



PARTICIPATION IN TACKLING THE PANDEMIC: A MAPPING OF THE DIGITAL INITIATIVES OF CITY HALLS¹

Luiza Jardim²
Rachel Callai Bragatto³

Abstract: The new coronavirus pandemic placed Brazil in a state of calamity, and the inaction of the federal government caused subnational governments to stand out in the actions in the face of the health, social, economic, and cultural ramifications of the disease. In this context, social participation initiatives for tackling the pandemic emerged throughout the country through digital mechanisms. This work presents a brief review of the literature on democracy and digital participation, as well as a mapping of the digital participation initiatives of the municipal executive branches that took place during 2020, carried out through a keyword search. We surveyed 104 initiatives from 72 municipalities, most from municipal councils. The research findings show a predominance of initiatives related to remote education and the resumption of in-person education, and more considerable expressivity in the Southeast Region and large municipalities.

Keywords: Social participation; Digital Government; Pandemic; Executive Branch; Legislative Branch.

1 Introduction

The new coronavirus pandemic, which reached Brazil in February 2020, placed the country in a state of emergency and demanded responses and positions from the governments regarding public policies to reduce the contagion and meet the different population needs. The subnational governments showed protagonism in the distancing measures, closing of schools and commerce, regulation of services, and economic recovery plans, amid conflicts in federalism⁴ and the absence of centralized and organized coordination by the Brazilian Presidency (ABRÚCIO et al., 2020; SOUZA; FONTANELLI, 2021).

The Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro, had already been causing a federative confrontation since the start of his government (2019), but this was intensified with the pandemic and culminated in subnational governments reacting to federal decisions with

¹ Paper presented to the Government and Digital Parliament Workgroup of the 9th Congress of the Brazilian Association of Researchers in Communication and Politics (COMOPOLÍTICA), held virtually from May 24 to 28, 2021.

² Master's student of Political Science at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) and researcher with a CAPES scholarship at the Institute of Democracy and Democratization of Communication (INCT-IDDC). Email: luizabsjardim@gmail.com

³ Post-doctoral researcher at the Institute of Democracy (INCT IDDC), doctor of Sociology from UFPR with a sandwich period at the University of California - Los Angeles (UCLA). Scholarship holder from the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes). Email: rachelbragatto@gmail.com

⁴ Before the pandemic, Bolsonaro had already been causing a federative confrontation, but this was intensified with the pandemic and culminated in subnational governments reacting to federal decisions with rejection letters, besides an increase in decisions from the Federal Supreme Court (STF, from the Portuguese *Supremo Tribunal Federal*) favorable to the states and a decrease in decisions favorable to the Union, as used to be the trend since 1988.

rejection letters, besides an increase in decisions from the Federal Supreme Court (STF, from the Portuguese *Supremo Tribunal Federal*) favorable to the states and a decrease in decisions favorable to the Union, as used to be the trend since 1988 (ABRÚCIO et al., 2020).

Social participation was a mechanism used in several municipalities for assessing paths, performing public consultations, making decisions, and assessing legitimacy during the pandemic. However, its history in Brazil goes back much further. As pointed out by Bragatto (2016, p. 26),

If we address only institutionalized participatory spaces, one may notice in the Joint Efforts, Community Councils, and Popular Councils of the 1980s, passing through the Participatory Budgets and Managing Councils of the 1990s and arriving at the expansion of the National Councils and Conferences in the period of the Lula government, a diversity of experiences in which old and new political practices, direct participation, and representation coexist and contribute to the construction of citizenship in Brazil.

The democratic advantages of participation would be many and intimately connected to the democratic ethos itself. According to participationalist theorists such as Carole Pateman (1992 [1970]), Crawford Macpherson (1987 [1977]), and Nicos Poulantzas (2000 [1980]), participation is fundamental to expand the sense of political efficacy, decrease the distance between representatives and those represented, contribute to a more significant understanding of collective problems, increment the formation and search for political information, and develop a more active and continuous interest in politics.

This work aims to map the digital participation initiatives for tackling the pandemic carried out by the municipal executive branches during 2020.

The cases covered in the mapping and analysis met the following criteria: (i) digital social participation initiatives (ii) carried out by city halls (iii) about matters related to the coronavirus pandemic (iv) throughout 2020.

The choice for analyzing the digital participation experiences is justified because social distancing, one of the main measures implemented worldwide that started to be recommended by Brazilian subnational governments in mid-March 2020, caused the digitalization of several processes that occurred in-person, such as education and other municipal services.

In the Brazilian case, political participation comprises *forms* already consecrated, such as participative budgets, public policy councils, thematic conferences, or even municipal master plans. Such experiences, fundamental for the democratization of the Brazilian State and, also, to pave the way for other initiatives, have been widely studied under various approaches that address, for example, the institutional design (FUKS; PERISSINOTTO; SOUZA, 2004; AVRITZER, 2008, 2012), the impact of the sociopolitical context (AVRITZER, 2003; FUKS; PERISSINOTTO, 2006; LÜCHMANN; BORBA, 2007; WAMPLER, 2007; BURGOS, 2007), the role of the political project (DAGNINO, 2002; DAGNINO; OLVERA; PANFICHI, 2006),

and the false separation between civil society and political society, criticism of a homogenizing view of each one (ABERS; BÜLOW, 2011; LAVALLE; SZWAKO, 2015). It is not a merely normative debate but an analytical one of the recent experiences in Brazil over the last thirty years. As Lavalle and Vera pointed out,

in Brazil, the debate takes place within a broad field of empirical research regarding the new instances of representation and the social incidence on public policies in which researchers of social movements, participatory democracy, civil society, public policies, democratic controls, and representation pluralization converge. This convergence has been outlining innovative empirical research agendas strongly connected to the democratic theory, unparalleled in the international debate (LAVALLE; VERA, 2011, p. 99-100).

Moreover, although digital participation already had notable experiences throughout Brazil, such as the participatory budgets, national conferences, public policy councils, and even a pioneer case of collaborative construction of a law with the Brazilian Civil Rights Framework for the Internet (*Marco Civil da Internet*), most times it was seen as a step of a process that also encompassed in-person actions, such as in the participatory budget in Recife, for example. Hence, the moment of the coronavirus pandemic allowed for different strictly online participation experiences to emerge throughout the country, a propitious context for in-depth analyses of matters of its particularity.

