

Brian Wample, Natasha Borges Sugiyama and Michael Touchton (2019). *Democracy at Work: Pathways to Well-Being in Brazil*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 354 pp. (Online ISBN: 9781108675949). Paperback/Ebook.

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During the first decade of the 2000s, Brazil was trending for its economic boom, participatory innovations and social achievements through public policies. Brazil was, back then, a notable example of how advancements on democratic institutions, practices and programs connected to socio-economic progresses of its population, especially the most vulnerable. The book *Democracy at Work: Pathways to Well-Being in Brazil* analyses and explains the links between more robust democracies and human development. It provides an essential contribution to the debate about the “democratic advantage” in supporting well-being, as well as the causal mechanisms behind this relationship.

The authors focus on answering the following question: “how does democracy, with all of its messy, contested, and time-consuming features, advance well-being and improve citizens' lives?” The core argument is that there are three democratic pathways towards human development: participatory institutions, rights-based social programs, and inclusive state capacity. These components of democracy are effective to promote better living standards and they clearly help explain variation on outcomes in the fields of health, education, women’s empowerment and poverty at the local level. The study convincingly shows that each pathway has the potential to improve lives, even in poor cities. The pathways perform even better when in interaction with each other. In sum, democratic pathways lead to enhanced well-being because they empower and promote the inclusion of citizens in policy-making processes, stimulate new relationships between the state and civil society, and allow governments to more efficiently meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

As a nation full of contrasts, with high levels of inequality, Brazil is an interesting country to test the advanced thesis. There is remarkable variation on both human development outcomes and democratic conditions at the local level. In addition, due to the federal system, municipalities have a considerable level of political and administrative autonomy to implement programs, practices and institutional innovations.

One of the main theoretical assets of the book is its thick approach of democracy and human development. Democratic practice is understood as having three key dimensions: participation, citizenship and a functioning state apparatus. A thicker definition of democracy moves beyond elections to better capture the ongoing practice of democracy: “citizens exercise political rights to access constitutionally guaranteed social and civil rights; governments implement social programs designated to fulfil social rights; and bureaucrats deliver the services that help to accomplish these goals” (page 8). This thick conception derives the three pathways to well-being, which is also assumed to go beyond basic socio-economic indicators.

The concept of development is derived from Amartya Sen’s “capabilities” or “human development” approach. This tool allows to better understand the process through which individuals gain and exercise agency over their lives. This approach is based on a normative assertion that “the goal of development should be to improve peoples’ general well-being and allow them to live dignified lives” (page 23). Connecting these two key and robust concepts, the book posits that well-being is higher when citizens, civil society, organisations, representatives, and public officials participate and deliberate in formal, state-sanctioned participatory institutions; when governments implement rights-based social programs; and when local states use their administrative capacity to promote inclusive social programs.

The argument is convincingly demonstrated using a mixed-method approach, in which the authors pair large-N quantitative analysis with intensive case studies of three municipalities. This methodological design and the empirical originality of the study are other strengths of the book. Time wise, the study covers the first decade of the 21st century, roughly from 2000 to 2013 (the period is a bit extended in the case studies). The quantitative analysis covers all the 5,570 Brazilian municipalities and focus on four fields of human development: poverty, health, women’s empowerment and education. Regression models provide robust evidence that the presence of participatory institutions, rights-based social programs and inclusive state capacity are related to higher indicators of well-being. The democratic pathways converge in terms of promoting well-being in all areas, but they work differently depending on the policy field and their direct impact on specific issues. For instance, among the three pathways, the delivery of rights-based social programs provided the more robust explanation for local variation in income, employment and inequality. In the field of health, all three pathways were equally crucial to explain improvements. In the area of education, local state

capacity was one of the strongest factors accounting for the indicator of high school performance. The presence of participatory institutions and social programs were the solidest factors explaining women's political empowerment at the local level. Nevertheless, in all policy fields the combination of more than one pathways improves development outcomes.

