

# Strengthening Participatory Governance Through Resilience and Tech-Enabled Democratic Innovations

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This study examines the experiences of participatory innovation in Latin American countries during the first year of the pandemic, identifying key participatory innovation trends with a focus on the ways democratic innovations can enhance the resilience and innovation of governance systems in times of crisis in the region. To this end, the study analyses democratic innovation platforms and initiatives adopted across the Latin American region, centring on the design, means of participation, inclusion and democratic innovation sustainability. Findings indicate a significant focus on e-participation initiatives, despite challenges like the digital divide, rapid unplanned deployment and that democratic innovations implemented during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated limited sustainability, with many failing to maintain their momentum or institutionalisation beyond their first year of existence. The study underscores the pivotal role of digital democratic innovations in supporting democratic resilience, suggesting that these tools have substantially contributed to sustaining democratic processes and enhancing civic engagement during the high of the health crisis, even if only a few innovations passed the time test.

**Keywords:** Pandemic; Democratic Innovations; Latin America

## 1. Introduction

Democratic innovations are new processes that enhance democratic practices by increasing citizen participation and influence in decision making, improving the quality and legitimacy of governance. The Latin American region has witnessed a significant increase in democratic innovations and citizen participation initiatives since the 2000s (Dagnino & Teixeira 2014). These processes were characterised by an extensive number of participatory experiments and frameworks, with remarkable diversity in design and scope. Many countries in the region implement democratic innovations, such as participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, and digital democracy tools, to promote greater citizen engagement, enhance democratic practices, and allow for the inclusion of minority groups in the decision-making process (e.g. indigenous communities, women, the elderly, and LGBT+ groups (see Avritzer 2008, Wampler 2008). The success of these democratic innovations varies across the region. While countries like Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay experienced significant progress in citizen participation in the 2000–2010 period, others faced challenges and setbacks in the past decade, due to a wave of conservative and far-right government administrations, with several participation spaces closed or remodelled to control the conservative agenda (see Lima 2020a).

The Americas were hard hit by the pandemic, accounting for 25% of total COVID-19 cases and 43% of total deaths, making it the region with the highest number of COVID-19 deaths worldwide (PAHO/WHO, 2024). The humanitarian crisis that followed the onset of the pandemic was caused by various factors, including low state capacity, unpreparedness, weak healthcare systems, and deep inequalities (Schwalb *et al.* 2022). Recently, political science research has started to focus on how pandemics can harm democracy in two ways: by providing a pretext to attack democratic institutions; and by offering an opportunity to restrict the freedoms and rights of minority groups, government opposition, and the media (García Montero 2021; Ginsburg & Versteeg 2021). However, the literature has also concentrated on movements that resisted the anti-democratic wave through solidarity networks, socially distant protests, and digital platforms, which were intensified with the impossibility of face-to-face mobilisation (Durans *et al.* 2022; Campos, Godoy & Coelho 2022; Holanda & Lima 2020).

Digital technologies have enabled democratic innovations to act as catalysts for political action, transforming citizens into active problem-solvers. By contributing their knowledge, data, and skills, citizens had some tools to address common issues in partnership with the government (Breuer and Welp, 2014). Against this backdrop, this article analyses the practices of digital democratic innovations in Latin America during the COVID-19 pandemic. This analysis is necessitated by the recent changes caused by the health crisis; therefore, this paper intends to contribute to the emerging body

of literature that examines democratic innovation through the lens of resilience, mobilisation, and digital technologies in times of crisis, and so contributing to academic and policy debates on the role and future of digital participation in 21st century democracy, both in Latin America and beyond.

More specifically, in this article, I focus on the substantial number of digital democratic innovations that were advanced in the first year of the pandemic (2020–2021) in Latin American countries. The research questions are:

1. What patterns of democratic innovations can be observed among digital democracy innovations in Latin America during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What factors contributed to or led to the decline of the sustainability of democratic innovations introduced during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America, and how can those initiatives inform efforts to strengthen participatory governance in other regions?

Answering these questions is crucial for understanding how democratic innovations, as dynamic processes, can enhance governance and democratic resilience during crises. It can also help us identify the factors that affect their sustainability in rapidly evolving contexts.

Next, I present a literature review on the areas of citizen engagement, democratic resilience, and e-participation. The latter refers to the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to facilitate public involvement in government decision-making processes. The paper also includes a brief discussion on democratic innovation in the Latin American region. This is followed by an analysis of democratic innovations data during the pandemic, and a comparison of case studies. I then proceed to examine the potential for resilience together with its current debates and the impact of democratic innovation.

## 2. Participatory Experiences, Civic Tech and Democratic Resilience

Democratic innovations refer to new institutional designs and practices aimed at enhancing citizen participation. This perspective posits that citizen participation is not just an end goal, but a means to achieve transparency, accountability, inclusion, and to meet the evolving expectations of citizens. The objective of democratic innovations is to boost various aspects of democracy, such as responsibility, responsiveness, political inclusivity, social equality, and the enforcement of the rule of law (Smith 2009). Citizen participation can manifest in multiple forms, including digital participation, deliberation, and mini-publics, which can be integrated in diverse ways. Experimentation and innovation in this realm are significant characteristics of democracy in Latin America in recent years.

An extensive body of literature acknowledges the importance of participatory democracy experiences in Latin America, offering vital insights into the effectiveness, methodologies, and motivations for participation to

enhance the quality of democratic processes (see Avritzer 2008; Baiocchi 2005; Dagnino & Teixeira 2014; Pogrebinschi 2023). This scholarship commonly recognises that the region's transition to democracy has concluded, regular elections occur, and that the concept of 'democratic consolidation' fails to fully represent the challenges of democracy building. There is a growing consensus that increasing political participation is crucial for cultivating a responsive democracy (Wolford 2010) and that the democratic innovations implemented over the past two decades have contributed to the strengthening of participatory democratic practices (Pogrebinschi 2023).

