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Upon These Terrible Ruins: Social Participation and Participatory Institutions in Brazil During Lula's Third Administration

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Cover photo: Vice President-elect Geraldo Alckmin and President-elect Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva attend a meeting with social movements. December 13, 2022.

Credit: Antonio Cruz/Agência Brasil

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Abbreviations

ASPAD	Assessorias de Participação Social e Diversidade
CPS	Consejo de Participación Social
COP	Conference of Parties
CONSEA	Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional
FHC	Fernando Henrique Cardoso
G20	Group of 20
GT	Gabinete de Transición
GTCCCN	Grupo de Trabalho Técnico sobre Colegiados, Conselhos e Conferências Nacionais
IBGE	Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística
INCT	Instituto Nacional de Ciência e Tecnologia
INPE	Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais
MP	Medida Provisional
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OP	Orçamento Participativo
OPN	Orçamento Participativo Nacional
PPA	Plano Plurianual
PT	Partido dos Trabalhadores
R\$	Brazilian real

Summary

This *Accountability Note* presents an assessment of social participation and participatory institutions in Brazil during the third term of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2023–2026), given the legacy of dismantling left by the preceding administration of President Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2023).

Brazil developed a dense and diversified social control regime through the institutionalization of participation throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Social control regimes are configurations of relationships between actors, organizational structures, norms, and resources that become institutionalized in recurrent patterns in order to exert social control over state actors and functions. In international discourse, the country was regarded as a vast laboratory for participatory innovation and the possibilities of its institutionalization.

Despite a widespread perception that the “deconstruction” efforts of the Bolsonaro administration had resulted in the failure of the participatory model, many participatory institutions have been resilient. Thus, the Brazilian experience offers some lessons on the vulnerability and resilience of participatory institutions in hostile circumstances.

Towards the end of Lula’s third term, a combination of three patterns characterizes what has happened to participatory institutions: reactivation, innovation, and evasion.

- Reactivation restored the existing participatory institutions, with their already known strengths and limitations.
- Innovation significantly advanced participatory institutions compared to past experiences that had been developed under the previous federal governments of the Workers’ Party.
- Evasion occurred when the government strategically avoided making progress on its initial commitments to rebuild social participation, in order to sidestep political damage.

The detailed analysis of these patterns, and their combinations, shows the importance of political costs to a government operating in a situation where the majority in the Congress was in opposition to its participatory policies. The Lula administration preferred to strategically reserve the politically costly support it needed from the legislature not for social participation, but for priority projects such as tax reform.

This analysis leads to two key lessons.

First, participatory institutions prove more resilient to hostile governments when they are firmly institutionalized and when they maintain strong ties to public policy communities, civil society actors included.

Second, social control regimes generate long-term structuring effects that shape both the possibilities for progress and the limits of participatory innovation. Incremental development built upon the foundations of a consolidated regime offers considerable advantages. However, unlike reactivation, innovation cannot rely on established institutional frameworks. When a government seeking to drive large-scale innovation lacks broad legislative majorities, the costs become prohibitive, and evasion emerges as a strategic response.

We have to deconstruct many things. Undo many things. So that later we can begin to build. If I can serve to be, at the very least, a turning point, I'll already be very happy. (sic)

Speech by President Jair Messias Bolsonaro during a dinner at the Brazilian ambassador's residence in Washington DC, March 17, 2019

The assessment we received from the Government Transition Team is terrifying. They drained the resources. (...) They dismantled. (...) They destroyed. (...) They disrupted. (...) They squandered. (...) It is upon these terrible ruins that I commit myself, together with the Brazilian people, to rebuilding the country.

Speech by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva during the inauguration ceremony before the National Congress, prior to the great revocation (revogação) event, on January 1, 2023

Introduction

This *Accountability Note* presents an assessment of social participation during Lula's third administration (2023–2026) with the aim of answering the following question: after four years in office, and considering the legacy of dismantling left by the Bolsonaro administration, what is the outcome for social participation and participatory institutions?

Conducting an analysis to answer this question is relevant for two reasons. First, Brazil developed a dense and diversified social control regime through the institutionalization of participation throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Social control regimes are configurations of relationships between actors, organizational structures, norms, and resources that become institutionalized in recurrent patterns in order to exert social control over state actors and functions. Their stability is a matter of degree rather than of kind: regimes are patterned enough to be recognizable and to shape behavior, yet they shift over time and vary across space. In international discourse, the country was regarded as a vast laboratory for participatory innovation and the possibilities of its institutionalization. Although the perception that the Brazilian participatory model failed and social participation was dismantled by the Bolsonaro administration's "deconstruction" efforts has become widespread, participatory institutions have been resilient, largely thanks to the characteristics of the social control regime, which, in turn, was one of the pillars of the "reconstruction" initiatives of Lula's third term (Miguel 2017; Goldfrank and Esquivel 2020; Koupak et al. 2021; Quadros and Mussoi 2021). Thus, the Brazilian experience offers some lessons on the vulnerability and resilience of participatory institutions in hostile circumstances, such as under a far-right national government that publicly reiterated its goal of putting an end to activism and institutionalized forms of non-electoral participation.

Second, an assessment of the progress and limitations of participation during Lula's third term on the eve of the presidential election scheduled for October 2026 is particularly timely. And yet, research aimed at this objective is still in its early stages in the specialized literature, and even more so are assessments accessible to broader international audiences of activists, practitioners, professionals, and specialists interested in strengthening participation and social accountability. In fact, the Brazilian participatory innovation most widely known internationally by this audience remains the participatory budget (OP, from its Portuguese acronym), which is not among the predominant participatory institutions and which, for more than 20 years, has ceased to be central to Brazil's broader range of democratic innovation experiences. This *Accountability Note* presents an overview of participatory innovations as a regime.

Here we not only offer a broad overview of the developments and limitations of the promises to rebuild civic participation that Lula made during his 2022 presidential campaign; we also show that a combination of three trends serves to characterize the current state of affairs. We show that the current situation can be characterized by a combination of three patterns: *reactivation*, *innovation*, and *evasion*. *Reactivation* restores the existing participatory institutions, with their already known strengths and limitations. *Innovation* represents a significant advance over past experiences developed during the federal governments of the Workers' Party (PT, from its Portuguese acronym), although it is concentrated in fairly specific areas and moments. In turn, *evasion* occurred when the government strategically avoided making progress, thereby sidestepping political damage and sacrificing part of the initial commitments made to rebuild social participation. The most telling case of evasion—though by no means the only one—is precisely that of the National Participatory Budget (OPN, from its Portuguese acronym), a central campaign promise that was never truly pursued, revealing the limits imposed by different factors, but especially by a Congress that was in opposition and hostile to the government's participatory policies.