Amid the pandemic and the state of emergency, state governments focused on building plans for closing and reopening the different sectors and indicators to categorize the state regions into phases, among other measures that, in many cases, were presented as suggestions, leaving the autonomy for the municipalities to decide on the adhesion to such recommendations. In this sense, this work will analyze the social participation experiences employed by city halls in the decisions related to tackling the pandemic.

We considered the initiatives created or endorsed by the public power but with the observation that the link between the results and the decision-making process does not necessarily imply a binding quality, but rather some type of consideration of the product of the participation in the decision-making by the public power.

Lastly, it should be explained that only the experiences that took place in 2020 were mapped to avoid possible biases caused by the change in municipal management in 2021 – and also because the pandemic is still ongoing at the time of writing.

2 Literature review

2.1 Democracy in Times of Catastrophes

Humankind is facing a new global crisis⁵ with the new coronavirus pandemic. Likewise,

⁵ "Humankind is now facing a global crisis". This is the opening of the text that Yuval Noah Harari published in the

the crisis of contemporary democracies was also gaining global proportions – it is not without reason the number of recent books seeking different explanations for the phenomenon and ways for democracy to survive and recover (LEVITSKY; ZIBLATT, 2018; RUNCIMAN, 2018; PRZEWORSKI, 2019; AVRITZER, 2019; ABRANCHES, 2020; AVRITZER; DELGADO, 2021).

Although there is no consensus among researchers about the extent of this crisis or about which countries fit this crisis diagnosis, it is important, especially in the Brazilian case, to consider the political behavior of the population and, especially, the popular support to antidemocratic solutions. Recently, Brazil has gone through repeated episodes of turbulence and instability, constitutional impasses, and presidential impeachments, creating a scenario of instability and institutional unpredictability.

For some authors, the coronavirus pandemic is seen as a catalyst of other crises already experienced in the country. Melo and Cabral (2020) identified four crises that, combined, result in a scenario that cannot help but be catastrophic: a chronic economic crisis, an acute economic crisis, a public health crisis, and a political crisis. Added to this is the federative, political, and administrative crisis of the Bolsonaro government, with little articulation with subnational governments (ABRÚCIO et al., 2020), difficulty articulating with Congress, and the inexistence of coalition presidentialism (ABRANCHES, 2020).

If since 2013 we were already experiencing a process of institutional regressions (AVRITZER, 2019) that would place us in a situation of opening to possible crises, we could identify the behavior of president Jair Bolsonaro in tackling the pandemic as authoritarian from actions related to the four dimensions proposed by Levitsky and Ziblatt: (i) rejection of the democratic rules of the game (or feeble commitment to them); (ii) negation of the legitimacy of political opponents (they claim that their rivals are threats or accuse them of being criminals without substantiation); (iii) tolerance or encouraging of violence (and here they also render explicit the bond with gangs and militia and the compliments to significant acts of violence from the past); (iv) propensity to restrict the civil liberties of opponents, including the media (LEVITSKY; ZIBLATT, 2018).

Attacks on the press and its disqualification; disinformation strategies about the pandemic, the necessary care, and the appropriate treatments; and the attempt to use violence to end the restrictions imposed by subnational governments are some examples of actions carried out by the Brazilian president. The new coronavirus pandemic and the reactions to it offered significant threats and damage to the democracy of the country through punishment measures, media control, authoritarian surveillance, and the weakening of the institutions; all justified from the context of tackling the disease and its effects.

Financial Times magazine on March 21, 2020, "The world after coronavirus".

As Tocqueville suggested, it is not enough for democratic theories to focus only on institutionalist aspects to define democracies, without considering the existence of that which is public or common (HONIG, 2015), especially when tackling catastrophes. However, even when visiting the literature on democratic crises that brings centrality to institutions, we see that the argument is not that simple. Congress remaining open and independent is not enough to discard the possibility of a crisis and does not protect a country from all forms of democracy degradation.

In times of calamity and urgency, guaranteeing survival would be above guaranteeing the maintenance of democracy (RUNCIMAN, 2018). Hence, the possibility of the breakdown of democracy is greater. "If something goes really and terribly wrong, whoever is left will be too occupied with the fight for survival to concern themselves too much with change through voting" (RUNCIMAN, 2018, p. 13).

Beyond the concern with survival, the moment of crisis and transition itself is the stage for the degradation of democracy, as it may trigger processes of polarization, passionate identification, populism, and authoritarianism (ABRANCHES, 2020).

The United Nations Disaster Relief Organization declared in 1982 that the participation of the community would be the "key of success" in post-disaster reconstructions, and we see this have centrality in tackling some relevant tragedies. Without wanting to open a vast debate on the appropriation and use of the concept and idea of participation, it is fitting to point out that the seemingly consensual adhesion to the participation ideal reveals how plastic it may be and how normative its understanding is (BRAGATTO, 2016). The meaning assigned to participation, i.e., its content, is quite diverse and often even contradictory, rendering explicit a true polysemy of the term and a permanent dispute over its meaning (DAGNINO, 2004).

Moreover, although the initiatives and experiences in favor of social participation are many, they are largely fragmented, lacking systemic planning and management (TEIXEIRA, 2013), often problematized from the viewpoint of the challenges posed by these new forms of representation that emerged from participatory spaces (AVRITZER, 2008; LAVALLE; HOUTZAGER; CASTELLO, 2006; LÜCHMANN, 2007), questioned regarding the inequality in the possession of cultural and political resources among those who take part and the ensemble of the Brazilian society (MORAES et al., 2009; FUCKS; PERISSINOTTO; RIBEIRO, 2011), and even some denounced as instrumental attacks since, under the guise of an expansion of involvement and more significant efficiency, they would render public entities not responsible for activities so far exclusive to the state (TATAGIBA, 2003).

In the face of a situation of public calamity, the exit possibilities would be various, from considering the participation of the population as crucial for assertive decision-making in times of so many uncertainties to making centralized decisions without involving the population. This work aims precisely to understand the role of participation in tackling the pandemic from its use

by Brazilian municipal governments.

