

From conflict to unity: deconstructing the discursive border between partisan and community politics in the participatory budget of Porto Alegre, Brazil

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Brazilian political culture is permeated by a strong discursive and imagined border between partisan and community politics (Mische 2008). With the end of the dictatorship in 1985, neighborhood leaders adopted a confrontational style of addressing government officials. The deliberative meetings of the Participatory Budget had been typical of this antagonistic communicative style. The Participatory Budget of Porto Alegre, Brazil, is a world-renowned mechanism of municipal resources allocation, which transfers some decision-making power from the City Council to public assemblies (Pimentel Walker 2015). The Workers' Party, who designed and administered the Participatory Budget for four consecutive terms in Porto Alegre (1989-2005), fostered conflict talk at the deliberative meetings as a sign of their accountability in public office.

Scholars characterize government and community interactions at the Participatory Budget during the Workers' Party administrations as "contestation among friends" since a significant proportion of the Participatory Budget public belonged to the Workers' Party (Baiocchi 2005; Wampler 2007). However, a shift in communicative interactions between city officials and neighborhood leaders has been taking place since 2005 when a coalition of political parties from the opposition took office. Conflict talk and confrontational styles of communication have been framed by the new governmental officials as partisan and selfish. An alternative way of conducting deliberative meetings, which emphasizes harmonious styles of deliberation between neighborhood leaders and city officials, became gradually hegemonic.

Projects promoting the creation of “strong communities,” “harmonious cities,” and “unified governments” have proliferated. These projects underscore the emerging emphasis on notions of consensus and civility achieved by minimizing conflict for the sake of unity. Constant calls for unification recall Laura Nader’s (1990, 1996) notion of the “harmony ideology” of legal models, pointing to the way that “harmony” can pacify social unrest and deepen inequality. According to Nikolas’ Rose, “Increasingly, it is the language of community that is used to identify a territory between the authority of the state, the free and amoral exchange of the market and the liberty of the autonomous, ‘rights-bearing individual subject” (1999: 475). As Gerald Creed (2006) acknowledges, the concept of “community” is an obscure term that takes on a variety of meanings surrounding relationships, hope, and place. This paper highlights an ethnographic instance in which the term community is used to hide conflict and promote conformity to cuts in social spending.

The findings are based on data collected for my dissertation fieldwork, which took place from July 2009 through March 2011. Methodologies used for this paper included participant observation of over one hundred Participatory Budget meetings, archival research of PB meeting minutes and transcriptions of meetings of the Council of the Participatory Budget (COP) for the past 15 years, and collection of oral histories. With these data, I could document the changes in the styles of communication fostered by competing municipal governments and political parties in power. Finally, I compare the expenditure and capital investments budget before and after the Workers’ Party government in order to compare longitudinally the relationship between political party ideology and discursive practices on one hand, and resources allocation on the other hand. Background data for this paper is based on 75 interviews with then current delegates and councilors and a socio-demographic survey of the COP.

Besides reinforcing imagined boundaries between politicians and communities, the discourse of community unity provided by the “harmony ideology” (Nader 1996) facilitated the preservation of the Participatory Budget as an institution during the government transition. The fact that the Participatory Budget started out as a government program and became an institution is positive for local democracy (Avritzer 2009). However, the use of coercive harmony ultimately harmed the

participatory process because municipal officials equated complaints about the Participatory Budget with partisan politics.

Although residents of squatter settlements were the social group that gained most visibility, political space, and resources from the Participatory Budget (Pimentel Walker 2013), slum upgrading and public housing requests either stopped being implemented or have been delayed. The use of coercive harmony in the Participatory Budget pacified protest against unfulfilled housing demands by silencing dissent. Community members and municipal officials alike deployed the emic concept of “unity” to mask disagreements and conflicts of interest. The communicative styles and sociality practices fostered by municipal officials greatly influence participatory planning mechanisms, including their legitimacy, longevity, and redistributive outcomes.

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