The pursuit of tools for consolidating and legitimising participatory democratic practices has led to the creation of a wide array of democratic innovations. These innovations involve a continual process of experimentation, learning, and adaptation to the evolving needs and demands of citizens, while promoting inclusivity, transparency, and accountability in decision-making processes. Those are specifically designed to enhance and deepen citizen involvement in the political decision-making process (Smith 2009: 5). Although deliberative theory –(originating from Habermas' procedural concept of democracy) asserts that legitimate decisions result from the public deliberation of citizens, it is now clear that increased political participation does not always lead to legitimate, transparent decisions or positive policy outcomes (Hadjiisky 2001; Holdo 2019; Lima 2020b; Rodgers 2010). However, in many instances, widespread participation, coupled with inclusive, robust institutional design, can indeed result in high-quality deliberation and effective policymaking (Pogrebinschi & Ryan 2018).

In recent years, there has been growing interest in technology-enabled solutions to integrate citizen demands into formal political processes and decision-making structures (Lima 2020, Freitas 2020). Consequently, the rise of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has spurred numerous studies on its potential to improve citizen-representative relations, increase transparency in public management, and create new avenues for political participation (Borge, Colombo & Welp 2009; Welp 2012), with rapid digitalisation supporting inclusiveness for achieving mass participation goals (Bussu, Golan & Hargreaves 2022). Civic technology is distinguished from other communication technologies as it is explicitly designed to enhance public participation in governance decision-making and to significantly increase and deepen democratic participation using digital means (Gilman & Peixoto 2019). In Latin America, the proliferation of digital democracy tools and e-participation experiences since 2010 has been remarkable, covering various policy areas such as open government, open data, digital rights, and broad e-participation. E-participation in particular has contributed to enhancing interaction opportunities and developing legitimate participatory democratic practices, with observable impacts on institutions, political, and governmental processes (de Freitas 2020). This trend, already in motion before the COVID-19 pandemic, reflects not only the retreat of the state and the decline of deliberation post-2015's left-turn end, but

also the changing dynamics associated with technological advancements that influence how citizens engage with the democratic process (Lima 2020; Pogrebinschi 2023).

### **2.1 An analytical concept for democratic resilience**

Resilience is a crucial aspect of a democracies. As countries considered to be democratic face significant resilience challenges, particularly from internal pressures like populism, political polarisation, and attacks on democratic norms, they face challenges that test the durability and adaptability of democratic institutions and norms. Those problems highlight the necessity of considering whether deliberation practices and citizen engagement can be resilient in times of crisis. Research on the topic has shown that civil society's role, judicial independence, and active citizen engagement are crucial for maintaining democratic resilience, even in the face of rising authoritarian tendencies and external pressures (Boese *et al.* 2021; Burnell & Caveat 1999); and that experimentation and innovation can occur even under difficult conditions, such as in the middle of a pandemic (Elstub *et al.* 2021). However, a recent systematic review, found that, while the concept of democratic resilience is gaining traction, it remains under-researched and studies on the topic often loosely define the term and are heavily focused on stability rather than systemic change (Holloway & Manwaring 2023). The authors also found that there is less emphasis on innovative forms of resilience, such as innovations in participatory democracy. This is a gap I intend to narrow in the present study, with the view to contribute to studies on democratic innovations in digital spaces in time of crisis (see Elstub *et al.* 2021; de Freitas 2020; Faganello & Luciano 2023; Karlsson, Åström & Adensskog 2020).

In more recent studies, democratic resilience refers to the ability of a democratic system to withstand and respond to both external threats and internal challenges without compromising its core principles, structures, and norms (Bezerra *et al.* 2024, Holloway and Manwaring 2023). It involves the capacity of democratic institutions, actors, and processes to adapt dynamically to evolving circumstances while maintaining the integrity and functionality of the democratic regime (Merkel 2023). This concept emphasises the interaction between democratic structures, functions, and actors to ensure that they respond effectively and democratically to changing contexts, including crises, without leading to regime change or the erosion of hard-won democratic advances.

I define democratic resilience, in the context of democratic innovation studies, as the ability of democratic systems to withstand and adapt to various crises, challenges, and external shocks while maintaining their core principles and creating new democratic innovation practices that secure the role of citizens in governance processes of participation, deliberation and policy influence. In the area of democratic innovation, this concept is not just pertaining to preventing democracies from turning into undemocratic regimes, but also about sustaining and avoiding the regression of democratic practices, propping digital platforms, civic

technology, and innovative democratic practices to ensure that participatory practices, including deliberation, participatory democracy, participatory budgeting, mini-publics, and similar remain active even if a fast-paced leap into new technologies is needed. In other words, it is the ability of democratic institutions and processes to not only survive, but to thrive during crises by incorporating technological innovations to safeguard active citizen participation. This is an attempt to keep improving the quality of democratic institutions – which is an everlasting work-in-progress. It involves ensuring representative governance, active citizen participation, respect for fundamental rights, and effective checks on government power. In reality, democratic resilience is critical for achieving long-term sustainable well-being, especially in the face of increasingly frequent and overlapping crises ('multicrisis' or 'permacrisis' to some), such as economic downturns, pandemics, wars, declining voter turnout, the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and increasing political polarisation and environmental challenges. During crises, traditional communication channels might be disrupted – during the COVID-19 pandemic for example, it was the face-to-face interactions that in many cases were disrupted and suspended. Digital tools then provided alternative to maintain a flow of information and supports the continuity of democratic principles even in challenging circumstances (Elstub *et al.* 2021; Lima 2021). Furthermore, resilience of democratic institutions depends on two key factors: their design and their embeddedness in policy communities. These factors determine their ability to withstand deinstitutionalisation. Resilience is shaped by the efforts of civil society and policy communities to preserve and adapt these spaces in challenging periods (Bezerra *et al.* 2024).

These multicrisis trends have weakened the governments' ability to anticipate and respond effectively to external challenges. In Latin America, trust in political institutions had already been declining even before the pandemic (Freidenberg & Gilas 2022; UNDP 2024). This erosion of trust created a space for the rise of populist leaders who capitalised on divisive rhetoric, a trend that intensified during the pandemic (Lima & da Cruz 2022). Countries like Paraguay, Honduras, and Brazil, where leaders opposed social distancing measures out of concern for economic impacts and anti-science views, severely delayed implementing these measures (Zahariadis *et al.* 2022). Additionally, prior to the pandemic, the ascent of the extreme right in some countries led to the systematic dismantling of participatory institutions, driven by a stagnant economic situation and the reorganisation of conservative sectors in the region (see Avritzer & Zanandrez 2024; Lima 2020). Despite these calculated but often clumsy attempts to deinstitutionalise citizen participation and discredit democratic goals (Bezerra *et al.* 2024; Lima 2020), the pandemic did not deepen the democratic crisis (Avritzer & Rennó 2021). This was largely due to the resilience and embeddedness of civil society efforts, in addition to new types of regional leadership (Lima & da Cruz 2022) which worked to preserve these participatory bodies as vital arenas for policy influence.

