

Citizen participation and public value creation in Latin American local governments: A systematic review

Participación ciudadana y creación de valor público en gobiernos locales latinoamericanos: una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

This systematic review examines how citizen participation contributes to the creation of public value in local governments in Latin America between 2023 and 2025. Following the PRISMA 2020 protocol and the PEO framework (Population: Latin American local governments; Exposure: participation mechanisms; Outcomes: dimensions of public value), 342 records were initially identified in academic databases such as SciELO and Scopus, of which 21 studies were selected for analysis and discussion. The results show that mechanisms such as participatory budgeting and sectoral or territorial councils strengthen the effectiveness and legitimacy of local governance, promoting territorial equity when spatial and prioritization criteria are incorporated. Although digital participation expands these possibilities, its hybrid design is crucial to avoid exclusions and biases. However, systemic barriers persist, such as regulatory misalignment, capacity deficits, representation gaps, and a lack of clarity in agendas and timelines. In conclusion, citizen participation can generate public value if mechanisms are designed to address its multiple dimensions, drawing on best governance practices in Latin America to foster effective co-production and establish feedback processes that benefit citizen well-being.

Keywords: citizen participation, public value, IAP2, Arnstein ladder.

Resumen

La presente revisión sistemática examina cómo la participación ciudadana contribuye a la creación de valor público en gobiernos locales de América Latina entre 2023 y 2025. Siguiendo el protocolo PRISMA 2020 y el esquema PEO (Población: gobiernos locales latinoamericanos; Exposición: mecanismos de participación; Resultados: dimensiones de valor público), se identificaron inicialmente 342 registros en bases académicas como Scielo y Scopus, de los cuales 21 estudios fueron seleccionados para análisis y discusión. Los resultados muestran que mecanismos como presupuestos participativos y consejos sectoriales o territoriales fortalecen la eficacia y legitimidad de la gobernanza local, favoreciendo la equidad territorial cuando se incorporan criterios espaciales y de priorización. Aunque la participación digital amplía estas posibilidades, su diseño híbrido es crucial para evitar exclusiones y sesgos. Sin embargo, persisten barreras sistémicas como la desalineación normativa,

déficit en capacidades, vacíos de representación y la falta de claridad en agendas y plazos. En conclusión, la participación ciudadana puede generar valor público si se diseñan mecanismos que aborden sus múltiples dimensiones, tomando como referencia las buenas prácticas de gobernanza en América Latina para fomentar una coproducción efectiva y establecer procesos de retroalimentación que beneficien el bienestar ciudadano.

Palabras clave: participación ciudadana, valor público, IAP2, escalera de Arnstein.

Introduction

Citizen participation at the local level within Latin American governments has emerged as a strategic tool for generating valuable public outcomes. Not only does it enhance the quality and relevance of services, but it also strengthens institutional legitimacy and trust, fosters innovation, and promotes equity in decision-making. As a result, participation is no longer regarded merely as a normative practice. Recent studies indicate that mechanisms like participatory budgeting in cities such as Mexico City and Porto Alegre (Ochoa & Méndez, 2023; Müller & Fedozzi, 2024), municipal councils in Brazil and Bahia (OPS, 2024), and social audits in Bogotá and other regions of Colombia contribute to citizen empowerment, effective social control, and improved decision-making quality when regulations and capabilities are well-structured at the municipal level (Roncancio et al., 2025).

This article, grounded in the public value framework proposed by Mark H. Moore, posits that value creation is achieved by aligning three strategic dimensions: the generation of valuable social outcomes, the legitimate support of political and citizen actors, and the operational capacity to implement those decisions (Moore, 1995). In this context, citizen participation in Latin American local governments transcends the mere expression of “voice and vote,” evolving into a collaborative process that produces sustainable and legitimized outcomes. Consequently, this review approaches participation not as an end in itself, but as a means to create public value, legitimize decisions, and ensure their implementation.

