

“More” or “Better” Institutionalization? Lessons From Latin American Institutions of Citizen Participation

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Abstract

The longstanding debate around the trade-offs of formalizing institutions of citizen participation (ICPs) within legal frameworks is currently facing a revival with the spread of citizens’ assemblies. Among arguments in favor of “more” institutionalization, the expectation that it will protect ICPs from eventual political changes stands out. Among arguments against institutionalization, the fear of crystallizing certain “recipes” translates concerns that overly routinized institutions can be more easily manipulated. But what exactly does institutionalization entail? We offer three contributions to this conversation. First, we define institutionalization, identifying four constitutive dimensions: formalization, political embedding, professionalization, and social engagement. It is rare for any ICP to achieve high degrees of all four dimensions. Second, we propose four connected arguments: (a) the debate is not whether to institutionalize or not but about contextual configurations, (b) formalization alone does not guarantee the persistence or success of ICPs, (c) the extent and form of institutionalization will and should vary across ICPs and over time, and (d) if any single dimension of institutionalization stands out as crucial, it is political embedding. Third, we explore these ideas by analyzing three Latin American ICPs: popular initiatives (direct decision-making), participatory budgeting (deliberative decision-making), and sortition-based citizens’ assemblies (consultative deliberation).

Keywords

citizen participation; deliberation; democratic innovations; direct democracy; Latin America; participatory budgeting; popular initiative citizens’ assemblies

1. Introduction

The spread of institutions aimed to promote, channel, or increase public participation beyond regular elections generates expectations for the revitalization of democracy, but it also raises concerns regarding their outcomes and potential misuses. While in Europe, the limited political outcomes of participation exercises are frequently emphasized (Spada & Ryan, 2017), in Latin America, a chief concern has been their instrumentalization (Balderacchi, 2017; Dagnino, 2007). In both regions, institutionalization is touted as a remedy—yet without consensus on what it entails or on whether and how it effectively tackles these challenges.

The longstanding debate around the trade-offs of formalizing institutionalization of citizen participation (ICP; i.e., democratic innovations) in more rigid legal frameworks is currently facing a revival in Western democracies, along with the growing popularity of citizens' assemblies (CAs) based on sortition. The expectation is that “more” institutionalization should grant stability to citizen participation, improve its quality and chances of policy impact (Lewanski, 2013, p. 2), and protect it from arbitrary decisions deriving from changing governments and ideologies (Avritzer, 2017). Sceptics, in turn, warn against the potential misuses of citizen participation. Participation may be merely symbolic (Lewanski, 2013) or disempowering (Welp, 2022); it can reinforce powerful leaders wishing to concentrate power, eroding checks and balances (Ruth et al., 2017); it can illegitimately displace political power from the many to the few (Lafont, 2019) or even challenge the legitimacy of electoral-representative institutions (López Maya, 2024).

But what does an ICP entail? Without a clear conceptualization of institutionalization, it is impossible to assess if it consistently results in meaningful and enduring citizen participation. We begin by exploring this question. The following section draws on the wealth of research and evidence from ICPs in Latin America, a critical context for this analysis given the region's longstanding tradition of highly diverse ICPs (c.f. Avritzer, 2017; McNulty, 2019; Pogrebinschi, 2023).

We bring three contributions to this debate. First, we propose a multidimensional framework to capture institutionalization that goes beyond legal prescription and regulation, defined in four dimensions: formalization, political embedding, professionalization, and social engagement. Second, we contend that the debate over whether to institutionalize participation or not is sterile. Some degree of institutionalization is clearly necessary, yet formalization alone does not guarantee the endurance or impact of ICPs, given elite resistance to sharing power. We argue that the extent and shape of institutionalization will and should vary across ICPs and over time, and that, if any single dimension of institutionalization stands out as crucial for engendering meaningful participation, it is political embedding. Third, we explore these ideas by examining three distinct ICPs: popular initiatives (direct decision-making), participatory budgeting (PB; deliberative decision-making), and sortition-based CAs (consultative deliberation). The third section of the article is devoted to analyzing these three types of ICPs. They were selected to capture variation in citizen authority, from binding outcomes to cooperation to advisory roles, and to examine what institutionalization entails in each type, from laws and dedicated funding and staffing to political party promotion and mass engagement to civil society “entrepreneurship.”

The fourth section presents our findings and discussion. Without neglecting the value and relevance of formalization, we argue that the addition of other dimensions of institutionalization is required for ICPs to

achieve both sustainability and impact without becoming instrumentalized. At a time when the foundations of representative democracy—free and fair elections—are under attack in many parts of the world, the notion that embedding new participatory institutions within democracy might be a quick and simple fix is misguided. After all, it took decades, if not centuries, for elites to accept the uncertainty of elections. Participatory institutions necessarily add new uncertainty insofar as they reduce elite control. Achieving consensus around such ICPs will be a difficult, arduous task. No “magic bullet” exists for sustainable, generative participation, and political context always matters. Latin America, a region ripe with political-institutional reform and socio-political volatility, critically demonstrates the relevance of context. The multidimensional framework we present can support future research in assessing how institutionalization may enable effective, enduring, and meaningful participation in different contexts, but also when and why it may fail to do so.