The shift towards participatory trends in Latin America following a period dominated by conservative and right-wing governments is crucial for studies of democratic innovations focusing on resilience. This is because it highlights the region's need to adapt and strengthen democratic processes in response to political and social challenges. E-participation, facilitated by ICTs, plays a significant role in enhancing democratic resilience by allowing citizens to engage in decision-making processes, even when traditional methods are disrupted (Elstub et al. 2021, Lima 2020). This is particularly relevant in contexts where state efforts to undermine democratic norms are present, or where the population lacks a historical foundation of stable democratic governance. By enabling collaboration, data sharing, and resource coordination, e-participation strengthens community resilience and helps uphold democratic principles against both immediate and long-term threats.

This paper argues that digital participation mechanisms strengthen the adaptability and stability of democratic systems, contributing to democratic innovation sustainability. This theoretical framework underscores that the resilience of democratic systems is significantly reinforced by digital platforms, which facilitate sustained citizen participation and the continual adaptation of democratic practices. E-participation contributes to democratic resilience by enabling continuous citizen engagement, particularly during crises that risk hindering traditional participation methods. Moreover, it acts as a counterbalance to populist and authoritarian tendencies by empowering citizens to hold leaders accountable and promoting democratic values. Integrating e-participation into democratic processes helps preserve democratic norms and practices, even amidst external disruptions and internal challenges. Considering that e-participation has emerged as a critical tool for promoting resilience and enabling civic engagement despite physical distancing requirements, little is currently known about the actors, types of e-participation, and sustainability in the pandemic context. This is addressed in the subsequent sections.

### 3. Research design and methods

This study uses data from a database developed by the LATINNO project (Pogrebinschi 2021a), which focuses on democratic innovations in Latin America, and particularly concentrates on a subset of this data that pertains to democratic innovations during the COVID-19 pandemic, complemented by the database provided on the same topic by Participedia (Participedia 2022). The LATINNO database encompasses democratic innovation initiatives in the first year of the pandemic (2020) across 18 countries in Latin America, aimed at addressing the social, political, economic, and public health issues associated with the pandemic. Similarly, the Participedia database includes various forms of public participation that address the COVID-19 pandemic. The cases identified often overlap, thus the Participedia database was utilised to both cross-verify and supplement data from the LATINNO database.

The countries included in the dataset are Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

The complete dataset comprises a total of 125 cases, primarily focused on e-democracy experiences, encompassing a diverse array of e-democracy types, such as digital participatory platforms, e-voting systems, online public consultations, and digital engagement tools aimed at enhancing civic participation during the pandemic. The data were analysed to identify patterns, trends, and insights into the democratic innovations captured in the dataset, involving quantitative assessments of the frequency and types of initiatives, as well as qualitative analyses of the descriptions and outcomes. The analysis aimed to uncover underlying themes, examine their features and implementation of different types of democratic innovations. The analyses utilised computer-assisted text analysis techniques on the data collected to uncover frequencies, themes, and general statistics, as outlined by Csomay and Crawford (2016).

The selection of cases for comparative analysis was guided by principles of purposive sampling, where cases were chosen based on their relevance to the research questions and their ability to illuminate variations in democratic innovations across different political, socioeconomic, and technological contexts. Brazil, Argentina, and Ecuador were selected for detailed analysis as they represent contrasting trajectories in digital participation during the pandemic. Specifically, these cases were identified for their ability to capture the interplay of institutional capacity, technological adaptation, and public engagement in democratic innovations.

The methodology combined a broad comparative analysis with selective deep dives into representative case studies. Initially, key trends were identified across all initiatives to establish a general overview of e-participation during the pandemic. A more detailed analysis of specific case studies from different national contexts was conducted on Brazil, Argentina, and Ecuador, to explore the impact of political, socioeconomic, and technological factors on their outcomes. This mixed approach allowed for drawing meaningful insights into the resilience of digital participatory innovations, despite the uneven granularity of the data.

In order to trace the development of each case study in the database, several methods and updates were utilised. The Wayback Machine (<https://web.archive.org/>) was employed for web searches to access archived versions of the initiative's web pages and track changes over time, including on social media, such as Facebook and Instagram. Whois (<https://who.is/> – a web platform that provides domain name information) was used to determine the availability of domains and confirm the availability of websites associated with the democratic innovations cases, which in combination with The Wayback Machine information, served as proxy for confirming the definite end of the initiative. While using website availability as a proxy for the continuation of initiatives provided valuable

insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The presence or absence of a website does not necessarily reflect the actual operational status of an initiative, as websites may remain active even if the initiative has ceased operations, or conversely, if the websites may have been taken down for reasons unrelated to the initiative's continuation, such as technical issues or rebranding efforts. The website availability served as an indicative measure, and so it was complemented with other data sources and methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the initiative's status. Therefore, social media posts and government documents were consulted to gather and verify case details. Data cleaning was performed to exclude cases not related to COVID-19 in both LATINNO and Participedia, remove titles and tidy up the dataset, as determined by the author. s. After those procedures, the derivative dataset had now included updated information, the inclusion of new cases, removal of irrelevant cases, and the addition of new variables such as: updated web links and PDF documents; the year of conclusion of the innovation; last website updates; and domain availability. The full dataset collated for use in this research is deposited in the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) in the Digital Repository of Ireland platform with open access. It can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.n0109228d>.

#### 4. Results

The word frequency results are visualised as a word cloud in **Figure 1**. These words collectively depict a landscape heavily influenced by technology, public engagement, and the global health crisis. Key themes are: citizen involvement, governmental response, and innovative solutions to pandemic-related challenges. The prominence of terms like 'initiative', 'COVID', and 'pandemic' underscores the focus on proactive measures and the health emergency context. Words such as 'platform', 'hackathon', and 'data' reflect the technological strategies employed to address the crisis, whereas 'government', 'civil society', and 'health' signify the collaborative efforts and sectors involved. This visualisation captures a concentrated emphasis on innovation, ingenuity, community action, and the collective response to the global health crisis.