With regard to citizen participation, both quality and intensity are distinguished, referencing the Ladder of Citizen Participation developed by Arnstein (1969), which differentiates between non-participation (absenteeism), symbolic inclusion (tokenism), and genuine citizen power (control). This framework allows for an understanding of how power is distributed and the extent to which citizens effectively influence decision-making. Additionally, the role of the public is considered at each stage of the participatory process, as defined by the IAP2 spectrum (inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower), a widely used practical framework in public administration for designing coherent processes that align objectives with resources (Arnstein, 1969).

However, despite a general consensus regarding its importance, the literature reveals fragmentation characterized by isolated case studies and empirical, institutional, and organizational inequalities across countries and sectors. Uncertainties persist regarding whether the mode of participation (in-person, digital, mixed) generates a specific dimension of value. The absence of systematic comparative syntheses limits the possibility of extracting transferable generalizations. For instance, in Chile and Colombia, digital participation offers advantages, although it also presents access biases and challenges in integrating citizen will into final decisions (Aguirre et al., 2022). Furthermore, in Chile, municipal implementation demonstrates disparities contingent on institutionalization, continuity, and leadership (Orozco et al., 2023), whereas in Brazil, normative differences impact decision-making capacity and the legitimacy of participation.

To overcome these limitations, this systematic review synthesizes evidence on how and under what conditions various participation mechanisms, classified by type (in-person, digital, mixed) and intensity (according to Arnstein and IAP2), contribute to the creation of public value in local Latin American governments. A total of 21 studies were analyzed following the PRISMA 2020 protocol, which ensures a comprehensive, transparent, and rigorous synthesis of available evidence.