2. State of the Art

We define ICPs as state-sanctioned processes—regulated by law or implemented by national or subnational authorities—that enable citizens to engage in policymaking or governance beyond elections (see Smith, 2009). These institutions may be permanent or temporary, but exclude participation driven solely by civil society or private actors. Their forms vary based on who participates (e.g., individuals or civil society organizations) and how they engage—e.g., agenda-setting, deliberation, consultation, proposal development, decision-making, implementation, or oversight (Welp, 2022).

The diverse strategies used to expand participation include the creation of mixed partisan and citizen conventions chosen by lottery to develop proposals for constitutional reforms, as in Ireland (Farrell et al., 2016); participation in broad multi-channel deliberative processes, as in the G1000 in Belgium (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015); deployment of communal councils with the capacity to directly manage budgets, as in Venezuela (García-Guadilla, 2008); implementation of national public policy conferences and councils, as in Brazil (Romão et al., 2017); adoption of PB, as in numerous countries worldwide (Dias et al., 2021); use of social oversight committees as in Mexico (Isunza Vera & Gurza Lavalle, 2025); development of new technologies for digital citizen participation (Gilman & Peixoto, 2019); and traditional mechanisms of direct democracy (MDDs; Ruth-Lovell & Welp, 2024). The main strands can be grouped around their distinct form of participation: direct decision-making, deliberative co-creation and decision-making, and consultative deliberation. Table 1 below summarizes those three strands, the goal that citizen participation pursues, and typical examples.

Table 1. Forms of participation and types of ICPs.

Form of participation	Goal of participation	Examples
Direct decision-making	Ratify, reject, or propose laws or political decisions	Referendums, plebiscites, popular initiatives
Deliberative co-creation and decision-making	Propose, discuss, and vote to make decisions	PB, multi-level planning councils, national public policy conferences
Consultative deliberation	Discuss and propose non-binding recommendations	Constitutional deliberative assemblies, neighborhood committees, prior consultation, sortition-based CAs

Under each category, ICPs vary in design, scope, impact, and sustainability. While these formats exist globally, Latin America, where ICPs have multiplied since the transitions to democracy and are often enshrined in law, offers unique insights into how institutionalization unfolds—and fractures—in practice. This section reviews the state of the art on ICPs, outlining different conceptual approaches.

2.1. The Evolution of Institutionalized Citizen Participation in Latin America

The promotion of ICPs in Latin America has followed a contested and nonlinear path, shaped by shifting political agendas and democratization struggles. From their origins as top-down tools for legitimation in the early 20th century, when the most common forms of citizen participation were government-initiated plebiscites, to their embrace by social movements and constitutional reformers in the 1980s and 1990s, citizen participation has oscillated between empowerment and co-optation. We review three critical phases: the spread of direct democracy, the expansion of local experimentation in the post-transition decades, and the reforms that both enshrined and diluted participation in the 21st century, opening space for the emerging wave of CAs.

Mechanisms of direct democracy were largely absent from Latin America's early 19th-century constitutions. Their occasional activations were driven by leaders seeking to consolidate power. A shift took place in the early 20th century, as four countries held popular consultations: in Bolivia (1931), an authoritarian government sought legitimacy; in Peru (1919), Chile (1925), and Uruguay (1917), consultations were held to ratify constitutions. Until 1980, such direct democracy exercises remained sporadic—often serving to endorse constitutions or legitimize authoritarian regimes (e.g., Guatemala in 1935 and 1954; Venezuela and Colombia in 1957; see Ruth-Lovell & Welp, 2024). Uruguay is the sole exception, with direct democracy playing a prominent role since its introduction in 1917 and recently serving as a veto point utilized by social groups to oppose what they view as harmful public policy decisions (Lissidini, 2015).

In the 1980s, the democratization wave opened political systems to new forms of citizen engagement. Left-wing parties and social movements seeking to renew democracy “from within” promoted local-level participation, often aided by decentralization reforms that established direct municipal elections (Avritzer, 2017; Goldfrank, 2011). New electoral arenas opened space for local governments and civil society to experiment with new institutions, leading to the creation of PB and local councils. They were characterized by low institutionalization and depended on the political will of incumbents, flexible rules that evolved through deliberative processes, and a focus on consensus-building among different actors (Goldfrank & Welp, 2024). While PB and councils were widely adopted, their institutionalization varied significantly. Some cities, such as Porto Alegre in Brazil, integrated PB into municipal governance structures, whereas others adopted PB in limited ways as an expendable add-on prone to political shifts (Goldfrank, 2021).