2.2 Digital Participation

The advancement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has provided new forms of relationship and innovation in processes from all sectors. As pointed out by Gomes (2016), this scenario represents a wave of renovation of the liberal democratic institutions. This field of interactions and studies is called digital democracy or, sometimes, "e-democracy", "electronic democracy", or "cyberdemocracy" (SILVA; BRAGATTO; SAMPAIO, 2016).

The literature on digital democracy defines the concept as an articulation between the digital and the physical worlds that allows a double direction: the vocalization of citizen interests (from the organization of civil society) and the incidence of political decisions and responsivity mechanisms (changes to the institutional structure of the state) (PEREIRA, 2015).

Digital democracy is viewed as a potential ally of social participation processes since it allows expanding the scope of contents and including more participants in a process. Digital participation has gained notable proportions and is nowadays provided for in the Law on Access to Information (LAI) and even associated with some mandatory aspects, such as those related to transparency and open data. However, the conceptual delimitations of this participation format represent a limitation to the theory that has not yet been overcome.

In a survey about the literature on the field from a bibliographic review of the term e-participation (electronic participation), Saebo et al. (2007) pointed out as a weakness of the field the use of the normative description of democratic participation transposed, inconsistently according to the authors, to electronic participation.

Part of the recent Brazilian literature on the theme also uses this transposition of the concept, highlighting only the use of ICTs as a differential relative to traditional participation (e.g., MENDONÇA; PEREIRA, 2011; SAMPAIO, 2013; ALMEIDA, 2017).

Sampaio (2013) surveyed the initiatives for participation, deliberation, and other forms of population involvement, all in digital environments, and classified them according to categories established by Gomes (2011) in which participation is differentiated from deliberation. Here, participation would be the contribution of civil society, while deliberation would require conversation and discussion among citizens. This distinction is made because there is a series of experiences on the Internet in which the participants express their individual preferences without necessarily interacting or considering the other contributions, as is the case of digital public consultations or the production of the Brazilian Civil Rights Framework for the Internet.

As Avritzer (2000) pointed out, reinforcing the first moment, "the idea of participation enters the national scene as a practical category, i.e., a category mobilized to confer meaning to

the collective action of popular actors" (AVRITZER, 2000, p. 34). In this sense, we see in Brazil a growing collection of experiences of digital democracy and population participation through the Internet, and such experiences have the capacity to feed the theory – however, as already mentioned, making the due adjustment of the classical participative or deliberative theories for the Internet environment.

Relative to the interaction with the Habermasian matrix of participation, some authors defend that "many of the potentialities attributed to the Internet are connected to the assumption that digital initiatives can enrich the existing deliberative processes or create new interlocution spaces" (MENDONÇA; PEREIRA, 2011, p. 2). Hence, they justify the use of deliberation for studying digital democracy initiatives and even point out that, within the deliberation, there are studies that highlight the potentiality of the Internet to carry out reason exchanges by a large number of people.

Smith and Craglia (2016) pointed out that the differentiation of digital participation could take place in its unfolding, highlighting two different views: the "push-button democracy", in which the Internet would simply reproduce the already existing behaviors of popular participation, yet digitally, and that which they call "mobilization theory", which would be the return to direct democracy, suggesting that the electronic participation instruments enable the creation of opportunities for politically marginalized individuals, amplifying their voices in the political process.

The definition by the United Nations (UN) also takes the access of citizens to the participation mechanism as a differential as it defines electronic participation as the "process of involving citizens through ICTs in decision-making processes, policies, and the provision and design of services with the purpose of rendering them more participative, inclusive, and deliberative" (United Nations, 2018).

Hence, electronic participation could be understood as the appropriation of digital mechanisms by the already existing logic of democratic participation, yet sometimes defined through an expectation that the mechanism will have the capacity to reach a greater – or more representative – number of people.

Braga and Gomes (2016) pointed out that electronic participation in decision-making processes presents the advantages of being potentially more transparent and more dispersed, increasing the level of responsabilization of politicians and public servants. Relative to the risks, the authors presented the digital divide, similar to digital exclusion, technological dependence, government censorship, and the breach of privacy in the virtual space.

Digital exclusion, which concerns people who do not have facilitated Internet access, is viewed as a limitation of digital participatory processes (ORTIZ et al., 2017; MARQUES, 2008). According to the 2019 TIC Domicílios survey, the population with Internet access is 74%, and Medeiros et al. (2020) estimated that the population active on the Internet is 70% in

Brazil⁶. Processes carried out digitally are not only inaccessible to a considerable part of the population but may also contribute to the social and political exclusion of such groups.

In recent years, the initial generalized optimism relative to digital participation and also the use of the Internet by democracies as a whole was gradually replaced by a critical and perhaps distrusting view regarding the risks the Internet offers beyond the already mentioned digital exclusion.

Up to the early 2000s, a period when the Internet and the forms of digital communication spread throughout the world, there was some euphoria and belief that democracy would be the great beneficiary of the Internet – the rhetoric of the power of the technique. The more frequent positive views defended that the employment of information and communication technologies could enable a more considerable information flow, reinforce community ties, reinvigorate the political participation of citizens, and, lastly, raise new forms of relationship between the public and the contemporary state institutions (LEVY, 1995; NEGROPONTE, 1995; ROSNAY, 1997).

Over the years, the expectations were gradually replaced by analyses of real experiences based on the use of ICTs in activities that foster or threaten democracy. Although the power of the technique is still strong and present, with the maturation of the analyses, the initial question of "what can the Internet do for democracy" starts to be replaced by questions about how the different digital means, channels, and tools that compose the Internet may be used by individuals, organizations, and institutions for political purposes and/or to increment democratic values. Added to this are countless variables such as socioeconomic and cultural factors, partisan ideology, Internet access level, digital literacy, and media governance. Likewise, the will of representatives, elites, and political institutions to implement or accept such innovations and the motivation of citizens and civic groups to create or appropriate such opportunities become study problems. In place of the opposition between optimists and pessimists, the existing relationships of digital media and broadcasting with the field of journalism and the market and within the political field become the object of study.

