

Running Democracy into the Ground?

Critical Sociology
1–9

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DOI: 10.1177/08969205241293013

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Democracy on the Ground: Local Politics in Latin America's Left Turn, by Gabriel Hetland. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. 336 pp. \$35 (paper) ISBN: 9780231207713.

In the early years of Latin America's Left Turn, 20 years ago, apart from the panic on the Right that the region would become a new 'axis of evil', one could find considerable optimism or at least hope about the chances that some of the newly elected left-leaning presidents might successfully expand and even scale up local experiments in citizen participation that their political partners had utilized in the prior decade. As Gabriel Hetland's excellent book illustrates, this is not what happened in Bolivia and Venezuela. Instead of widespread democratic deepening, experiences of participation under municipal governments varied widely, and in somewhat unexpected ways, yielding vastly different urban regimes. Against Hetland's original expectations, participatory democracy fared better in the Venezuelan cities he studied during the populist-left government of Hugo Chávez than in Bolivian cities during the movement-left government of Evo Morales, and even achieved some surprising success under a right-wing mayor for a brief period in Sucre, one of the largest municipalities in metropolitan Caracas. The rich descriptions of and explanations for these differences in *Democracy on the Ground* are novel, interesting, and engaging. Even if one core argument – that Chavismo's success in developing left-populist hegemony pushed the right to adopt participatory democracy – is ultimately unpersuasive, the book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of local politics in the region and particularly of the difficulties of implementing participatory urban governance for the long term.

After briefly reviewing a few of the book's many strengths, this essay critiques its conceptualization of the Left-Right distinction, presentation of the distinctiveness of the four city cases, and evidence for the claims about Chavismo hegemony. In so doing, the essay encourages less optimism regarding both the Right and the Left's commitment to democracy, participatory or otherwise, and broader, multi-causal understandings of participatory institutions and the determinants of their implementation and success. Because Hetland's provocative book offers an explicit – and welcome – challenge to my more pessimistic perspective on the trajectory of participatory democracy in Latin America over a decade ago (Goldfrank, 2011), the essay concludes with a response that reassesses some of my own previous claims in light of political changes in the past decade.

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Strengths: Combining Macro-Sociology with Micro-Ethnography

Efforts at understanding local-level politics under the Chávez and Morales governments are rare, especially with a comparative, longitudinal focus that speaks to broader issues of democracy and ideological and programmatic differences between Left and Right governments. Hetland combines this focus with impressive ethnographic work, comprising 22 months in the two countries and over 200 interviews. This experience allows him to pair sociological theory-building with compelling, original stories about each of the four fascinating cities he chose to study: El Alto and Santa Cruz in Bolivia, Sucre and Torres in Venezuela. Hetland uses his observations of meetings and interviews with officials, activists, and ‘everyday’ citizen participants expertly and, in several places, humorously, making the book an enjoyable as well as an edifying read. Another appealing aspect of the book is its novel argument explaining how the national political dynamics of Bolivia and Venezuela, combined with local-level class power differences, affect the viability of local-level participatory democracy.

Hetland’s main argument explaining why each city developed different urban regimes – Participatory Democracy in Torres, Administered Democracy in Sucre, Inverted Clientelism in El Alto, and Technocratic Clientelism in Santa Cruz – is two-fold. First, the pair of Left- and Right-governed Venezuelan cities found more success with participatory experiments than their Bolivian counterparts because Chávez succeeded in developing a left-populist hegemonic regime in the aftermath of conservative backlash. This hegemony forced the Right to adopt Chavismo’s participatory democracy agenda, while the more demobilizational strategy of Morales and his party (MAS, Movement Towards Socialism) led to a passive revolutionary regime that did not promote participation in practice in either city despite their participatory rhetoric. Second, the greater success in Torres than in Sucre and the lesser failure in El Alto than in Santa Cruz is due to the balance of power between classes, whereby Torres and El Alto had better organized and stronger popular classes, leading to a ‘socially controlled urban regime’, while the elite-professional classes held greater force in Sucre and Santa Cruz, leading to a ‘state-controlled regime’ (p. 35). Like his city-based case chapters, Hetland’s accounts of the national politics of Bolivia and Venezuela, and particularly of Chavismo’s mobilizational strategy compared to that of Morales and MAS, are effective and persuasive. Readers will learn a lot about these two countries and four cities.