From the 1990s onward, constitutional reforms advanced ICPs. Colombia (1991), Peru (1993), Venezuela (1999), and Ecuador (1998, 2008) incorporated participatory mechanisms into new constitutions, regulating direct democracy mechanisms (e.g., referendums, plebiscites) and deliberative-consultative instances promoting transparency and accountability (Breuer, 2011). In parallel, many countries advanced legislative frameworks introducing and even mandating citizen participation, such as Peru, Bolivia, and Guatemala (McNulty, 2019).

Despite such high formalization, the implementation of these mechanisms has remained limited or controlled by incumbents. Many ICPs initially hailed as democratizing tools struggled to achieve long-term sustainability. Challenges include: co-optation and manipulation, when governments use ICPs to reinforce control rather than expand citizen power (Balderacchi, 2017; Ruth-Lovell & Welp, 2024); lack of implementation, when even constitutionally enshrined mechanisms depend on executive commitment for implementation (Ruth et al., 2017); bureaucratic constraints, when institutionalized participation faces administrative inertia, limiting citizen influence on decision-making (McNulty, 2019); and participation-washing, when citizens are engaged for merely symbolic ends to legitimize existing policies, or when “lay citizens” are involved who effectively respond to a political party or sector (Ortiz, 2015).

Finally, in the past decade, democratic backsliding and autocratization have afflicted countries with robust participatory traditions, such as Venezuela (Mallén & García-Guadilla, 2017) and Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro (Bezerra et al., 2024), raising questions about the role of ICPs in spreading democratic values and protecting other democratic institutions. In this context, citizen participation promotion has increasingly relied on civil society and political activism. Newly introduced experiments include sortition-based CAs and collective mandates (Ross, 2024), less institutionalized and more bottom-up, potentially to circumvent established ICPs under political control or subject to dismantling (Cervellini et al., 2024).

2.2. The Debate on Institutionalization: Competing Perspectives

No scholarly consensus exists on the meaning of institutionalization, but it is often implicitly equated with formalization through state sponsorship. Most scholars conceive institutionalization as formalization through constitutional or legal entrenchment (Isunza Vera & Gurza Lavalle, 2025; Pogrebinschi & Ross, 2019). Pogrebinschi (2021, p. 30) maintains that institutionalizing democratic innovations requires legal codification, binding decisions, and stable resources to endure government changes. Yet formalization does not prevent misuse, as seen in Venezuela’s manipulated community councils (Balderacchi, 2017). Moreover, reducing institutionalization to formal regulation alone risks sidelining power struggles (Goldfrank, 2011; Welp, 2022).

Others adopt a broader perspective. Elstub and Escobar (2019, p. 7) frame institutionalization as embedding democratic innovations into a polity’s institutional landscape, including non-state actors. Warren (2007) emphasizes rule-based interactions that structure social action, while Avritzer (2017) critiques state-centric views, stressing citizen agency instead. Mayka and Abbott (2023) add that participatory institutions can either mobilize or demobilize citizens, reflecting varied political goals. Yet these conceptions lack specificity in terms of trajectories, defining elements, and expected outcomes of institutionalization.

These divergent views indicate the extent to which institutionalization remains a contested and context-dependent concept in participatory and deliberative democracy. We identify at least three shortcomings in existing approaches: (a) they rarely provide an explicit definition of institutionalization and what it entails, (b) they often conflate institutionalization with mere formalization, and (c) they typically do not acknowledge the diversity of ICPs and variation in their processes and outcomes.

To address these shortcomings, we define ICP as the process by which participatory practices become durable and legitimate through some level of *formalization* in laws and regulations, their *embedding* within political institutions and public agencies, their *professionalization* by trained staff applying standard practice, and their

rooting in *social engagement* driven by cultural practices, advocacy, and citizen demand. In the following segment, we advance a proposal to better capture the complex institutionalization trajectories of ICPs.

2.3. Institutionalization Beyond Formalization: A Multidimensional Approach

We propose a multidimensional approach to understand institutionalization, composed of four key dimensions defined in Table 2. We further provide a non-exhaustive list of some practices and actions that can constitute those dimensions (“potential elements”), which vary across ICPs. This framework allows us to move beyond definitions of institutionalization of ICPs as either “achieved” or “lacking.” We depart from the acknowledgment that ICPs can exhibit different degrees of institutionalization across these dimensions. A participatory process may be formalized in legislation but lack political embedding and social engagement or even professionalization, leading to ineffective or nonexistent implementation. Conversely, grassroots participation may achieve a degree of routinization and impact without formalization, relying mainly on social engagement; but with limited political embedding, it will remain vulnerable to partisan shifts.

Table 2. Dimensions of institutionalization.