3 Methodology

Aiming to analyze digital participation in Brazilian city halls amid the pandemic, we surveyed the initiatives carried out throughout 2020. The mapping took place based on a search on the Google search engine by combining the word "*prefeitura*" (Portuguese for city hall) and keywords selected to bring up the addressed themes. The ten first results display pages were considered. There was a total of thirty word combinations, totalizing three hundred results display pages, which resulted in three thousand assessed links. The search took place from

⁶ Pop.AI indicator developed by the authors from existing data. See Medeiros et al. (2020, p. 655-656).

March 13 to April 11, 2021. The table below shows the terms used, and the combinations considered one term from each column.

Table 1 – Keywords for combination and search on the Google search engine

Keyword 1	Keyword 2	Keyword 3	Keyword 4
prefeitura (city hall)	COVID-19	consulta pública (public consultation)	participação (participation)
-	coronavírus (coronavirus)	audiência pública (public hearing)	deliberação (deliberation)
-	pandemia (pandemic)	conselho (council)	-
-	-	iniciativa (initiative)	-
-	-	experiência (experience)	-

Source: Devised by the authors, 2021.

Municipal councils were included in the search for being understood as important social participation mechanisms. Regarding its institutionality on the part of the city halls, as is a criterion for this study, we considered these mechanisms special state agencies and, thus, understand that their government link is the municipal executive branch.

The choice for not including words related to the digital nature of the participation initiatives was because, in the distancing scenario, most of the initiatives were expected to be digital. Only one initiative that met the other criteria (carried out by city halls in 2020, related to tackling the pandemic) was found that did not meet the digital nature criterion. This initiative was carried out at the end of March 2020 in São Pedro da Aldeia (RJ) and consisted of a meeting of the Department of Education, the Municipal Education Council, CACS-FUNDEB, SEPE Costa do Sol, and the Municipal School Feeding Council to address alternatives to reduce the impact of the pandemic on the Education Network. It was discarded and not considered in the corpus.

For each experience that fully met the search terms, we surveyed the following set of characteristics: city/state; modality of the participation mechanism (e.g., public consultation, public hearing, council, committee); theme of the process; month of the initiative; secretariats involved in the initiative; nature of the participation (approval/decision-making, diagnostics/assessment, orientation/recommendation, discussion, and provision of service); who was able to participate; municipality population. In the end, 104 initiatives corresponded to the search criteria and were analyzed, configuring the corpus of this paper.

It is important to highlight that, because the search was carried out using a search engine, it is possible for there to have been some bias related to the results the engine delivers. Convincing evidence of the existence of filter bubbles in search engines is lacking, but some

studies suggest algorithm effects (BRUNS, 2019). All combinations were searched from the same computer and the same location in São Paulo (SP).

3.1 Hypotheses

Considering the literature on digital participation and the knowledge from news articles on participation during 2020, four hypotheses about the types of initiatives carried out in 2020 were raised: They were all assessed with the information surveyed in the mapping.

(1) predominance of initiatives in capitals and municipalities with over 100 thousand inhabitants;

(2) predominance of practices via digital public consultation due to the ease of implementation of the mechanism;

(3) most of the initiatives seem to involve the reopening of schools due to the autonomy of municipalities regarding this decision, the complexity of actors, and the exchange of practices among municipalities;

(4) in times such as the pandemic, when there is an emergency nature, participation focuses on diagnostic surveys about the problems or assessment of measures taken by the public power, and the participation results are considered in the decision-making process but do not generate decisions in themselves.

4 Mapping of the Initiatives and Analysis

4.1 Regional Distribution of the Initiatives

Initiatives were found in 19 states in all regions. The states that do not appear in the mapping are Amapá, Amazonas, Goiás, Piauí, Roraima, Sergipe, and Tocantins. The Federal District is not contemplated given that we analyzed the municipal initiatives and the district government is typically counted with the state governments.

The most significant concentration of initiatives is in the state of São Paulo (41), followed by Rio de Janeiro (16) and Paraná (10). Six states had only one initiative. The table below shows the distribution of initiatives per state.

Table 2 – Initiatives per Federative Unit (FU)

State (FU)	Number of initiatives
AC	1
AL	1
BA	3
CE	1
ES	1
MA	2
MG	3

MS	1
MT	1
PA	3
PB	2
PE	2
PR	10
RJ	16
RN	2
RO	5
RS	5
SC	4
SP	41

Source: Devised by the authors, 2021.

It is possible to observe a predominance of initiatives in the Southeast Region. The four states had at least one initiative and, together, added up to 61 initiatives (58.65% of the total). The Southeast is the region with the most significant population; however, in terms of the number of municipalities, it has only 29.95% of the country. The South Region also had initiatives in its three states, adding up to 19. We found 13 initiatives in the Northeast Region, nine in the North Region, and two in the Central-West Region.

The initiatives surveyed are from 72 different municipalities, with eight being from São Paulo/SP, five from Rio de Janeiro/RJ, and four from Porto Velho/RO. In some of the municipalities, as is the case of Canoas/RS, with three initiatives, the page found from the search methodology on the Google search engine presented a series of social participation experiences, and, from this compilation, we selected those that met the study criteria.

The first hypothesis presented in this study suggested that there would be a predominance of initiatives in capitals and municipalities with over 100 thousand inhabitants. This expectation stems from previous studies focused only on large cities, such as that carried out by Fariniuk (2020), who analyzed smart city experiences in Brazil considering the hundred largest municipalities, besides a perception that these cities would have more significant adhesion to digital participation due to their socioeconomic characteristics. Hence, we chose as a criterion that which characterizes a large city according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) and the Brazilian legislation: having more than 100 thousand inhabitants.