#### 4.1 E-participation trends

E-participation employs ICTs to facilitate citizen involvement in democratic processes. Individuals can express opinions and preferences to digital platforms using internet connected devices, such as smartphones, computers, and tablets. E-participation is listed as a means in approximately 75.97% (or 98) cases in the dataset (**Figure 3**). This high percentage underscores the significant role of e-participation methods in the initiatives covered by the data, highlighting their role in facilitating public engagement, participation, and interaction in various contexts. Interestingly, some initiatives use both e-participation and citizen representation at the same time to combine multiple means of participation, aiming to enhance inclusivity and engagement. In this case, e-participation provides a platform (e.g., an online forum or voting system) where citizens can directly engage, while involving certain participants representing the interests of a specific group within that platform. For example, COVIDLab Cordoba was created used both digital tools for participation and citizen representation mechanisms.

There were 28 hackathons conducted in the first year of the pandemic, addressing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hackathons are short, collaborative events where participants join forces to generate solutions targeting specific societal issues. These initiatives became a notable tool that gained traction during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a way to tap into the creative potential of individuals who voluntarily gathered for a short duration to address specific challenges (Bertello, Bogers & De Bernardi 2022), further indicating the collaborative fusion of technology and civic engagement. Ecuador hosting the most initiatives, followed by Argentina, Mexico, and Peru (7, 4, 3, and 3 initiatives, respectively). In terms of accessibility, 23 hackathons were open to the public, while five had restricted participant selection. These trends underscore the widespread adoption of e-participation as a method of engagement and highlight Ecuador's leading role in organizing hackathons during the period of the study.

The 'Hackathon 2020: Women and Girls Post Covid-19', for example, was designed to mitigate the effects of Covid-19 on Mexican women and girls. Participants



**Figure 1:** Wordcloud frequency generated on NVivo.

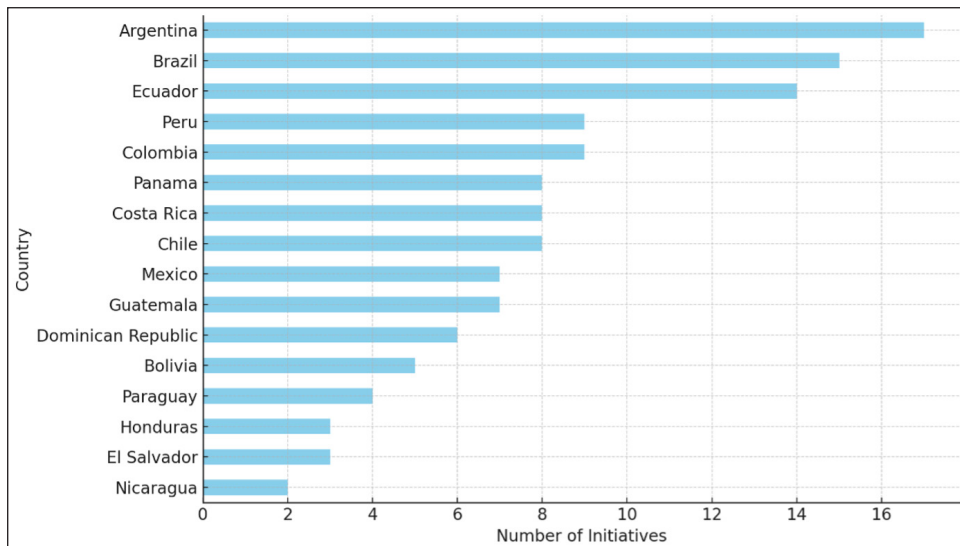
registered online and formed teams to create services and products aimed at addressing the challenges arising from the pandemic, such as the uptick in domestic violence cases. This reflects a dynamic intersection of technology and participatory democracy, emphasising the potential of digital tools in enhancing access to information, citizen involvement in decision-making and collaborative problem-solving. It is important to note that due to health restrictions, face-to-face to events were discouraged, and so e-participation as an alternative to in-person events made sure people still had a way to participate and work together. Recent research has shown that e-participatory spaces were largely more inclusive, drawing in a greater number of citizen participants where access was facilitated through digital media (Faganello & Luciano 2023; Hofstra & Meijer 2022).

**Figure 2** presents the number of initiatives by country, with each bar representing the frequency of initiatives in a particular country. The overall trend indicates that South

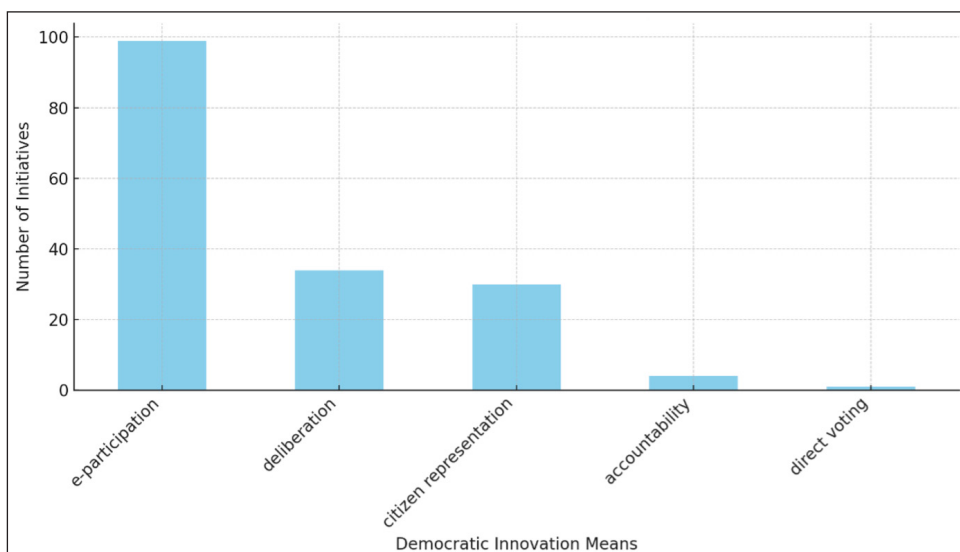
American countries, particularly Argentina and Brazil, have the highest number of initiatives, while Central American countries, such as Nicaragua and El Salvador, have the fewest.

