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Evaluation of digital participation at the national level: the Brasil Participativo platform

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After a government marked by setbacks in social participation, this process returned to the forefront in 2023 with the revitalization and creation of different Participatory Institutions. The Participatory Multi-Year Plan 2024–2027 became the largest digital participation experience in the country, with over 4 million accesses and nearly 1.5 million participants. However, beyond numerical success, the limitations imposed by digital participation make it necessary to evaluate the participatory nature and quality of this participation. This article aims to present a reconstruction of the design and implementation process of the Participatory PPA and based on this, evaluate the digital participation platform. To this end, different models of participation evaluation and the literature on social participation in national planning are considered to construct an evaluation model suitable for the context: a digital participation experience in Brazil of unprecedented proportions. The evaluation is based on data provided by the government, semi-structured interviews with public managers responsible for implementing the mechanism, and participant observation of the face-to-face instances of the Participatory PPA. The results reveal how the process influenced the profile of participants and how platform design choices influenced the interaction between participants and the decision-making process. The research provides a theoretical contribution by advancing digital participation evaluation models and a practical contribution by pointing out the limitations of digital participation on a national scale.

Keywords: social participation; digital platform; participation evaluation; national planning; representativeness.

Avaliação da participação digital em nível nacional: a Plataforma Brasil Participativo

Após um governo marcado por retrocessos na participação social, esta volta a ter centralidade em 2023 com a retomada e criação de diferentes Instituições Participativas. O Plano Plurianual Participativo 2024–2027 configurou na maior experiência de colaboração digital do país, com mais de 4 milhões de acessos e quase 1,5 milhão de envolvidos. Mas para além de um sucesso numérico, limitações impostas pela participação digital tornam necessária uma avaliação do teor participativo e da qualidade dessa participação. Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar uma reconstrução do processo de desenho e implementação do Plano Plurianual Participativo e, a partir disso, avaliar a

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plataforma digital de participação. Para tanto, são considerados diferentes modelos de avaliação da participação e a literatura sobre participação social no planejamento nacional, com o intuito de construir um modelo de avaliação adequado ao contexto: uma experiência no Brasil, de participação digital, e de proporções inéditas. A avaliação se baseia em dados disponibilizados pelo governo, entrevistas semiestruturadas com gestores públicos responsáveis pela implementação do mecanismo, e observação participante das instâncias presenciais do Plano Plurianual Participativo. Os resultados revelam como o processo influenciou o perfil dos participantes e como as escolhas do design da plataforma influenciaram a interação entre estes e o processo de tomada de decisão. A pesquisa oferece uma contribuição teórica ao avançar em modelos de avaliação de participação digital, e uma contribuição prática ao apontar limitações da participação digital em escala nacional.
Palavras-chave: participação social; plataforma digital; avaliação da participação; planejamento nacional; representatividade.

Evaluación de la participación digital a nivel nacional: la Plataforma Brasil Participativo

Tras un gobierno marcado por retrocesos en la participación social, este proceso vuelve a cobrar centralidad en 2023 con la reactivación y creación de diferentes instituciones participativas. El Plan Plurianual Participativo 2024–2027 se configuró como la mayor experiencia de colaboración digital del país, con más de 4 millones de accesos y casi 1,5 millones de participantes. Sin embargo, más allá del éxito numérico, las limitaciones impuestas por la participación digital hacen necesaria una evaluación de la naturaleza participativa y la calidad de esta participación. Este artículo tiene como objetivo presentar una reconstrucción del proceso de diseño e implementación del Plan Plurianual Participativo y, a partir de ello, evaluar la plataforma digital de participación. Para ello, se consideran diferentes modelos de evaluación de la participación y la literatura sobre participación social en la planificación nacional, con el objetivo de construir un modelo de evaluación adecuado al contexto: una experiencia de participación digital en Brasil, de proporciones inéditas. La evaluación se basa en datos proporcionados por el gobierno, entrevistas semiestructuradas con gestores públicos responsables de la implementación del mecanismo y observación participante de las instancias presenciales del Plan Plurianual Participativo. Los resultados revelan cómo el proceso influyó en el perfil de los participantes y cómo las decisiones en el diseño de la plataforma influyeron en la interacción entre los participantes y el proceso de toma de decisiones. La investigación ofrece una contribución teórica al proponer modelos de evaluación de la participación digital, y una contribución práctica al señalar las limitaciones de la participación digital a escala nacional.
Palabras clave: participación social; plataforma digital; evaluación de la participación; planificación nacional; representatividad.

1. INTRODUCTION

Participation has proliferated in Brazil since the Federal Constitution of 1988, with an expansion in the number of participatory initiatives throughout the country, but has experienced a setback since 2014 (Avritzer & Carvalho, 2021; Bezerra et al., 2024). The administration that assumes the Federal Government after the 2022 elections begins its mandate with the recovery and creation of different mechanisms of participation, breaking with this trend. In addition to recording the dismantling or recreation of these initiatives, it is important to assess how participatory these processes are and how the population adheres to the mechanisms.