Questions about Concepts, Cases, and Evidence

Concepts

In setting up one of the book’s main lines of analysis – how the Left and the Right relate to democracy – the introduction presents a conception and history of Left-Right differences that, in my view, oversell the Left’s democratic commitment. While acknowledging some variation over different time periods and different types of left organizations, for Hetland, the Left is basically pro-democratic while the Right is anti-democratic. He writes, ‘Democracy is constitutive of the left-right distinction’ and has been since the French Revolution (9). This conception contrasts with the way many other scholars, particularly political scientists, understand the Left-Right distinction as relating to the two sides’ views on equality. Norberto Bobbio’s (1996) conception of the Left as egalitarian, aiming to reduce economic, social, and political inequalities, and the Right as inegalitarian, viewing inequality as natural and inevitable, continues to influence scholars of Latin America’s Left and Right (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011: 5; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2023: 2). These and other scholars view both the Left and the Right as having inconsistent relationships to democracy, in which they sometimes sacrifice democracy in favor of furthering other goals. Such a view is more accurate historically and more helpful as a guide for understanding the region’s recent political trajectory.

Hetland points to the many US-supported coups d'état carried out by the Right against left-leaning democratically elected presidents over the last century, yet his account of the Left mostly leaves out its own autocratic actors. For example, some leftist guerrilla movements emerged during democratic governments, including in Venezuela in the 1960s and perhaps most (in)famously in Peru, where the Shining Path's first acts started in 1980, just as democracy had returned, severely weakening the electoral Left's chances, particularly in the case of participatory government pioneers, the Izquierda Unida.¹ And while deepening democracy did become a key slogan for most of the Latin American Left in the post-Cold War period, in part to reclaim its allegiance to democracy, Cuba remained an important outlier. Cuba's persistence as a left-wing dictatorship into the 21st century, accepted as above reproach by left parties in the region (because of its economic egalitarianism and its anti-imperialism), continues to allow the Right to call into question the Left's democratic ideals. With the Right's removal of left-leaning presidents in Honduras (2009), Paraguay (2012), Brazil (2016), and Bolivia (2019), through legally questionable impeachments or traditional coups, and the nominally Left's descent into highly repressive authoritarian rule in Nicaragua and Venezuela, the pro- versus anti-democracy axis can hardly be viewed as coinciding cleanly with the Left-Right distinction today, regardless of whether it could be in the past.²

Cases

Hetland notes that the four interesting cities he chose to study in-depth are not meant to be representative of urban governance in Bolivia and Venezuela. Of the 14 cities he originally considered, he chose two left-governed and two-right governed cities 'where credible participatory governance reform seemed to exist' (p. 19). More broadly, Hetland avers that 'participatory clientelism' was the most typical pattern in Venezuelan cities during the Chávez era while traditional clientelism continued largely unabated in Bolivia (pp. 33–34). Left slightly unclear is how the four cases fit into the larger universe of cases. Aside from Sucre, how many other Right-governed cities in Venezuela promoted participatory democracy to a significant degree? And how many other cities governed by leftists like Julio Chávez did the same? Hetland claims that his case studies show not only that it is possible for participatory clientelism to lead to participatory democracy (through a process that he calls 'refracting' left-populist hegemony), but 'arguably likely' in those cities that hold competitive elections and 'have recently flipped from a ruling party to an opposition party of the Left of Right' (p. 33). Providing at least one or two additional examples would help strengthen this claim and give the reader a sense of the degree to which the chosen cities are exceptional, or even one-of-a-kind, cases.

