs provide a source of new national-level legislation (Pogrebinschi and Samuels 2014), there is no evidence that they have been able to influence a significant proportion of the actually enacted laws or that they have had any decisive effect on the most strategic areas of the administration. National conferences seem to affect policy when their outcomes entail relatively low electoral stakes for the government, when their topics bear relatively low political salience for the general population (but high salience for an

organized and active group), and when they deal with particular sector-specific areas, such as oral health, sports, and youth, or broader topics like social assistance and the environment (Samuels 2013; Pogrebinschi and Samuels 2014).

In cities such as Porto Alegre, participation took center stage, as it touched on strategic areas (i.e., the public budget), and helped to circumvent or neutralize conservative opposition in the legislative branch. In contrast, overall, neither sectoral policy councils nor national conferences were “elements of a radical alternative,” as Shankland notes (2010, 49). By putting these institutions and processes at the center of its participatory agenda, the Lula administration was far from seeking to implement a counterhegemonic participatory strategy.

In the first years of the Lula government, PT members in the party bureaucracy and in the federal government did try to craft and implement alternative participatory models, but they were eventually discontinued. Some of them promoted a debate to implement PB at the national level, which was never seriously considered but which resulted in a consultative mechanism to define government priorities and long-term investments. More important was the creation of a capillary participatory system of management committees for the Zero Hunger program, a form of delegated power that would give civil society and ordinary citizens a fundamental role in managing Lula’s most important social policy at the time. The following sections examine these experiments and the reasons for their lack of success.

## **LEAVING ASIDE THE PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING PROMISE**

When Lula assumed office, participatory budgeting mechanisms had already spread across several municipalities, with some particularly successful cases. At the state level, however, the experience was limited to one single case, in which PB lasted for a whole government term: the Olívio Dutra administration in Rio Grande do Sul (1999–2002). From its Second National Congress in 1999 on, the PT envisaged scaling up participatory budgeting mechanisms from the local level to the national sphere (PT 2004, 692–717). The idea of a federal PB was revisited by the party in its Third National Congress in 2001 (PT 2004, 1657) and was incorporated into the first pages of Lula’s electoral manifesto in 2002 (CLP 2002, 3).

Given the enormous size of the Brazilian territory and its population, a federal PB was obviously not an easy promise to deliver. Yet the intention was never to automatically implement this instrument at the national level but to adapt it to the Brazilian federal structure, as the 2001 and 2002 documents make explicit (CLP 2002, 3; PT 2004, 1657). In any case, this process was rather complicated because a wide range of actors influenced the deliberation of the public budget at the federal level. Whereas a mayor may face opposition from only one institutional actor, namely the city assembly, national presidents face various intermediate levels, such as mayors and state governments, as well as a national congress with more budgetary powers than municipal or state assemblies. Yet despite the difficulties, it was reasonable to expect, given the PT’s history and the commitments made, that a creative

mechanism to democratize the federal public budget would eventually be discussed. This was not the case, however, because those with influence kept it off the table.

Party leaders had mixed opinions on the extent to which PB was feasible beyond the municipal sphere. Leaders of the leftist factions in the PT, particularly those who had participated in the Dutra administration, thought PB had potential at the state level (Agustín 2010; Rosetto 2009; Sousa 2008), while many in Lula's inner circle disagreed (Belchior 2009; Dirceu 2009; Dulci 2008). Luiz Dulci, who was the main authority responsible for the promotion of participatory mechanisms as general secretary of the presidency, argues that the municipal model based on assemblies and citizens' individual participation had practically failed at the state level, and therefore was even less feasible in the national sphere (Dulci 2008). During the interviews conducted for this study, it emerged that most of the leftist groups in the PT supported the creation of a federal PB, while leaders in Lula's faction—in control of the party's executive commission—were reluctant or skeptical.