This article evaluates one of the first initiatives implemented by the new government in this process of resuming participation in 2023: the Participatory Multiannual Plan[1], which was attended by almost 1.5 million people. As this is a process that integrated face-to-face and digital participation mechanisms, this study focuses on the use of the Brasil Participativo Platform, created to enable the digital participation of citizens, aiming to answer the following questions: how was the process of establishing a digital participation platform that had unprecedented proportions of adherence, and what was the participatory character of this platform in the context of PPA 2024–2027? The focus on

[1] The Multiannual Plan is a planning instrument, in portuguese called Plano Plurianual and also known for its acronym, PPA.

digital participation is justified by the design of the participatory process, in which the platform was the only channel for formalizing proposals and preferences.

The purpose of the research is to present a reconstruction of the process of design and implementation of the Participatory PPA and, from this, to carry out an evaluation of the digital participation platform based on the following dimensions indicated by the literature: degree of openness, representativeness, inclusion, degree of participants' interaction, facilitation of deliberation, and decision-making power. The evaluation of these dimensions considers the factors that guided the design of this process, the participation itself, and the profile of the participants. This evaluation is relevant insofar as it allows for a more complex understanding of the process of restoring participation so that it is not analyzed only from the perspective of its existence or its dismantling.

This research was developed based on data from the platform provided by the government, semi-structured interviews with public managers involved in the initiative, and participant observation of face-to-face meetings held during the planning of the PPA. The platform's implementation process is reconstructed and documented in a descriptive section, and the evaluation is conducted from the development of a digital participation evaluation model, designed based on referenced models with previous application.

The PPA is the main instrument of government planning in the country, foreseen and mandatory for all levels of government since the Federal Constitution of 1988. Developed in the first year of each mandate, this document establishes the guidelines, goals, and objectives of the public administration, guiding the priorities and budget of the next four years for the main projects and resources destined to each sector of the government.

The development of the federal PPA has been carried out in a participatory manner since 2003, with different participation models, which led to different results. After a setback during the elaboration of the PPA 2020–2023, by the Bolsonaro government, the elaboration of the PPA 2024–2027 wanted to bring participation back to centrality and had a structure that combined three mechanisms of participation, face-to-face and digital: the reestablishment of the Inter-council Forum, an experience that had already been used in 2011 in the elaboration of the PPA 2012–2015, and that in 2023 met three times during the PPA process; the resumption of state plenaries, held in all state capitals and the Federal District; and the Brasil Participativo Platform.

The Participatory PPA 2024–2027 stands out for being the first major process of national participation after a period marked by dismantling and setbacks and for being a process of resumption of planning, which was also scrapped during the previous government. The experience had significant numbers of collaborations, surpassing all previous experiences in PPA development and being one of the largest national participation experiences in the world. More than 34,000 people participated in the state plenary sessions, and the digital platform had almost 1.5 million participants.

Despite the relevance of the numbers, it is necessary to evaluate the participatory character of this experience, especially for questions posed in the use of a digital tool, such as digital exclusion, decreased deliberation, among other characteristics that will be explored in the next section of this article, which highlights the most relevant dimensions for the evaluation of digital participation. The following section presents the background of citizen participation in PPAs, and then the main research methods used in this study are presented, which are: literature review, primary data analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Finally, the results of the research are presented, starting with a section that reconstructs the process of design and implementation of the Participatory

PPA 2024–2027, so that the next section presents the evaluation of this participatory process according to six dimensions pointed out by the literature. Finally, a discussion is presented on how the process of establishing the Participatory PPA influenced the profile of the participants and how the choices made for the design of the platform influenced the interaction between the participants and the decision-making process, which was individual involvement and prioritized.

2. DIMENSIONS OF PARTICIPATION

Participation in Brazil has been registered since the 1970s (Avritzer, 2008), with a fundamental role for civil society in confronting the authoritarian regime and in the transition to democracy (Dagnino, 2002). The National Constituent Assembly and the Federal Constitution of 1988 incorporate this participation into their institutional channels (Avritzer, 2008). Participation in Brazil was divided into two stages: its institutionalization and the proliferation of mechanisms from 1988 to 2014; and the dismantling of these after 2014, especially at the national level during the government of Jair Bolsonaro (Avritzer & Carvalho, 2021; Bezerra et al., 2024), accompanied by the decrease of the democratic space in the country (Magalhães et al., 2021). With the beginning of the Lula government in 2023 and the institution of different mechanisms of participation, it is possible to think of a third moment, which would be the resumption of participation in the country.