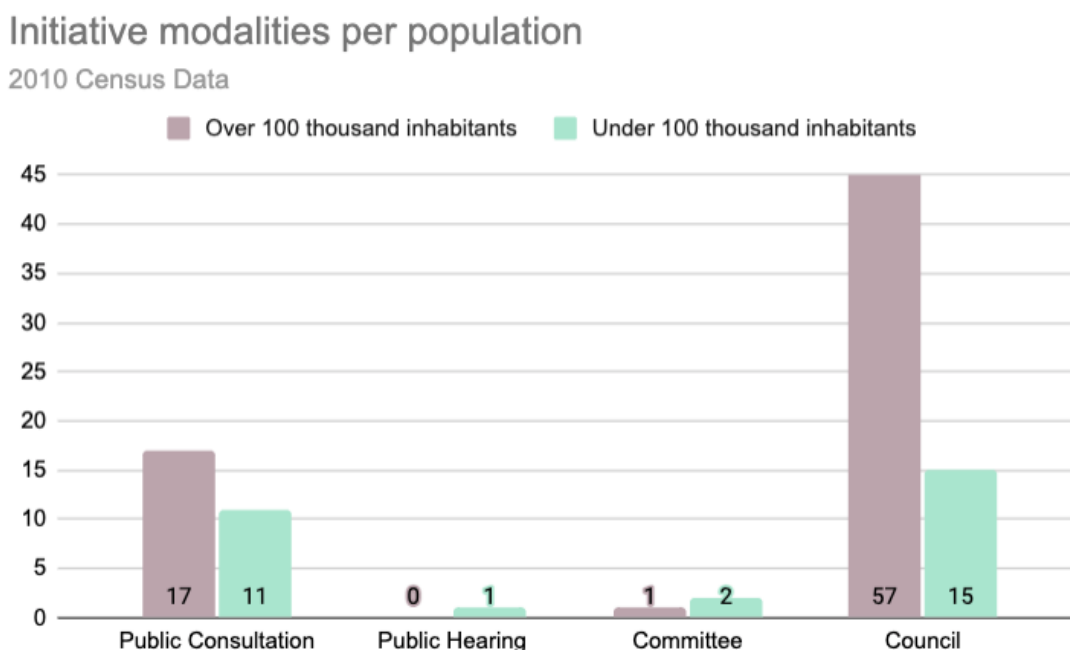
To test this hypothesis, we consider the population data from the 2010 Census and the population estimated by the IBGE for 2020. Since the analysis criterion differentiates

municipalities with more or less than 100 thousand inhabitants, we identified if there was a variation in the categorization of our sample by comparing the two data sources and found that two municipalities, Itaperuna/RJ and São Pedro da Aldeia/RJ, transitioned to having more than 100 thousand inhabitants according to the estimated population data for 2020. Hence, we classified these two municipalities in the group with over 100 thousand inhabitants for the study.

The hypothesis was proven: 75 initiatives were mapped in large municipalities and 29 in the other municipalities. Therefore, we identified that studies that look only at the largest municipalities in the country may have limitations for not covering little over one-fourth (27.99%) of the initiatives existing in the country. It is worth noting that the first group with the 75 initiatives is composed of 46 municipalities and has an average of 1.6 initiatives per municipality, while the group with less than 100 thousand inhabitants contains 26 municipalities, with on average 1.3 initiatives per municipality.

Regarding the capitals, 28 initiatives are distributed in 12 capitals. This value corresponds to 28.92% of the surveyed initiatives, but the 12 capitals are only 16.67% of the 72 municipalities presented in the mapping. Therefore, the capitals presented an average above that of the other cities, with 2.3 initiatives per capital in contrast to the average of 1.3 occurrences in the other municipalities.

Figure 1 – Initiative modalities per population



Source: Devised by the authors, 2021.

From Figure 1, one may observe a difference between the two population groups relative to the distribution of the initiatives per modality. In the group of large municipalities,

there is a more significant proportion of councils than other participation modalities (76%), while in the municipalities with under 100 thousand inhabitants, councils are 51.72% of the initiatives, a little over half. The proportion of public consultations in this second group is also high (37.93%), while, in the first group, it corresponds to 22.67%.

4.2 Participation Modalities

The second hypothesis of this paper assumed that it would be more common to find digital public consultation practices due to the ease of implementation of this mechanism and the need of governments to perform such processes with the purpose of increasing public trust and sharing or transferring the responsibility for the decisions, as detailed in the bibliographic review. However, the predominance was of activities of municipal councils, which migrated to the virtual environment and continued conducting deliberations, approvals, and orientations to the municipal executive branches. These activities represent 72 initiatives (69.23% of the total found), while 28 were public consultations (26.92%), three were initiatives related to the participation of the population in committees for tackling the coronavirus (2.88%), and one was a public hearing (0.96%).

Table 3 – Participation Mechanism Modality

Participation Mechanism	Number of initiatives
Conselho (Council)	72
Consulta Pública (Public Consultation)	28
Participation in Committees	3
Audiência Pública (Public Hearing)	1

Source: Devised by the authors, 2021.

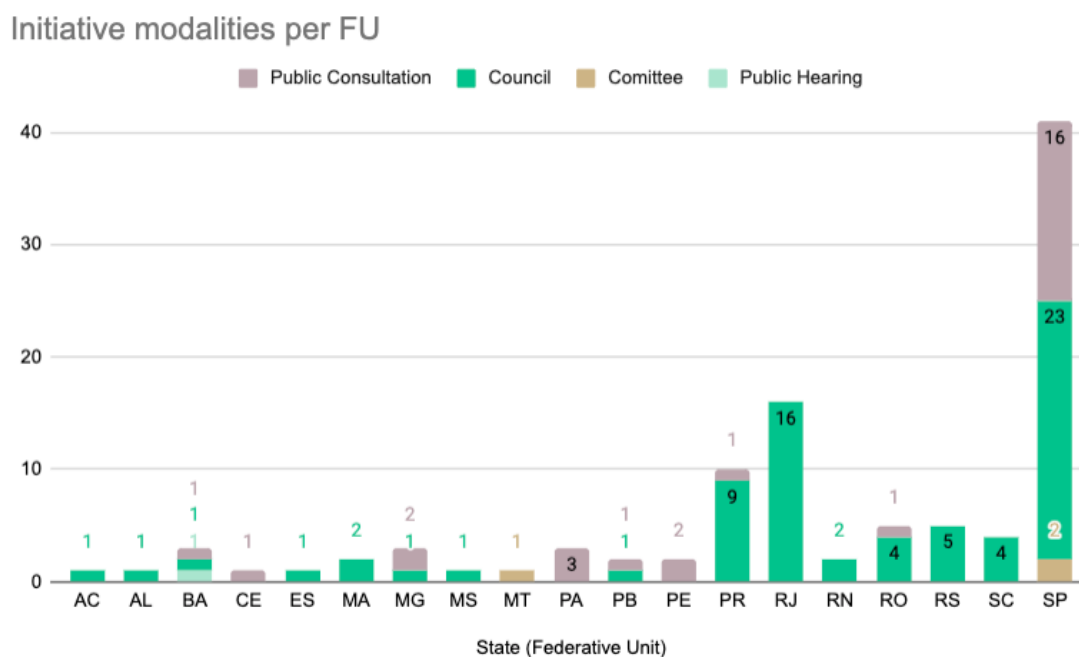
In the table above, we counted as a public consultation an initiative in Canaã dos Carajás/PA that could also be in the council category, given that it has the particularity of being a public consultation on the assessment of remote education carried out by the Municipal Education Council with the support of the Municipal Department of Education.