Likewise, for Bolivia, is the inverted clientelism in El Alto or the technocratic clientelism in Sucre more typical of Bolivian cities in general? Hetland argues that preexisting clientelism and the Morales administration's inability 'to get its own supporters, much less the opposition, to accept its rhetoric of "ruling by obeying"' are important for explaining 'the failure of participatory reforms' in the two cities (p. 34). Because the El Alto case is so striking, I suspect other readers would also like to know whether similar patterns of civil society clientelistic control occur elsewhere. After all, Hetland considered El Alto – with its highly organized popular movements and Leftist mayors – his most likely case for success, yet it ended poorly. El Alto reminded me of the 23 de Enero neighborhood in Caracas and some of the popular councils in Porto Alegre, where local leaders sometimes asserted their autonomy in ways that made broad participation and state-society collaboration difficult. Popular movement leaders in El Alto went far beyond this, however, with their use of kidnapping the mayor and burning city buildings in order to demand jobs and public works projects. If these kinds of local state-society dynamics exist more broadly in Bolivia's other MAS-governed cities, they would seem to present a fairly important obstacle to implementing sustainable participatory governance regardless of the national dynamics that Hetland emphasizes.

Evidence

While the arguments presented in the book are generally well-founded and persuasive, I was less convinced by the evidence for two related claims regarding Venezuela. One is that Chavismo achieved left-populist hegemony, which in turn forced rightwing parties to move left ‘and to promote participatory democracy to an extent rarely if ever seen in Latin America, or anywhere’ (p. 258). The other is that the relatively successful case of participation in Sucre under Mayor Carlos Ocariz of the center-right Primero Justicia party and the more robust experience during left-wing government in Torres signify that Venezuela under Chávez was a ‘conducive setting for urban participatory reform’ (p. 270).

Hetland argues that left-populist hegemony existed from about 2005 to 2013 and involved all political parties, affecting opposition strategy at both the national and local levels (p. 51, 258). But did Chavismo really achieve hegemony, did that hegemony force the ‘transformation of the Venezuelan Right’ (p. 258), and was there widespread rightwing promotion of participatory democracy? I have doubts on each point. Hetland defines hegemony as ‘a form of political rule marked by a ruling bloc that successfully presents its ideas as the ideas of all, thereby achieving moral and intellectual leadership over society as a whole’ such that there was ‘active consent of the governed’ (pp. 28–29). However, the massive student protests in 2007 and Chavismo’s losses in the 2007 referendums to amend the constitution raise questions about hegemony.

Venezuela’s opposition certainly did shift strategies in 2006. There is no doubt that the presidential candidates Manuel Rosales (2006) and Henrique Capriles (2012) accepted that Chávez was the legitimate president and made some populist or leftist promises regarding public spending; this signaled that they accepted democratic elections as the way to engage in politics, unlike prior rightwing actors. Yet, I am not convinced that left-populism hegemony is the main reason for this. It is equally likely that the more democratic opposition strategy came about because the previously more radical tactics – coup attempt, oil blockade, recall referendum, and abstention from congressional elections – had all failed to remove Chávez from power. Those sometimes violent actions had been counterproductive in a country where the population generally favored (electoral) democracy (see Cannon, 2014). In other words, the opposition had to prove its democratic bonafides because of its past anti-democratic actions, not because Chavismo was hegemonic. And public spending promises by politicians were not rare in Latin America during this period of relatively high economic growth rates. Brazil’s Lula – and his social spending – had become the model in the region by then. Candidates of various political stripes, including Capriles,³ claimed that they wanted to be like Lula in the late 2000s.

Hetland notes that other scholars explain the Right’s shift to emphasizing elections in 2006 differently, such as the argument by Maryhen Jiménez (2021) that it was due to increasing levels of government repression. Another perspective worth including here is Barry Cannon’s (2014, 2021) work on the Venezuelan opposition, which shows that opposition parties always included extra-constitutional or anti-democratic strategies against Chávez and that their neoliberal goals remained unchanged over the period from 2010 to 2019. Most importantly for the question of participatory democracy, Cannon (2021: paragraph 14) cites the opposition’s policy documents as referring to popular participation initiatives under Chávez as ‘tutored participation’ that are ‘suffocating citizen initiative’. These accounts raise doubts about the notion that left-populist hegemony forced a transformation of the Venezuelan Right.