We argue that the dominant pattern across the various public institutions and areas of social participation depends mainly on the political costs that the eventual adoption of more ambitious initiatives would impose on the government in relation to the necessary support from the legislature in areas of central interest to the government. This equation is crucial in a government where the right wing has secured a majority in the Chamber of Deputies and holds significant influence in the Senate. We also argue that this analysis allows us to draw out key lessons, two of which are worth previewing here. First, participatory institutions prove more resilient to hostile governments when they are firmly institutionalized and when they maintain strong ties to public policy communities, civil society actors included. Second, a broad political perspective, grounded in the notion of a regime of social control, is needed in order to understand the possibilities and limits of the expansion and consolidation of participatory institutions.

The *Accountability Note* draws on primary and secondary sources. The primary evidence used consists of a compilation of federal government laws and subordinate regulations aimed at affecting the functioning of participatory institutions during the Bolsonaro administration, as well as the systematic collection and specialized monitoring of measures and policies on participation implemented from the establishment of the transition cabinet (GT, from its Portuguese acronym) between administrations through the third Lula administration; that is, from November 2022 to July 2025. With regard to secondary sources, the *Accountability Note* draws on a well-informed review of the body of research produced in the field of social participation in Brazil; the vast majority of these findings have not been widely circulated internationally. This review was conducted by two specialists in the field.

In the next section, we offer a brief characterization of the Bolsonaro administration's intentions and measures to dismantle the participatory institutions, making it plausible to expect that their role in influencing public policy would be nullified as a result. We then discuss the characteristics of the social control regime within which these institutions operate and present an assessment of the outcomes of the dismantling. In the fourth section, we examine the progress and limitations of social participation during Lula's third term, highlighting three patterns. Finally, we summarize the relevant lessons.

The Dismantling of Participatory Institutions and its Logic

Activists, social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and PIs were the target of recurring attacks in Bolsonaro's speeches during his first presidential campaign in the second half of 2018 (Bezerra and Szwako 2022). Not only did he state in his first speech, following the announcement of the first-round results, that he would "put an end to all activism in Brazil" (Band 2018), but the following year, after taking office, he accused environmental NGOs of being responsible for the fires spreading across the Amazon. In his view, these CSOs "lost money" due to his government's honest management of public resources. At the United Nations Biodiversity Summit (COP 2020), in addition to defending a supposed decline in deforestation during the first two years of his administration—despite official monitoring figures from the National Institute for Space Research (INPE, from its Portuguese acronym)—he also claimed that his government was fighting "organizations that, in association with certain NGOs, orchestrate environmental crimes in Brazil and abroad" (Terra 2020). These NGOs had been referred to just a few days earlier, using a medical metaphor, as a "cancer" that Bolsonaro had not yet managed to eliminate (*Metrópoles* 2020).

Discourses are not mere words; they are a way of acting in the world and producing effects in it. Analysts sympathetic to the Bolsonaro administration often invoked a sharp distinction between "discourse" and "action" to dismiss the president's statements as rhetoric. That distinction is both analytically flawed and politically short-sighted—and in any case, the president himself soon settled the question, translating his words into action. Bolsonaro ordered the suspension of public bank financing for NGOs. The director of Banco do Nordeste was dismissed in September 2021 for continuing to provide financing to an NGO—amounting to approximately BRL 600 million (US\$ 111.2 million)—whose contract had been signed during Lula's second term as president (Globo 2021). Previously, Army General Joaquim Silva e Luna had been appointed by Bolsonaro as the Brazilian director-general of the Itaipú Binacional dam; the general ordered a thorough review of all funding agreements to ensure they were "in line with Itaipú's institutional mission." As a result, all agreements with CSOs that the so-called "exhaustive" review identified as "ideological" were unilaterally terminated.

The attack on the participatory institutions—which were central to social participation during the administrations of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC) (1994–1997, 1998–2001) and, to a greater extent, Lula (2002–2005, 2006–2009) and Dilma Rousseff (2010–2013, 2014–2016)—is emblematic of the logic and ambitions of the Bolsonaro administration's dismantling efforts. On his first day in office, Bolsonaro issued Provisional Measure 870,¹ through which, as any incoming administration does, he defined the administrative structure of the offices of the presidency of the republic and the ministries or state secretariats. The National Council for Food and Nutritional Security (CONSEA, from its Portuguese acronym) was excluded from the ministerial structure in Provisional Measure 870 and, as a result, was effectively abolished by omission (Avelino and Reis 2019). Throughout its history, CONSEA (founded in 2003)² served as a central forum for civil society advocacy in shaping the policies of the National Food and Nutrition Security System (SISAN); this advocacy was particularly notable in the development of programs for family farming (Grisa and Schneider 2014; Schmitt et al. 2020). It is no coincidence that this Provisional Measure also abolished the Special Secretariat for Family Farming and Development. There was a political selectivity in these decisions by a government strongly aligned with the most conservative agendas of agribusiness. These "measures by omission" were overshadowed by another measure actively directed against all participatory institutions operating at the national level; a measure that, due to its scope and apparent forcefulness, drew public attention and sparked mobilization from various sectors of civil society. Presidential Decree No. 9,759 had the explicit objective of abolishing, in a single stroke, the more than 700 participatory institutions allegedly existing within the federal public administration.³

The Bolsonaro administration's attacks on participation were neither doctrinal nor opposed to participation per se; rather, they were political attacks motivated by a clear assessment of the role of participatory institutions in

the social governance of the PT governments (Bezerra 2020; Bezerra et al. 2024). Decree No. 9,759 was commonly and erroneously interpreted as an expression of the “anti-participatory” orientation inherent in the government’s authoritarian nature. On the one hand, the role of mobilizing an ideal of the people, the active participation of “decent citizens,” and “true participation” in which the majority prevails are not only elements of Bolsonaro’s populist discourse (Scerb 2021) but also formed part of the Bolsonaro administration’s strategy while in power, operating according to the logic of a party-movement (Couto 2021). On the other hand, underlying that assessment lies a majoritarian understanding of democracy, consistent with the decision to eliminate the ability of actors who advocate agendas contrary to the campaign commitments and political priorities of the Bolsonaro government—elected by the majority—to influence public policy. Thus, it was not participation itself that was under attack, but rather certain actors, interests, values, and institutions (Carlos et al. 2025; Fernandes 2026; Gurza Lavalle and Bezerra, in press).

