

# Brazil's new leaders are challenging the tradition of participatory democracy. Here's why.

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## At risk are councils that focus on the disabled, environment, child labor, public security and LGBT issues.

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By Valesca Lima

A few months into the regime of President Jair Bolsonaro, 60 percent of Brazilians believe democracy is the optimal form of government, according to the latest [Americas Barometer](#) opinion survey. For the past 20 years, [many scholars](#) have considered Brazil the world's leading laboratory of democratic innovations, including participatory budgeting, a model of local decision-making created in Brazil in 1989 and adopted by [hundreds of municipalities](#) around the world.

But did the election of Bolsonaro, a candidate on the far right, put Brazil's tradition of citizen participation at risk? In April, Bolsonaro signed a [government decree](#) that eliminated over 55 policy councils and related participatory bodies. Arguing that cutting the councils would reduce costs, Bolsonaro's government promised to take further action to revoke all policy councils and committees, viewing these as slow and expensive institutions — and, ultimately, remnants of the former Workers' Party administration.

Bolsonaro's administration is not the first to dismantle participatory institutions in Brazil, but his actions suggest he will go much further than his predecessors. Here's what you need to know about Bolsonaro's move.

### 1. Brazil has a long tradition of participatory decision-making

[Policy councils](#) in Brazil allow for participation of civil society by engaging citizens in the political decision-making process. These councils set political agendas and formulate and monitor government implementation of policies at the national, state and municipal levels.

Some of Brazil's participatory institutions, like the national health council, predate the country's return to democratic rule in 1985, after 25 years of dictatorship. Since then, policy councils have expanded considerably, especially after the election of the leftist candidate [Lula da Silva](#) in 2003. Lula created 25 new national policy councils between 2003 and 2010. Since then, Workers' Party administrations have empowered and redesigned the councils to target policies addressing specific minority groups, such as people with disabilities, the LGBT community and indigenous people.

Among the new councils created by Lula's governments were those devoted to Sustainable Rural Development, Economic Solidarity, Racial Equality, Cultural Policy and Eradication of Slave Labor. The memberships of most councils are balanced among civil society representatives, governments, private sector and other stakeholders. Policy council members are not paid: They receive only reimbursement for council-related expenses, such as attending meetings in Brasília, where the federal government is based.

## **2. But some politicians now see these councils as instruments of the left**

In my recent research, I trace both support for and resistance to the idea of participatory citizenship, as I examine the rise and disintegration of inclusive democracy and governance in Brazil. In recent years, conservative Brazilian politicians have branded participatory councils as instruments of the Workers' Party. Thus, Bolsonaro's move to dismantle dozens of councils directly strikes against political rivals on the left.

In fact, efforts to undermine this part of Brazil's democratic governance started under President Michel Temer's administration, Bolsonaro's predecessor who served from 2016 to 2018. Conservatives and right-leaning politicians targeted innovative governance mechanisms adopted by Workers' Party governments between 2003 and 2016 in part because the councils increased participation of marginalized groups.

Since the removal of Workers' Party President Dilma Rousseff from office by a controversial impeachment process in 2016, conservative leaders in the legislature have attacked national policy councils and policy conferences by different means. For example, critics cut council budgets drastically and ran smear campaigns. The goal? These measures seem aimed at discrediting and undermining these spaces for democratic deliberation by forcing them to undergo restructuring in the name of "efficiency." Bolsonaro's policy council revocation cements this authoritarian trend.

## **3. Some policy councils are being revamped into tools of the right**

So far, the decision puts at risk councils that favor left-leaning social policies. Bolsonaro's government has targeted councils and committees likely to object to implementation of several of Bolsonaro's campaign pledges, such as the "School Without Party" (Projeto Escola Sem Partido), weakening of labor laws and easing of environmental controls. Also targeted are councils that address and monitor policies of importance to minority groups — such as national councils focused on disabilities, child labor, public security, LGBT issues and others.

Trimming back these participatory spaces reinforces perceptions of Bolsonaro's authoritarian tendencies. This decree seems aimed at aligning the remaining policy councils with the policy views of the current administration by filling them with people who agree with the new government's far-right views.

True, not all policy councils are at risk of elimination; those defined in statute — such as national health and education councils — are protected. But Bolsonaro's decree has already caused an outcry from groups that monitor Brazil's participation, transparency and accountability. With many of the institutional innovations that aimed to increase citizen participation in Brazil now under threat, even if participatory organizations survive, their effectiveness could be in doubt during Bolsonaro's administration.