

**THE INSERTION OF BRAZILIAN SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN THE DEBATE OF  
DEMOCRATIC THEORIES**

***A INSERÇÃO DA PARTICIPAÇÃO SOCIAL BRASILEIRA NO DEBATE DAS  
TEORIAS DEMOCRÁTICAS***

***LA INSERCIÓN DE LA PARTICIPACIÓN SOCIAL BRASILEÑA EN EL DEBATE  
SOBRE LAS TEORÍAS DEMOCRÁTICAS***



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**How to reference this paper:**

VASCONCELOS, M. The insertion of Brazilian social participation in the debate of democratic theories. **Rev. Sem Aspás**, Araraquara, v. 12, n. 00, e023003, 2023. e-ISSN: 2358-4238. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29373/sas.v12i00.17738>



| **Submitted:** 14/02/2023  
| **Revisions required:** 18/07/2023  
| **Approved:** 31/07/2023  
| **Published:** 07/08/2023

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**Editor:** Prof. Dr. Carlos Henrique Gileno  
**Deputy Executive Editor:** Prof. Dr. José Anderson Santos Cruz

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**ABSTRACT:** The present work explores the intersections between democratic theories and social participation in the Brazilian context. Democratic theories represent a crucial area of Political Science and discuss how the concept of different authors understand the idea of democracy participation is another critical area of Political Science and a fundamental principle inherent to democracy, constituting an essential exercise to establish more excellent proximity between the State and society and enable the implementation of public policies. Through a bibliographic review of authors referenced in democratic theories and social participation, the article aims to present and analyze the key concepts that bring these two areas together, considering the methodological assumptions of Political Science and public policy research. The conducted investigation reveals a conceptual and methodological convergence that can be established between the two areas in the Brazilian context, as these theories converge when applied in a comprehensive analysis of the conditions that allow active population participation in the construction of the political system.

**KEYWORDS:** Democratic theories. Social participation. Democracy. Public policies.

**RESUMO:** O presente trabalho tem como objetivo explorar as interseções existentes entre as teorias democráticas e a participação social no contexto brasileiro. As teorias democráticas representam uma área crucial da Ciência Política e discutem como o conceito de democracia é compreendido por diferentes autores. Por sua vez, a participação social é outra área importante da Ciência Política e um princípio fundamental inerente à democracia, constituindo-se em um exercício essencial para estabelecer uma maior proximidade entre o Estado e a sociedade e viabilizar a implementação de políticas públicas. Através de uma revisão bibliográfica de autores referenciados nas teorias da democracia e na participação social, o artigo tem como propósito apresentar e analisar os conceitos-chave que aproximam essas duas áreas, considerando os pressupostos metodológicos da Ciência Política e da pesquisa em políticas públicas. A investigação realizada revela uma aproximação conceitual e metodológica que pode ser estabelecida entre as duas áreas no contexto brasileiro, uma vez que essas teorias convergem ao serem aplicadas em uma análise abrangente das condições que permitem a participação ativa da população na construção do sistema político.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Teorias democráticas. Participação social. Democracia. Políticas públicas.

**RESUMEN:** El presente trabajo está dedicado a explorar las intersecciones existentes entre las teorias democráticas y la participación social en el contexto brasileño. Las teorias democráticas conforman un área importante de la Ciencia Política y debaten cómo se establece el concepto entre diferentes autores. La participación social, otra área importante de la Ciencia Política y presupuesto básico inherente a la democracia, es un ejercicio fundamental para acercar Estado y sociedad y viabilizar políticas públicas. En este sentido, a través de una revisión bibliográfica de los autores de referencia en las teorías de la democracia y la participación social, el artículo tiene como objetivo exponer y discutir los conceptos clave que unen estas dos áreas, teniendo en cuenta los presupuestos metodológicos de la Ciencia Política y la investigación en público. política. La investigación realizada apunta a una aproximación conceptual y metodológica que se puede establecer entre las dos áreas en el contexto brasileño, ya que estas teorías convergen cuando se utilizan en un análisis coyuntural de las condiciones que permiten la participación activa de la población en la construcción del sistema político.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Teorías democráticas. Participación social. Democracia. Políticas públicas.