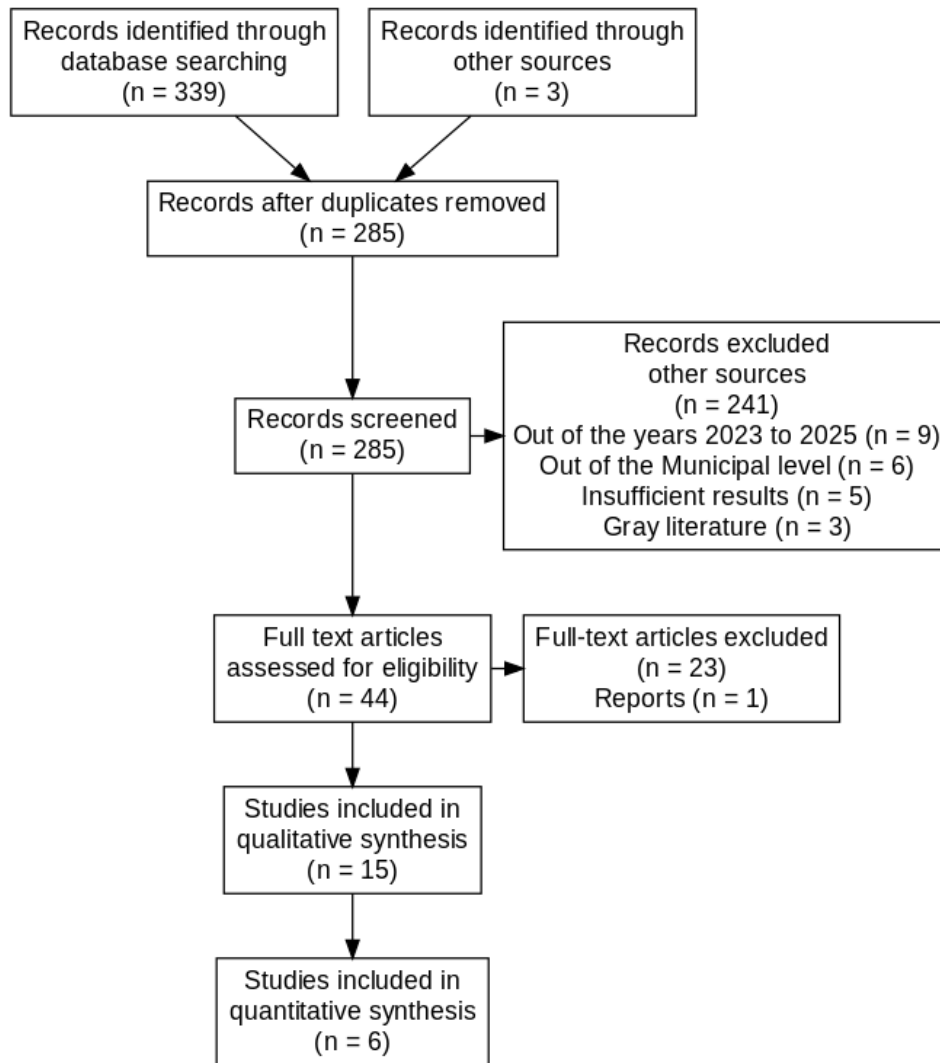
Methodology

This systematic review employed a comparative qualitative approach, primarily aimed at explaining how and under what conditions citizen participation in local governments in Latin America contributes to public value creation. It was framed within Moore’s public value theory, the Ladder of Citizen Participation, and the IAP2 Spectrum, opting for a standardized tabulation of effects alongside a narrative synthesis based on dimensions of value. To ensure clarity and reproducibility, the PRISMA 2020 protocol was adhered to, identifying studies aligned with the research objectives through a systematic search in databases such as Scielo, Redalyc, and Scopus, among others. Boolean operators “AND” were utilized to combine terms related to mechanisms, territorial scales, and outcomes, yielding an initial total of 342 articles.

Subsequently, inclusion criteria were applied, prioritizing original articles with empirical data published between 2023 and 2025, set in local contexts in Latin America, preferably in Spanish, Portuguese, and English, explicitly linked to public value outcomes. Conversely, duplicates, studies outside the specified temporal range, those not corresponding to the local (municipal or regional) level in Latin America, and works lacking sufficient empirical data or a clear connection to value dimensions were excluded. Ultimately, based on these criteria, 21 studies remained for detailed review and analysis, as illustrated in the subsequent diagram.

This robust methodology ensures an exhaustive, rigorous, and transparent analysis of the available evidence regarding citizen participation and its contribution to public value in local Latin American governments.

Figure 1
PRISMA flow diagram



Results

The results of this systematic review integrate evidence from 21 studies that, despite displaying notable diversity in cases and methodological heterogeneity, allow for a comprehensive understanding of how citizen participation operates in local governments across Latin America and its impact on public value creation. Due to the variety of designs and contexts, a meta-analysis was not feasible; therefore, a standardized tabulation was employed to synthesize the main findings, prioritizing comparability among Latin American municipalities. This organizational strategy facilitates the identification of common patterns and significant differences regarding aspects such as participatory design, citizen appropriation, institutionalization, leadership, digital inclusion,

transparency, and decision-making capacity. In this way, both advances and limitations are highlighted, providing insights into not only effective practices but also the challenges that local governments face in ensuring meaningful, equitable, and sustainable participation based on the theorized dimensions of public value. This comparative perspective enhances clarity and coherence in the analysis, enriching the understanding of the role that citizen participation plays in the local governance of the region.

Table 1
Analysis of identified research articles

No.	Author(s)	Main Conclusion	Country of Publication	Database
1	Ochoa et al. (2023)	Participatory budgeting in Mexico City exhibits greater appropriation when co-design is promoted; in contrast, induced designs limit citizen empowerment.	Mexico	SciELO
2	Sanhueza & García-Moreno (2025)	Although the legal framework in Chile is uniform, municipal implementation varies significantly; institutionalization and leadership are key factors for effectiveness.	Chile	SciELO
3	Orozco et al., (2023)	E-participation expands the reach and traceability of citizen participation but requires measures to mitigate biases and ensure proper integration into the decision-making cycle.	Chile/Colombia	Scopus
4	Gurza et al. (2023)	The normative regime conditions both the dissemination and operation of municipal councils, directly affecting their decision-making capacity.	Brazil	SciELO
5	Moreira et al, (2025)	Gaps between formalization and participatory legitimacy reduce the effective incidence of municipal health councils.	Brazil	SciELO
6	Cavalcante et al., 2023	Delays in budgetary schedules limit social control and deliberative incidence; it is recommended to align deadlines and enhance transparency in processes.	Brazil	SciELO
7	Vázquez (2023)	Municipal transparency and accountability in Michoacán are heterogeneous; institutionalizing practices is crucial to improving these aspects.	Mexico	SciELO
8	Sánchez-Ramos (2023)	Open government actions at the local level are associated with better performance, although the institutionalization of these practices is still nascent.	Mexico	SciELO
9	Agüero & Montero (2023)	Citizen participation through social audits, such as citizen oversight in Bogotá, positively influences urban planning when there is real access to information.	Colombia	SciELO
10	Espinoza & Pico (2025)	Citizen participation is constrained by various factors that diminish its benefits for the general population.	Ecuador	SciELO
11	Palumbo et al. (2022)	In Lima, citizen involvement in public decision-making is limited, and the available participation mechanisms are perceived as ineffective.	Peru	SciELO

