

Temporal Tactics: Procedural Legitimacy and Exclusion in Brazil's River Basin Committees

Brazil's transition to democracy in the late 1980s marked an important moment in the country's history, culminating in the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution, widely celebrated for its sweeping expansion of civil rights and political freedoms. Brazil's democratization process thus went beyond the restoration of electoral competition. Instead, it aspired to more inclusive and responsive forms of self-governance that embedded citizen participation into the everyday functioning of the state.

Over the next decade, the institutions and practices of participatory democracy expanded to other areas of governance, including the governing of natural resources. In 1997, the National Water Resources Law (Brazil, Law 9.433) translated the constitutional spirit into the realm of water management, establishing a decentralized model built around river basin committees. These bodies were meant to bring together representatives from government, civil society, and water users, including industries, municipalities, and agricultural interests, to deliberate over water allocation, resolve conflicts, and approve resource management plans. Like the participatory councils in health and social assistance, the river basin committees represented an ambitious attempt to democratize governance by pushing decision-making authority downward and outward.

Despite these intentions, many of these institutions gradually come to be dominated by technical actors, state officials, or organized interests. This raises a puzzle: *how do participatory spaces retain legitimacy even when their democratic mandate is progressively undermined in practice?* This paper examines this question through the case of river basin committees in the Federal District of Brazil during the process that led to the approval of the water use charge plan in 2019. River basin committees are emblematic institutions of participatory environmental governance. In principle, they are designed to enable deliberation among multiple stakeholders and to democratize water management decisions. In practice, however, they often become highly proceduralized spaces where participation coexists with subtle forms of exclusion.

We argue that understanding this dynamic requires attention to administrative procedures embedded in the temporal organization of decision-making. I introduce the concept of temporal tactics, defined as the recurring and situated deployment of time and its instruments within participatory processes. These tactics shape when issues can be raised, how long they can be debated, and when decisions become effectively closed. In doing so, they can gradually erode meaningful participation while still appearing procedurally legitimate.

The analysis draws on a focused ethnographic revisit to the river basin committees in the Federal District at the time the water charge plan was being finalized. We followed an ethnographic revisit approach (Burawoy 2009, 2003), which involves returning to a previously studied site to observe how institutional dynamics evolve over time. The empirical material

combines documentary and observational sources, along with their respective field notes. First, we analyzed 16 official meeting minutes of the river basin committee from 2017 to 2019, which provide a written record of discussions, decisions, and interactions among members. These minutes highlight the formal dialogue and decision-making processes recorded by the institution. Second, we conducted participant observation at the two public meetings held before the approval of the charge plan in 2019. These observations allowed us to follow participants' interactions in real time and to document informal behaviors and tensions that were less visible in the formal records.

The meeting minutes were manually coded to identify recurring themes, argumentative patterns, and key moments in the deliberative process. Particular attention was given to moments where tensions between participants became visible in the institutional record, to the types of claims advanced by technical experts and civil society actors, and to instances where power dynamics shaped the flow of discussion. Field notes complemented these records by documenting interactions, reactions, and informal negotiations that occurred during the meetings. Through the triangulation of these materials, we constructed a dataset comprising hand-coded minutes, transcriptions of selected meeting segments, and field notes from the sessions attended.

Through this analysis, we identify four *temporal tactics* that structured the deliberative process. First, *sequencing*, whereby the order of agenda items structured what could be discussed and when. Second, *postponement*, through which discussions were deferred through procedural moves that pushed contentious issues into future meetings or technical subcommittees. Third, the *mobilization of urgency*, where deadlines were invoked to accelerate deliberation and limit the time available for debate. Finally, *windows of opportunity*, which determined when specific claims could be raised by defining certain moments as either premature or already closed according to administrative milestones.

Taken together, we argue that these tactics show how time can operate as a subtle instrument of governance within participatory institutions. Temporal tactics reshape the conditions of deliberation without formally excluding participants or openly violating participatory rules. As a result, participation can be gradually constrained while institutional procedures continue to appear legitimate and rule-bound. By highlighting the temporal organization of administrative procedures, this paper contributes to debates on democratic legitimacy and proceduralism in participatory governance, as well as to sociological work on the politics of time in institutional settings. More broadly, it shows how seemingly neutral procedural tools can structure the boundaries of participation in contemporary governance institutions.

References

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