Dimension	Definition	Potential Elements
Formalization	Citizen participation is enshrined in legislation or regulations, with the necessary infrastructure for implementation	Legislation, regulation, staffing, budget
Political embedding	Citizen participation is embedded in political institutions and public agencies and accepted by powerholders	Political party promotion, interagency collaboration, programmatic commitment
Professionalization	Citizen participation is designed, implemented, and assessed by practitioners and/or public officials with expertise and training	Training, practice standards, participation entrepreneurship
Social engagement	Citizen participation emerges from or responds to societal demand and is rooted in cultural practices, ensuring broad participation	Participation advocacy, popular demand, mass engagement

These dimensions may manifest through different combinations of elements in distinct ICPs. The following section takes three cases of ICPs in Latin America to illustrate how different combinations of elements across the four dimensions effectively occur and how they vary.

3. Examining Institutionalization in Practice

What does the ICP look like in practice? What are its main drivers and outcomes? We examine these questions applying the multidimensional framework to three types of ICP: popular initiatives as a form of MDDs, PB as a form of deliberative decision-making, and sortition-based CAs as a form of consultative deliberation. These cases are selected to reflect variation considering three factors.

First, the three types broadly correspond with the different moments in the evolution of participation in the region, reflecting the different moments of ICP promotion. As noted above in Section 2.1, MDDs were introduced in legislation and new constitutions both during the formation of republics and throughout the democratization process. PB emerged in the third wave of democratization, accompanying decentralization

processes and the reemergence of left-leaning parties in political competition. Finally, CAs are recent, with the earliest cases starting in 2017 and most taking place after 2020, reflecting developments in the Global North (Ross, 2024, p. 48).

Second, a variety of stakeholders have promoted and supported these three ICPs. MDDs were introduced via institutional reform with the support of political elites; PB was promoted first at the local level by left-leaning political parties with close links to social movements but later taken up by governments of all political orientations and supported by international organizations; CAs in the region generally have been introduced by civil society and practitioner organizations, with international professional support and philanthropic funding.

Third, each type of ICP pursues a distinct set of goals (see Table 1). MDDs allow citizens to set the political agenda via popular initiative or defer political decisions directly to citizens through referenda and plebiscites; PB historically aimed to redistribute public resources attending to territorial needs and priorities; while CAs seek to create protected environments for fair and equal participation, collective learning and reasoning, and the production of recommendations, although in a merely informative capacity.

3.1. Popular Initiatives

Mechanisms of direct democracy reshape power balances among political actors, making their adoption and implementation highly contentious. Executives may use referendums to bypass legislatures, while mandatory referendums or popular initiatives can challenge government agendas (Breuer, 2011). Today, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela permit citizen-initiated legislation (Ruth-Lovell & Welp, 2024). Despite—or perhaps because of—their potential to amplify citizen influence in policymaking, in practice, popular initiatives remain less common than top-down referendums triggered by public authorities.

In terms of *formalization*, while legislation of popular initiatives is a necessary condition for their activation, it is insufficient. The term “regulation” is key here: merely naming popular initiatives in the constitution does not automatically guarantee they can be used. Without specific procedural rules, citizen-initiated mechanisms cannot be activated, and legal requirements play a decisive role in shaping the effectiveness of direct democracy mechanisms. As Linares and Welp (2019) highlight, critical factors include:

- *Trigger mechanism*: Direct triggers (automatically put to a vote) versus indirect triggers (subject to legislative approval). When parliamentary approval is required, legislators often resist citizen initiatives they oppose, undermining the mechanism’s potential to channel counter-power.
- *Signature thresholds*: High requirements hinder activation, although other aspects could play a more relevant role (see Lissidini, 2015).
- *Time limits*: Strict deadlines complicate efforts to gather sufficient support. When signature requirements are high and timeframes short, successful completion becomes unlikely.
- *Quorum rules*: Some systems impose participation thresholds for validation. This creates incentives for demobilization strategies rather than campaigning, as seen in Colombia.
- *Thematic restrictions*: Many countries exclude fiscal or constitutional matters from citizen initiatives. Cases like Costa Rica (Raventós, 2020) and Mexico (Sandoval Alvarado, 2020) demonstrate how such exclusions limit the potential of popular initiatives.

- *Judicial review*: Pre- or post-signature constitutional scrutiny and ambiguities in procedural rules can obstruct popular initiatives, as illustrated by Ecuador's experience (Pozo Bahamonde, 2020).

Table 3 summarizes legal frameworks and implementation barriers in the region's 10 countries that allow popular initiatives.

Table 3. Popular initiatives in Latin America.