But only the existence or not of participatory initiatives is not enough to infer their quality. There are several factors that impact the implementation of the process, such as its design, the laws that regulate it, and the participation systems. Participatory processes lead to better results when their design allows for: (1) broad and diverse recruitment; (2) substantial interactions between participants and government representatives; (3) informed contributions; and (4) the possibility of influencing public policies and actions (Nabatchi et al., 2015). The interaction of the participants is decisive for the experience of participation, and the absence of spaces for discussion and deliberation associates participation with a space for listening (Teixeira, 2020).

Fung (2006) uses some of these dimensions to evaluate participatory processes in the model called "Democracy Cube": the definition of who is the public involved in the initiative, from a committee of experts to the broad public; the way in which interaction and deliberation between participants occurs; and the link between discussions and public policies or actions.

Broad recruitment is one of the objectives of digital participation, which can be defined through expectations about the tools' democratizing effects, such as reaching a larger—or more representative—number of participants (ONU, 2018). However, on the contrary, the digital exclusion is presented as a risk of this mechanism (Schradie, 2020; Braga & Gomes, 2016), which impacts precisely the representativeness of the participants. The digital exclusion is manifested at three levels: access to technology and internet infrastructure; skills and patterns of use, contemplating the way the internet is used; and inequalities arising from the results achieved with the use of the internet (Macaya et al., 2021; Scheerder et al., 2017). Still, socioeconomic factors, such as gender, race, social class, age, etc., define the use that people will make of technologies (Pantić et al., 2021; Schradie, 2020).

There is evidence on the relationship between internet use and educational level (Tarpaile, 2013), although it is not a sufficient variable to increase digital participation (Pérez-Morote et al., 2019). Urban or rural location (Pérez-Morote et al., 2019), age group (Friemel, 2014), gender (Abu-Shamad & Al Jamal, 2015) and other sociodemographic variables have also been used to explain digital

participation or the level of adherence to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This is related to digital participation, as the level of ICTs is a crucial variable in determining the level of digital participation (Jho & Song, 2015; Pérez-Morote et al., 2019).

Given this scenario of potentialities and limitations, it is necessary to evaluate digital participation with models that include dimensions on representativeness, inclusion, and design of the mechanism. Hofmann et al. (2020) developed a framework for evaluating massive systems of digital participation in urban planning that includes the variables representativeness, inclusiveness, internal transparency, and facilitation of deliberation. Chart 1 presents these dimensions.

CHART 1 HOFMANN ET AL. EVALUATION MATRIX (2020)

Criterion	Definition
Representativeness	Participants must be representative of the affected audience, monitoring the sociodemographic distribution. Representation may be excessive to ensure participation of typically marginalized groups.
Inclusiveness	Measures to ensure that everyone contributes equally, considering power imbalances and communication habits.
Internal Transparency	Ensure that the process is understandable to participants, explaining steps and meanings.
Facilitation of Deliberation	Evaluate whether the tool allows the expression and improvement of participants' ideas.

Source: Adapted from Jardim (2024, p. 12).

Coelho et al. (2022) present a model with complementary dimensions: platform design, recognizing that design choices reflect government choices and effects on interaction between participants; interaction between participants, a dimension contemplated by Nabatchi et al. (2015) and Fung (2006); mediation, which in the authors' understanding encompasses both the facilitation of participation and also the prior information available to participants; and mechanisms of influence, used by citizens and the government to empower participants and influence public policy.

3. PARTICIPATION IN BRAZILIAN NATIONAL PLANNING

Participation in the elaboration of PPAs began at the national level in 2003, while the PPA 2004–2007 was being designed. Chart 2, prepared by Menezes et al. (2024), highlights the incorporation of social participation in these processes.

CHART 2 HISTORY OF PARTICIPATORY PPA

PPA	Steps and mechanisms of social participation
2004–2007	**Plenary sessions (State Forums for Social Participation)** oriented to discuss guidelines and challenges present in a document previously prepared by government technicians.
2008–2011	Social participation **via councils and conferences, through general consultations.**
2012–2015	**Inter-Council Forum** as a mechanism for discussion, proposition, and monitoring.
2016–2019	Articulation between **Inter-Council Forum**, as a space for discussion and proposal of guidelines and monitoring of the process, and **face-to-face plenaries (Regional and Sectoral Forums of Dialoga Brasil**), as a space for discussion and proposal by region and sector (women, youth, unions, and businessmen). Use of digital as a mechanism for transparency and disclosure from the Participa Br platform.
2020–2023	Public consultation **via digital platform** (consultaspublicas.ipea.gov. Br/wikilegis/).
2024–2027	Plenary sessions as spaces for mobilization. **Inter-Council Forum** as a space for monitoring the process and filtering the proposals. **Digital platform (Brasil Participativo Platform)** as a space for proposition and voting.

Source: Menezes et al. (2024), our translation.