Despite the skepticism in Lula's faction and among his inner circle, PB was included in the electoral manifesto in 2002, possibly because it was not easy to leave aside a banner that was strongly identified with the PT. What mainly stands out, however, is that there was no discussion about scaling up participatory budgeting or even alternatives to democratize the formulation of the annual budget. High-ranking party leaders in the government acknowledged that initiatives to democratize the budget were relegated because "more important political issues" took priority (Ananias 2009; Dirceu 2009; Genro 2009).

According to José Dirceu, chief of the presidential civil house (similar to a minister of the interior) between 2003 and 2005, "when the PT took office, the priority was to solve the economic crisis, take hold of the state apparatus and achieve a majority in the legislature" (Dirceu 2009). Tarso Genro, one of the main champions of participatory budgeting as mayor of Porto Alegre (1993–97, 2000–2001), put forward a similar argument. In his view, the democratization of the public budget was not promoted at the federal level because the administration had "urgent matters to solve." His explanation is that when the PT took office in 2003, "we had a country in bankruptcy; high inflation, stratospheric interest rates, unfavorable trade balance, and lack of foreign reserves" (Genro 2009). Clearly, within the governability strategy adopted by the Lula administration, macroeconomic stability and the formation of a stable parliamentary alliance determined the order of priorities.

## **FOME ZERO MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES: A SHORT-LIVED EXPERIMENT**

The Fome Zero management committees shaped during the first year of the Lula administration remain largely unexplored in the literature.<sup>4</sup> It is worth looking at this experience because it represents one of the PT government's most significant attempts to create an alternative mechanism of counterhegemonic participation beyond the existing decentralized participatory system previously established in Brazil. It is interesting that for some of the leaders who were involved in this initia-



tive, the management committees could have eventually led into “the federal version of the PT’s participatory budget” (Betto 2007, 428).

The proposed structure was intended to give society a majority of seats on the committees and decisionmaking authority to both manage and control Lula’s Fome Zero. Although those who led this adventure were eventually defeated, their story offers more evidence of how electoral politics and the need to secure governability in its elite-centered fashion, coupled with the nature of Lula’s leadership, shaped and limited participation during his administration.

In the months leading up to the 2002 presidential election, the Citizenship Institute, a think tank created by Lula after the 1998 election to formulate specific policies outside the constraints of the party structure, discussed with experts and civil society organizations a food security program, Fome Zero, which established a comprehensive set of 25 policies to address extreme poverty, hunger, and malnutrition (Instituto Cidadania 2001). From the outset, the project was expected to attract massive popular support and confer a leading role on civil society. Before the Fome Zero was officially launched in October 2001, Lula and his group discussed it with several NGOs, social movements, trade union confederations, and academic experts (Instituto Cidadania 2001, 5). Having established that hunger eradication and poverty alleviation would be a top priority, one of Lula’s first decisions as president was to create a new Ministry of Food Security and Hunger Eradication, responsible, among other things, for promoting social participation around the Fome Zero program. In addition, Lula appointed two special advisers attached to the presidential office—the Liberation Theology priest Frei Betto and one of the founders of the World Social Forum, Oded Grajew—and gave them responsibilities to create a mobilization support network. These decisions signaled the new administration’s intention to give civil society a key role in one of its most publicized programs.

From the beginning, Fome Zero generated intense polemics and was the center of media attention. Government officials lacked a unified vision of how to implement the program and differed in their views on the role that civil society should play at the local level. Three main groups influenced the debate; I call them the autonomists, the civil society watchdogs, and the municipalists. The autonomists were the group led by Frei Betto, who expected civil society to play the most significant role in the program, both in selecting beneficiaries at the local level and in exercising social oversight. For this group, who wanted civil society to act in a self-organizing fashion, the success of the program depended on a massive mobilization.

The group of civil society watchdogs was based in the Ministry of Food Security and had the main responsibility for the operation of Fome Zero. They distrusted municipal governments because of their well-known corrupt and clientelistic practices.<sup>5</sup> In order to avoid them, they intended to put in place a strong mechanism of social oversight over municipalities. This group shared some of the aims of the autonomists but was less driven by mobilization and more interested in the efficiency and transparency of the program. Both of these groups distrusted the local political elites and wanted to oppose them, or at least to counterbalance their prac-

tices. However, whereas the autonomists defended a hard counterhegemonic strategy, the civil society watchdogs had a softer counterhegemonic approach.