Country and year of introduction	Signatures required	Timeframe for collection	Thematic exclusions	Referendums held?
Bolivia (2009)	20% (recall referendum) 10% (legislative referendum)	90 days	Human rights, international treaties	Yes (2006)
Colombia (1991)	5% (agenda) 10% (referendum)	12 months (proactive) No deadline (reactive)	Fiscal, electoral, international relations, public order, human rights	Yes (2018, invalid due to low turnout)
Costa Rica (2002–2006)	5% of electoral roll	9 months	Budget, public spending, electoral matters, human rights	Yes, but finally promoted by the president (2007)
Ecuador (2008)	8% (constitutional) 5% (legislative)	No deadline (constitutional)	Structural state reforms, human rights, public spending	Yes (2023)
Honduras (1982, reforms debated)	No formal citizen initiative mechanism	N/A	Constitutional core matters	No
Mexico (2012)	2% of electoral roll	12 months	Budget, taxes, human rights, security, military, and electoral matters	Recall referendum in 2022 (and 4 blocked by the court in 2014)
Nicaragua (1987, reformed 1995 & 2000)	No binding citizen-initiated referendums	N/A	Electoral matters, public order, state organization	No
Peru (1993)	10% (constitutional) 0.3% → 10% (indirect)	No deadline	Human rights, taxes, budget, international treaties	Yes (2010)
Uruguay (1967)	10% (constitutional) 25% (repeal)	No deadline (constitutional) 5 months (repeal)	Bills exclusive to the executive	Yes, multiple times
Venezuela (1999)	15% (recall referendum) 10% (initiative for referendum)	180 days	Constitutionally ambiguous; broad powers given to the electoral council	Yes, recall (2004) and two attempts blocked (2016, 2022)

Source: Own elaboration based on Linares and Welp (2019).

Most countries display none or very few initiatives effectively advanced, with Uruguay representing the exception. Colombia and Mexico impose severe restrictions on referendum topics, and in Costa Rica and Ecuador, vague procedures have prevented many initiatives from reaching a vote.

This is due to the lack of *political embedding* of popular initiatives within institutions and public agencies, as most powerholders reject them. In Peru, legislative intervention distorts or halts initiatives. These are not just design flaws but reflect power struggles. High thresholds affect the viability of a procedure. Congressional veto power, as happens in Peru, can dilute or nullify proposals. Arbitrary limitations, as in Costa Rica, restrict initiatives to just one to three per period, which explains why so many initiatives never come to a vote. Overall, unclear legal frameworks allow powerholders to delay or prevent referendums.

Procedural hurdles translate into stark empirical disparities, as evidenced by activation rates across the region. A review of scholarship over the past two decades confirms that executive-triggered referendums dominate, while those initiated by citizens rarely reach a vote (Lissidini, 2015). Between 2000 and 2023, only 22 citizen-initiated processes completed signature collection across seven countries. Uruguay accounts for nine of these, all successfully voted upon. Of the remaining 13, only four went to a vote—Colombia 2018, Ecuador 2023, Peru 2010, and Venezuela 2004 (Welp & Whitehead, 2023).

In the best scenario of a high degree of *professionalization*, public officials can administratively support the activation of a popular initiative following unbiased standards; in the worst, co-opted institutions serve the political interests of the government. In some cases, electoral authorities and courts obstruct popular initiatives. Venezuela exemplifies this: recall referendums against Nicolás Maduro (2016, 2022) were blocked despite sufficient signatures. Similarly, Ecuador's constitutional court has delayed rulings, creating uncertainty about when referendums can proceed.

To activate a popular initiative, *social engagement* is key. People need to know of its existence, be able to follow the procedure, and trust in the results. Engagement means investing time in a process that often requires mobilization for months or even years. The Latin American experience with popular initiatives highlights that institutional design—both formal and informal—explains whether they function as genuine participatory tools or symbolic gestures. Countries with strong rule of law and political responsiveness (Uruguay) see more frequent citizen engagement in activations, whereas those with restrictive frameworks (Colombia, Mexico, Peru) inhibit it. Strengthening these mechanisms requires not just legal frameworks but also political will, institutional guarantees, and an active civil society capable of sustaining their use.

Ultimately, despite formalization, popular initiatives remain fragile tools whose effectiveness depends on clear rules, political guarantees, and sustained civic mobilization.

3.2. Participatory Budgeting

In the pioneering participatory experiments in Caracas, Montevideo, and Porto Alegre of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which all involved citizen engagement with local budgets, institutionalization emerged as a key question (Goldfrank, 2004, 2011). The new municipal administrations convened large public assemblies across neighborhoods to discuss local problems and prioritize needs with residents, but quickly realized they needed rules for organizing ongoing participation. The arguments in favor and against *formalizing* participation were

similar in each case. For those in favor, enshrining the new ICPs in law meant they would gain acceptance from a broader range of political parties and continue into future administrations regardless of electoral outcomes. For those opposed, *political embedding* and *social engagement* were more relevant, with some advocating that existing social movements should design their own ICPs without partisan interference, while others pushed for a collaborative option that would avoid opposition parties muting participant power.

In Caracas and Montevideo, incumbent parties spent years negotiating the rules with opposition politicians in the city legislature before finally passing laws that watered down the power of participants and guaranteed partisan positions in the resulting ICPs; in Caracas, after the next election, the new administration revoked the law. In Porto Alegre, incumbents instead focused on designing the process with the participants, granting them greater decision-making power and including the ability to revisit the internal rulebook each year, which allowed PB to expand over time. By the end of the 1990s, PB in Porto Alegre had achieved significant degrees of political embedding and social engagement, and eventually *professionalization*, without formalization in local or national legislation. One initial lesson was that formalizing PB in legislation guaranteed neither persistence nor impact.