It can be seen that the first participation initiatives relied on face-to-face discussions and the use of Participatory Institutions already established in society, such as councils and conferences. Abers et al. (2014) argue that the Lula governments of 2003–2006 and 2007–2010 did not have a centralized project to institutionalize participation, but these initiatives found space and developed during their governments both due to the context of maturity of social movements at the time and the presence of activists and leaders of these movements within some government agencies. Participation in the PPA began in this context and was expanding in the governments of the Workers' Party (PT, from Partido dos Trabalhadores, in Portuguese).

For the PPA 2012–2015 and the PPA 2016–2019, the Inter-Council Forum was incorporated into the participatory design. This arrangement was created with the purpose of promoting the debate in a unified and intersectoral way, and representatives of each council who were members of civil society and not government representatives were invited to participate in the forum (Avelino & Santos, 2014). This structure was responsible for the elaboration and for the monitoring of the PPAs and was active until 2017, when it was interrupted during the Temer government and then resumed in 2023.

Oliveira (2013) already highlighted that the first three experiences did not follow a linear evolution, and this was even more intensified in 2019. Avelino et al. (2021) point out the absence of institutionalization as a crucial factor for the discontinuity and decline of participation in the PPA during the Bolsonaro government. The plan 2020–2023, considered the least participatory, was designed by a government marked by dismantling of participatory structures, and participation was limited to a digital public consultation with 2,100 contributions (Brasil, 2019).

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews

To reconstruct the formulation and evaluate the digital involvement during the Participatory PPA 2024–2027 process, this research analyzed the data on the profile of the participants on the Brasil Participativo platform, conducted semi-structured interviews with public servants who worked in the planning and implementation of the Participatory PPA, and made participant observation of the face-to-face mechanisms of collaboration.

The documentary analysis of primary sources (Thies, 2002) was carried out based on two reports made available by the Federal Government: (i) "Platform Report" (Brasil, 2023a); and (ii) "Social Participation Report in PPA 2024–2027" (Brasil, 2023b). The documents present general information about the PPA process; the most voted proposals for each ministry; and the profile of the participants, information presented from data obtained directly from the participation platform, through data from gov.br, and from the crossing of these data with the bases of the National Registry of Social Information, the Annual List of Social Information, and the *Cadastro Único*—Brazilian national databases of the population.

This profile data refers to gender, age group, and region. Disaggregated data and additional information from the profile of the participants were requested via the Access to Information Law (LAI) on September 15, 2023, but the response sent by the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic (SGPR) on September 28 of the same year informed that they do not have access to these data. The agency reported that data on race, disability, income range, and education are not analyzed because of the high percentage of missing information, not informed by the participants. Such information was not mandatory in the registration of citizens through gov.br. Therefore, the data obtained in these documents allowed an analysis of the profile of the participants according to the three socioeconomic dimensions available.

To complement the evaluation of digital participation in the PPA, semi-structured interviews were conducted with public servants involved in the process. These interviews were conducted online between September 2023 and January 2024, and participants' identities and positions were preserved. The working bodies of the respondents are: Directorate of Digital Participation of SGPR; Directorate of Planning and Participatory Budgeting, also of SGPR; Planning Secretariat of the Ministry of Planning and Budget (MPO); office of the MPO minister; and a Special Advisor on Social Participation and Diversity of a finalistic ministry. Regarding participant observation, this was carried out during three meetings of the Inter-Council Forum, two state plenary sessions, and preparatory meetings of one of these state plenary sessions.

Considering the participation evaluation models and the dimensions pointed to in the literature review as relevant to digital participation, a specific model is presented for the evaluation of the Brasil Participativo Platform in its use for the PPA, considering the relevance of these dimensions in the Brazilian context. Chart 3 shows the dimensions incorporated and the references used to choose each of these dimensions, and then the evaluation is presented.

CHART 3 MODEL FOR EVALUATION OF THE BRASIL PARTICIPATIVO PLATFORM

Dimension	Description	Reference
Platform design	It refers to the recognition that the architecture of the platform influences the possibilities of participation and interaction among participants.	Coelho et al. (2022)
Degree of Openness	Refers to the selection of participants for the participatory instance.	Nabatchi et al. (2015); Fung (2006)
Representativeness	It concerns ensuring that the population affected by the participatory project or plan is proportionally represented in the participants, especially considering sociodemographic characteristics.	Hofmann et al. (2020)
Inclusiveness	It refers to the opportunity and ability of all participants to contribute equally to the process, considering power imbalances and communication habits that can cause, even in contexts of assured representativeness, some voices not to be heard.	Hofmann et al. (2020)
Interaction between participants	It focuses on the way participants interact with each other in the mechanism. Whether there is debate, deliberation, negotiation, etc. It is understood that the configuration of the platform interferes with the interaction.	Nabatchi et al. (2015); Fung (2006); Coelho et al. (2022)
Decision-making power	Refers to the link between discussions and public policies or actions.	Nabatchi et al. (2015); Fung (2006); Coelho et al. (2022)

Source: Elaborated by the author.