In this regard, the explanatory memorandum for Decree 9,759, signed by Onyx Lorenzoni, Chief of Staff⁴ of the Bolsonaro administration, is crystal clear. The main reason cited is that “lobby groups”:

use participatory institutions—whose composition and *modus operandi* are directed—to attempt to promote demands that are not aligned with the orientation of the democratically elected authorities (*Planalto* 2019).

In sum, the dismantling carried out by the Bolsonaro administration did not stem from a doctrinaire aversion to participation, but from a political calculation about its effects. The rhetorical attacks on activists and NGOs, the suspension of public funding, the elimination by neglect of CONSEA and of the Special Secretariat for Family Farming and Development, and the blanket revocation effected by Decree No. 9,759 all form part of a single strategy: to strip actors whose agendas ran counter to the government’s priorities and alliances of their capacity to shape policy. Underlying this strategy is a majoritarian conception of democracy, according to which the mandate conferred at the ballot box renders any non-aligned societal mediation illegitimate.

The Social Control Regime and the Outcome of the Dismantling

If the institutions created over the 27 years between the enactment of the 1988 Constitution and preceding President Rousseff's impeachment were merely advisory, dismantling them would not be a political priority. Understanding this priority and the impact of the dismantling measures requires a comprehensive characterization of the role of these institutions. They are numerous, diverse, and difficult to summarize succinctly, but they include policy management councils, national conferences, river basin committees, public hearings, public consultations, roundtables, working groups, forums, committees, commissions, observatories, urban master plans, participatory budgeting, public facility councils, public service provider councils and local security councils. However, a sociopolitical analysis of the creation, evolution, and functions of the participatory institutions that became prevalent during that period allows us to characterize them as a regime: "a stable configuration that connects state and social actors with the fulfillment of functions that are formally recognized and accepted, or at least backed by institutional structures of the state, mediated by the presence of power resources (whether institutional or not) accessible to the actors involved" (Isunza Vera and Gurza Lavalle 2025: 49).

Three types of participatory institutions became prevalent throughout the 1990s and 2000s: policy management councils (hereinafter, "councils"), national conferences, and river basin committees. All three share common characteristics that help define the social control regime. A brief comparison with the participatory budget (OP) will provide a clearer understanding of the specific nature of these common traits.

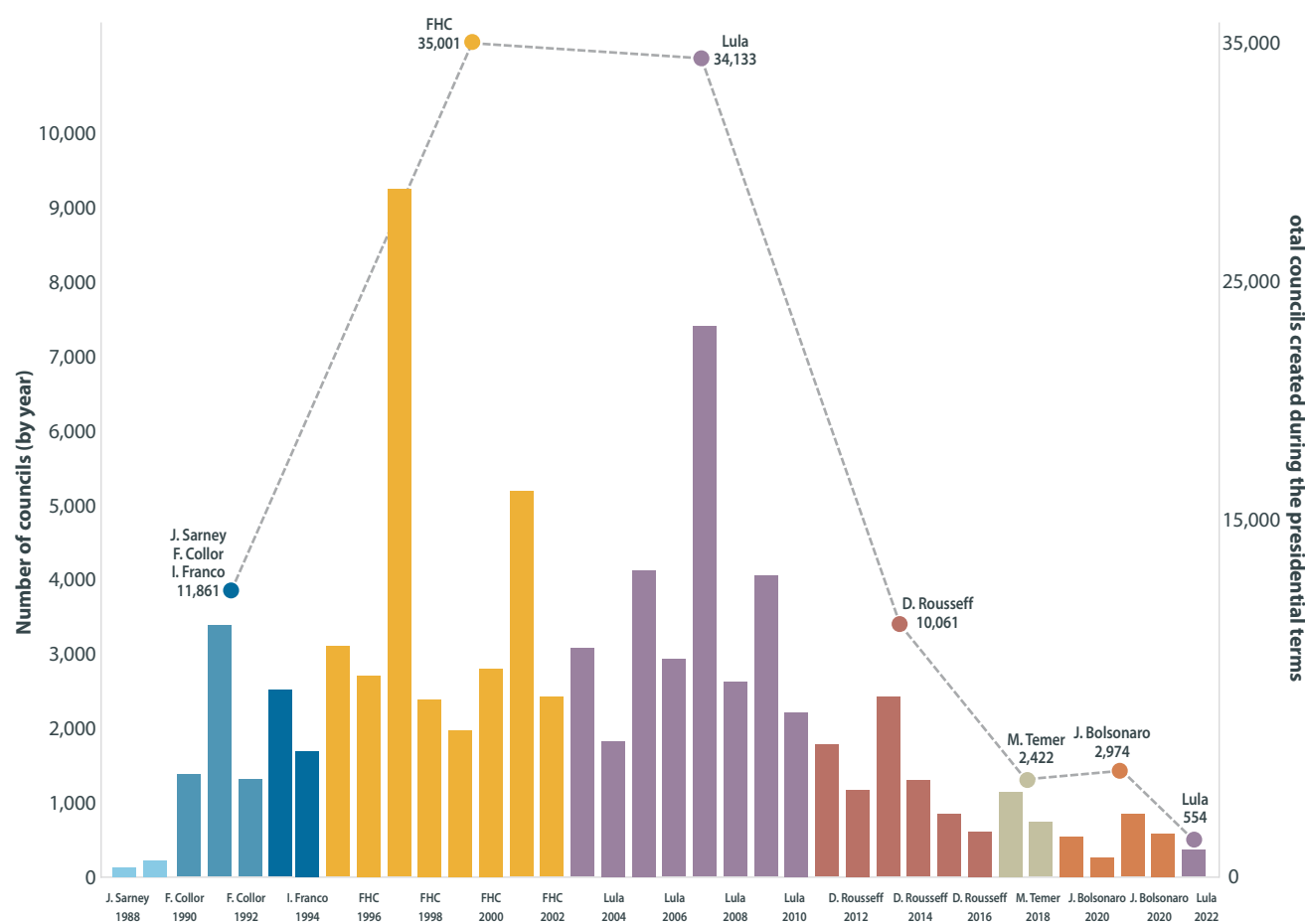
Although it is the best-known Brazilian experience internationally, the OP is not part of the country's established social control regime. It was never institutionalized, nor did it follow a single model; each city implemented it based on a decision by the mayor and under the terms deemed most appropriate, leading to serious challenges in ensuring its continuity (Souza 2022; Bezerra and Junquera 2022). Typically, the OP began with assemblies that brought together residents of a specific subregion of the city, where they voted on budget allocation priorities for urban improvement projects in their respective neighborhoods (Porto de Oliveira 2016). Thus, the OP involved citizen participation in defining budget priorities that would later be incorporated into the municipality's budget law through a process of consolidating the priorities selected across all subregions of the city where the assemblies had been held. There were approximately 350 participatory budgeting initiatives implemented in Brazil throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Spada 2014), when numbers began to decline (Wampler and Goldfrank 2022).