For the local level, little if any evidence is presented to show that the opposition was involved in promoting participatory rhetoric and institutions beyond Ocariz. Did any right-wing parties do so other than Primero Justicia, a center-right party that in other national contexts could easily be classified as center-left? Did any other Primero Justicia mayor do so, or was it just Ocariz in one

of his two terms in office? Further evidence on these points would have strengthened the hegemony claim. As to whether Ocariz was forced to adopt participatory budgeting because of left-populist hegemony, Hetland notes additional potential reasons for Ocariz's participatory strategy. These include electoral calculations driving Primero Justicia's attempt to win in what they considered Chavista territory (p. 117) and Ocariz's past in COPEI (a now nearly defunct Christian Democratic party), which had 'a left wing that supported participation in the 1970s and early 1980s' (p. 119). It could also be noted that by 2009, when Ocariz started his first term, participatory budgeting was not only being praised by Chávez, but was being implemented across the Americas and even being supported and globalized by international organizations like the Inter-American Development Bank, where Ocariz had worked prior to entering politics (Hernández-Medina, 2007). Rather than being due primarily if at all to Chavismo's hegemony, Ocariz's pursuit of participatory budgeting in Sucre is likely multi-causal, similar to the cases of Center and Right mayors in Brazil who did the same in the 2000s and 2010s (Wampler and Goldfrank, 2022).

Hetland presents the fact that Ocariz ended participatory budgeting in 2014, coinciding with the end of Chavismo's left-populist hegemony, as the main piece of evidence that it was the latter that had forced Ocariz to introduce robust participatory budgeting in the first place. Yet his later acknowledgment that 'rampant inflation undermined budgeting of any kind' (p. 142) is at least as compelling. It is generally difficult to sustain participatory budgeting over time because infrastructure projects often take longer and cost more than foreseen and because municipal budgets face fluctuations (Wampler and Goldfrank, 2022), even when inflation does not reach 700% as it did in this period in Venezuela (p. 142).⁴

Whether or not many other readers will question the left-populist hegemony argument, I suspect that many will balk at the notion in the Conclusion that the Chávez presidency offered propitious conditions for participatory local democracy. The very uneven, at best, experience of the communal councils, and the lack of evidence of successful participatory budgeting beyond Torres and a brief period in Sucre, offer grounds for doubt. Earlier in the book, Hetland provides evidence of the participatory clientelism that he acknowledges as prevalent, describing Chavista loyalists bragging that they used the infamous *Lista Tascón* to exclude opposition supporters from public funds for communal councils (p. 132).⁵ More generally, the Conclusion at times tends toward what seem like efforts to defend or rehabilitate the Chávez era as more democratic than many observers, even sympathetic observers, would grant. While the book does include evidence indicating that pluralism and civic autonomy were not as suppressed as some scholars have argued, other critiques about the anti-democratic use of government resources for electoral campaigns, changing electoral rules and districts, creation of parallel governing bodies, stacking judicial bodies with cronies, and implementation of measures defeated in popular referendums are downplayed or ignored. The conclusion also overlooks the argument that the same nepotism, criminality, and corruption that have undermined Venezuelan democracy throughout Nicolás Maduro's presidency already existed under Chávez (López Maya, 2018).

The Left, the Right, and Pathways to Participatory Democracy

The main counter-intuitive finding in *Democracy on the Ground* is that, against expectations in the literature that left-governed cities are more likely to adopt successful participatory reforms than those governed by the Right, Sucre succeeded with participatory budgeting under Primero Justicia. Based on this finding, Hetland argues that the Left need not worry about making democracy seem unthreatening to the Right, that under the conditions of leftist hegemony, right-wing parties may not only tolerate democracy but promote democratic deepening, and that therefore 'the possibilities for real democracy are greater than most existing scholarship allows for' (p. 257). The road to

real democracy that is supported and even helped along by the Right, according to Hetland, is through establishing leftist hegemony, which he claims Chávez did in Venezuela much like Margaret Thatcher did for neoliberal hegemony in Britain.