5. THE BRASIL PARTICIPATIVO PLATFORM AND THE PPA 2024–2027

This section aims to reconstruct the participatory process of the PPA, incorporating both face-to-face mechanisms and the establishment of the Brasil Participativo Platform in its first use for the Participatory PPA. This detailing of the process is based on the literature already published on the subject and the data collected in interviews with public servants and participant observation during the PPA process.

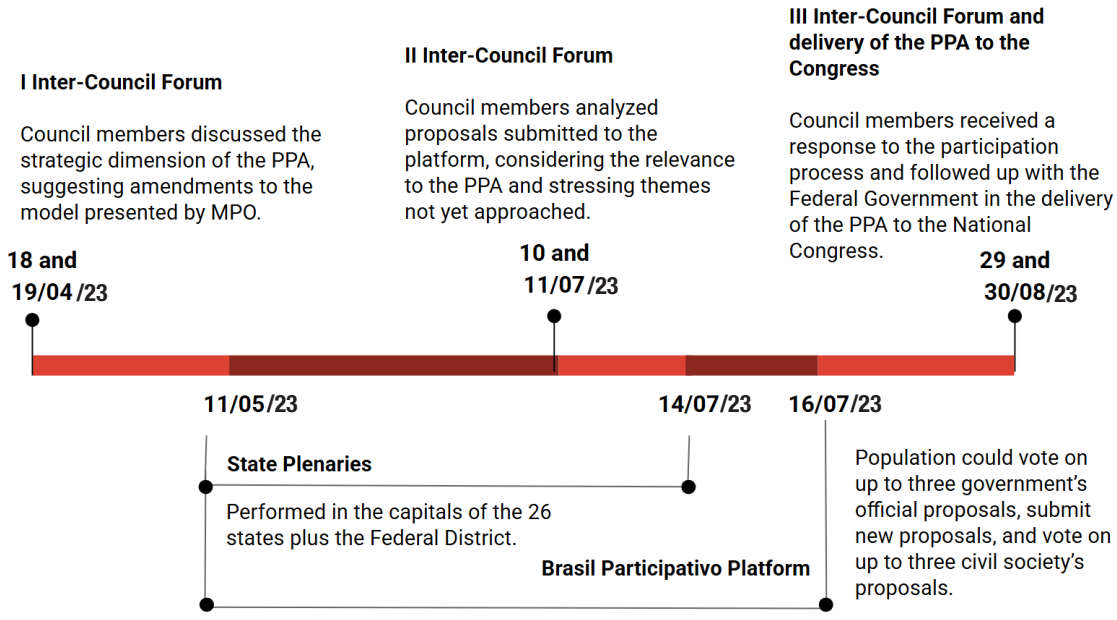
After a government marked by setbacks in participation, this returns to centrality based on a demand from civil society, still during the transitional government. Members of civil society pressured the government to put the issue on the agenda, and so a Social Participation Council was convened, which was responsible for discussing measures and actions to resume participation. There, it was decided on the structure of the National Secretariat for Social Participation within SGPR; on

the creation of a Digital Participation and Network Communication Board, an area that became responsible for the Brasil Participativo platform; and on the commitment that the preparation of the PPA would be participatory. The preparation of the PPA is the responsibility of the MPO, and a matrix of responsibilities was established with the SGPR so that it would be responsible for participation during the process.

The digital contributions to the PPA, through the Brasil Participativo Platform, took place between May 11 and July 16, 2023. Through the platform, citizens submitted and voted on up to three proposals suggested by the population. There was also a tab with official programs presented by the government, of which citizens could also prioritize up to three. The visualization of the proposals and registered programs was available to any internet user in Brazil, but participation was only carried out through an integrated login with gov.br, a Federal Government portal that gathers government services and information. At the time, there were 140 million people registered with gov.br (Comitê Gestor da Internet no Brasil, 2023), whose requirement is the need for a valid Brazilian Tax Identification Number (CPF). In total, 1,419,729 participants participated in the Participatory PPA platform, which registered 8,254 proposals and registered 1,529,826 votes—the largest participatory process ever carried out by the Brazilian Federal Government and one of the largest digital participation in the world (Bezerra & Fonseca, 2024).

The digital platform was accompanied by two other mechanisms of participation in the elaboration of the PPA 2024–2027: the Inter-council Forum, which brought together representatives of all national councils in meetings to discuss the Participatory PPA; and the State Plenaries, which took place in the capitals of all the States of the Federation and in the Federal District. The three mechanisms were designed to happen simultaneously, with the digital platform as the only channel for registration of proposals and voting. Figure 1 shows a timeline with the main dates of the three mechanisms.

FIGURE 1 PARTICIPATORY PPA 2024–2027 TIMELINE



Source: Elaborated by the author.