**4.2 Participants**

There is a diversity of participants engaged in the initiatives, ranging from open public involvement to more restricted, selective groups. Out of the 125 cases, 63 cases involved citizens directly, 20 initiatives included both citizens and civil society groups, and 19 initiatives involved a combination of citizens, civil society, and private stakeholders (see **Figure 3**). A strong trend towards involving citizens is observed, indicating an inclination towards collaborative governance models that combine various sectors of society. In the context of democratic innovations, this is significant because it involves complex, intricate policies that necessitate specialised local knowledge and policies of an intersectoral nature, which



**Figure 2:** Number of Initiatives by Country.



**Figure 3:** Democratic Innovation Means.

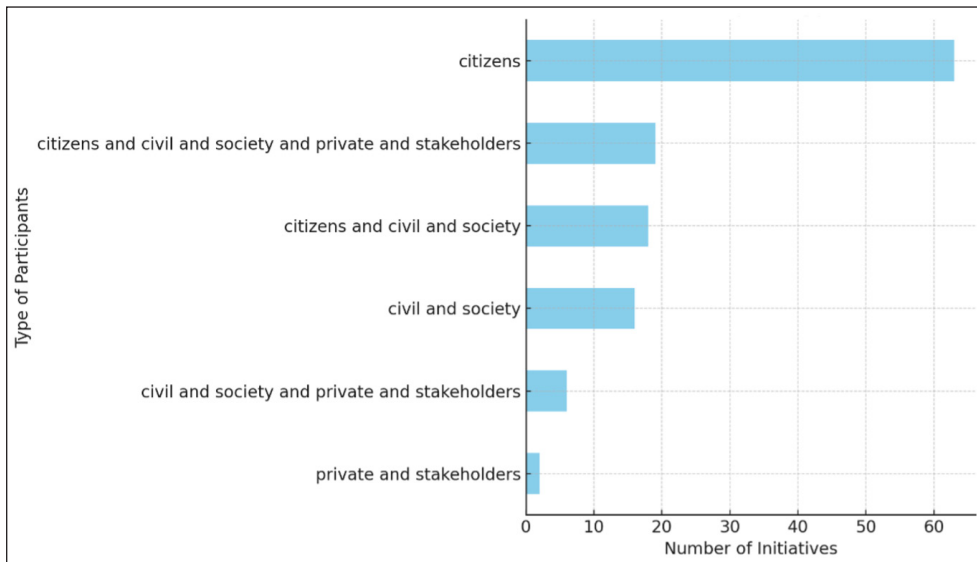
call for cooperative efforts among various stakeholders (Pogrebinschi 2023).

The distribution of participant types varies significantly across different countries, indicating that regional or national contexts might influence how public participation is structured in these initiatives (see **Figure 4**). For instance, some countries show a higher inclination towards involving citizens directly, while others have a more balanced approach that includes citizens, civil society, and private stakeholders. The prevalent trend indicates that e-participation is the most common means across multiple countries, suggesting a widespread adoption of electronic platforms for participatory governance. Argentina and Brazil are not just at the forefront in number of initiatives with 16 and 15 initiatives respectively but are also the countries that employ e-participation the most in the region. This acknowledges the countries historical experiences with

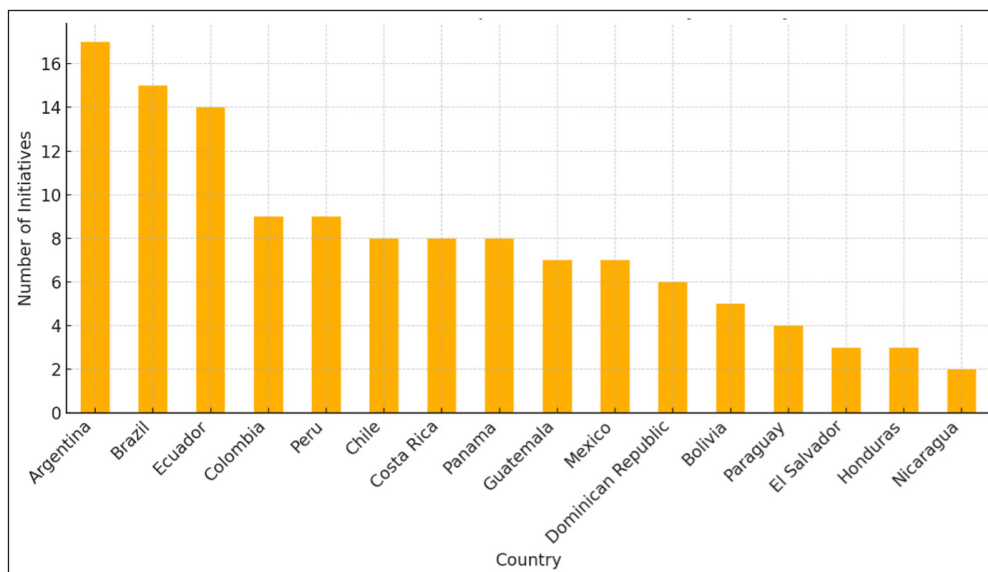
participatory innovations, including some reduction on clientelist relationships and expanded political inclusion (Fung 2011). Surprisingly, Ecuador, which does not have the same participatory traditions as Brazil or Argentina surpassed several other countries in putting forward electronic or digital means to facilitate participatory governance and civic engagement during the pandemic (**Figure 5**).

**4.3 Democratic innovations overtime**

Community resilience has the potential to contribute to effectively coping with shocks (Magis 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic tested the strength of political institutions and government capacity, leading to communities to survive the crisis, thrive after it and get out of it better equipped for the next challenge (Russell 2022). Some initiatives had a strong focus on resiliency-building, often involving aspects such as improving community preparedness,



**Figure 4:** Distribution of Participant Types.



**Figure 5:** Number of E-Participation Initiatives per Country.

promoting adaptability, faster responses and promoting sustainability in the middle of the crisis.