Most of the digital public consultations were carried out through questionnaires with closed and open-ended questions, but there are cases such as the consultation in Rio Claro/SP about the return to in-person classes in which the participation was through emails sent to the

secretary, presenting criticisms and suggestions for a plan previously presented by the city hall, or the consultation in Sobral/CE about the same theme, in which case participation through an online form was complemented by participation via phone calls.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of initiative modalities for each Federative Unit (FU). The proportion of public consultations in the state of São Paulo, which corresponds to 39% of the total surveyed in the state, stands out. Except for an initiative in the capital of São Paulo about the occupation of public spaces during and after the pandemic, all public consultations are about the return to in-person school activities. All take place in close periods, with two in July, ten in August, and three in September, leading us to think that one initiative may have stimulated the other, something that must be investigated in future research. And this theme leads us to the debate of the third hypothesis about the predominance of education-related initiatives.

Figure 2 – Initiative modalities per FU



Source: Devised by the authors, 2021.

4.3 Theme of the Participation Initiatives

The vast majority of the initiatives (77) are related to education, involving primarily the reopening of schools, decisions about remote education, and the readjustment of school calendars. There are also decisions related to the calculation of activities in a year so affected in education, the guarantee of the feeding and distribution of meals to students, and other themes involving the school community.

Besides the theme, another indicator of the predominance of the education agenda

among the participative processes is the distribution of the agencies participating in each initiative. The municipal education councils participated in 52 of the 104 initiatives surveyed, and the municipal departments of education participated in 24 initiatives. For this indicator, all entities involved in each initiative were surveyed, and many had the involvement of more than one municipal agency.

The municipal health councils and the municipal departments of health participated in nine and three initiatives, respectively. In turn, the social assistance councils participated in four, the school feeding councils in three, and there are three other initiatives for which the city halls did not indicate the sector responsible, so they were classified as general city hall initiatives. There are also initiatives involving sectors and councils connected to culture, the rights of children and adolescents, sports, and economic development, besides state and federal agencies such as universities.

4.4 Decision-Making Nature of the Participation

Relative to the nature of the participation, most initiatives provide inputs for the executive branch to make the decision (69.23%). We categorized 12.50% of the initiatives as decision-making ones, with two being COVID-19 tackling committees, one public consultation, one public hearing, and the others were council initiatives. Added to this are 18.27% of approval initiatives, all from situations in which municipal councils approved some city hall proposal.

The Municipal Department of Education of Sobral, Ceará, performed a public consultation in December with family members and guardians of students to validate a decision already made by the Department. As they stated in a release, in case the population was in favor of resuming school activities, this resumption would take place on January 18 – respecting the rules and indications of the State Government and the epidemiological situation of the municipality. This is the only public consultation with a decision-making nature.

Another aspect that merits discussion is the degree of openness of the participation mechanisms. Most of the initiatives were restricted to specific groups of people, with the deliberations being exclusive to council members and some consultations on education being exclusive to parents/guardians and the school community, among other criteria. Only nine of the 104 initiatives were open to any citizen who wished to participate, all being public consultations. Eight were about the resumption of in-person classes without a binding nature: seven were diagnostic, and one was a request/recommendation initiative. Only one had a more general nature about public space use, also with a request/recommendation nature.

Besides these nine, there is the case of Poços de Caldas/MG, which carried out in a public consultation format a survey on the undernotification of COVID-19 cases in the municipality, and the participants were selected by a draw.

Among the other initiatives, 68 were exclusive for the members of the involved municipal council, and four others included, besides the counselors, servants of the corresponding municipal department and other guests. Other initiatives, especially education-related, differentiated themselves upon including education workers, students, or only parents and guardians. The two public consultations on the Law on Cultural Emergency in Jequié/BA and Rafael Jambeiro/BA were restricted to artists and culture workers.

5. Final Considerations

The paper illustrates the attempt of municipal governments to make complex decisions from the participation of the population. Especially the decisions on the reopening of schools and hybrid education could draw upon national guidelines and indicators, considering the transmission rate, contamination index, and school adequation, which would help municipalities define the best time to carry out in-person school activities. However, the absence of such definitions gaps the impact of a crisis on Brazilian federalism and ends up being contingent for the formulation of relatively innovative exits by municipalities.

The mapping carried out has enormous potential to depict, albeit not in its totality, the use of digital participation in the tackling of the pandemic by Brazilian city halls. The previous section of the result presentation detailed the main characteristics of this set of initiatives. Hence, we reserved this space for addressing the research paths from the mapping.

The education theme, connected mainly to the decisions about remote or in-person education, was the most present in the presented initiatives. The theme was also the target of much attention from public opinion during 2020 due to both its relevance to citizens and the pressure of well-articulated groups such as teacher unions and private school employer unions. An interesting research path is to understand the disputes that involve these decisions and how participation in school management manifested itself. This mapping could serve as a base for case selection.

Comparative analyses may be made among the different themes, as if comparing education with the other sectors to understand if there are specific patterns in the set of initiatives related to the theme, or, in the future, from 2020 to 2021 to understand the differences in the two steps in tackling the pandemic, besides possible effects of the change in management in some municipalities.