In the 25 years since then, two trends have modified that lesson. The spread and institutionalization of a thin version of PB across the globe has demonstrated that formalization via national legislation is often associated with the persistence of ICPs over time, though not their impact. Gradual retreat and deinstitutionalization of PB in Porto Alegre and Brazil suggest that even for well-regarded ICPs, political embedding and social engagement can fade, perhaps especially in the absence of formalization.

Thousands of local governments have now adopted PB, particularly but not only in Latin America, and often as the result of formalization through national legal mandates. Table 4 illustrates that those countries with

Table 4. PB laws and current cases in Latin America.

Country	National law mandating or supporting PB (Year)	Number of municipalities with active PB (2018–2021)	Percentage of municipalities with active PB (2018–2021)
Argentina	—	61	3%
Brazil	—	32*	6%*
Chile	—	20	6%
Colombia	2015	120–130	11%
Costa Rica	—	8	10%
Dominican Rep.	2007	90	56%
Ecuador	2010	221	100%
Guatemala	—	3	1%
Mexico	—	16	1%
Panama	2015	1	1%
Paraguay	—	1	< 1%
Peru	2003	1,876	100%
Uruguay	—	7	8%

Notes: *Number of cities with over 50,000 residents utilizing PB; in Brazil, there are roughly 580 such cities. Source: Own elaboration based on Dias et al. (2019, 2021) and Nickson (2011, p. 17).

national PB mandates have a greater number and higher percentage of cities implementing PB, except for Panama. In general, national PB laws prioritize formalization and professionalization, especially regulation and bureaucratic assessment of adherence to technical standards, but typically fail to engender broad social engagement and often political embedding at the local level, where professionalization also tends to lag.

Unlike the original Porto Alegre model of PB (which predominated in Brazil), elsewhere, powerholders frequently adopted regulations that limited the uncertainty of PB outcomes. Participation was often restricted to civil society organizations or specific neighborhoods rather than being open to all. Government or partisan officials received automatic seats, citizen input focused only on infrastructure projects, dedicated funds represented a minuscule part of the budget, and redistributive allocation formulas to benefit underserved communities were left out. While initial uptake of PB was neither uniform nor speedy, national laws mandating and regulating local-level PB in Latin America have proven more successful in making the process widespread and durable over time than local laws and then efforts to sustain PB without legislation. Nonetheless, perhaps unsurprisingly, the narrow form of PB that results generally has not led to the broad expansion of citizenship or democratic deepening expected by promoters (Goldfrank, 2021, pp. 129–134).

A partial exception to this pattern of low local political embedding and social engagement is Peru. Peru's national PB rules have evolved since they were first legislated in 2003, and the process has started to show surprisingly encouraging results in terms of pro-poor spending and citizen well-being in municipalities that implement it more robustly—i.e., that dedicate a larger share of the budget to PB for longer periods of time (Abbott et al., 2024). Allocating more funds through PB reflects local political decisions to go beyond the minimum requirements set by the (national) finance ministry. While mass engagement is not uniformly high across municipalities, roughly 150,000 members of local civic associations participate annually country-wide (Banco Mundial, 2010, p. 6). In countries where PB is not a national legal mandate, political embedding and social engagement vary even more across cities, with most processes not enduring once the initiating mayor or party is voted out and popular demand often fading over time.

This holds true even in PB's birthplace, Brazil. There, the number of municipalities implementing it has sharply declined. In the handful of cities where it still exists, PB has been hollowed out, including Porto Alegre. Without national legislation, PB expanded from 12 cities in the 1989–1992 term to a peak of 138 cities in the 2001–2004 term, yet then declined to a maximum of 43 cities holding PB at least once in the 2017–2020 term (Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022, p. 90). Even municipalities with long-standing PB processes, like Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte, and Recife, saw declines in projects completed, budget share dedicated to PB, and mass engagement. The gradual weakening of PB in Belo Horizonte has been described as “deinstitutionalization” (Montambeault, 2019) and in Porto Alegre as “dedemocratization” (Müller & Fedozzi, 2024). The causes of decline in the number of cases and the quality of PB in Brazil are many (Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022). Three related to political embedding stand out. First, as new national fiscal rules reduced local flexibility and as mayors saw that the electoral benefits for implementing robust PB processes were minimal while administrative and budgetary costs were high, party promotion of and programmatic commitment to PB declined. Second, once the Partido dos Trabalhadores reached the presidency in 2003, it prioritized other participatory institutions (public policy conferences and councils) rather than PB despite having been the central architect and promoter of PB for the prior 15 years. And third, corruption scandals tarnished the Partido dos Trabalhadores brand, which had been linked to PB, creating a disincentive for mayors of all political stripes to adopt PB.