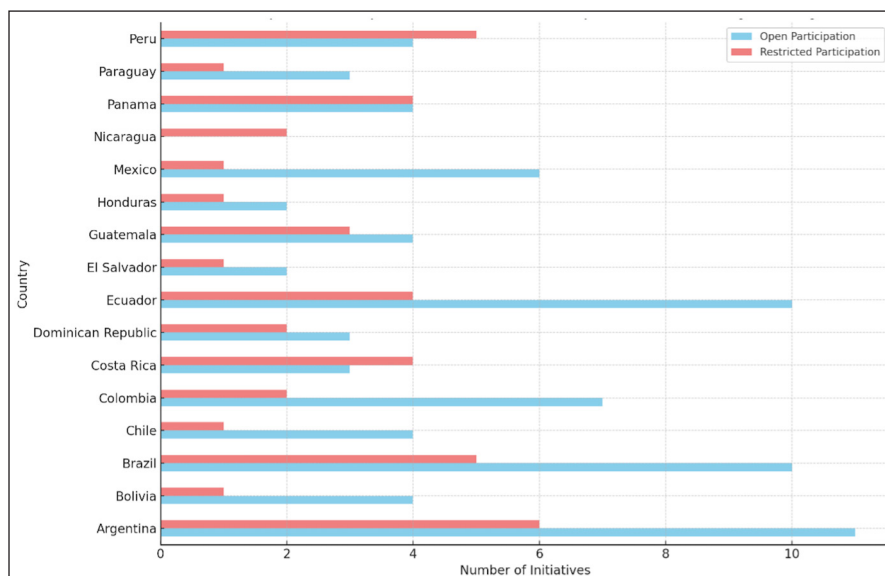
The analysis of the initiatives' time frames reveals important trends in their duration and ending periods. The distribution of initiatives by their start year highlights when these initiatives were launched, starting from 2020 reflecting responses to the first year of the pandemic. In terms of duration, the majority of initiatives lasted between zero to two years, with a few extending beyond this timeframe. Paraguay had the longest average initiative duration, with initiatives lasting an average of two years, three of which lasting more than four years, suggesting a more sustained approach compared to other countries. A closer look at the longest-lasting initiatives from the dataset reveals a few key examples suggesting that those lasted longer were created as part of an existing platform (e.g. Atados Brasil, a volunteering platform that created several initiatives to help to those who could not leave their homes or needed emotional support); or kept some of the activities even after the end of the pandemic and turned into post pandemic recover. The second is exemplified by 'I Want to Help', in Mexico, an initiative implemented by the Mexican Centre for Philanthropy that still have links for donations and collection that are open and active to users. 'Brasil.io Covid-19 Municipal Data' was created as part of an existing platform (Brasil.io), which was originally used to maintain data for various purposes but adapted to provide critical COVID-19-related municipal data. Similarly, initiatives like Civic Space Guardian in Argentina and the Needs and Offerings Bazaar in the Dominican Republic also showcase how platforms continued activities beyond their initial phases, addressing ongoing societal after the pandemic. These examples indicate how sustained efforts often stemmed from pre-existing platforms or continued support even after the peak of the pandemic. But overall, 63.5% of the initiatives ended in its first year. Mostly likely, they were one-off or short-terms initiatives with specific mandates, such as some of the hackathons or other

initiatives that had very specific pandemic-related tasks, for instance, live data collection and analysis of health data, especially in countries that tended to restrict and tamper access to pandemic information (i.e. Bolsonaro's government in Brazil).

#### 4.4 Inclusiveness

Open participation in this study refers to cases where the general public can participate without restrictions or selection methods, thereby suggesting broad and inclusive access. Conversely, restricted participation involves some form of selection or condition for participation, which could imply a more selective or exclusive process. Using those as proxy for investigating inclusion, of the initiatives analysed, 77 employed open participation, suggesting broader access and inclusivity for a wide range of participants. In contrast, 43 initiatives implemented restricted participation, indicating more selective inclusion that may have potentially excluded certain groups (see **Figure 6**). These figures suggest that while the majority of initiatives aimed for broader inclusivity through open participation, a significant portion still employed restricted participation, potentially limiting access and engagement for specific populations. Civil society and citizens were the most restricted participants.

An investigation on whether openness or restriction was associated with 'no binding' or 'no decision' decisiveness outcomes was performed. After calculating frequencies and running a Chi-square test calculate on SPSS (to determine association between two categorical variables) no associations were found. This means there is no significant association between decisiveness and selection based on the given data. In fact, while the frequency table shows that there are some differences in the distribution of decisiveness across different participants selection methods, these differences are not statistically significant (see Table 1). This means that other factors, such as the specific context of the



**Figure 6:** Open and Restricted Participation Initiatives by Country.



democratic innovation initiatives, may have a more significant impact on decision-making.

**Table 1:** Decisiveness and Selection in Democratic Innovation Initiatives.

Decisiveness	Open	Restricted	Both	Total
<b>0 No Decision</b>	12	23	1	36
<b>1 Non-Binding</b>	3	3	0	6
<b>2 Binding</b>	1	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	16	26	1	43

The political and institutional context most likely shaped the inclusiveness of participatory initiatives during the pandemic. Authoritarian-inclined regimes often opt for restricted participation as a means to maintain control over public engagement and decision-making processes (Guimarães & Carvalho 2024; O'Connor, Janenova & Knox 2019; Owen 2020). Current democracies still carry remnants of past authoritarian regimes, and these vestiges persist despite the transition to democratic systems. This might be especially strong in the Latin American region with its authoritarian past and the ebb and flow of democratic administrations. In contrast, democratic systems with more decentralised governance structures are more likely to prioritise open participation, encouraging broader inclusion and citizen involvement. The level of political stability also influences the scope of participation; unstable environments may restrict engagement to limit dissent, while stable political contexts often facilitate wider public involvement (Avritzer & Zanandrez 2024). Moreover, trust in government institutions plays a pivotal role in shaping participation modes. Countries with low levels of public trust may limit participation to control the narrative and maintain legitimacy, whereas governments with high levels of trust are more likely to embrace open participation as a means to legitimise their actions through civic input (Norris 2022). This interplay between political systems, stability, and government trust, when added to the digital divide, affects the inclusiveness of participatory democratic innovations. It is challenging to investigate the role of e-participation in promoting inclusive civic engagement in such a varied context of cases. Additionally, the dataset did not include specific information on participant demographics, digital access, and engagement across different socio-economic groups. However, it is possible to look on the specific factors that contributed to the prevalence of e-participation in specific countries using a comparative approach.