At the other end of the spectrum, with an elite-centered influence, was the group of municipalists, who demanded a greater role for state institutions at the local level and were skeptical of giving civil society major responsibilities in the execution of a public program.<sup>6</sup> This group was concerned with accommodating the interests of local political elites. Given that the PT had elected only 186 out of 5,565 municipalities and that many mayors control *deputados* at the national level, accommodating the mayors' interests by giving them a role in Lula's main government program was part of a strategy to form alliances with other parties and eventually secure a parliamentary base of support. The three groups created a political dispute during the first two years of the Lula administration, with autonomists and civil society watchdogs more or less united on one side and municipalists on the other. As we will see, it was the municipalists who eventually prevailed.

One of the initial components of Fome Zero was a cash transfer program by which a smartcard (the *cartão alimentação*) was distributed to the poorest families and topped up on a monthly basis for them to purchase food. In order to put the program in place, the government needed to create a registry of potential beneficiaries and update information gathered by the previous administration. Because such a task had been performed by municipal governments in the past (often based on political considerations), officials in the Ministry of Food Security did not trust the existing lists of beneficiaries and sought to compile new ones or revise the existing ones without the involvement of the municipalities. These officials wanted to prevent both corrupt practices and the electoral use of the program. In their view, these problems could be avoided by transferring resources directly from the federal government to a bank account that only the beneficiaries could access. However, if the mayors were able to manipulate the selection processes, the risks of misallocation would be much higher.

By establishing Fome Zero management committees, those in the Ministry of Food Security who were advocating for a civil society watchdog role sought to install a local-level social oversight institution, which would also become the program's "operational arm" (Balsadi et al. 2004, 83). Unlike the constitutionally mandated sectoral policy councils, in which civil society and government were equally represented, officials in the ministry decided that these spaces should be controlled by two-thirds of citizens or representatives of civil society organizations and only one-third of local government officials. The committees were responsible for finding inconsistencies in the list of beneficiaries; they could suggest the inclusion of new families and eventually demand the exclusion of those who no longer required benefits.

These tasks were particularly important in the Northeast, the poorest and most unequal region in Brazil, where local institutions are weak and practices of corruption and clientelism particularly widespread.<sup>7</sup> In order to avoid such problems, the ministry decided that the money would be handed only to those municipalities in which management committees had been formed. This decision was not free from

controversy, as bureaucrats and party officials, many of them municipalists, contended that it would slow down the implementation of the program.<sup>8</sup>

The expected role of the committees, however, was even more ambitious for the autonomists. In particular, this group wanted the committees to help the program evolve from the initial phase, mostly based on cash transfer distribution, to one capable of implementing deep structural changes. In May 2003, Frei Betto explained in an interview how his team envisaged committees playing a role in the creation of a “social inclusion network” to tackle the “structural causes” of hunger, poverty, and malnourishment (Gordillo and Gómez 2005, 156–67). The autonomists saw the committees as having a strong component of “citizens’ education” (Gordillo and Gómez 2005, 155) and expected them to play a political role.

During the first year of the Lula government, members of these committees received training to “elaborate local development plans,” “stimulate discussions about problems in the communities,” and even to promote “public actions among civil society” (Balsadi et al. 2004, 84). Did they intend to create a structure parallel to the local powers? Some party and social leaders suggest that this was probably the case. Miriam Belchior, a representative of the municipalists who advised Lula at the time, considers that “behind the creation of those committees was a Soviet-type approach that wanted to decide everything about everything” (Belchior 2009). Requesting anonymity, a representative of civil society argued that Frei Betto wanted to implement a model inspired by the Cuban Committees for the Defense of the Revolution or the Bolivarian Circles in Venezuela, organized in each neighborhood in each municipality. In his view, “Betto *wanted to create a base of power opposed to the representative power of Brazilian municipalities* [in which] decisions for social policy would cease to be made by local politicians and would be handled instead by popular organizations” (emphasis added).