An already predicted continuity to this study is an analysis of the effectiveness of the participation mechanisms surveyed in the mapping from the viewpoint of the municipal managers who elaborated them. The research will aim to understand the motivations for holding participatory processes in tackling the pandemic and has as a predominating hypothesis the search for increasing the legitimacy and sharing of responsibilities related to unpopular decisions. Moreover, it will address the assessment of results and advantages and disadvantages

in holding entirely digital processes.

The ICT COVID-19 Panel on the use of the Internet in Brazil during the new coronavirus pandemic, published in 2021, showed an expressive increase in the provision of public services through the Internet during the pandemic compared to the data from the TIC Domicílios surveys of 2018 and 2019. Although the increase was more significant for classes C, D, and E, these groups still perform electronic government services at lower proportions than Internet users in classes A and B and those with higher levels of education. Upon presenting these results, the research report suggests that this is a limitation for actions to tackle the pandemic that depend on Internet access. Therefore, the need for research that analyzes in-depth the digital participation experiences in tackling the pandemic to identify if the population, especially the low classes and groups with lower education levels, managed to get involved.

References

- ABERS, R. N.; BÜLOW, M. V. Movimentos sociais na teoria e na prática: como estudar o ativismo através da fronteira entre Estado e sociedade? **Sociologias**, v. 28, p. 52-84, 2011.
- ABRANCHES, S. **O tempo dos governantes incidentais**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2020.
- ABRÚCIO, F., GRIN, E., FRANZESE, C., SEGATTO, C., COUTO, C. Combate à COVID-19 sob o federalismo bolsonarista: um caso de descoordenação intergovernamental. **Revista de Administração Pública**, v. 54, n. 4, p. 663-677. Rio de Janeiro, jul. – ago. 2020.
- ALMEIDA, D. C. R. Os desafios da efetividade e o estatuto jurídico da participação: a Política Nacional de Participação Social. **Sociedade e Estado**, v. 32, n.3, pp.649-680, 2017.
- AVRITZER, L. Teoria Democrática e Deliberação Pública. **Lua Nova**, n. 49, p. 25-46. São Paulo, 2000.
- AVRITZER, L. **O Orçamento Participativo e a teoria democrática: um balanço crítico**. In: AVRITZER, L.; NAVARRO, Z. A inovação democrática no Brasil. Editora Cortez: São Paulo, 2003.
- AVRITZER, L. Instituições participativas e desenho institucional: algumas considerações sobre a variação da participação no Brasil democrático. **Opinião Pública**, Campinas, v. 14, n. 1, p. 43-68, 2008.
- AVRITZER, L. Sociedade civil e Estado no Brasil: da autonomia à interdependência política. In: **Opinião Pública**, v. 18, pp. 383,398, 2012.
- AVRITZER, L. **O pêndulo da democracia**. São Paulo: Todavia, 2019.
- AVRITZER, L.; DELGADO, P. **Crises na democracia: legitimidade, participação e inclusão**. Belo Horizonte: Arraes Editores, 2021.
- BRAGA, L. V.; GOMES, R. C. Participação Eletrônica e suas Relações com Governo Eletrônico, Efetividade Governamental e Accountability. **Organizações & Sociedade**, v. 23, n. 78, p. 487-506, 2016.
- BRAGATTO, R. C. **Participação política e o Marco Civil da Internet: vontade política, tradição associativa e desenho institucional**. Tese de Doutorado em Sociologia pela UFPR. Curitiba, 2016
- BRUNS, A. Filter bubble. **Internet Policy Review**, v. 8, n. 4, p.14-26. 2019.

- BURGOS, R. Da democratização política à radicalização da democracia: novas dimensões estratégicas dos movimentos sociais. In: DAGNINO, E.; TATAGIBA, L. **Democracia, sociedade civil e participação**. Chapecó: Argos, 2007.
- DAGNINO, E. Sociedade Civil e Espaços Públicos no Brasil. In: DAGNINO, E. (org). **Sociedade Civil e Espaços Públicos no Brasil**. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2002.
- DAGNINO, E. Construção democrática, neoliberalismo e participação: os dilemas da confluência perversa. **Política & Sociedade**, n. 5, p. 139-164, 2004.
- DAGNINO, E.; OLVERA, A. R.; PANFICHI, A. Para uma outra leitura da disputa pela construção democrática na América Latina. In: Dagnino, E.; Olvera, A. R.; PANFICHI, A. **A disputa pela construção democrática na América Latina**. Campinas: Editora Unicamp, 2006.
- FARINIUK, T. Smart cities e pandemia: tecnologias digitais na gestão pública de cidades brasileiras. **Revista de Administração Pública**, v. 54, n. 4, p. 860-873. Rio de Janeiro, jul. - ago. 2020.
- FUKS, M.; PERISSINOTTO, R.M.; SOUZA, N. R. de (orgs). **Democracia e Participação: os conselhos gestores do Paraná**. Curitiba: Editora UFPR, 2004.
- FUKS, M.; PERISSINOTTO, R.M.; SOUZA, N. R. de. Recursos, decisão e poder: os conselhos gestores de Curitiba. **Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais**, São Paulo, v. 21, n.60, p. 67-82, 2006.
- FUKS, M.; PERISSINOTTO, R.M.; SOUZA, N. R. de; RIBEIRO, E. A. Cultura Política e Desigualdade: O Caso dos Conselhos Municipais de Curitiba. **Revista de Sociologia e Política**, v. 21, p. 125-145, 2011.
- GOMES, W. 20 anos de política, Estado e democracia digitais: uma “cartografia” do campo. In: SILVA, S. BRAGATTO, R. SAMPAIO, R. **Democracia digital, comunicação política e redes: teoria e prática**. Rio de Janeiro: Folio Digital: Letra e Imagem, cap. 2, p. 39-76. 2016.
- HARARI, Y. N. Yuval Noah Harari: the world after coronavirus. **Financial Times**, publicado em 20 de março de 2020. Disponível em: https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75?fbclid=IwAR3hfSZJhv_F5YdjuSO3ExfeJZebeD7pL7gYjninhQmyzsp98CzM0kZA040. Acessado em 29 de março de 2021.
- HELD, 1987 HELD, D. **Modelos de Democracia**. Belo Horizonte: Paidéia, 1987.
- HONIG, B. Public Things: Jonathan Lear’s Radical Hope, Lars von Trier’s Melancholia, and the Democratic Need. **Political Research Quarterly**, 1-14. University of Utah, 2015.
- LAVALLE, A. G.; HOUTZAGER, P.; CASTELLO, G. Representação política e organizações civis. Novas instâncias de mediação e os desafios da legitimidade. **Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais**, v. 21, n. 60, pp. 43-66, 2006.
- LAVALLE, A. G.; VERA, E. I. A trama da crítica democrática: da participação à representação e à accountability. **Lua Nova**, v. 84, p. 353-364, 2011.
- LAVALLE, A. G.; SZWAKO, J. Sociedade civil, Estado e autonomia: argumentos, contra-argumentos e avanços no debate. **Opinião Pública**, v. 21, n. 1, p. 157, 187, 2015.
- LEVITSKY, S., ZIBLATT, D. **Como as democracias morrem**. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2018.
- LÜCHMANN, L. H. H. A representação no interior das experiências de participação. **Lua Nova**, n. 70, pp. 139-170, 2007.
- LÜCHMANN, L. H. H.; BORBA, J. Orçamento participativo: uma análise das experiências desenvolvidas em Santa Catarina. In: Julian Borba; Lígia Helena Hahn Lüchmann. (Org.). **Orçamento participativo: análise das experiências desenvolvidas em Santa Catarina**. 1 ed. Florianópolis: Insular, v. 1, p. 21-59, 2007.