## 5. Comparative Case Studies: Brazil, Argentina, and Ecuador

### *Argentina – Low trust and strong civil society*

Innovative institutional designs in Argentina trace back to the 1990s and 2000s, reflecting the country's political culture, which has long prioritized civic engagement. Argentina has been at the forefront of democratic innovations, particularly through the implementation

of various self-managed and non-institutionalized assemblies, as well as participatory spaces, despite its largely unstable political and economic context (Pogrebinski 2021b; Rodgers 2012).

During the pandemic, Argentina saw an increased reliance on digital tools for civic engagement. The government and civil society organisations created platforms such as Civic Space Guardian to facilitate citizen involvement in monitoring the pandemic response. According to the Latinobarómetro (2021), Argentina ranked amongst the lowest in Latin America for trust in public institutions. However, civil society organisations played a crucial role in mitigating this trust deficit by stepping in to sustain and facilitate public engagement in initiatives focusing on research-oriented solutions and hackathons. Examples include platforms such as Jujuy's Labor and Social Observatory that focused on the social and labour impacts of the pandemic, and Argentina Hacks COVID-19 that involved citizens and technologists in creating digital tools for pandemic management. These initiatives underscore the key role citizens and civil society played in maintaining and creating new spaces of citizen participation during the pandemic.

Argentina's relatively high levels of digital connectivity also played a role, with 88.4% of the population having access to the internet in 2022, against the 72.8% regional average (CEPAL, 2024).

### *Brazil – historical leadership in participatory governance*

Brazil has long been a frontrunner in democratic innovation, particularly through participatory budgeting, which has created an institutional framework conducive to broader civic participation (Fung 2011). This history fostered a culture of engagement and provided the necessary experience to quickly adapt to digital forms of participation during the pandemic. Despite political instability and challenges posed by President Bolsonaro's administration, which included serious attempts to dismount institutional space of participatory democracy and a problematic handling of the pandemic (Avritzer & Zanandrez 2024; Lima 2020; Lima & da Cruz 2022), civil society actors played a critical role in mobilising citizens through crowdsourced health data initiatives and hackathons for developing COVID-19 solutions. Some examples are digital platforms like Brasil.io, which offered real-time pandemic municipal data, and HackCOVID, in which participants developed telemedicine platforms and Covid-19 tracking apps.

Brazil has higher trust in political institutions compared to Argentina, although the levels of trust are generally low in both countries (Latinobarómetro 2021). Similar to Argentina, this trust deficit in both countries plays an important role in shaping their respective e-participation landscapes, with strong civil society organisations involved in democratic innovations. Additionally, Brazil's has a good level of digital connectivity, with 80.5% of the population using the internet in 2023 (CEPAL 2024), further facilitated the transition to e-participation.

**Ecuador – Strong e-participation growth**

Ecuador’s role in e-participation during the pandemic stands out as an unexpected development, especially given its historically lower levels of participatory innovation compared to countries like Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia. However, two factors help explain the rapid adoption of e-participation in Ecuador. First, the reorganisation of the country’s early pandemic response. After suffering a very high number of deaths and chaos in the initial pandemic months (Capella 2022), strict lockdowns and the initiation of mass vaccination efforts were made (Torchia 2020). Second, Ecuador’s strong, locally organised social movements, such as Cotacachi, which emerged from the powerful Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement, have long been experienced in local participatory democracy (Addor 2018). Additionally, President Lenín Moreno’s efforts to reverse the populist transformations of his predecessor, Rafael Correa, also played a role. Moreno employed participatory mechanisms like referendums, though these did not fully embrace the egalitarian and solidaristic goals of genuine participatory democracy (Posner 2022). This may be attributed to the urgency of the pandemic, which forced the government and civil society to innovate rapidly.

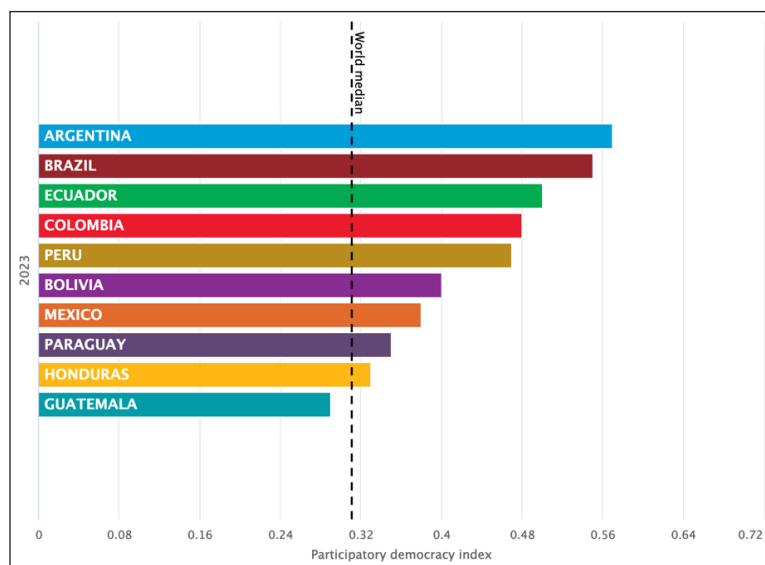
Overall, Ecuador’s trust in institutions remains significantly weaker than in Argentina and Brazil, counterbalanced by active social movement. This is a reflection on the number of innovations that focused on Citizen Oversight Commissions, which aimed at ensuring transparency and accountability in government actions during the pandemic, with multiple initiatives focusing on monitoring government responses and ensuring proper management of resources and health policies. 89% of the population was using the internet in 2020 (CEPAL 2024), which is above the regional average.