## Introduction

The theoretical debate concerning the social participation theme has played a significant role in shaping the theoretical foundations of democracies. Indeed, contemplating democracy presupposes considering the involvement, in varying proportions, of the people's actions. Within this context, related issues emerge, raising fundamental concerns about the space and role that social participation should assume within the scope of the democratic regime, taking into account the political and historical context in which it is embedded. In light of this perspective, the present work aims to draw parallels between the theme of participation and democratic theories, focusing the investigation on the specific case of participatory exercises in Brazil.

To conduct the present analysis, a methodology of bibliographic review was adopted, relying on specialized authors in the literature of the subject, mainly oriented towards the topic of public policies, which, as highlighted by Marques (2013), places the State and its actions at the core of the investigation. During the process of gathering references and reviewing the material, the current relevance of the theme became evident, especially when considering the context of Brazilian participation, which, as demonstrated by Cortes (2011) and Fonseca *et al.* (2021), played an essential role through Participatory Institutions (PIs).

However, as presented by Romão, Bezerra, and Rodrigues (2021), such involvement underwent a significant rupture during the governmental transitions starting in 2016, losing centrality in the government agenda and suffering a profound dismantling of its institutions. Regarding democratic theories, Camps (1996) demonstrated that participation does not directly influence governance. Nonetheless, this issue concerned authors who preceded him, such as Schumpeter and Michels, who were essentially interested in the system's stability, arguing that increased social participation could directly affect it.

In this context, Camps engage in dialogue with the work of Carole Pateman (1992), who revisits the arguments of those authors that debated democratic theories in their time and demonstrates that the concern for regime stability lacks a solid foundation, primarily when stemming from a critique of classical theories. Pateman shows that the so-called classical ideas are a myth, as their critics did not thoroughly study them. As will be further explored throughout the development, the author argues that participation is indispensable for representative government and should be considered from the standpoint of the ordinary citizen, not from a minority and elitist segment of the population.

Constant (1985) and Finley (1988) are authors whose works contribute to theoretically underpinning the theme in question. Constant does so through the idea of freedom, which shapes participation in government and the regulation of social life based on the fundamental interests of the population, both in antiquity and in modern times, with distinct practices depending on the adopted model of social organization. On the other hand, Finley traces the evolution of democratic theories, from their formulations in ancient Greece to contemporary contributions, to provoke reflections on the validity of democracy and its transformations over time.

In summary, the purpose of this essay is to elucidate the issue of participation within democratic theories, presenting their affinities and disagreements regarding the more structured inclusion of the people in the scope of the democratic regime. In this sense, the analysis of social participation in the Brazilian context gains relevance on the research agenda, as it allows for a significant understanding of the political and social dynamics that characterize Brazil.

Social participation plays a fundamental role in the consolidation of an effective democratic system, involving active citizen engagement in policy formulation, decision-making processes, and the monitoring of governmental actions. Therefore, comprehending the relationship between democratic theories and social participation in the Brazilian context is of utmost importance for a critical and reflective analysis of the functioning and challenges the country's regime faces.

### **The theme of participation in democratic theories**

Within democratic theories, the theme of social participation has always been an intrinsic discussion since the essence of democracy, in its lexical origin, presupposes the involvement of the people in some instances of decision-making. The debate brought forth by Constant (1985), in addressing the question of freedom, establishes a comparison between the forms of sociability practiced by the ancients and the moderns, highlighting how social transformations and modernization have also entailed different forms of political participation.

