

Civil Organizations and
Political Representation in Brazil's
Participatory Institutions

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There is considerable evidence that civil organizations such as advocacy NGOs, membership organizations and community associations have become *de facto* and *de jure* representatives of particular segments of the population and interests in the design, implementation and monitoring of public policy. Governments are, for a variety of reasons, inviting this set of collective actors into institutionalized spaces for policymaking, in either a consultative or a deliberative role. Conversely, many civil organizations are themselves pressuring governments to create such spaces, in order to gain access to policymaking centres. The institutions that have been created over the past twenty years to link these actors and policymakers, such as the systems of deliberative development councils in Guatemala and of policy councils in Brazil, are often part of larger democratic decentralization reforms that, at least formally, seek to redistribute power within the state and between state and society (Heller 2001; Grindle 1999).

Students of the new participatory institutions and the role civil organizations play in them have not identified the issue of political representation as an important one, because this issue is masked by the emphasis put on 'citizen participation', which is seen as the foundation of contemporary democratization. Institutions such as the councils in Brazil are often referred to as spaces for 'citizen participation', even though more often than not they bring collective actors (rather than individual citizens) into contact with public officials (Gurza Lavallo et al. 2005). We are not witnessing simply an

increase in opportunity for citizen participation, but a broader process of *reconfiguration of political representation* in which civil organizations play a central role.

The contribution of this reconfiguration to greater political inclusion and democratization hinges in part on how the dilemmas of civil organizations' *representativeness* are resolved. We believe, on the one hand, that as networks of advocacy NGOs, membership organizations and community associations acquire a new role in political representation, the current processes of the reconfiguration of representation around the executive may converge to produce more inclusive democracy. Similar to the emergence of mass political parties, which contributed to the expansion of institutions of political representation and of democracy itself in the early decades of the twentieth century, the contemporary shifts in forms of political representation involve changes in the workings of the traditional institutions of representative government and an expansion of the locus and the functions of political representation.

On the other hand, the consequences of this reconfiguration for political inclusion and democratization depend in some measure on the answers to two linked questions. Who do civil organizations represent when they act as representatives in the polity, and in what terms is this representation constructed? The large majority of organizations that engage in political representation do not have electoral mechanisms through which they can establish their representativeness – that is, build a mandate and ensure accountability – and most are not membership-based. Furthermore, there are no well-established or widely accepted models of how civil organizations could establish their representativeness beyond these two classic mechanisms. Civil organizations therefore face a significant challenge when it comes to establishing their representativeness.

This chapter explores some of the efforts to meet this challenge using the findings of a survey of 229 civil organizations – that is, neighbourhood or community associations, membership organizations, NGOs, and coordinators of networks of these organizations – in the city of São Paulo (population 10 million, within municipal boundaries). The survey was undertaken in 2002 and used sampling criteria that favoured organizations that were actively working with (or on the behalf of) the urban lower middle class, the working class and the poor.¹ Because this universe of organizations works with or for social groups that are said to be marginalized in classic

representative institutions and from centres of political power, their role as representatives is especially relevant to the debates on the direction of contemporary democracy and whether greater political inclusion is in the offing.

São Paulo is a 'forerunner case' that may reflect what lies on democracy's horizon. The city is the largest and politically most diverse in Brazil, a country that has since its democratic transition in 1985 become a democratic laboratory of enormous dimensions. It has a tradition of councils linked to left-wing actors, has experimented with participatory budgeting and other participatory institutions, and has a long-standing presence of societal actors linked to popular sectors, such as the housing and health movements. Civil organizations in São Paulo and elsewhere in Brazil have, furthermore, achieved notable influence in various areas of public policy since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985, and particularly since the 1988 Constitution. As the research agenda on the democratization of democracy suggests, with its empirical focus on Brazil and other middle- and low-income countries, perhaps for the first time democracy and the cutting edge of democratizing reforms are being imagined and constructed in the southern hemisphere.

Civil Organizations, Representation and Democracy

The processes of state reform that have unfolded in recent years, and in particular the wave of institutional innovations that have created new opportunities for citizen participation in policy processes, have intensified the political protagonism of civil organizations. In the case of São Paulo, almost two-thirds of our sample of organizations that work with or for the urban poor participate in at least one of the new participatory institutional arrangements, namely the participatory budget or the policy councils (Houtzager et al. 2004). Furthermore, the actors have a broad representative commitment in São Paulo – almost three-quarters explicitly assert that they represent the social groups that take part in or benefit from their activities. And, when we take into account the different forms of political representation that lie within reach of these actors, we find that claims of engaging in political representation are associated with actual political practices during which representation is likely to occur. The inverse relationship is as consistent: civil organizations that carry out few