12	Carmo et al. (2022)	In the health sector, the involvement of multiple actors aligned plans with the actual needs of the territory; however, the process faced challenges, reinforcing the idea that health is a collective construct.	Brazil	SciELO
13	Bazurto & Saltos (2024)	Gaps exist in the inclusion of citizen proposals, weaknesses in communication platforms, and limited access to budgetary information, negatively impacting participation.	Ecuador	SciELO
14	Bogo (2025)	For participatory budgeting to yield equitable and sustainable effects, strong institutional and political support is necessary, along with a design that incorporates spatial criteria and local capacities.	Brazil	SciELO
15	Muñetón et al. (2023)	A multidimensional indicator is proposed and applied to evaluate the quality of citizen participation, operationalizing dimensions such as territorial conditions, actors, practices, and outcomes.	Colombia	SciELO
16	Vargas & Arrieta (2024)	In Colombia, issues arise in appointing replacements on councils, with representation gaps due to a lack of knowledge about territorial entities and insufficient training and handover protocols.	Colombia	SciELO
17	Rodríguez & Bass (2023)	In Mexico, gaps in regulation affect the municipal level of citizen participation instruments.	Mexico	SciELO
18	Alcantar (2024)	A positive association exists between municipal revenue and electoral participation, with spatial effects among neighboring municipalities.	Mexico	Scopus
19	Méndez (2024)	Citizen participation fails to adequately respond to the real needs of communities and affected territories, showing limitations and deficiencies in the process.	Chile	SciELO
20	Herrera et al. (2024)	Implementing a digital governance model that promotes active and effective citizen participation in municipal decision-making processes is essential.	Peru	SciELO
21	Torres (2023)	The absence of auxiliary boards resulted in negative outcomes, deteriorating governance conditions in the studied context.	Mexico	SciELO

Discussion

The collected evidence demonstrates a consensus that mechanisms for citizen participation possess the potential to generate public value, contingent upon the presence of clear rules, adequate operational capacities, and political backing within local governments. In these contexts, decisions and services significantly improve, being perceived with legitimacy, trust, genuine inclusion, and particularly, transparency. Conversely, designs limited to formalities or those deficient in information reduce citizen involvement and, consequently, the generated value.

Various studies conducted in cities such as Mexico City and Portoviejo (Ecuador) illustrate that when citizen participation is integrated alongside open information, decision-making directly benefits the community (Ochoa et al., 2023; Bazurto & Saltos, 2024). Moreover, in terms of theoretical and practical aspects linked to territorial justice, it is argued that participatory budgeting only yields equitable and sustainable effects when backed by political-institutional support and spatial criteria embedded in its design (Bogo, 2025). At the level of councils, such as those for health and planning, institutionalization and normative standardization facilitate operation and

dissemination; however, they do not replace the necessity for technical capacity and synchronized timelines to enable effective social control (Cavalcante et al., 2023; Vargas & Arrieta, 2024).