In this context, the debate promoted by Constant, while centered on the idea of freedom, provides essential insights to introduce the theme of democratic participation, highlighting how its realization varies according to relevant conditions of the political conjuncture. As presented by the author, the conception of freedom for the ancients was intrinsically linked to direct political participation, where citizens actively exercised the power of decision-making and

surveillance over collectively deliberated actions. As a result, the private sphere of individuals was subjected to the social body and its determinations, as each citizen shaped their personal life according to the decisions made by the majority (CONSTANT, 1985).

On the other hand, in the modern era, there is a greater emphasis on freedom in the private sphere, allowing individuals greater autonomy to make decisions about their private life. This implies less direct political participation, as the modern way of life entails various responsibilities beyond civic participation, such as work, which makes direct involvement increasingly less viable. Constant argues that the representative system is a product of modernity and could not be employed in another historical moment, as modern social organization values a form of freedom distinct from the ancients (CONSTANT, 1985).

In light of this, Constant concludes that historical epochs and their characteristics must be well delimited to avoid confusion between modern and ancient practices. According to the author, there is no way that old freedom could be practiced in modernity, just as modern freedom could not have developed in antiquity. Despite modern space being concentrated in the private sphere, political activity is not entirely abandoned but takes on a new form, where social participation assumes specific conditions according to the system's organization (CONSTANT, 1985).

In this sense, Finley (1988) observes that in the 20th century, the terms "democracy" and "democratic" came to assume a moral position of approval by society, emptying the idea of democracy as a unit of analysis of forms of government. While analyzing the historical evolution of the democratic regime, Finley perceives that the meaning of terminology can vary depending on the historical moment in which it is used—similarly to Constant's focus on comparing the freedom of the ancients and the moderns. Finley explains the differences in understanding democracy between Aristotle and Schumpeter. His conclusions demonstrate that the classical theory of democracy may seem, in contemporary times, contradictory to everyday practice. However, this occurs due to the common sense perception of democracy as an ideal form of political organization, as raised by the author in discussing the emptying of this concept (FINLEY, 1988).

Thus, Carole Pateman (1992) constructs an understanding of the "classical myth" and recent theories of democracy, inserting participation fundamentally to comprehend the existing articulation between the two themes. Starting with a question about the position taken by involvement in modern democratic theory, the author understands that participation is more readily accepted as it occupies a reduced space, occurring mainly due to two crucial concerns:

the stability of the system and the updating of the classical understanding of theories on democratic participation (PATEMAN, 1992).

To construct her understanding of the question of participation in democracy, Pateman draws on various perspectives from authors such as Michels, Schumpeter, and Dahl, considering the two concerns mentioned earlier. The author argues that there has never been a classical theory of democracy, as the predecessor authors were not thoroughly studied. She highlights that the contemporary conception of classical theories derives from Schumpeter, who understands them as the institutionalization of social organization for decision-making through the election of representatives of the people.

Therefore, Pateman concludes that this contemporary understanding weakens the discussion about participation, as it essentially focuses on a minority elite rather than the typical individual. According to the author, expanding the participatory question beyond the context offered by contemporary approaches makes it evident that the participatory principle and the demands for greater participation are not based on an outdated theory, as is sometimes claimed. Therefore, it is still possible for her to conceive a modern democratic idea that values participation as a fundamental aspect (PATEMAN, 1992).

Additionally, Victoria Camps (1996), when discussing the limits of participation, summarizes that the representative democratic regime does not invalidate participatory activity but constitutes it essentially without compromising governability. For the author, democracy consists of a "[...] political procedure, a form of government that is not exhausted in itself or justified solely as a procedure: it is also justified if it does things and does them well if it is effective, capable of making decisions, and executing them" (CAMPS, 1996, p. 103, our translation). Thus, disqualifying representation is disqualifying participation since both are interconnected components - corroborating with the aspect of different freedoms in the social organization previously addressed by Constant.

Camps agree with Pateman's understanding that one of the main reasons for the lack of participation is the lack of equality. The disinterest in politics, especially on the part of the ordinary citizen, using Pateman's terms, undermines confidence in the democratic regime, relegating political participation to a dispensable activity. This implies, therefore, that underestimating this system, even in the form revised by contemporary theories of democracy, means denying participation and, consequently, denying democracy itself.

