

National Conferences in Brazil

A New Participatory Political Model

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During Lula's mandates, national conferences dedicated to women issues, human rights or social assistance galvanized thousands of Brazilians. This article details who they were, which issues mobilized them most and how influential this new pattern of participation has been.

Lula's Participatory Policy

The inauguration of the presidency of Luiz Ignácio Lula da Silva marked a change in the pattern of participation at the national level in Brazil. Already in January 2003, Lula showed his willingness to assign to participation a larger role in government, when he issued a decree changing the role of the general-secretary of the presidency in his very first day in office in January 2003. The general-secretary, historically an agency of negotiation with parliament, started to play the role of helping the president "...to consult with civil society associations and to elaborate tools of direct consultation and participation..." (Diário Oficial, 2003). In his first two years in government Lula pursued three main participatory policies: 1) the first one was participation in the elaboration and implementation of the PPA (Pluri-annual Investment Program). Participation in the PPA was organized in a partnership with ABONG, Brazilian NGO association. It took place in all the states and was a participatory format which included associations at the state level: 2,170 associations and 4,738 people participated in the PPA which was initially considered successful (Moroni, 2010). 2) The second important participatory policy was the strengthening and the increase in the number of national councils. Brazil has had 16 national councils and Lula's government created 15 new councils during his two administrations, almost doubling the number of national councils in Brazil. 3) It was at the level of the national conferences that we can see the greatest focus of the participatory policies during Lula's two mandates.

Lula's two mandates established a new pattern of participation at the national level in Brazil. Among the 115 national conferences that have taken place in Brazil since 1941, 74 took place during Lula's administration. Lula's government standardized national conferences: they were all called by one of the ministries through an administrative act (*portaria*); they all involved debates at the three levels of government, city, state and national;¹ all conferences made deliberations and

¹ There have also been conferences that took place only at the national level and for the aims of this work these are not included in the figures above. They are: conferences of the A.P.L.; science and technology; professional learning, Brazilians abroad, and two human rights conferences (the 8th and the 10th).

recommendations to the government; all conference decisions became law decrees signed by the president.² Conference decisions also became law projects or legal initiatives by the federal government in many cases (Progrebini, 2010). In this short article, I will discuss two characteristics of the national conferences: 1) their pattern of participation, that is to say, who participates and how to compare participation at the local and national levels. 2) Their deliberative impact on the decision-making process at the federal level.

Who Participates?

Participation in the national conferences in Brazil has been very high. In a survey applied in partnership with Vox Populi, a major polling institute in Brazil on a national sample³, we have been able to find out that 6.5% of the Brazilian population participated in national conferences (close to 6 million adults).

Table 1: Participation in national conferences and at what level:

	#	%	Total
Regional	94	65.7	143
Municipal	108	75.5	143
Estadual	39	27.3	143
Nacional	19	13.3	143

Participation at the national conferences followed a double logic: the federal government called for assemblies at the three levels of government and people volunteered to participate. At each level delegates were elected and in the end a deliberative conference took place in Brasilia with only nationally elected delegates. An analysis of participation shows an interesting pattern at the socio-economic level: it strongly resembled participation at the local level in at least three aspects: in income, in education and in gender aspects. The average participant of a national conference is a woman (51.2% of the cases) with four years of education (26.9% of the cases) with an income between 1 and 4 minimum wages. It is worthwhile to compare with an average participant of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre (Avritzer, 2002) particularly in regard to income and gender. Table 2 below shows a very similar pattern of popular participation between participatory budgeting and the national conferences.

² Lula signed into decree most of the decisions of the national conferences, which does not mean that all these decisions became law. Most of the decisions in the area of public policies required law projects and in many cases decisions contradicted existing laws. Abortion could be the best example: it was approved in the national conference on human rights in 2010 and it was rejected in the national conference on health. In both cases, it was signed by Lula.

³ The sample involved 2,200 respondents and was representative for all regions of Brazil. The sample was a quota sample which resembled income, education and gender for Brazil as a whole.