As shown in the figure above, the II Inter-Council Forum had more dialogue with the platform, as the council members dedicated themselves to evaluating the proposals received. Bezerra & Fonseca (2024) point out a relationship between the access peaks on the platform and the dates of the state plenary sessions, showing the integration between the mechanisms. In addition to a demonstration of how to use the platform, civil society representatives who were previously invited by the government to give a short speech on stage during state plenaries were encouraged to use this space to present proposals registered on the platform, as observed in a preparatory meeting of one of the plenary sessions. However, in a clipping of speeches analyzed by Menezes et al. (2024), only 72% referred to proposals registered on the platform, and, of these, less than half got the number of votes necessary for them to be analyzed by the government. Approximately 46% of the proposals in the clipping had less than one hundred votes.

In addition, the dialogue between face-to-face and digital participation mechanisms was not sufficient to reduce digital exclusion barriers. Jardim (2024) points out that, although the plenary sessions had a presentation on how to use the platform, in some of them there was no *Wi-Fi* available to participants, and technical support or devices to assist in the registration of proposals were discontinued throughout the plenary sessions. Participation in a state plenary was highlighted by the government as positive, as it promoted a space in which civil society representatives presented their proposals and were heard by authorities such as Ministers of State (Bezerra & Fonseca, 2024), but the perception of participants was of a non-participatory space (Carvalho et al., 2025).

6. BRASIL PARTICIPATIVO PLATFORM EVALUATION

In this section, the Brasil Participativo Platform, in its use during PPA 2024–2027, is evaluated according to the model presented in the methodology. The six dimensions will be presented according to the data collected during the research, and at the end a chart summarizes the evaluation.

The *design of the platform* comes from the choices that guided its implementation. The definition that there would be digital participation in the preparation of the PPA came both from the council established during the transitional government and from the desire of some key actors in the process, such as the National Secretary of Social Participation, to reproduce the affective memory they had in relation to Dialoga Brasil, a platform developed by the Federal Government in 2015.

The choice of the platform occurred in the first weeks of government. It was decided to replace the one in use by the previous government, Participa+ Brasil, due to limitations such as the programming language in which the platform was developed and the insufficient interaction possibilities for the digital participation design they desired, in addition to the premise of adopting a free software platform. The choice for Decidim was due to the evaluation of the platform in rankings such as the one developed by the organization People Powered[2], the functionalities of the mechanism and contextual aspects, such as the fact that the city of Barcelona, progressive and governed by people who have a good relationship with President Lula, is where the platform was created and one of its main users. In addition to these justifications presented by the interviewees, Bezerra & Fonseca (2024) add that the government also evaluated that Decidim would allow a greater interaction with the face-to-face instances of participation.

[2] Available at: https://www.peoplepowered.org/platform-ratings. Accessed on: January 11, 2025.

The implementation of the platform was carried out through a multisectoral collaboration that involved different actors. A Decentralized Execution Term was carried out with the University of Brasília (UnB), which Aguiar et al. (2024) evaluated as fundamental to the success of the project due to the expertise of the responsible team. In addition, there was involvement of the Ministry of Management and Innovation in Public Services (MGI), Banco do Brasil, Dataprev and a team of Brazilian specialists in the Decidim software, who worked free of charge to adapt the tool to the PPA because they had already done so with a city hall in the northern region of the country.

The authentication of the profiles of citizens who wanted to participate in the Brasil Participativo Platform was carried out by logging in to the gov.br portal to make the participation process safer. In addition, at the time there were 150 million Brazilians with an account on the portal. However, one of the interviewees reported that this had limited effectiveness in facilitating the process, as there are widespread difficulties in accessing gov.br, also experienced in the use of other services—and which, therefore, were outside the scope of the SGPR. This difficulty of access may have impacted the profile of the participants, something discussed in the "representativeness" dimension of this model.

Regarding the *degree of openness*, participation through the Brasil Participativo Platform was broadly selected, with the possibility of any citizen participating—if they were able to have an account with gov.br. In the design of the Participatory PPA, the digital platform was the mechanism of wide access; in the state plenary sessions the broad public could watch, but the speeches were restricted to representatives of civil society previously selected by the government; and the Inter-Council Forum was restricted to a specific audience—the representatives of the National Councils.

Due to the login link with gov.br, all proposals submitted on the Brasil Participativo Platform had an individual as author, not organizations—and anyone could submit proposals and vote. All proposals were instantly published on the platform, but proposals were moderated in a timely manner, aiming to contain speeches that hurt human rights or were unconstitutional. This moderation was carried out by an UnB team that received the proposals published through notifications on Telegram, a messaging app, and reported those publications that had hate speech or undemocratic content. In total, less than 1% of bids were reported.