Undoubtedly, the OP was a politically significant experiment of the New Republic, which began with the 1988 Constitution, but it is far from being one of the most prevalent participatory innovations. Public policy conferences, river basin committees, and policy councils have become prevalent and form part of the country's social control system. Unlike these participatory institutions, the OP is not institutionalized in a nationwide regulation; it does not operate through civil society organizations; it is not structured federatively; and its effectiveness has been systematically limited by the disconnect between voted-on demands and budget cycles.

The prevalent participatory innovations, by contrast, share five distinctive features: (i) a high degree of institutionalization; (ii) a sectoral focus on the definition and co-management of public policies; (iii) membership composed of representatives from CSOs, government officials, and civil servants; (iv) a federative structure with state and municipal level outreach; and (v) recognized, albeit variable, effectiveness (Isunza Vera and Gurza Lavalle 2025). The combination of these features is the result of an institution-building process rooted in the 1988 constitutional pact, the sectoral reforms that followed it (Mayka 2019), and the relationship between the party system, civil society, and the state throughout the New Republic.

For reasons of space and to facilitate the analysis of the resilience of participatory institutions in the face of the Bolsonaro administration’s measures, we examine the case of the councils.⁵ As shown in Figure 1, these councils expanded over the first two and a half decades of the New Republic (1988 onwards); in other words, they are a new institution of the Brazilian state and not of any specific administration (Gurza Lavalle 2011; Gurza Lavalle and Barone 2018). In fact, more councils were created in the country’s municipalities during the FHC administrations than during the Lula or Dilma administrations (Figure 1). The rapid proliferation of councils, particularly in areas such as health, social assistance, and education, was driven by federal inducement mechanisms, chief among them the conditioning of federal transfers to municipalities on the creation of councils in the corresponding policy areas (Gurza Lavalle and Barone 2018). The contribution of Lula’s first two terms to the expansion of the councils was to broaden the policy areas in which they were implemented, beyond the most central social policy areas (health, social assistance, education, and the rights of children and adolescents). By the late 2010s, the number of municipal councils nationwide had exceeded 70,000, involving hundreds of thousands of council members (Gurza Lavalle, Voigt, and Serafim 2016; Gurza Lavalle, Guicheney, and Vello 2021) and covering more than 30 areas of public policy. An analysis of more than 15,000 resolutions issued by municipal councils in five big municipalities of different states between 2005 and 2011 shows that, in the policy areas where they are most institutionalized, these councils issue binding decisions on the definition, oversight, and co-management of policies (Ibid.).

Figure 1. Creation of Policy Management Councils in Municipalities (1988–2023)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on the MUNIC-OPar dataset: Consolidated Survey of Basic Municipal Information 2004–2023 (IBGE, from its Portuguese acronym), from National Institute of Science and Technology (INCT, from its Portuguese acronym) Participa

What, then, is the outcome of the dismantling measures discussed in the previous section? As mentioned, the measures promoted by the Bolsonaro administration were radical and directed against the social governance of public policies made possible by the social control regime—which has allowed actors with agendas clearly opposed to those of Bolsonaro government to influence policies in the areas of social, environmental, and human rights policy (moral agendas). However, the outcome of this “deconstruction” is far from uniform. Again, focusing the analysis on the policy councils, the outcome could hardly be described as a set of “ruins.” To begin with, the federative structure of the social control regime confined the measures abolishing councils and other collegiate bodies to the federal level. Tens of thousands of councils at the municipal and state levels therefore remained out of direct reach. At the subnational level, councils in the more highly institutionalized policy areas proved not only resilient to federal spending cuts in those areas, but also able to sustain their demonstrated effects on the well-being of the population in their respective cities (Touchton, Sugiyama, and Wampler 2017 and 2026).

Even at the federal level, the dismantling had much more limited effects than the federal government intended. A comprehensive analysis of all the legal and administrative measures taken by the Bolsonaro administration to eliminate or curtail the capacity of councils and other national collegiate bodies to act reveals mixed results (Bezerra et al. 2024). An examination of 103 national councils and collegiate bodies—identified through an exhaustive search—shows that the Bolsonaro administration’s measures succeeded in revoking or permanently suspending 19% of these national participatory institutions; however, 34% of them continued to operate without changes, and 28% remained active with some alteration that reduced their capacity to act (e.g., limitations on the number and duration of meetings, or a reduction in the number of civil society members). Thus, there was no widespread “deconstruction,” as intended by the 2019 decree: 62% of the councils and collegiate bodies remained active, although half of them did so with varying frequency and alterations. The same study shows that the policy areas whose agendas most directly challenged government priorities were the most affected: the environment was the hardest hit by revocations, accounting for 28% of the revoked councils, while human rights and social policies accounted for 72% of the active councils with substantive changes (Bezerra et al. 2024). Notably, the area of economic development and infrastructure was the least affected, consistent with the greater presence of market actors in those councils and their greater alignment with government preferences.

This mixed outcome stems not only from the Bolsonaro administration’s political preferences regarding policy content but also from the resilience of the councils and other governing bodies themselves. This resilience, in turn, stems from a combination of two factors: first, institutionalization, which is stronger when the participatory institutions in question are established by law, with well-defined powers and financial resource management also defined by law—not merely by decrees or administrative regulations; second, embeddedness in policy communities—that is, the role (central or peripheral) that a specific council plays in the strategies of the bureaucracies within the respective sector, as well as among civil society actors, experts, and politicians with stakes in that sector (Bezerra et al. 2024; Almeida, Martelli, and Coelho 2021; Martelli, Almeida, and Coelho 2022; Almeida 2020). Thus, the most resilient councils were those with a robust institutional design and a central role within consolidated policy communities—including the presence of civil society actors with the capacity for mobilization—such as health and social assistance councils (Bezerra et al. 2024).

The Reconstruction of Participation: Reactivation, Innovation, and Evasion

Among the more politically informed segment of the electorate that brought him to victory, Lula's return to the federal government was read under the sign of national reconstruction: of democracy, of state capacities, and of the policies dismantled under the Bolsonaro administration. This is a commitment the president has expressly made on several occasions, including during the so-called "*revogação*,"⁶ as stated in the epigraph. Under the Bolsonaro administration, the attack on the participatory institutions served as a "showcase case," highly symbolic due to its association with the historical trajectory of the PT and civil society actors who had advocated for the expansion of social participation in public policy since the Constituent Assembly (1987–1988) and throughout the first two decades of the new republic. In addition to its symbolic value, the case of institutionalized participation was particularly ripe for "deconstruction" due to the relatively low economic and political (electoral) costs of dismantling it, especially compared to other areas such as social policies.