The book integrates dominant discussions present in the literature, notably on the influence of regime type, elections and economic growth on development. Instead of opposing previous findings, it builds on them in order to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced explanation. The analysis does not rule out the importance of economic growth and free and fair elections to promote human development, but shows that they alone are not sufficient to explain variation on the performance of democracies to promote well-being to its citizens. Two main innovations in the present analysis contribute to the existing literature. First, the study goes beyond the differentiation between democracy and autocracy, looking at different configurations of democracies. Second, it looks at variations on patterns of democracy and development outcomes within a country, at the local level. It shows that, beyond the well-known advantage of democracy over authoritarian regimes in promoting well-being, thicker democracies perform better in terms of human achievements.

The book is organised in nine chapters. The first chapter introduces the theoretical framework connecting the three democratic pathways to human development. The second chapter provides a contextual overview of reforms and political developments in Brazil since its democratisation. The third chapter presents the mixed-method research design. It justifies and explains the operationalization of concepts, the construction of the original dataset and the techniques of analysis used. The chapters 4 to 7 are organised thematically around four areas of well-being under focus, respectively: poverty, health, women's empowerment and education. The thematic analyses draw on quantitative methods assessing patterns of presence of democratic pathways and well-being at the local level. Using a qualitative method, chapter 8 sheds lights on the mechanism connecting participatory institutions, social programs and state capacity with well-being. The case studies comprise three cities in the federal state of *Pernambuco* that perform at low, medium and high levels: *Camaragibe*, *Jaboatão dos Guararapes* and *Garanhuns*. Finally, the concluding chapter discusses the theoretical and policy implications of the research findings. Giving that older democracies have also struggled with similar challenges to younger democracies, such as rising inequality, expansive citizen needs, misallocation of

public resources, and poorly performing democratic institutions, they could equally benefit from the lessons learned from democratic pathways in order to improve their performance.

The case studies provide interesting insights about the role of governments, community representatives and civil society to create or even take advantage of existing favourable conditions, to implement and sustain the democratic pathways. Actorness is extremely important to generate so-called “virtuous cycles” of democracy. However, they are embedded in macro-structural conditions that are hard to overcome. The examples show that it can be difficult to break with traditional features of the political system that constitute barriers to democracy and well-being, such as personalism, clientelism, and corruption. On one side, the case studies emphasise that when one or all three pathways are absent, development is seriously constrained. On the other side, they show that the links in the “virtuous cycles” created by participation, inclusive social programs and local administrative capacity are fragile and can be broken when governments and societies abandon their support of any one area. As the authors put it: democratic practices cannot be taken for granted.

This is, of course, a point that raises some new and crucial questions along the reading. The empirical findings of the book refer to a very positive context of Brazilian democracy, characterised by promising political stability, inclusiveness and economic growth. However, by the period that the analysis ends, Brazil starts a new cycle that is drastically different. To be fair, at the end of the book the authors express their awareness to this shifting scenario. They expect the deep economic recession, a national-level political crisis and the election of Jair Bolsonaro to have negative effects on efforts to improve well-being.

Of course, the empirical and theoretical findings remain relevant when the country experiences a critical moment regarding its democracy and socio-economic indicators. Nevertheless, they raise important and unanswered questions in the field, opening up a new research agenda. In particular, it seems relevant to ask the following: once democratic pathways are implemented, under which conditions can they be sustained? How is it possible to protect the human progress achieved through democratic pathways in a context where there are increasing threats to democracy, such as polarisation, populism and disinformation? How to explain that non-democratic tendencies can increase following a notable improvement in well-being of citizens?

To conclude, this book makes relevant theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions to the links between democracy and development. It also inspires new puzzles about the forward and backward movements of Brazilian democracy. The reading is highly recommend to scholars from different fields, including development studies, participatory democracy, public policies and Brazilian studies.