The comparative analysis of democratic innovation and e-participation in Brazil, Argentina, and Ecuador highlights three main findings related to those countries’

specific contexts. First, the countries’ strong civil society organisations played a crucial role in filling the trust gap in public institutions by pushing civic oversight and tech solutions through digital platforms during the pandemic. Second, Brazil’s historical leadership in participatory governance provided a robust institutional foundation that helped quickly transition to e-participation initiatives, despite political instability. Third, Ecuador’s unexpected growth in e-participation, driven by grassroots movements and the pandemic’s urgency, underscores the potential for rapid democratic innovation even in countries with historically lower levels of participatory engagement. Brazil, Argentina, and Ecuador ranked among the highest in the 2023 Participatory Democracy Index, which evaluates citizen engagement in governance through local democratic institutions, civil society organizations, direct democracy mechanisms, and electoral democracy (V-Dem, 2024) (Figure 7). This data aligns with the broader analysis presented here, reinforcing the argument that these countries exhibit strong capacity and structure for democratic innovations. Furthermore, all three nations benefited from relatively high levels of internet connectivity, which facilitated the rapid transition to digital participation platforms in a period of restricted physical interaction.

**6. Discussion and Conclusion**

Democratic resilience is gaining prominence in both academic research and policy discourse, particularly as it is increasingly viewed as both a symptom of and a solution to the current era of overlapping crises. As seen in the comparative case studies of Latin American countries, democratic resilience highlights the capacity of democratic systems to adapt and survive through the active engagement of citizens, the integration of innovative participatory mechanisms, and the counterbalance of institutional trust. This flexibility and inclusivity are crucial for understanding how democracies can withstand external shocks and internal disruptions, and ‘bounce back’ when necessary.



**Figure 7:** Participatory Democracy Index in Selected Latin American Countries in 2023. (V-Dem, 2024).

Burnell and Calvert (1999) argued that democratic resilience often stems from an accumulation of context-specific lessons, yet no universal manual for democratic success exists. Such observations are supported by the findings of this study, which suggest that the adaptive use of digital platforms for civic engagement (as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic) reveals how flexible, context-driven innovations can sustain democratic participation in times of crisis. The emergence of e-participation, as delineated above, aligns with scholarly perspectives that discuss how digital platforms have become integral to enhancing citizen involvement and ensuring the continuity of democratic engagement, particularly under the constraints imposed by the pandemic. This alignment is not incidental but is rooted in the broader evolution of ICTs in Latin America, which has been pivotal in democratising access to the political sphere, enhancing transparency, and cultivating a more engaged citizenry (Borge, Colombo & Welp 2009; Welp 2012). The hackathons and open-data initiatives, for example, point to the innovative synergy between technology and participatory democracy, providing platforms for collective problem solving and policy innovation, thereby embodying the potential of civic tech to deepen democratic participation (Gilman & Peixoto 2019).

The engagement patterns across countries reveal distinct approaches to public participation, with some nations like Argentina, Brazil, and Ecuador not only leading in the number of initiatives, but also prominently utilising e-participation, resonating with their participatory inclinations and the recent digital engagement surge during the pandemic. The shift to e-participation, ensured continued collaborative engagement with a push for innovations, representing more opportunities for participatory spaces, albeit with inherent challenges.

The Latin American experiences examined in this study, particularly in Brazil, Argentina, and Ecuador, offer three key lessons for strengthening participatory governance, not just in the region, but potentially in other contexts. Firstly, civil society's role as a counterbalance to low trust in political institutions, evident in Argentina, Brazil, and Ecuador, provides a relevant insight into the power of grassroots movements to uphold democratic practices. In the Global North, where trust in political institutions is also waning (OECD 2024), promoting stronger partnerships between governments and civil society organisations can help rebuild public trust while promoting more inclusive democratic practices. This is particularly relevant for countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, where populist movements and political polarisation have eroded institutional trust in recent years (Norris 2022), a phenomenon observed in other parts of the world too (see Posner 2022; Dalio 2024).

Secondly, the success of digital participation in Latin America, where internet penetration is growing but uneven, signals that with adequate digital infrastructure, similar initiatives can be employed elsewhere to promote resilience and inclusivity in governance. Countries that enjoy higher levels of internet access and digital

literacy, may find even greater success in replicating these models. The pandemic served as a catalyst for new technologies, creativities and mobilisation, proving that e-participation is not just an alternative, but could inform the broader pursuit of more inclusive and resilient democracies.

Lastly, the lessons from Ecuador, which lacked the same participatory traditions as Brazil or Argentina but have a few particularly strong social movements, rapidly developed e-participation initiatives, highlighting the potential for digital tools to democratise access to governance even in nations deeply struggling due to political, economic, and this research study, an extreme health crisis. This serves as an indicator that technological adoption, when paired with local grassroots movements, can potentially offset deficits in participatory governance. This could be a valuable insight for newer democracies and regions experiencing democratic backsliding and deserves further examination.

The swift and unanticipated shift to e-participation have influenced well-established social participation mechanisms previously dependent on face-to-face engagement (Faganello & Luciano 2023). The fast, largely unplanned shift to e-participation underscored the critical role in maintaining democratic resilience, revealing the reactivity and creativity of communities and governments. While not universally adopted, the used ICTs accelerated the adoption of digital technologies for societal resilience (ESCAP 2022). In several Latin American countries, the transition from traditional to virtual participation revealed significant potential benefits, both during and beyond the pandemic context. However, the research also underscores key challenges that emerged during this shift, notably the persistent digital divide and the heightened risks related to cybersecurity. The digital divide, in particular, represents a structural barrier to inclusivity, limiting access for marginalised communities and highlighting the uneven distribution of digital infrastructure across countries. Individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often lack access to necessary digital devices and reliable internet connections, while rural and remote areas face significant barriers to digital access, and women, for example, may face cultural and societal barriers that limit their engagement in digital platforms. Additionally, the rapid adoption of e-participation might expose vulnerabilities in digital security, further complicating efforts to establish resilient and secure participatory mechanisms.

In conclusion, while e-participation has shown significant insight into the ways to strive for democratic resilience, further empirical studies are needed to measure its effectiveness in supporting truly inclusive and long-term participatory governance. The findings from Latin America provide a strong foundation for comparative analyses and offer valuable insights for other regions, especially regarding the design of digital governance systems capable of responding to global challenges and on the effects of democratic innovation during crisis periods. These insights contribute to democratic innovation

theory by highlighting the importance of adaptive, context-specific innovations and the role of digital tools in enhancing democratic resilience and participation.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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