Precisely because of this symbolism and the greater degree of freedom that participatory policies enjoy in relation to budgetary constraints, the reconstruction efforts of Lula's third administration (2023–2026) were able to present an ambitious agenda in the realm of social participation. In fact, the return of participatory governance took center stage as early as the campaign, when Lula repeatedly cited the OP as a sort of antidote to Congress's opaque and abusive use of mandatory budget amendments ("secret budget").⁷ It is worth noting that this was a rhetorical antidote, because the differences in scale and binding nature between decisions on investment resources available to municipal OP initiatives and the budgetary decisions of a hypothetical participatory process in the federal budget—which never materialized—make any comparison between the "secret budget" and a hypothetical national OP inappropriate and even naive. However, Lula's message was symbolically encouraging: the federal OP had been a proposal included in his 2002 electoral platform. However, not only was it never implemented, but the decline of the OP in municipalities coincided precisely with the years the PT was in federal government (Bezerra 2020; Spada 2014; Wampler and Goldfrank 2022). Thus, during the campaign, participatory governance seemed poised to make a comeback—both to be restored and to fulfill unfulfilled historical promises.

The expectations generated during the campaign were backed up by actions taken immediately after Lula's victory, through the creation of the GT. If creativity and ingenuity in tackling problems were indicative of innovative potential, the GT would undoubtedly be a harbinger of an innovative government. Bolsonaro's refusal to acknowledge defeat—and, consequently, to facilitate the work of the transition teams between the incoming and outgoing administrations—led Lula's team to convene specialists, civil society actors, social movements, and career civil servants to assess the damage inherited from the Bolsonaro era and define priorities for the new administration's first steps across more than 30 policy areas. This also led to the creation of a minimum government agenda for the first year, in a context where policy proposals had not been central to the election campaign—which had taken the form of a referendum pitting the far right against a broad front in favor of democracy.



President-elect Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Vice President-elect Geraldo Alckmin during the ceremony to present the final transition report, December 22, 2022.

Credit: Marcelo Camargo/Agência Brasil

Civil society's demands to specifically include social participation as an issue in the GT were addressed with the creation of the Council for Social Participation (CPS, from its Portuguese acronym).⁸ More than fifty CSOs, forums, social movements, and networks of activists and experienced civil servants took part in it as representatives of their constituencies, both to assess the state of social participation inherited from the Bolsonaro administration and to put forward proposals.

The CPS's final report defined a list of immediate and short-term priorities for the government's first 100 days. The report is, in itself, an example of the development and operation socially embedded state capacities in the country (Gurza Lavalle et al., in press): it does not contain generic demands, but rather specific priorities and an identification of the technical means to achieve them, beginning with the immediate restructuring of the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic as the body responsible for social participation policy, defining its secretariats, directorates, and areas of responsibility (*Comissão de Transição Governamental* 2022). Most of the priorities and measures were fully implemented during the first year of the administration. Moreover, the CPS was not dissolved after the transition process ended, but rather elevated to the status of a body within the Presidency responsible for advising it in its dialogue with CSOs and popular movements, and for collaborating with the General Secretariat of the Presidency in restoring and expanding social participation in the design, implementation, and oversight of public policies (Planalto 2023).

With nearly all 48 months of Lula's third term elapsed at the time of writing, it is possible to identify three patterns that summarize the progress and limitations of the reconstruction and innovation of institutionalized participation in the country. Thus, institutionalized participation is not in "ruins"—not only thanks to the reconstruction efforts but also because, as demonstrated, the Bolsonaro administration managed only to partially dismantle it. At the same

time, the overall assessment does not bear out the most optimistic expectations raised by the CPS's comprehensive diagnosis and ambitious proposals.

These patterns can be summarized in three words: *reactivation*, *innovation*, and *evasion*. Reactivation restores or rescues participatory institutions and processes that were previously active and were dismantled or ignored under the Bolsonaro administration. Evasion, in its literal sense, is the act of evading—that is, the choice to avoid a difficulty or an obligation by guile. Note that this involves not merely avoiding difficulties, but doing so in the face of commitments or obligations already assumed; hence the relevance of guile. Innovation, unlike reactivation, does not restore but rather moves along new paths that, precisely because they are new, demand creativity. Innovation is thus more than incremental expansion. These patterns do not constitute a (logical) typology; they are recurrent processes, observed here in the particular combination in which they occurred during Lula's third term.

Patterns of reactivation, and reactivation with evasion

The pattern of reactivation followed familiar paths. Given the legacy it inherited, reactivation occurred primarily within the national participatory processes that make up the country's social control regime; that is, within participatory institutions whose institutional repertoires are well-known. These bodies could draw on two resources: a shared memory of how they operate, retained by civil society actors and public officials alike, and the continued presence of actors long mobilized around their political agendas. Reactivation began with restoration measures: the revocation of Bolsonaro's decrees, Decree 9,759 among them, followed by the re-creation of each dissolved council, one by one. This second step was necessary because Brazilian law does not provide for the automatic revival of extinguished bodies when the decree that abolished them is itself revoked (*represtinação*, in Brazilian legal terminology). Councils that had been severely weakened, though not abolished, were also the object of reactivation measures. Thus, in the first 15 months of the administration, 46 specific decrees were issued to reinstate collegiate bodies: 26 of them related to councils and five to national conferences (FES Brasil and ABONG 2024: 53–56). The decrees not only reinstated these institutions but also restored their powers or expanded their membership. In the case of national councils, 76% saw their membership expanded; this was the case, for example, with the Council for Transparency, Integrity, and the Fight Against Corruption, whose number of council members increased from 7 to 30 (Ibid: 60–61). In addition, national conferences were resumed: five in 2023, eight in 2024, 16 in 2025, and six through June 2026, compared to six national conferences organized during the four years of Bolsonaro's administration (Gusso, Fonseca, and Avelino 2025).⁹ As with the councils, incremental expansions and adjustments were introduced to reactivate and strengthen the conferences.