Once viewed as a “best practice,” PB is now on the decline in much, but not all, of Latin America. Formalization through national law has slowed or stopped, as has local-level diffusion. Both mandated and locally created PB processes are a far cry from the original more robust versions in Brazil. Mandated PB endures because of formalization and professionalization, but in a weak version that delivers too little power to participants to engender social engagement. Where “autochthonous” PB endures, it is because of lingering social engagement in the form of popular demand, built up in prior years when PB offered a meaningful channel of participation.

3.3. Citizens’ Assemblies

CAs based on sortition are new to the region. CAs are the most common form of deliberative mini-publics, meaning small deliberative forums carefully devised to achieve the “ideal conditions” for inclusive participation, equal voice, and the reasoned exchange of arguments (e.g., Smith, 2009, p. 2ff). Unlike other widespread forms of citizen deliberation, like self-convened popular assemblies, sortition-based CAs are intentionally organized and designed. Unlike popular or citizen-led deliberation, CAs usually entail: (a) the use of sortition, or “civic lottery,” to select participants; (b) information on the issue at hand accessible to all participants; (c) facilitated deliberation that ensures equal voice; and (d) some form of output that condenses citizens’ preferences and recommendations after their collective deliberations (Curato et al., 2021). In the Global North, scholars initially experimented with CAs as an attempt to operationalize the theoretical premises of deliberative democracy, as in the 2004 British Columbia Assembly (Warren, 2007) and deliberative polls (Fishkin, 2011).

In Latin America, however, CAs were first introduced as tried-and-tested methods following their popularity and expansion in the Global North—the so-called “deliberative wave” (OECD, 2021). The main driver behind their introduction has been *professionalization*, following the initiative of practitioners and policy entrepreneurs. The region’s first documented CA took place in Brazil in 2017, introduced by a practitioner organization in partnership with a municipal government. To date, 27 sortition-based assemblies have been documented in the region: one in Argentina, two in Mexico, five in Colombia, and 19 in Brazil. About two-thirds were implemented by practitioner organizations in partnership with a local government agency or public official and relying almost exclusively on international funding.

Latin American CAs are generally not *formalized*. In Brazil, where most CAs have occurred, the lack of formalization became a favorable factor for their uptake and expansion. Their promoters present CAs as an inclusive response to the offensive against ICPs under Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency (2019–2022). During that time, the national executive pursued an active policy of dismantling highly formalized ICPs like public policy councils (Bezerra et al., 2024). CAs were proposed as “a supplementary form of social involvement in the context of the participation crisis, especially given the deinstitutionalization of Brazilian participation spaces” (Cervellini et al., 2024, p. 740). As local, non-formalized, one-off initiatives, CAs were expected to circumvent the federal government’s hostility toward more established participation channels. As merely consultative instances that engage small numbers of individuals, CAs could pose a “lesser” threat to a hostile government than longstanding ICPs that demanded responsiveness from incumbents and which had historically engaged highly organized and mobilized sectors. In Mexico and Argentina, too, assemblies have been introduced outside of any regulatory framework, relying exclusively on practitioner entrepreneurship, international funding, and some receptivity from public officials.

In Colombia, formalization was achieved but ensued from both professionalization and *political embedding*. The first local case, Bogotá's Itinerant Citizens' Assembly, resulted from direct collaboration between practitioner organizations and the municipal government, and was developed in tandem between practitioner organizations, international and national funders, elected officials, and public servants. The CA's recruitment, selection, and operation processes are regulated in Executive Resolution 555/2020. While most CAs are one-off initiatives, Bogotá's Itinerant Assembly was envisioned from the start as a four-year cycle endeavor with potential for permanence. The first assembly took place in 2020–2021 (exceptionally online due to the Covid-19 pandemic), and each yearly iteration brought together a new group of randomly selected citizens to build on the previous year's results by (a) working with the prior cohort's recommendations and (b) incorporating a group of participants from the prior cohort in the new composition (OECD, 2021, p. 25). The Bogotá assembly met three times (2020–2021, 2022, 2023). In 2024, a new CA cycle was introduced—starting with a “meta-assembly,” which developed a regulation to be adopted by the Bogotá district government to establish a new four-year cycle CA.

Table 5. CAs in Latin America until 2024.

Country	Cases completed (+Planned)	Government support (+Planned)	International funding	Number of participants, range	Reported policy uptake
Brazil	19 (+ 2)	11 (+ 2)	13	9–50	4
Colombia	5 (+ 3)	5 (+ 3)	4	50–60	4
Mexico	2	1	1	40–50	—
Argentina	1	—	1	50	—

Note: Recurrent assemblies in Colombia are counted once per yearly cycle.

Brazilian CAs also evidence the relevance of political embedding. Over half of the implemented CAs have engaged municipal government representatives, public servants, or members of the city council who expressed interest in experimenting with the format, although the deliberative processes were designed and delivered by practitioners. In particular, public servants and elected representatives report interest in CAs given the lack of appropriate channels to advance climate policies—the policy area most CAs have tackled (see KNOCA, 2025)—under Bolsonaro's hostility towards environmental protection at the federal level and his party's growing electoral success nationwide at the municipal level. One elected official shared that “because of their environmentalist stance, it was virtually impossible to make progress on any legislation that deals with protecting the environment” in a Bolsonaro-controlled city, leading this councilor to seek support “from external actors” (Cervellini et al., 2024, p. 748).