Former officials from the Ministry of Food Security counted 2,285 committees officially formed during the first year of the Lula administration and claimed that the process mobilized 20,000 volunteers all over the country (Balsadi et al. 2004, 85).<sup>9</sup> In his memoirs, Frei Betto described public assemblies with more than 300 participants and up to 1,000 in more than 560 municipalities, with considerable activity in the Northeast (Betto 2007, 107). Despite the lack of formal evaluation, the limited available evidence suggests that an incipient but strong mechanism of social oversight was slowly emerging. Former officials of the Ministry of Food Security argue that due to the action of the volunteers who participated on the management committees, many causes of wrongdoing were exposed.<sup>10</sup> The question arises, therefore, why the administration abruptly decided to abort these efforts despite the apparent achievements.

## BOLSA FAMÍLIA: LEAVING PARTICIPATION ASIDE

A governing party that wants to win elections and remain in office will not always be willing to share power with civil society or lose control over policies that might have strong electoral impact. Electoral pressures started to dominate the food security policy agenda toward the end of the first year of the Lula administration. This altered the nature of Lula's main social policy, which adopted the new brand of Bolsa Família, becoming a key platform for Lula's re-election in 2006.<sup>11</sup>

The original form in which Fome Zero was conceived changed significantly toward the end of 2003, when Lula's inner circle perceived that its most important social policy innovation was not showing results as rapidly as the electoral cycle required. The PT faced important municipal elections in 2004 and needed to consolidate its power to be ready for the 2006 contest. Soon, following World Bank prescriptions, the government decided to unify a series of federal government cash transfer programs created during previous administrations, including the *cartão alimentação* that the Lula government had created in 2003. The result of this unification was Bolsa Família.

Along with this change, the administration decided that the recently created Ministry of Food Security and Hunger Eradication would be abolished and its functions subsumed into a new Ministry of Social Development. To take charge of this new area, Lula appointed Patrus Ananias, a former mayor of Belo Horizonte, who came to represent the interest and views of the municipalists (even though he was an activist in the progressive church and had even promoted a participatory budget when he was mayor). Lula was anxious to see the program functioning at full speed, and set his new minister a tight deadline: to reach around 11 million beneficiary families before the presidential election. As the Lula administration had reached only 3.5 million families with its *cartão de alimentação*, the challenge to Ananias and his team was considerable.

A radical modification in the composition and attributes of the committees accompanied these changes. Lula eventually decided that the municipal government, rather than civil society, should assume the main role in the implementation of the program at the local level. Most of the management committees' functions were transferred to the municipalities, including expanding the lists of beneficiaries of Bolsa Família, giving the municipalities a critical political tool as a result. The committees formally remained as institutions for social oversight of the new program; however, their role was weakened because the number of civil society representatives was reduced. Like most sectoral policy councils in Brazil, from then on they had an equal number of government and civil society representatives. To make matters worse, mayors were given the freedom to determine which type of social oversight mechanisms they wished to establish in their municipalities.

Ananias prioritized the relationships with municipal governments over civil society. In December 2004, Frei Betto decided to leave the government, possibly

because he realized that his agenda would not move forward. In the following years, the Bolsa Família program spread around the country, with civil society playing only a marginal role. The committees created during the first year were not formally abolished, but only some of them remained active. Despite the overwhelming call by the National Conference on Food Security (*Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar*, CONSEA), in March 2004, to maintain committees controlled by civil society (and also to create new committees elected in popular assemblies; see CONSEA 2004 in Takagi 2006, 115), the government ignored this appeal, as it ignored the deliberations of other NPPCs.