Regarding *representativeness*, the three sociodemographic dimensions presented in the PPA reports and data made available via LAI are region, sex, and age group. The data show that there is an overrepresentation of women (60.72% of the participants), who represent 51.5% of the population (Census, 2022). The literature points out that processes can choose to overrepresent groups that usually have no voice in these processes, as could be the case (Hofmann et al., 2020). However, the participation of men and women was different on the platform, because women were the majority in the number of votes, but men were responsible for the registration of 50.49% of the proposals, guiding the process even though they were fewer individuals, while women registered 49.51% of the proposals. This may have explanations both in the inequalities of gender roles in Brazilian society and in the digital exclusion literature that points to the influence of sociodemographic markers on the skills and uses of ICTs.

The age group dimension also indicates a division between the profile of participants and bidders, with the age group from 25 to 44 years being the one that registered the most votes, and the age group from 45 to 65 years being the one that registered the most proposals. The distribution of PPA participants does not reflect the literature, which points to the age group as a marker of digital exclusion (Pantić et al., 2021; Schradie, 2020; Friemel, 2014)—nor does it reflect data on internet access in Brazil,

such as the ICT Households survey. One interviewee reported that there was difficulty in engaging the young population during the process, which may justify this phenomenon. Finally, the regional representation among PPA participants was similar to the distribution of the Brazilian population.

The unavailability of information on race, disability, education, and income range of the participants made it impossible to incorporate these dimensions in the analysis of representativeness. This is a limitation, both because they are dimensions pointed out by the literature as markers of digital exclusion and because they are markers of inequality in the population affected by PPA.

As for the dimension of *inclusiveness*, there were no mechanisms to deal with inequalities of power between groups such as women, who had a smaller participation in the submission of proposals, as presented. But as for the use of the tool in general, the design of the platform sought to simplify the participation experience, making it more inclusive, easier, and adapted to users with less internet domain.

Participants with little familiarity with a digital participation mechanism could consult an explanatory section on the platform that addressed the steps of digital participation, their motivations, and how those contributions would be incorporated into the PPA. The inclusion of Brazilian sign language was pointed out by interviewees as a breakthrough, but they also highlighted that they received criticism regarding accessibility by people with disabilities. In a book published by the Ministry of Planning, the inclusion of Libras and high contrast is pointed out as a challenge of the platform (Bezerra & Fonseca, 2024). However, for people who do not have easy access to the internet, the process presents a gap in measures that could ensure their inclusion. Even face-to-face interactions during state plenary sessions failed to offer *Wi-Fi* or equipment to expand access to the platform.

Regarding the *degree of interaction between participants*, a choice was made not to allow direct interaction between users on the platform, restricting it to the support of proposals. This decision was taken to protect the space from anti-democratic comments and hate speech—a concern latent in the government mainly due to the attacks that occurred earlier that year, which had digital means as a field of mobilization and expression of hate speech. But for the PPA, the impossibility of commenting on the proposals is limiting to the deliberative potential of the process, in addition to being able to result in less qualified ideas. The journey of participation in the digital platform had an individual character since the login, which was carried out with the registration of the individual in gov.br, and the possible interactions on the platform were restricted to the reading, registration, and voting of proposals.

Finally, dimension *decision-making power* deals with the link between access to the Brasil Participativo Platform and the decisions made. As for the official programs presented by the government, people's voting operated as a tool to prioritize the main ideas. Regarding the proposals of civil society, all proposals with more than 300 votes were sent to the competent ministries to include them in the PPA or write a return to the bidder explaining why the proposal would not be incorporated into the document. Therefore, citizen participation worked as a way to send proposals to the government and signal priorities.

From these six dimensions, it is possible to have an evaluation of the participatory nature of the digital platform, answering the research question. Chart 4 summarizes the main findings.

CHART 4 SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE EVALUATION OF THE BRASIL PARTICIPATIVO PLATFORM

Dimension	Main findings
Platform design	The choice for the Decidim platform was based on its positive evaluation in rankings, functionalities, and political context. The project involved multi-sector collaboration with the University of Brasília and other bodies and aimed to integrate digital participation with face-to-face instances.
Degree of Openness	Participation was broad, allowing the participation of any citizen with registration on the gov.br portal, which requires Brazilian Tax Identification Number (CPF).
Representativeness	There was a greater participation of women (60.72%), but they were a minority in the registration of proposals. The age group from 25 to 44 years old was the one that voted the most and the group from 45 to 65 years old was the one that registered the most proposals. The regional representation was consistent with the Brazilian population.
Inclusiveness	The platform sought to simplify participation, with features such as accessible explanations and support in Libras. However, there were limitations to ensure inclusion of people with disabilities, and difficulties for those who did not have easy access to the internet.
Interaction between participants	The platform did not allow direct interaction between participants, to avoid hate speech. The interaction was limited to reading, submitting and voting on proposals, which restricted the deliberative potential of the process.
Decision-making power	Participation in the platform influenced the prioritization of the most voted ideas, and civil society proposals with more than 300 votes were sent to the ministries for inclusion or feedback, functioning to send priorities to the government.

Source: Elaborated by the author.

