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Making sense to decreasing citizen eParticipation through a social representation lens



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the development of an electronic platform by a local government with the goal of increasing citizens' participation in public decision-making process, particularly the modality known as participatory budgeting. The local government of Belo Horizonte, a Brazilian municipality, decided to use web-based technologies to create a project called digital participatory budgeting (DPB), whose purpose was to include new segments of the population – particularly the middle class and youth – in the process of prioritizing the allocation of investments in the city's public works. The project was launched in 2006 and repeated in 2008 and 2011. Intriguingly, however, citizen participation decreased significantly. This study seeks to understand why citizens' participation decreased over time, despite the availability of a cutting-edge, user-friendly and iterative web-based platform to help connect citizens to the process. The theoretical approach is based on social representation theory (SRT) and the methodology of critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 101 documents and 19 interviews. This combination of SRT and CDA helps in understanding how people gave meaning to a new social object – the digital participatory budgeting – through their voices. Simultaneously, this approach represents a skillful approach to uncovering power imbalances signaled by "silences". The results suggest that deviations in the social representation process, namely, trivialization and reification, help us to understand the process through which citizen participation decreases. Therefore, governments seeking to improve eParticipation should, without neglecting the technical aspects, pay more attention to the social representational processes that characterize their web-based initiatives.

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1. Introduction

There is growing interest among academic researchers and governmental representatives in new forms of relationships between the state and its citizens, especially in the sphere of citizen participation. Electronic participation, or simply eParticipation, is one type of relationship that is increasingly the subject of investigation. eParticipation implicates processes and structures through which information and communication technologies (ICT) supports relationships among citizens and other organizations. ICT implementations that foster eParticipation present new opportunities, particularly for governments, to promote new forms of "communication, consultation and dialogue between public organizations and citizens" (Federici et al., 2015, p. 287). However, it

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is not easy to increase citizens' participation and engagement through eParticipation platforms, and more research is needed to understand how such initiatives might succeed.

"Participatory budgeting" is an example of a public participation process that occurs at the municipal level as it allows citizens to influence or decide on public budgets, usually in terms of expenditure allocations in their territories (city, state). Although there are various methodologies and versions of participatory budgeting, the process usually relies on periodic open meetings and direct negotiations with the local government. A Brazilian local government's decision to create the first web-based, digital version of participatory budgeting – called DPB – represented an attempt to benefit from new technologies to engage citizens, particularly youth and the middle class, who were not participating in participatory budgeting in its traditional offline form. The DPB was introduced in 2006 as a new alternative to allow citizens to vote on public works, and the experiment was repeated in 2008 and 2011. Surprisingly, despite the belief that electronic technologies have the potential to increase engagement in democratic processes (Dertouzos, 1997), public participation in the city of Belo Horizonte *significantly* decreased over time: approximately 172,000 people took part in the first deployment (2006), 124,000 participated in the second deployment (2008), and 25,000 participated in the third deployment (2011).

This decrease is intriguing. The various modalities of public budgeting have been seen as having the potential to increase citizen participation in public decision-making (Pinho, 2011; Cunha, Coelho, & Pozzebon, 2014). When conceived as an e-platform, public budgeting enters the research area of eParticipation, which also seems promising with regard to facilitating citizens' involvement (Sæbø, Rose, & Flak, 2008). Because the Belo Horizonte experience combines the two aspects of participatory budgeting and eParticipation, the decrease in public participation was unexpected, which suggests that there remain gaps to be filled regarding governmental effort in implementing e-platforms that serve to include citizens in public decision processes. We therefore address the following research question: *How to explain a governmental e-platform's failure to help increase citizens' participation in public decision-making?*

To explore our research question, we designed a research project using social representation theory (SRT) as our theoretical lens and combined it with critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodological frame. Serge Moscovici (2000) argues that through social representation, new objects come to make sense to people. People construct representations to make sense of social objects or concepts, and based on those representations, they perform their daily actions, interact and communicate. By investigating the DPB experience, we seek to understand the social representations of the participatory budgeting modality that was created in Belo Horizonte. As existing research insists on proposing ICT as a trigger of positive social impacts, the case of DPB is quite interesting and deserves investigation.

Our study makes two main contributions. First, from a substantive viewpoint, our results shed light on why the use of web-based technologies might not have positive effects on citizen participation in public decision-making processes. More than the ICT itself, the political use of ICT represents a significant source of explanation. From a governmental practices perspective, it is inadequate to mobilize substantial resources to create a dynamic and user-friendly electronic platform that is technically well designed if representational meanings are not considered. Second, from a theoretical perspective, our results illustrate the value of applying a social representation lens combined with critical discourse analysis to better understand emerging areas such as eParticipation. The original combination of STR and CDA has the potential to rescue the critical dimension of social representation analysis (Hoijer, 2011). Discursive practices enact social representational processes and certain deviations, e.g., trivialization and reification, might obstruct some of the intended consequences, such as increasing participation or fostering the emergence of emancipatory practices.

In the next two sections, we present the theoretical background of eParticipation, including a description of social representation theory. We then outline our methodological approach and show how social representation theory as a theoretical lens was integrated within critical discourse analytical techniques. We then present the case study in detail and describe the results. The rest of this paper contains the discussion and conclusions.

2. Theoretical background on eParticipation

For decades, academicians, politicians and activists have been proclaiming the positive political implications of ICT use in general, and the Internet in particular, and have attributed to it the potential to revolutionize various aspects of society, including business, education, government and democracy. Terms such as eBusiness, eEducation, eGovernment, and eDemocracy have appeared in an attempt to reinforce particular aspects of these new forms of social practices. Ainsworth, Hardy, and Harley (2005) argue that this view not only reflects change in ICT infrastructures but also has profound implications with regard to communication and organizational practices that both affect and are affected by social and political relations.

Grönlund (2001, p. 93) defines eDemocracy as the "use of IT in democratic processes", a very broad definition that covers all forms of democracy. The focal point of eDemocracy research is to explore how ICT might facilitate the achievement of democratic goals (Sucha & Grönlund, 2012). eParticipation is being seen as a sub-field of eDemocracy (Macintosh, 2004), although Sucha and Grönlund (2012) delineate two discrepancies between these concepts. For the purpose of our investigation, we outline the first one: there is a lack of internal logic in linking eParticipation uniquely to democratic regimes of governance, particularly because technological tools can be used for different purposes depending on how they are mobilized. This linkage extends to non-democratic regimes when, for example, they are used to create barriers to public participation.

The term eParticipation refers to the use of new technologies, particularly the Internet, and their ability to either change or transform citizens' involvement in deliberative or decision-making processes (Sæbø, Rose, & Flak, 2008). eParticipation connects with opportunities for consultation and dialogue between government and citizens using a series of ICT tools. One exemplary

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