Existing scholarly evidence shows that participation in Bolsa Família was weak. Hevia (2009), who conducted comparative studies on social oversight institutions in different cash transfer programs in Latin America, found that the way Bolsa Família operates does not allow space for civil society, nor does it contemplate forms by which beneficiaries can engage in the program and hold authorities to account. Even some of the main civil servants and party leaders directly involved in this program recognized that the role of civil society was marginal (Ananias 2009; Aranha 2009; Mesquita 2009). Their most common justification was the pressures they faced to expand massively the number of beneficiaries and the speed with which they had to put Bolsa Família in place.

Those leading the implementation of the cash transfer program emphasized the importance of a government-led program, rather than one in which civil society would act as a mediator. This was justified as being part of the state's responsibilities to guarantee basic rights, as explained by Ananias.

We are interested in social participation, but in our view the responsibility for securing rights rests with the state.... Hunger cannot wait. *Immediate and energetic action is needed, therefore state action....* As a citizen and as a Christian, I believe in mobilization and social organization, but when you assume a public job you have to work with deadlines and goals and respond effectively to the demands and needs of the people. (Ananias 2009, emphasis added)

This emphasis on state action was also present in the discourse of the Secretary of Food Security, Crispim Moreira.

Our emphasis is on the state and its capacity to manage a massive social policy on a legal and institutional basis. You need the state to manage a R\$22 billion budget to spend on a program like this. Fully institutionalized structures with procedures set in decrees and laws are necessary.... *We are not in charge of the "ministry of popular power"* [*Nos não encabeçamos a secretaria do poder popular*]. Can you imagine what that would be like?... The committees no longer decide whose names are included in the registry because the criteria are set in law. (Moreira 2009, emphasis added)

It is interesting to note how, according to these views, efficiency and effectiveness are synonymous with "state actions," rather than being attributes of civil society. Such a stance contrasts with the counterhegemonic participatory strategies that the PT promoted in several cities it had governed. More in tune with the

elite-centered approach that emphasizes the role of the state over civil society, participation is seen as something that can generate obstacles rather than facilitate solutions.

Although most people would find it hard to disagree with the statement “hunger cannot wait,” the way it is used seems more like a justification. Participation in Bolsa Família was not weak because the government wanted to emphasize the role of the state as the main guarantor of the right to food or a minimum income. If the management committees were ignored or left aside, it was mostly because the administration wanted to retain control over a social policy that was a key plank of the PT’s electoral strategy.

Indeed, electoral pressures determined the characteristics and pace of implementation of Bolsa Família. Clarice dos Santos, an activist from the MST who worked for the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), put it bluntly: “Bolsa Família responded to the most immediate political need to reelect Lula.” In her view, “organizing the people or promoting participatory mechanisms would have taken more time and effort” (Santos 2009). It is clear that the president wanted to see results much earlier.

Finally, it should be said that governability also played a significant role in removing meaningful participatory mechanisms from Lula’s main social policy. Not only did the counterhegemonic characteristics of the management committees cause suspicion among the defenders of the elite-centered perspective, but the government also needed to accommodate the interests of those opposition parties that became allies in Congress and also wanted to have a role in Bolsa Família. Frei Betto suggested this in his memoirs when he explained how granting more power to the municipal governments was part of a strategy of the Lula government to broaden its political alliances before the 2004 municipal elections (Betto 2007, 249).

## FINAL REMARKS

This article has shown how two issues not usually addressed in the literature on participatory democracy—electoral pressures and the need to secure governability—limited the scope and depth of the participatory mechanisms put in place during the first Lula administration. It is not easy to determine which of these two factors played the most important role. I have mentioned that the need to accommodate the dominant strategic actors’ interest in governability precluded party leaders from discussing a meaningful process to democratize the public budget. However, electoral pressures also played a role in making the government opt for policies capable of generating immediate impact and a larger electoral appeal, particularly among the poorest, as in the case of the Bolsa Família program. In this context, participation was regarded as something that could slow down the implementation of the most important government policies.