The evasion by Lula's government is evident even among established participatory institutions that shape the country's social control regime, although in this case it is intertwined with a pattern toward reactivation. The reactivation and reestablishment of participatory institutions could lead to their strengthening, as suggested by the Technical Working Group on National Councils, Collegiate Bodies, and Conferences (GTTCCCN, from its Portuguese acronym). A widely accepted assessment of the resilience of participatory institutions in the face of the Bolsonaro administration's dismantling measures underscores the importance of their degree of institutionalization: participatory institutions whose creation and powers were not established by law but rather by administrative acts or decrees proved to be more fragile (Bezerra et al. 2024; Almeida, Martelli, and Coelho 2021). In these cases, in addition to reestablishing them by decree, it would be desirable to strengthen their institutionalization by enshrining them in law. However, evasion prevailed as a strategy on this front, even though the solutions and their benefits are, in principle, obvious and widely agreed upon. Although incremental adjustments were used to strengthen national participatory institutions, one question is unavoidable: given such a clear diagnosis, why did the Lula administration choose not to draft bills to strengthen the most vulnerable councils? It does not take much political insight to realize that the "elephant in the room" is Congress. The reestablishment was made possible by administrative acts and decrees, but strengthening the most vulnerable participatory institutions would have to go through Congress, whose costly support the federal government preferred to strategically reserve for priority projects such as tax reform.

Pattern of innovation

The pattern of innovation is composed of various initiatives, but it focuses on four developments in the institutionalization of participation that are unprecedented in the country's social control regime, albeit with quite variable success: the creation of the GTTCCCN, digital participation, Social Participation and Diversity Advisory Bodies (ASPADs, from their Portuguese acronym), and territorial participation associated with popular education. The innovation trend began early. Of course, the CPS, its role in the transition, and its subsequent institutionalization already constituted a sign of innovation, and the assessment prepared by CPS at the start of the Lula administration pointed the way forward. In fact, the debates within the CPS made it clear that the reconstruction of social participation should not be limited to restoring the participatory model consolidated throughout the New Republic (Isunza Vera and Gurza Lavalle 2025), especially during the PT administrations. It was expected that the Lula administration would innovate by going beyond mere restoration (Martelli, Almedia, and Capella 2024).

In light of the call for innovation made by stakeholders at the CPS, the creation of the GTTCCCN —tasked with formulating recommendations for the reform of participatory institutions—makes sense. Established in September 2023 and composed of officials from more than 30 state secretariats, the Group published its recommendations on councils and conferences in July 2024, including gender parity in the composition of participatory institutions (GTTCCCN 2024). This working group not only suggested alternative paths for innovation, in addition to those identified by the CPS, but is itself a novelty and reflects the willingness to innovate under Lula's third administration.

The most notable area in terms of innovation was the expansion of digital participation through the development of the *Brasil Participativo* platform, created in 2023, during the first year of the administration.¹⁰ Its use in the Multi-Year Plan (PPA, from its Portuguese acronym) for the budget cycle is particularly illuminating. The PPA is a budget planning tool that defines four-year guidelines and objectives to guide annual goals and budgets. The call to resume the Participatory PPA and immediately reactivate the Inter-Council Forum for its implementation was already included in the CPS's recommendations. In this sense, the participatory PPA carried out during the first term of the Lula administration could be understood as a case of reactivation, since it had previously been carried out four times and the Forum had served as the informal body that had, in the two preceding processes, made possible the participation of civil society represented on the national councils.



However, in the 2023 process the participatory PPA saw a significant increase in the number of participants, extending beyond the civil society sectors represented on the national councils. This increase was due to two factors: its coordination with the *Brasil Participativo* platform and the political climate—more specifically, Bolsonaro’s defeat and the intense mobilization of civil society, which marked a return to participatory engagement. In total, more than 34,000 people participated in-person in the state plenary sessions—organized in collaboration with social movements and civil society organizations—while the platform recorded more than four million visits, and more than 1.5 million citizens registered their preferences for the PPA through it (MOP 2024). Furthermore, the PPA was recognized by the developers of the Decidim software—widely used globally by governments and civil society actors to organize digital participatory processes at the local level—as the largest initiative to date worldwide by the software’s user and adaptation community (Barandiaran et al. 2024). The participatory PPA clearly demonstrated that digital participation engages broad segments of the population when it succeeds in combining with in-person mobilization, through hybrid formats.

In any case, the *Brasil Participativo* platform expanded its services to other participatory processes, linking very different spheres of participation. In the realm of global climate governance, the platform was adapted for the Participatory Social G20 (Group of 20), an unprecedented initiative of the Brazilian G20 presidency (2024), which recorded 130,000 page views and 24,000 unique visitors, generating 761 contributions from civil society on the three priority thematic areas, of which 192 were fully or partially incorporated into the G20 final document (Queiroz et al. 2024). It is worth noting that the Social Summit held in parallel with the G20 brought together more than 50,000 people in Rio de Janeiro, with nearly 20,000 participating in debates that totaled 520 hours of activities, setting a precedent for social participation in global governance forums, the continuity of which was ensured by South Africa during its subsequent G20 presidency (2025). In terms of domestic climate policy, the platform also hosted the Participatory Climate Plan and, in 2025, facilitated 99 additional participatory processes, including 85 public consultations, nine conferences, and five plans, with 1.3 million visits and nearly 9,500 proposals submitted—almost double the number from the previous year (DIEST IPEA 2025). The platform’s trajectory illustrates the potential of this innovation model due to its capacity for expansion—not only in terms of scale, but also in the way it integrates micro- and macro-levels, as well as online and offline spheres.

ASPADs are a less far-reaching innovation, but one that was actually implemented. They address a long-standing shortcoming. Since the end of Lula’s second term, it has been commonly noted that there was a lack of cross-cutting coordination among participatory institutions both within and outside the government, as well as unequal valuation and incorporation of participation across different ministries and policy sectors (Gurza Lavallo and Szwako 2014; Teixeira 2013; Lopez and Pires 2010; Abers and Almeida 2019). This shortcoming was explicitly acknowledged in President Dilma Rousseff’s National Policy on Social Participation (Decree No. 8243), which was vetoed by Congress in 2014 amid the presidential elections—a harbinger of the escalating conflicts that would lead to the president’s impeachment (Almeida 2017). The CPS took up this assessment and proposed the creation of participatory structures within the various ministries of the public federal administration dedicated to promoting and coordinating participation within the State Secretariats. Thus, the ASPADs were created, formally institutionalized and in fact implemented within the federal government’s structure (Fonseca et al., 2025).