Table 2: Income, Education and Gender in Brazilian Participatory Processes

Participation in PB and national	Average income of the participants	Average education of the participants	Gender
Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre (year 1998)	2 to 5 minimum wages (34.4%)	Up to 8 years of education(46.1%)	51.4% of the participants are women
National conferences (year 2010)	1 to 4 minimum wages (52.2%)	Up to 8 years of education (38.1%)	51.2% of the participants were women

Source: Cidade, 2000; Avritzer, 2010

It is also important to see in which areas there is social participation in the national conferences. Social participation in Brazil has been traditionally linked to certain areas and themes that have been organized during democratization. The health movement was very important during this period in the city of São Paulo (Sader, 1988), the social assistance movement was also organized during the same period, as well as the movement for urban reform and the landless peasants movements (Avritzer, 2009). More recently third generation movements have emerged such as the feminist movement and the movement for affirmative policies based on race. Other movements driven by material considerations (Ingelhart, 1989) also emerged after democratization, such as “*ação da cidadania*”⁴ which had played a key role in minimum incomes policies. When we observe the themes which motivated social actors’ participation (see table 3 below), we see a mix between the two phenomena. On the one hand, the new areas which have mobilized social actors appear initially as the ones in which participation has been historically high. When we see the themes in which social actors participated (see table 3 below) we see a mix between the two phenomena. On the other hand, the new areas which have mobilized social actors appear initially as the ones in which participation has recently been stronger, which suggests continuity between local and national forms of participation. Policies for women rank first in terms of participation and human rights ranks second. Only after these new arenas for participation is it possible to identify the traditional areas for social participation such as social assistance. However, as we move from participation to intensity of participation we can note a different phenomenon, namely, the continuous relevance of the areas in which participation is more traditional (see table 3 below). Our explanation to this two-pronged tendency of participation in the national conferences is that traditional participants are an important part of the core group who participates in the conferences and they have been participating in more than one conference. However, this core group still has its main area of interest in one of the original areas of social mobilization of the democratization period, namely, health, and social assistance.

⁴ “*Ação da Cidadania contra a Miséria e pela Vida*” (the Citizen’s Action Against Hunger and Misery, and for Life) started in 1993.

Table 3: Participation in national conferences

If you have participated and in which area?	Among the conferences you participated in, which one did you participate more actively in?			
	<i>N</i>	%	Frequência	%
Policies for women	64	44.8	5	3.5
Human rights	56	39.2	5	3.5
Social assistance	52	36.4	17	11.9
Culture	42	29.4	12	8.4
Education	27	18.9	17	11.9
Sport	23	16.1	11	7.7
Public safety	18	12.6	9	6.3
Youth policies	16	11.2	4	2.8
Mental health	16	11.2	1	0.7
Communication	16	11.2	2	1.4
Urban policy	15	10.5	2	1.4
Food security	5	3.5	2	1.4
Health	12	8.4	21	14.7
Other	0	0.0	7	4.9
NR	0	0.0	28	19.6
Total number of respondents	143	-	143	100

Source: Avritzer, 2010.

Is This Representation Effective?

It is thus possible to understand the new pattern of participation that is emerging at the national level in Brazil. It is a pattern through which social actors who have been participating in local policies acquire representation in social policies at the national level. At the same time, they take advantage of new venues for participation in new areas that were established or strengthened by the P.T. (Lula) administration. However, we may wonder about the effects of participation at the national level: how deliberative has this kind of participation been and which kind of effect has it had on Lula's administration?

The first question to raise in order to check the effectiveness of national conferences is whether the decisions taken in the conferences played a role in the organization of the government decision-making system. The answer to this question can be found out at three different levels: at the level of social actors' opinions, at the level of the decision-making in congress and at the level of the organization of government. We will start discussing this question at the level of social actors' opinion. We have asked in the survey applied to national conferences how effective interviewees thought the decisions taken by the conferences were. The answers showed in table 4 below are a good starting point to this debate. On the one hand, it shows that even

among the actors who participated in the national conferences only 5.6% think that all deliberations are implemented and only 16.1% think that most of the deliberations are implemented. There is no doubt that this corresponds to the reality since many decisions required changes in laws and/or administrative processes.

Table 4: Regarding the implementation of decisions would you say that ...

Government always implements conferences decisions	8	5.6
Gov. implements most of the decisions	15	10.5
Gov. implements an average number of decisions	28	19.6
Gov. implements a small number of decisions	26	18.2
Gov. does not implement conference decisions	13	9.1
NR	53	37.1
Total	143	100.0

Table 4 above focuses on the influence of deliberative national conferences on the government. There is not enough evidence to give a straight answer to this question but I will propose a model. Conferences are deliberative in areas in which there is a strong civil society tradition, in which the government agenda overlaps with civil society's agenda and in which the decisions do not break along party lines. Examples of four different conferences will help us see how this typology works. If we select four areas in which conferences were well organized and there was a lot of participation we can note the different impact of participation on the government. In the area of health, which is one of the most mobilizing in Brazil, conferences have been strong and deliberative. However, the agendas of social actors and state actors have clearly diverted during Lula's administration. The Brazilian government tried hard to introduce "public foundations" in the area of health, which would reduce the cost of labor. Trade unions strongly rejected foundations: twice in national health conferences. Thus, in the area of health, conferences played the role of producing a tension between civil society and state actors. Civil society could not produce an agenda for the state, and the state could not implement its agenda for the health sector. Neither were public foundations implemented,⁵ nor the agenda of civil society actors as regards health issues.