## Social participation in the Brazilian context

An element of paramount importance for understanding social participation in democratic theories is to comprehend the process of its integration into the field of Political Science, as the decision-making process involves power relationships specific to this analytical methodology. Marques (2013) defines public policies as the "State in Action," characterizing research in this area as an analysis of how the State operates in the face of the social conditions of the context in which it is embedded (MARQUES, 2013). Therefore, in Political Science, public policy studies seek to understand and interpret their relationship with the state structure.

By elucidating the existing link between these areas, it becomes evident how the debate on social participation is integrated into Political Science and, consequently, into studies of democratic theories. Cortes (2011), in analyzing different types of Participatory Institutions (PIs) at the municipal level in Brazil, emphasizes that social participation has a positive impact on a country's political culture, contributing to legitimizing its political system and generating a positive effect on adherence to democracy (CORTES, 2011), an essential aspect considering the importance of legitimacy for sustaining the democratic regime.

The author characterizes social participation in Brazil through Participatory Institutions (PIs) to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the topic and allow perspectives for improvement. Participatory Institutions can be understood as mechanisms that enable citizen participation, either directly or indirectly, in the country's public governance - constituting a form of involvement different from that solely envisioned in electoral processes but complementing it. As provided for in the Federal Constitution, they can occur regularly, conferring an institutional character to this mechanism (CORTES, 2011).

In general, Cortes believes in the existence of a "[...] strengthening of the institutional forms of society and its citizens' inclusion in decision-making and monitoring of public policies conducted by the state apparatus" (CORTES, 2011, p. 582, our translation). This occurs even though there is a specific challenge for the current democratic system to integrate the participatory sphere with the formal representation of the Legislature, which already prevails in the contemporary political system (CORTES, 2011).

Fonseca *et al.* (2021) present an analysis of the trajectory of Participatory Institutions (PIs) at the federal level, highlighting the growth and decline of these initiatives from 2010 to 2020. According to the authors, the first decade of the 21st century they have witnessed a significant transformation in Brazil's institutional democratic politics, primarily through the expansion of channels for participation in public policies. They emphasize the interconnection

between social participation and the democratic regime, considering participatory spaces as responsible for carrying the "[...] expectation of contributing to the strengthening of democracy" (FONSECA *et al.*, 2021, p. 91, our translation).

As highlighted by the authors, the approval of participation through a decree represented the high point of the evolution process of participatory institutions but also marked the beginning of the decline of this model. Political tensions related to Dilma Rousseff's government (2011 - 2016) also contributed to accelerating this process, which intensified during Michel Temer's mandate (2016 - 2018). Although there was an attempt at approximation in 2018, it was interrupted by Jair Bolsonaro's inauguration (2019 - 2022) in 2019. The complete extinction of the bodies related to the theme was prevented by legislative regulation prohibiting the elimination of certain PIs. However, there was almost complete exhaustion of resources allocated to PIs by the Bolsonaro government, along with restricting their autonomy (FONSECA *et al.*, 2021).

When addressing this dismantling of social participation in contemporary Brazil, Romão, Bezerra, and Rodrigues (2021) assert that limiting participation is synonymous with determining the formulation of public policies (ROMÃO; BEZERRA; RODRIGUES, 2021). Throughout the essay, the authors present the strategies adopted by the government of Jair Bolsonaro to restrict openness, execution, and participation in public policies. In other words, the authors develop the conception that the weakening of democracy is one of the results of reducing social involvement. This position aligns with what was previously discussed by Camps (1996) and Pateman (1992).

After analyzing the presented text, the configuration of the scenario of incorporating social participation in Brazil becomes evident in the works above, characteristic of public policy studies. Given the changes in the relationships established between the state and society, which came into effect with the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution, participation that goes beyond what is foreseen solely in electoral terms becomes viable, thus allowing for the incorporation of the interests of organized social groups (CORTES, 2011).