The ASPADs were established in 33 ministries and related ministerial bodies in 2023, acting as bodies providing direct and immediate support to each minister. They are composed of civil servants, and their responsibilities include coordinating the respective ministry’s relations with civil society; strengthening mechanisms for dialogue; and advising ministerial leadership on issues of participation, gender, ethnic, and racial equality, and the fight against inequalities. In practice, engagement with organized civil society became the focus of their work. Ninety-six percent of ASPAD heads identify this engagement as a core activity, and the advisory offices maintained regular contact with 94 different organizations, covering issues such as land rights, environmental rights, racial equity, and gender (Fonseca et al. 2025; de Souza 2024). Unlike councils and conferences, which draw on existing structures,

the ASPADs constitute a new direct and continuous channel between the state and civil society, with the potential to systematically articulate intersectional demands. However, they were created without clearly defined functions and devoted a significant portion of their energy to creatively developing the best way to fulfill the purposes for which they were established. Moreover, there is no evidence that the government invested political capital in any serious way to advance their strengthening. Such backing matters all the more for a policy implemented across every ministry, where bureaucratic cultures differ considerably in their receptiveness to participation. Thus, the institutional innovation represented by the ASPADs does not appear to have matured sufficiently and they are still in an experimental phase, with poorly defined functions and without having consolidated a stable place within the federal government's structure, even though they represent the greatest participatory administrative innovation of the Lula III administration (Fonseca et al. 2025).

Finally, the area in which the government wished (but was unable) to innovate most extensively is that of community participation linked to popular education. "Territory" is the catchword used to refer to community participation, reflecting the government's understanding of one of its main challenges: reconnecting with the citizens who benefit from public policies. According to the government's political advisors, the absence of significant popular mobilization against President Rousseff's impeachment, the defeat in the 2019 presidential election, and the victory by a narrow margin in the 2022 election occurred largely because the PT governments were unable to make clear to the public the political connection between the Lula and Rousseff administrations and the many social benefits delivered by them (Carvalho 2018; MDS et al. 2025). Thus, participation would have to return to its role as a form of popular education in order to articulate the demands in each territory that would enable citizens to coordinate collective action with local civil society actors mobilized to address the communities' economic, health, and security issues, among others. Advancing the territorialization of citizen participation in a country where the social control regime is policy sector driven and centered on civil society actors potentially amounts to seeking paths outside the established model (Isunza Vera and Gurza Lavalle 2025). The search for ways to innovate in this direction spanned the first three years of the administration, and in this case, references were sought not only in the tradition of popular education promoted by Paulo Freire and his legacy but also in other Latin American countries. As late as the end of 2025, the results of the interministerially funded research project "Public Policies, Community Work, and Popular Education in Latin America—Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia" were presented to provide input for an international seminar organized by the federal government (MDS et al. 2025).

The main innovations in this area are belated and very limited in scope: the "Program for the Coordination of Social Participation in the States, the Federal District, and the Territories" (SG/PR 2025), dated March 12, 2025, and the "Reference Framework for Popular Education in Public Policies" (SG/PR 2026), launched in May 2026. The Coordination Program defines the "what" and "where" of the territorialization of participation, setting out guidelines for different sectors and sectoral programs, as well as mechanisms such as the territorial agents that operated in the fields of culture and racial equality. The Framework establishes the ethical and political foundations, fields of practice, and methodological resources that guide how it is carried out. In this sense, both are two sides of the same political commitment: bringing the state closer to citizens in local communities based on the principles of popular education. Broadly speaking, the main challenges of these initiatives are the uneven and disjointed implementation of public policies in local communities; the weak connection between the government and citizens in those communities; and the spread of misinformation in the media. Popular education was conceived as a central strategy to foster social participation and training regarding the importance of such participation in public policy, and to make this rapprochement and reconnection possible at the local level. The results of both initiatives, however, were severely constrained by structural and situational limitations alike: a shortage of trained personnel; the absence, from the outset, of a clear strategy capable of updating the principles of popular education to the characteristics and expectations of the population in the twenty-first century; tight budgetary margins; a political context in which the government faced constant resistance in Congress (Szwako and Gurza Lavalle 2025); and the sheer challenge of scaling up in a country of continental dimensions such as Brazil.

Pattern of evasion

The limits of this innovation pattern become clearer when we broaden our focus beyond the *Brasil Participativo* platform and compare the participatory PPA with the promised National Participatory Budget (OPN). From this perspective, the role assumed by Congress—where the conservative majority is in opposition to Lula’s government—highlights a clear trend toward evasion. It was not the only factor, but it weighed heavily in defining the government’s priorities.

The comparison with participatory PPA is enlightening. Participatory PPA involved extensive coordination between the federal government and civil society actors mobilized across the country’s various states; these actors not only participated in the state-level plenary sessions but also intensively mobilized their constituencies to vote on specific proposals on the the *Brasil Participativo* platform. Incorporating the most-voted-on proposals into the four-year priorities is a political signal of the Lula administration’s commitment to social participation, but it entails no expenditures and carries very low political costs.

In contrast, despite its symbolic centrality during the campaign, the OPN was not implemented, and there were not even clear attempts to move it beyond the drawing board. There were no well-defined ideas about what the OPN would actually consist of, nor did it help that there had been little renewal among cadres appointed to high echelon positions able to think beyond the most successful historical experiences at the municipal level. Moreover, the initiative had raised doubts about its feasibility as far back as Lula’s first administration. In any case, beyond the operational, design, and implementation challenges of an unprecedented initiative at the federal level—challenges also present during Lula’s first two terms, when no progress was made on implementing the OPN—a decisive factor this time was the government’s minority status in Congress, combined with very limited budgetary room for discretionary allocation, owing to the expansion of congressional budgetary prerogatives. It was never clearly stated that the OPN would be postponed indefinitely; people from national government simply stopped talking about it.

Findings and Some Lessons

The findings of this *Accountability Note* can be summarized as follows. Brazil has a consolidated structure of institutionalized participation that gives shape to its social control regime; although this structure faced attempts to dismantle it, it withstood them and served as the starting point for the Lula administration's participatory policies. The national reconstruction Lula promised proved uneven in scope, combining three patterns: reactivation, in the case of the participatory institutions at the core of the social control regime; innovation, highly successful in digital participation but incipient or even dormant elsewhere; and evasion, where political costs constrained progress, most notably in the case of the OPN.

We have shown that social participation served as a “showcase” in two opposing directions: for the Bolsonaro administration, it showcased the project of dismantling; conversely, it came to symbolize the Lula administration's declared commitment to national reconstruction. That commitment could be framed in ambitious terms precisely because its political and economic costs were relatively low—especially compared with redistributive policies—which left room for innovation, and for going beyond the reactivation or restoration demanded by the social actors gathered in the CPS. Other constraints nonetheless intervened: a shortage of trained personnel, a lack of experience and of clear ideas in the very areas where innovation was needed, and the secondary weight of participation-promoting policies relative to strategic policy areas. Above all, Lula's third administration faced the limits imposed by the reconfiguration of the Brazilian party system and of executive–legislative relations. The president and his coalition had lost their dominance over a range of policy agendas, while parties and actors aligned with the far right had gained ground both ideologically and in Congress.