However, the adoption of a conservative and elite-centered governability strategy, different from the counterhegemonic strategies promoted by the PT in some of its subnational executive experiences, might have been a more powerful reason. Ulti-

mately, electoral pressures were also influential at the local level, but many PT administrations found ways to promote participation and simultaneously perform successfully in elections. It is not evident that participatory policies could have rendered similar electoral dividends at the national level (at least not in the short run), given the time that participatory processes take to consolidate. It is clear, however, that the strong suspicion with which the defenders of an elite-centered strategy regarded counterhegemonic participatory institutions, such as the Fome Zero management committees, was a strong deterrent to any possible attempts at innovation. Indeed, the governability strategy adopted by Lula's inner circle became a suprarationale that shaped the substance, character, and scope of participatory initiatives and limited the PT's progressive potential at the national level.

A secondary factor contemplated in this study was the nature of Lula's leadership and how it drove energies away from participatory processes. Indeed, Lula's leadership had important implications for the PT's transformative project because the party in public office would no longer rely on the input of civil society as much as on the input of those who had been elected and who would govern in its name and in the name of the whole society.

All these elements had important implications for the PT's transformative project because the Workers' Party during the Lula administration left aside one of the most powerful and original ideas that had inspired its creation in the late 1970s: the need to organize the poor and transform society as a whole without seeking state power as the only source of transformation.

## NOTES

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1. Houtzager (2008) observes that the electoral cycle forced politicians to implement programs capable of producing "significant benefits" within a two-year period in order to produce visible results toward the third year.

2. It is not the intention of this article to explain in any detail how participatory budgeting worked in Porto Alegre, an issue widely studied in the literature. Among others see Abers 2000; Avritzer 2002; Baiocchi 2005; Sousa Santos 1998; Wampler and Avritzer 2004.

3. The number of cities adopting this instrument increased from 36 in 1996 to 140 in 2003 and to 170 in 2004, according to estimates compiled by Cibele Rikek (2003, cited in Avritzer 2006, 623; see also Pires 2006, 14–15).

4. The only exceptions are a handful of academic studies conducted by some actors who were involved in the creation of such committees during the first year of the Lula administration (see Balsadi et al. 2004; Takagi 2006), as well as memoirs written by other actors who were involved in the process (see Betto 2007; Poletto 2005).

5. Officials reviewed data from the National Audit Office (TCU) showing that as many as 70 percent of the municipal governments in Brazil had corruption problems (quoted in Betto 2007, 444).

6. This characterization was made by Takagi (2006, 163–64) in her doctoral thesis on the implementation of the food security policy during the Lula administration. Takagi worked for the Ministry of Food Security between 2003 and 2004.

7. A former official who worked for the Ministry of Food Security stated anonymously that the administration was extremely worried about potential accusations of corruption that could jeopardize the program in terms of public opinion.

8. Others also disagreed on the grounds that fundamental rights, such as the right to food and the right to a minimum income, “cannot be conditioned on the process of organization of civil society, no matter how legitimate or necessary it might be” (Ananias 2009).

9. The estimates are subject to different interpretations. Another official who worked for the Ministry of Food Security, requesting anonymity, acknowledged that there were no more than 1,500 committees that actually functioned. The municipalists made even lower estimates. Adriana Aranha, chief of staff for the minister of social development, maintained that only 500 committees worked in reality (Aranha 2009).

10. An academic study conducted in three states of Northeast Brazil between July and August 2003 showed that despite many operational problems, the committees not only promoted transparency and accountability but helped to reach the neediest in their municipalities, to make the beneficiaries spend the money on food, and to achieve other objectives of the program (Ortega 2003, in Takagi 2006). The National Court of Audit (TCU) also praised the committees for being important elements in preventing corrupt practices (TCU 2004, in Betto 2007, 117).

11. The literature identifies more generally the electoral consequences of Bolsa Família (Bohn 2011; Hunter and Power 2007; Licio et al. 2009; Zucco 2006). Here I look more specifically at its implications for participation.

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