These are stimulating arguments that contest the pessimism with which I concluded my book on local democracy in Latin America nearly 15 years ago. Hetland cites me, appropriately, as being particularly skeptical about the likelihood of successful participatory governance under the Right (pp. 15, 287). From my perspective, participatory democracy is about making politics a more equal and inclusionary playing field such that the power of the elites is diminished and the chances for public policies and investments that promote a more egalitarian society increase. This, for me, explains the affinity between participatory democracy and the Left. If we understand the Right as opposed to efforts to promote egalitarianism, as exclusionary, as comfortable with hierarchy and powerful elites, then the idea that we might expect the Right to promote participatory democracy, to seek to ‘extend and deepen democracy’ (p. 7), is hard to swallow. Should *Democracy on the Ground* convince skeptics that there is hope for a kind of Left-Right convergence on the benefits of participatory democracy?

Maybe, Hetland provides some quite convincing evidence that Sucre enjoyed successful participatory urban governance during that first Ocariz term. At its peak, the Ocariz administration dedicated up to 40% of the municipal investment budget, or roughly USD35 million, to the participatory budgeting process, and the participants had ‘near-binding’ control over which project proposals were selected. Furthermore, by the end of the term, a diverse cross-section of the residents was participating and the vast majority of projects approved were implemented. Compared to many participatory budgeting processes, this amount of money is impressive, and I concur with Hetland that Sucre under Ocariz cannot be dismissed as a case of pseudo-participation. The outcome certainly matches his definition of success: ‘participatory reform giving citizens real control over local political decisions’ (p. 5). At the same time, the amount of popular participation is quite low. Of Sucre’s 600,000 or 1.2 million residents, depending on official or unofficial figures, only 2500 participated in the year of highest participation, which comes out to 0.4% of the official population. In Torres, by comparison, up to 25% of the population was engaged in participatory budgeting, which decided on 100% of the investment budget over nearly a decade. While Hetland is surely right that Sucre under Ocariz’s first term is successful compared to his Bolivian cases, is that one experience enough to erase skepticism about the Right’s commitment to democracy?

My take-away from the book is that deepening democracy through participatory reform over the long term is difficult. It requires consistent, strong commitment by public officials, both elected and non-elected (see Nylén, 2003); it requires political leaders who are willing to cede some of their power, which is something that few on the left or right seem consistently ready to do. For me, Hetland’s case studies reinforced these and other lessons. Hetland’s interview with Torres mayor Julio Chávez, where he talks about ‘governing with the people’ (p. 77), sounds like the ideals espoused by La Causa R leaders in Libertador municipality in Caracas in the early 1990s; but even with their commitment, they were unsuccessful due to local opposition backlash and resource constraints because of weak levels of national decentralization (Goldfrank, 2011). And his interviews with municipal bureaucrats opposed to robust participation and in favor of expert technocratic decision-making in Sucre and Santa Cruz (pp. 129, 181) reminded me of similar views I encountered among some city officials and politicians in Caracas, Montevideo, and Porto Alegre (Goldfrank, 2011).

In the subsequent decade, my pessimistic expectations given all of these obstacles seem mostly though not entirely borne out. The limitations on and of participatory institutions like participatory budgeting in terms of extent of popular control, number of participants, inclusion or pluralism, and impact that Hetland finds in Sucre and especially in Santa Cruz are fairly common throughout Latin America (Goldfrank, 2021; McNulty, 2019). And the return of the Right in Latin America has

not been accompanied by an increase in participatory democracy. Where the Right has implemented participatory institutions, it has been mostly due to previously existing legal mandates, not ideological transformation.