- MACPHERSON, C.B. **The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy**. Oxford University Press, 1987 [1977].
- MARQUES, F. P. J. A. **Participação política e internet: meios e oportunidades digitais de participação civil na democracia contemporânea, com um estudo do caso brasileiro**. Salvador, 498 fls, Tese (doutorado). Faculdade de Comunicação, Universidade Federal da Bahia, 2008.
- MEDEIROS, B., GOLDONI, L., BATISTA JR., E., ROCHA, H. O uso do ciberespaço pela administração pública na pandemia da COVID-19: diagnósticos e vulnerabilidades. **Revista de Administração Pública**, v.54, n. 4, p.650-662. Rio de Janeiro, jul. - ago. 2020.
- MELO, C.; CABRAL, S. A grande crise e as crises brasileiras: o efeito catalisador da Covid-19. **Revista Eletrônica Gestão & Sociedade**, v. 14, n. 39, p. 3681-3688. 2020.
- MENDONÇA, R.; PEREIRA, M. A. Democracia digital e deliberação online: um estudo de caso sobre o VotenaWeb. **Congresso Latino Americano de Opinião Pública –Wapor, 4**, Belo Horizonte, 2011.
- MORAES, I. H.; VEIGA, L. F.; VASCONCELLOS, M. M.; SANTOS, R. F. R S. Inclusão digital e conselheiros de saúde: uma política para a redução da desigualdade social no Brasil. **Ciência e Saúde Coletiva**, v. 14, p. 879-888, 2009.
- UNITED NATIONS. **2018 United Nations E-Government Survey**. United Nations: New York, 2018.
- ORTIZ, M.; VICTER, G., CARDOSO, D. Usos e fronteiras da participação digital: as experiências das plataformas colaborativas da Prefeitura de Niterói. **Congresso CONSAD de Gestão Pública**. Brasília, jul. 2017.
- PATEMAN, C. **Participação e Teoria Democrática**. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra,1992.
- PEREIRA, J. V. Q. **É pra valer? Experiências da Democracia Digital Brasileira: Um estudo de caso do Marco Civil da Internet**. Dissertação do Mestrado em Ciência Política pela FFLCH-USP. São Paulo, 2015.
- Pesquisa web sobre o uso da Internet no Brasil durante a pandemia do novo coronavírus: Painel TIC COVID-19 [livro eletrônico]**. Núcleo de Informação e Coordenação do Ponto BR. -- 1. ed. -- São Paulo : Comitê Gestor da Internet no Brasil, 2021
- POULANTZAS, N. **State, Power, Socialism**. Londres: Verso, 2000.
- PRZEWORSKI, A. **Crises da democracia**. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- RUNCIMAN, D. **Como a democracia chega ao fim**. São Paulo: Todavia, 2018.
- SÆBØ, Ø., ROSE, J., & FLAK, L. S. The shape of eParticipation: Characterizing an emerging research area. **Government Information Quarterly**, 25, n. 3, p.400–428, 2008.
- SAMPAIO, R. **Participação e deliberação na internet: um estudo de caso do orçamento participativo digital de Belo Horizonte**. Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2010.
- SAMPAIO, R. Democracia digital no Brasil: uma prospecção das iniciativas relevantes. **Revista Eletrônica de Ciência Política**, v. 4, n. 1-2, 2013.
- SILVA, S. BRAGATTO, R. SAMPAIO, R. **Democracia digital, comunicação política e redes: teoria e prática**. Rio de Janeiro: Folio Digital: Letra e Imagem, 2016.
- SMITH, R. S., CRAGLIA, M. Digital Participation and Access to Geographic Information: A Case Study of Local Government in the United Kingdom. **URISA Journal**, n. 15, APA II. 2003.
- SOUZA, C. e FONTANELLI, F. Antídotos institucionais do federalismo brasileiro: a COVID-19 mudou a dinâmica federativa? In: **Governo Bolsonaro: retrocesso democrático e degradação política**. São Paulo: autêntica, 2021.

TATAGIBA, L. **Participação, Cultura Política e Modelos de gestão**: A democracia gerencial e suas ambivalências. 189f. Tese (Doutorado em Ciências Sociais). Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, 2003.

TEIXEIRA, A. C. C. **Para além do voto**: uma narrativa sobre a democracia participativa no Brasil (1975-2010). 174f. Tese (Doutorado em Ciências Sociais) – Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, 2013.

WAMPLER, B. **Participatory Budgeting in Brazil**: contestation, cooperation, and accountability. University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.