Political embedding, however, does not mean policy change. Formalized or not, CAs generally struggle with producing and tracking policy impact (cf. Curato et al., 2021, pp. 105–115). In Brazil, CAs have been successfully conducted in partnership with public officials, building local capacity to host citizen deliberation, but the extent to which recommendations are acted upon remains difficult to document (Cervellini et al., 2024, pp. 744, 750). In Colombia, the assembly's recommendations are directly submitted to the City Council for consideration, but have no binding effects. The Mexican and Argentinean CAs do not report any policy impact on public officials or government institutions.

Promoters of CAs maintain that their added value lies in their inclusivity due to the use of sortition, or stratified random selection, which can help avoid “that only the same people have a voice in collective

discussions” and allows “for a more comprehensive view of existing positions in society” (Cervellini et al., 2024, p. 742). An additional argument is that CAs strengthen legitimacy due to their capacity to “help decision-makers...on difficult issues, that is, issues that involve polarized perceptions in society, or that involve ethical and/or moral sensitivities” (Cervellini et al., 2024, p. 742). Despite their inclusionary ethos, CAs remain uncommon in the Latin American ICP landscape. In the Global North, some social movements have demanded CAs as a mechanism to break political deadlocks, such as Extinction Rebellion, which promotes climate assemblies as the way to overcome political inaction and corporate interests preventing climate policy change. Such *social engagement* is not present in Latin America. The introduction of this ICP has relied exclusively on the initiative of professionals, international networks, and external funding. Indeed, the disconnect between CAs as “technical fixes” to participation, and mass movements and the public sphere, represents one of the longest-standing critiques of small-scale deliberative forums (Lafont, 2019; Welp, 2024).

In Latin America, where CAs have taken place, they have done so due to the professionalization of the participation sector, through the active promotion by practitioners, scholars, and civil society organizations, and the availability of dedicated international funding, which allowed local governments to advance the “experiment” without cost to public budgets. Despite some degree of political embedding via the receptiveness of individual public servants or elected representatives, most cases are not formalized, operate entirely outside of electoral-representative institutions, and lack direct policy impact. There is evidence of policy uptake of citizens’ recommendations only in seven cases, suggesting that professionalization and political embedding without formalization may not ensure the incorporation of citizen recommendations into policy or institutional action.

4. Discussion and Conclusion: Revisiting the Debate on Institutionalization

Does institutionalization mean creating rules, structure, and regularity beyond fixing ICPs in legislation? Should ICPs always be enshrined in legislation, or should they remain open-ended so that they can be re-imagined and expanded over time?

Our evidence suggests that some degree of *formalization* in terms of creating rules and regularity is important for participation to become meaningful, but it needs to be coupled with consequential *political embedding*. Institutionalization does not necessarily have to entail legislating these rules locally or nationally. PB in Porto Alegre and many other places was never fully legislated but entailed a clear set of rules that enabled generative participation and, for a time, outstanding results. Popular initiatives, by contrast, cannot be activated unless legislation enables them, and yet even then they can be blocked when political actors refuse to “play by the rules.” At the same time, formalization alone does not lead to meaningful political change or policy action: the spread of CAs does not hinge on formalization but relies heavily on *professionalization* and political embedding.

Returning to the scholarly debate that, implicitly or explicitly, equates institutionalization of ICPs with formalization, we see arguments both in favor and against granting this dimension such centrality. The main argument in favor of formalizing ICPs in law assumes that this will ensure the transparency, clarity, and durability of participation over time, protecting citizen participation and making it more difficult for governments or politicians to manipulate participation to their advantage or eliminate it. Our study demonstrates several shortcomings in such an argument. First, legislation can lead to reducing participants’

power to design their own institutions, potentially enabling politicians, technocrats, or professional practitioners to dominate. Second, in Latin America, as everywhere else, laws often go unheeded; ICPs enshrined in law may rarely or never be put into practice or may lack substantial impact. Third, excessive formalization may result in subsequent governments performing a simulacrum of participation—following the rules without meaningful engagement—because the ICP may reflect a different government’s ideological commitment. In all these scenarios, ICPs are unlikely to produce their expected results and may instead lead to citizens becoming more disenchanted with democracy.

Rules and routinization are both fundamental and insufficient for an ICP’s successful institutionalization. We find instead that political embedding plays the biggest role in the introduction, sustainability, or demise of ICPs. Power struggles take place in a given context, which shapes the alternatives to resolve social and political conflict. Disputes can be ended by force, can be violent, or can be channeled through institutional frameworks. For this reason, although the rules of the game must be modified and adapted over time, respect for the existing rules and/or broad agreements to change them are fundamental to avoid authoritarian drifts.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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