While the Sucre experience is interesting, my pessimistic expectations about right-wing or centrist implementation of successful participatory governance have been tested more by other recent discoveries. For instance, I doubted that national mandates for local-level participation would be effective, in part because of right-wing sabotage or apathy. However, Brazil's legally mandated municipal policy councils – in conjunction with local state capacity and rights-based social programs – appear to not only allow for some degree of citizen control over some kinds of public policy but to deliver gradual but beneficial outcomes for well-being regardless of the partisan affiliation of the mayor (Wampler et al., 2020). Similarly, Abbott et al. (2024) find that requirements for local-level participatory budgeting in Peru led to increases in 'pro-poor' spending and, when carried out over longer periods of time, improved human development indicators. Instead of the twisty, refracting path through national left-populist hegemony that Hetland suggests as potentially viable, it may be that to get broad and sustainable participatory urban governance, you need legal mandates with specific rules that can function regardless of ruling party ideology.

Nonetheless, as welcome as these gradual, incremental improvements in quality of life are, they have not led to the more extensive socio-political transformations that participatory democrats, including me, initially envisioned. To Hetland's broader concerns about the relationship between local and national politics and the limits on real democracy, it is worth underscoring that participatory local governance in Brazil and Peru has not pushed the Right toward tolerating democracy at the national level. Right-wing forces led by Jair Bolsonaro and Keiki Fujimori, respectively, violently contested electoral outcomes in both countries, and Peru's left-leaning president, Pedro Castillo, was eventually removed from office. At this point, neither Right nor Left have sterling reputations regarding democracy in Latin America. Maduro's recent refusal to recognize his defeat in the 2024 presidential election could be putting the final nails in the coffin.


Despite their participatory rhetoric, both Chávez and Morales contributed to the view of the 21st-century Left as anti-democratic by, among other things, pushing to remove term limits. Chávez then campaigned for a fourth time while dying of cancer and, on his death bed, anointed an autocrat to succeed him. Morales ran for a fourth term even when voters had rejected it explicitly in a referendum. Their negative examples have made left hegemony less likely in at least the near future. Thatcherite orthodoxy is far more hegemonic than participatory democracy has ever been or will ever likely be. In qualifying Morales' 'radical left' government as different from what the radical left meant in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, Hetland writes, 'It is telling that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) praised the macroeconomic policies of Morales' (p. 265).

Hetland ends the book by considering the possibilities of a leftist hegemony that seeks to dismantle the capitalist world system, something which seems much more distant now than it did at the peak of the left turn. In this terrific final section, he rightly lays out the key challenges for any new form of leftist hegemony, including governing without relying on revenues from fossil fuel extraction and overcoming a kind statism that distrusts 'popular, bottom-up initiatives' (p. 276). Another challenge, just to maintain minimal democracy, will be for aging politicians to help develop younger leaders and not seek to remain in power indefinitely. With the growing strength of a democracy-threatening Right in Latin America, the region needs a principled, pro-democracy Left now more than ever.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. For a comprehensive account of Latin American guerrilla movements, see Wickham-Crowley (1993).
2. One should also note the increasingly autocratic and repressive rule of the current rightwing president of El Salvador, Nakib Bukele, who started his political career as a mayor for the leftwing FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front).
3. Henrique Capriles has lauded Brazil's policy choices under Lula and his successor, Dilma Rousseff. Capriles has pointed out gains under both these leftist leaders, and has said that he plans to follow the 'Brazilian model' if elected, even saying 'I'm 100 percent Lula'. <https://cepr.net/the-real-lula-speaks-out/>
4. An unusually large budget likely helped Ocariz devote significant funds to participatory budgeting at the outset of his first term. A cable from the US Embassy in Caracas in December 2009 reports that in Sucre:

it was initially easy to improve on the previous administration's activities. The municipality has benefited from its unusual ability to raise money through taxes. The municipality has been helped by an unexpected uptick in municipal tax receipts from companies and organizations that resisted paying their taxes in full to the previous Chavista administration. 'Our tax income has gone from 650 million Bolivares Fuerte (about 300 million USD at the official exchange rate) in 2008 to 1.2 billion BsF (558 million USD) in 2009',

according to one of Ocariz' senior advisors. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09CARACAS1543_a.html.

5. The Tascón List refers to the names of all those who signed a petition demanding a recall referendum to remove Chávez. The list was published on the website of a National Assembly member, Luis Tascón, in 2004.

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