The second area of analysis is public safety. Public safety is an area of very low mobilization in which left-wing actors have no tradition of organization, mainly because of the role of security personnel during the authoritarian period. In the last ten years, there has been a tradition of unionization among these actors mainly at the national level. Human rights are also an issue for the public security personnel. The conference on public safety (*segurança pública*) was very well attended and gathered groups having rarely acted together such as policemen and human rights activists. However, when it came to the production of a common agenda, these actors could not cooperate and the agenda that emerged from the public security conference was a corporatist agenda, on the wage of prison personnel.

⁵ In his last day in Office, December 31st, Lula issued a decree implementing a light version of public foundation in university hospitals.

Table 5: Civil society and state organization in selected conferences.

Type of conference	Tradition of social organization	Overlap between civil society and state agenda	Impact on the law-making branch	Number of participants local and national
Health	Strong. One of the first social movements of the democratization period.	Civil society and the state clashed over public foundations.	Low. Government disagreed with the conference agenda.	Local 100,000 National 4,700
Public safety	Weak. The tradition is of a class between human rights activities and the police.	Low. The area did not have policy councils.	Low. Only a corporatist agenda was approved.	Local 524,461 National 2,0951
Gender/ Women issues	Strong.	Strong.	Strong.	Local 120,000 National 1,787
Food security	Strong. Ação da cidadania and the campaigns against hunger.		Strong. The national system on food security was created through law number 11,346.	Local 144,237 National 1,960

The conference on feminist issues was one of the most productive national conferences. Since the Ministry on women policies (*Secretaria de Políticas para a Mulher*) was created by Lula himself, it needed civil society support for its agenda and it became strongly involved in the organization of the conference. The conference took as its priorities five themes: economic autonomy and equality, inclusive (non-sexist) education, women's health and reproductive rights, struggle against domestic violence and women's political participation. The conference involved the participation of 120,000 people and its national phase in Brasilia involved a strongly shared agenda between civil society actors and the state. The result was a strong presence of the agenda in the government and National Congress with 48 legal initiatives which resulted from the conferences deliberations between 2006 and 2010.⁶

A New Political Model?

Last, we shall discuss the area of food security (*proteção alimentar*). This is an area in which civil society has been strong since the mid-1990s when the national campaign against hunger started. CONSEA (Conselho Nacional de Segurança alimentar) was created at that point and Lula campaigned with a clear platform on this issue. The ministry in charge of social programs (MDS, *Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social*) was a strong supporter of both social assistance and food security conferences. They were both very well attended with 144,237 people attending the local phases of the conference on food security. In the end, the conference decided for a national system on food security. There were in Brazil only two other national systems for public

⁶ I would like to thank Thamy Progrebinschi for kindly sharing these data with me.

policies, one for health and the other for social assistance, one of them created during the 1990's and the other as a result of the national conference of social assistance. The implementation of the conference deliberations required a law that was approved by an overwhelming majority in Congress. The law also required an additional decree issued by Lula in 2010. This is the most successful case so far because civil society and the state agendas fully overlapped.

Thus, we can see the characteristics that make conferences an important part of the decision-making process at the national level in Brazil today. Conferences as a whole are important but their effectiveness varies more according to civil society strength and its articulation with the government than with the number of participants. Many areas of public policies have pursued their agendas through national conferences, which points towards a new political model. At the same time, the government has been able to re-establish a common agenda with civil society actors that help the approval of several pieces of legislation in Congress particularly after the “mensalão” scandal in 2005⁷. In this way, participation through the national conferences provided a new method of bringing to center stage actors and policies which could have remained marginal if the standard method of representation inherited by Lula and the P.T. from traditional politics had prevailed.

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⁷ This snowballing scandal broke on June 6 2005 as the leader of the small party, Roberto Jefferson, accused the P.T. of making secret monthly payments of \$12,500 to allies in Congress for continued support in passing legislation.