7. DISCUSSION

The resumption of the process of preparing the Participatory PPA and the evaluation of digital participation reveal how the design of participation impacts its results, in line with what the literature presents (Nabatchi et al., 2015). Despite a moment of dismantling of participation at the national level, the initiative had record adherence of the population, and this reach added to the robustness of the participation structure seems to indicate the insertion of this initiative at a time of resumption of participation after the dismantling period.

The information presented in the section "The Brasil Participativo Platform and the PPA 2024–2027" demonstrates that all the choices made in this process, from the very premise of a Participatory PPA to the arrangement of the mechanisms and the centrality of a digital tool, derive either from organized civil society or from the public managers who participated in this elaboration. This corroborates the argument of Abers et al. (2014) when they mention that in the first two Lula governments the institutionalization of participation came mainly through the opening of dialogue and positions for people with a trajectory in social movements.

The results reveal that the design of the three participation mechanisms, focusing on the digital platform as the only channel for formalizing proposals and indicating preferences, influenced the profile of the participants. The combination of face-to-face participation mechanisms with the digital tool may have represented a decrease in the digital exclusion expected for the process, but the absence of measures that formalized face-to-face participation represented a limitation on the effectiveness of these participatory spaces. This is evidenced both by the low number of votes in the proposals presented in plenary (Menezes et al., 2024) and by the profile of the participants, widely explored in the "representativeness" dimension.

The arrangement of three mechanisms also made an interesting contribution by offering different forms of interaction between participants. While the design of the digital tool provided only the registration, reading, and voting of proposals—which, in the view of Teixeira (2020), configures a listening space and is discussed in the dimension of interaction between the participants—in the plenary sessions there was dialogue between some participants and in the Inter-Council Forums, deliberation.

Finally, the model adopted proved to be adequate to assess digital participation in contexts marked by digital exclusion, such as Brazil. The model covers the design of the tool, the profile, and interaction of the participants, and the link between participation and decision-making. This combination of classical dimensions of the literature with dimensions necessary for the analysis of the digital environment provides a complete model that, as a next step, can be adopted in the evaluation of other experiences to record their suitability.

8. CONCLUSION

This work reconstructed and evaluated the digital participation in the elaboration of the Multiannual Plan for the quadrennium 2024–2027 of the Federal Government of Brazil, with a focus on the Brasil Participativo Platform. This was the first edition of a national digital participatory process of such proportions, and, in general, a success of the process was observed in terms of expanding the number of participants, an expectation already foreseen since the concept of digital participation. Just over 30,000 people attended the state plenary sessions of the Participatory PPA, while the digital platform was accessed by more than four million users and had almost 1.5 million participants.

The methods used in this research acted in a complementary way, as the data revealed the profile and behavior of the participants on the platform, the interviews brought the choices of the formulators of this design, and the participant observation revealed the practical experiences of the collaborators. This diversity of methods allowed a record of the process of establishing the Participatory PPA, which works as historical documentation and potential inspiration for other cases of participatory processes and allowed a more accurate evaluation of the participation process—connected with practical experience.

The platform stood out for its degree of openness, allowing any citizen with a gov.br account to participate, submit proposals and vote, which expanded access to participation. However, some limitations in terms of representation were observed, especially related to the presence of women and specific age groups, in addition to the lack of data on other relevant social dimensions, such as race and income, which could provide a more complete view of digital inclusion. The profile of the participants reflected some of the dimensions of the digital exclusion and represented inequality in

the type of interaction according to the group, such as women, who had a significant participation in votes, but not in proposal registrations.

Despite efforts to ensure an inclusive experience, such as adapting the platform to the use of Libras and simplifying the participation process, challenges regarding digital accessibility have persisted, especially for those without easy access to the internet or with little familiarity with digital technologies. In addition, the choice to restrict interactions between participants, although it was a security measure against hate speech, limited the deliberative potential of the process, preventing a richer exchange of ideas between citizens.

This study contributes to academia and practice by offering a detailed assessment of Brazil's largest digital participation experience, providing inputs for planning upcoming digital participation actions, and going beyond the enthusiasm generated by the resumption of collaboration in a context of crisis. In addition, the consolidation of a digital process evaluation model that contemplates different dimensions allows processes to be examined according to the characteristics crucial for their critical understanding. Future research can apply this model in evaluating other digital participation initiatives to understand how changes in one dimension, such as platform design, can interfere with the different dimensions.

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Luiza Jardim: Conceptualization (Leadership); Data curation (Leadership); Formal analysis (Leadership); Funding acquisition (Leadership); Investigation (Leadership); Methodology (Leadership); Project administration (Leadership); Validation (Leadership); Visualization (Leadership); Writing - original draft, review & editing (Leadership).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The entire dataset that supports the results of this study is available upon request to the corresponding author [Luiza Jardim]. The dataset is not publicly available due to the protection of information that may compromise the privacy of the people interviewed in the survey.

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