## Final Considerations

The analysis of the integration of social participation in Brazil within the context of democratic theories represents a research agenda of great importance. This approach links the participatory issue, a recent topic in public debate, with an area of study in Political Science with a long history of theoretical construction. In this sense, the present work aims to introduce this discussion, examining how democratic theories address the participatory question and highlighting the contemporary scenario in Brazil.

The beginning of the development of this topic was attributed to Constant (1985), whose work addresses participation through the understanding of freedom. He argues that the specific form of organization of social life, with greater or lesser freedom in regulating public and private life, determines how ancient and modern societies structure participatory activity. Constant demonstrated that different historical moments require adaptations in the political characteristics of the system and participation.

Finley (1988) continues the discussion, showing that the concept of democracy varies over time by revisiting both ancient Greek classics, such as Aristotle and Plato, and more recent authors, like Michels and Schumpeter. His work highlights that ancient democracy, although a product of a specific historical context, provides essential foundations and analyses for understanding modern democracy.

To delve further into the participatory theme, Carole Pateman (1992) revisits the works of various authors on democracy and observes that there has never been a classical theory that could be reviewed, as the authors themselves did not sufficiently detail the studies of their predecessors on the subject. This led to a limitation of the participatory topic only to a specific population capable of understanding it, distancing questions of interest about organizing collective sociability from the ordinary citizen. Following this same perspective, Camps (1996) sees inequality as an essential factor in restricting participation and understands that the limits of participation affect the legitimacy of democracy as a system.

Given the understanding of the participatory question in democratic theories, the works of Cortes (2011) and Fonseca *et al.* (2021) are mobilized in this literature review to outline a scenario of participation in Brazil through Participatory Institutions (PIs). These PIs, as spaces of continued citizen engagement, significantly contribute to constructing a culture that values politics as a primary activity for forming social collectivity. However, there was a process of dismantling this structure built until 2016, which begins to be dismantled during the

governmental transition, becoming a topic that is no longer on the agenda of interests for the governments of Michel Temer (2016 - 2018) and Jair Bolsonaro (2019 - 2022).

In this way, a logical line can be drawn between democratic theories and Brazilian social participation, as these themes converge when employed in a conjunctural analysis of the conditions for the population's active involvement in the construction of the political system. While Pateman emphasized participation as fundamental for democracy, the works of Cortes and Fonseca *et al.* demonstrate the importance of involvement in the construction of institutional politics that operates through the integration of individuals in the exercise of power, going beyond the realm of representative politics.

In summary, although representative democracy is crucial for modernity, as explained by Constant in emphasizing the preferred individual freedom in this historical moment, as highlighted by Camps, participation cannot be repressed, as that would also imply suppressing the democratic regime itself. Therefore, democracy and participation coexist and cannot be dissociated, as their interconnections, beyond theory, also manifest in everyday political practice, especially in the Brazilian context, where participation is an essential mechanism for articulating and engaging individuals.

It is essential to emphasize that this theme is part of a broad field of study in Political Science. By exploring the intersection between democratic theories and social participation in Brazil, this article sought to provide perspectives and reflections on the nature of democracy and the processes of political participation in a complex and diverse society like Brazil. Given the current context characterized by increasing social demands, strengthening social participation and reflecting on democratic theories becomes even more relevant. Understanding the mechanisms that promote or hinder citizens' active involvement can support the improvement of democratic practices and the construction of a more inclusive and participatory political environment.

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### ***CRediT Author Statement***

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**Acknowledgments:** Not applicable.

**Funding:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** There are no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical Approval:** Not applicable.

**Data and Material Availability:** Not applicable.

**Authors' Contributions:** Mariana VASCONCELOS is responsible for the research, analysis and writing of the article.

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**Processing and editing: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação.**  
Proofreading, formatting, normalization and translation.