The patterns outlined speak for themselves: the *reactivation* of participatory institutions (especially councils and conferences) and, more ambitiously, the participatory PPA and the innovation that made it possible to expand participation through the *Brasil Participativo* platform, entail relatively low political costs vis-à-vis the Congress. Why? Because reactivation and innovation of this kind require no legislative approval and do not directly affect the opposition's interests—and where they do, Congress retains the power to reverse the decisions in question.

Despite campaign promises, repeated demands from civil society to the transition cabinet, and calls from academics committed to reconstruction, the implementation of OPN was never truly attempted due to its potential political cost. This political cost also factors into the decision not to institutionally strengthen the reestablished councils by enshrining them in law, despite the consensus regarding their vulnerability stemming from the administrative nature of their creation and functions. Thus, an assessment of Lula's third term shows that the reconstruction of participatory governance has involved a degree of *innovation* with mixed results. It has been more limited when political costs in relation to Congress were higher and when the existing institutional foundations were weaker, and more successful when there was more independence from negotiations with the legislature and when more direct coordination with civil society actors interested in expanding participatory governance. It also consisted of a *reactivation* of participatory institutions, in some cases without going beyond restoration and in others with incremental progress as well as *evasion* when there was a risk of increasing the costs of governance in relation with the legislature.

The legacy of the Bolsonaro administration's dismantling measures and the assessment of the reconstruction of participation carried out by the Lula administration contain some lessons of broader interest.

The importance of institutionalization

The Brazilian experience reveals that the degree of institutionalization of participatory institutions is the most decisive factor in their resilience in the face of hostile governments. Collegial bodies whose creation and powers were established by law—with well-defined functions and management of their own resources—withstood the onslaught of Bolsonaro's measures significantly better than those created by administrative acts or decrees. Social and state actors interested in defending these participatory institutions had more institutional resources at their disposal to do so. The lesson is clear: institutionalization is not a legal technicality, but a political safeguard that contributes to the capacity of participatory institutions to survive hostile changes in government and to resist deliberate attacks on their existence—not only because dismantling them faces more institutional obstacles, but also because it fosters and provides institutional resources to coalitions mobilized to defend them.

The long-term structural effects of social control regimes

Social control regimes generate long-term structuring effects that shape both the possibilities for progress and the limits of participatory innovation. The Brazilian case shows that incremental development built upon the foundations of a consolidated regime offers considerable advantages. The reactivation of councils and conferences was faster, less costly, and more effective precisely because it drew on familiar institutional frameworks, historically mobilized actors, and already-established policy communities. In contrast, innovations that sought to go beyond the established model faced greater difficulties due to their lack of such accumulated foundations. Social control regimes thus favor certain developments and inhibit others: they operate as windows of opportunity that reward incremental continuity and discourage a break with previous institutional paths.

Limits of innovation

Participatory innovation is demanding in terms of the conditions that make it possible, even in countries with a long history of developing participatory initiatives, such as Brazil. Even with a solid technical assessment prepared by the CPS, mobilized civil society actors, and a government with a stated willingness to go beyond restoration, the most innovative attempts (such as the ASPADs, the territorialization of participation, and the National Participatory Budget) encountered significant obstacles that severely limited their scope. Unlike reactivation, innovation cannot rely on established institutional frameworks or already-articulated policy communities, and therefore requires greater organizational resources, greater tolerance for error, and a greater willingness to negotiate with actors who do not necessarily share its objectives. When a government seeking to drive large-scale innovation lacks broad legislative majorities, these costs become prohibitive, and evasion emerges as a strategic response to the impossibility of bearing the cost of innovation.

Participation within the political process

An analysis of the patterns and trajectories of social participation falls short when it examines innovations in isolation, without situating them within the broader ongoing political process and within the historically constructed social control regime. The success of *Brasil Participativo* can only be properly assessed when contrasted with the relative failure of National Participatory Budgeting. Both can be more fully understood only when viewed within the logic of a minority government that reserves its political capital for higher-priority legislative negotiations. Similarly, the variation in the resilience of participatory institutions in the face of Bolsonaro's measures is explained by their embeddedness in policy communities and by the role they play within the social control regime. Examining participatory innovations without considering these dimensions leads to partial conclusions that overestimate voluntarism and underestimate the historical trajectories that define the political and institutional foundations upon which participatory politics operates.

Notes

- 1 A provisional measure (MP) is a regulatory act with the force of law issued by the President of the Republic in situations of significance and urgency; it takes effect immediately but is subject to subsequent approval by the National Congress to become a definitive law. It is similar to an Executive Decree.
- 2 CONSEA was originally created in 1993, during the government of Itamar Franco (1992–1995). It was abolished in 1995 and re-established in 2003 during Lula's first government.
- 3 Decree No. 9,759 was partly justified by the economic cost of professional associations. However, the participation of civil society actors is voluntary or unpaid. No information was ever provided to effectively document the existence of 700 professional associations in the federal public administration.
- 4 The position is equivalent to the functions of governmental coordination and policy coordination carried out by a minister of the interior or a secretary of the interior, but without the functions related to internal public security.
- 5 Systematic analyses of the evolution of national conferences can be found in the works of Gusso, Fonseca and Avelino (2025) and de Souza et al. (2013), and an overview of the evolution of the PB, the councils, and the conferences is available in Fedozzi (2026). The best study on watershed committees remains that of Abers and Keck (2013).
- 6 As we noted, rhetoric is not merely empty words. On the second day of his third term, Lula announced the *revogação*, through which he revoked all decrees that had abolished or altered councils and all national collegiate bodies. The measure was not limited to the area of social participation and encompassed a larger number of decrees issued by the Bolsonaro administration. Hence the term *revogação* (roughly "great revocation" or "massive revocation"): a broad and forceful reversal of regulations with the stroke of a pen.
- 7 The "secret budget" was a mechanism for distributing federal resources without public criteria, through legislative amendments, used during the Bolsonaro administration to secure parliamentary support. The contrast with the "participatory budget" announced by Lula during the 2022 campaign was no accident: by juxtaposing the two terms, Lula condensed into a single image the difference between transparency and corruption, between citizen participation and patronage.
- 8 Thus, the images of social participation were more diverse and heterogeneous in the transition cabinet (see Martelli, Almeda, and Capela 2024).
- 9 The figures on the conferences were compiled from the conference schedules of the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic. https://www.gov.br/secretariageral/pt-br/noticias/2023/novembro/conferencias-nacionais?utm_source=chatgpt.comnacionanacionales.
- 10 *Brasil Participativo* replaced the *Participa + Brasil* portal.

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