

The contribution of the local level to deepen a “culture of participation” in Portugal

The existence of unique nation-wide innovations such as the three national participatory budgeting processes certainly owes a lot to the local level dynamics of the last two decades.



Despite a cultural tendency to centralistic approaches (with reduced legacies of the Municipalist Movement born in the brief period of the first republic in the early '900), Portugal experiences a decentralization systems where the **3,091 Inframunicipal Governments called “freguesias”** (heirs of the old medieval parishes, transformed into decentralized organism of the secular State) are recognized as very important by citizens, especially in rural areas.

The administrators elected in the **308 municipalities** enjoy - as various European socio-political barometers show - a higher degree of trust from part of the citizens than almost all national institutions (except for the Church and the police). However, **abstentions in local election grew from 39,9% (in 2001) to 45% (in 2017)**, remaining lower today than in parliamentary elections (51,4% in 2019).

The regionalization of the country (attempted by Law 19/1998) has not been ratified by the confirmatory referendum, and today (in addition to the autonomous regions in the two archipelagos of Madeira and the Azores) in continental Portugal there are only **5 Regional Coordination and Development Commissions (CCDR)**, faint administrative divisions of “deconcentrated” management of the central State.

THE STRUCTURE OF DECENTRALIZATION



The first level of decentralized administration is poor: the incomplete decentralization reforms have never seriously structured a coordination government of the two metropolitan areas, while the **supra-municipal districts were abolished in a “top-down” reform in 2013** (being only partially replaced by 21 institutions of second level in the form of “inter-municipal associations” still under construction).

With Decree n. 30/2015, the **XXI government embarked on a long negotiation journey with local authorities to reform the delegation of competences** of municipalities and inter-municipal associations, starting from the scope of school functions and social and health care.



Source of Statistic Data: PORDATA, 2019

SEEDS AND OUPUTS OF A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH:



In early 2000, Portugal has seen the growth of a series of participatory experiments (as in the field of the so-called “local social networks”, the council of youth or the participatory budgets), through which municipalities and parishes gradually tried to rescue the decline of citizens’ trust and improve local policy effectiveness, in the direction recommended by **Art. 2 of the Constitution** (reformed in the ‘90s), which praises for **deepening “participatory democracy” as one of the duties of the State of the Rule of Law.**

However, until 2018, more than **240 local authorities experienced with Participatory Budgeting** (see the book “Hope for Democracy”, 2018), and in **2014 the “Network of Participatory Local Authorities” (RAP)** was born, exchanging good practices and exerting pressures on national and regional governments to scale-up experiments. **Youth Councils (previously financially weak) often merge with Youth PBs for being more “incisive”** in shaping local policies, despite a national reform for institutionalizing them in all municipalities was partially banned by court in 2009.

Participatory Budgets, without any special Law Framework, started in 2002 being just “advisory” consultation processes, but since 2008 (when Lisbon started devoting 5 millions €) they tended to become co-decisional spaces in which citizens can vote for prioritizing a list of proposals they want to see implemented. Today – according to the new **“World Atlas of Participatory Budgeting” (2019)** - Portugal hosts 1686 Participatory Budgeting experiences (almost 36% of the European PBs), being **136 in local governments and 1550 in secondary schools**. The latter have been multiplied by a Ministerial Order (436-A/2017) which established the Participatory Budget for Schools (OPE) as compulsory

In 1998 and in 2007, the reforms of the Basic Law on spatial planning (n. 48/98 and n. 54/07) increased the consultation of citizens in territorial governance. In 2015, a grassroots collaboration among universities, municipalities and communities created the project **“MAIS PARTICIPAÇÃO melhor saúde”**, which worked on a national “Charter for Public Participation in Healthcare”, which was approved by the Parliament with Law 108/2019.

COST MEMBERS:

Giovanni Allegretti (Center for Social Studies of Coimbra University) e Maria Manuela Dias Marques Magalhães Silva (CIDEFF & Universidade Portucalense)



Constitutional Deliberative Democracy:

Portuguese

(from the) Constitutional
(to the) Participatory Democracy
(un)reality

Law: Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (1976)

Art. 2nd Democratic state based on the rule of law.

“The Portuguese Republic is a democratic state based on the rule of law, the sovereignty of the people, plural democratic expression and political organization, respect for and the guarantee of the effective implementation of the fundamental rights and freedoms, and the separation and interdependence of powers, with a view to achieving economic, social and cultural democracy and deepening participatory democracy.”

Art. 115th Referendum;

Art. 167th Initiative in relation to laws and referendum.

Parliamentary
Elections

Abstention

2005 – 35,60%.

2009 – 40,30%

2011 – 41,90%

2015 – 44,10%

2019 – 51,43%

Rights (?)

Duties (?)

Active

Citizenship(?)

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Democracy and
Power(s)

(?)



UNIVERSIDADE
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Fundamental
Rights

Art. 12, n. 2

“Legal persons enjoy
the rights and are
subject to the duties
that are compatible
with their nature”