Regarding effectiveness and collaboration, positive correlations have been documented between citizen participation and governmental performance. For instance, in municipal finance, revenue collection is closely linked to electoral participation (Alcantar, 2024). In public health, the integration of multiple actors in El Salvador aligned plans with actual needs, highlighting health as a collective process (Carmo et al., 2022). However, budgetary delays limit deliberation in other contexts (Cavalcante et al., 2023). In urban planning, structured participatory practices, even digital ones, enhance process quality in Chile and Colombia, although their scope depends on political will (Orozco et al., 2023; Méndez, 2024).

In terms of transparency, the case of Michoacán, Mexico, displays heterogeneous progress, with citizen oversight being crucial for credibility (Vázquez, 2023). Open government initiatives in Mexico are also associated with improved performance, although institutionalization remains nascent (Sánchez-Ramos, 2023). In Bogotá, social audits reveal that citizen oversight impacts urban development when there is genuine access to information (Agüero & Montero, 2023). However, representation issues in territorial councils in Colombia undermine their legitimacy and impact (Vargas & Arrieta, 2024). The elimination of auxiliary boards in Mexico has negatively affected governance and institutional stability (Rodríguez & Bass, 2023).

From the theoretical perspective of inclusion, equity, and participation quality (Arnstein/IAP2), the results indicate that participatory levels that involve and collaborate generate greater public value than those limited to mere information or consultation. To reinforce equity, it is essential to bridge inclusion gaps, enhance communication platforms, and ensure access to budgetary information (Bazurto & Saltos, 2024). Social justice requires the integration of spatial criteria and capacities tailored to local contexts, thus consolidating genuine value creation (Moreira et al., 2025). The proposal for multidimensional indicators to evaluate participatory and deliberative quality, as seen in Medellín, offers replicable tools for measuring actual incidence beyond mere active participation (Muñetón et al., 2023).

Regarding digital and hybrid participation, these modalities broaden reach and traceability but carry exclusion risks if accessible and well-integrated strategies are not implemented in decision-making (Orozco et al., 2023). Models of municipal digital governance can enhance effectiveness if they are anchored in appropriate processes and timelines, rather than merely in technologies (Herrera et al., 2025). Conversely, cases in Lima and Ecuador reveal limitations due to a lack of institutional coordination and prior preparedness, demonstrating that technology alone does not guarantee enabling participation (Palumbo et al., 2022; Espinoza & Pico, 2025).

Finally, concerning the systemic conditions affecting citizen participation and public value creation, two crucial levels emerge. At the institutional level, variability in the implementation and scope of participation under the same legal framework is attributed to factors such as leadership and normativity (Sanhueza & García-Moreno, 2024; Gurza et al., 2023). At the organizational level, temporal disalignment and inadequate timely information limit deliberation and social control (Cavalcante et al., 2023). Community-level issues, such as the disappearance of participatory structures, like certain auxiliary boards, negatively impact local governance (Torres, 2023).

The findings from this systematic review suggest four strategic lines to maximize the creation of public value through citizen participation: 1) Design collaborative mechanisms with spatial criteria and delegable power (Bogo, 2025; Ochoa et al., 2023); 2) Synchronize calendars and technical capacities to integrate planning and deliberation (Cavalcante et al., 2023; Carmo et al., 2022); 3) Strengthen transparency through traceability and open data to sustain trust and social control (Vázquez, 2023; Agüero & Montero, 2023; Sánchez-Ramos, 2023); 4) Adopt and adapt multidimensional metrics to evaluate deliberative quality and actual incidence, linking them to tangible public policy outcomes (Muñetón et al., 2023; Alcantar, 2024).

Conclusions

Due to the heterogeneity of the evidence, characterized by a predominance of qualitative studies and a sectoral concentration primarily in health, urban planning, and participatory budgeting, biases in publication towards innovative experiences have been identified, alongside considerable variability in outcome measures across countries. It is concluded that citizen participation contributes to the generation of public value when its incidence is effective and institutionalized, as participation mechanisms operate optimally only when supported by clear regulations, adequate resources, consolidated technical capacities, and stable political backing. This indicates that mere formality does not ensure tangible results.

The configuration of these mechanisms becomes particularly relevant when decisions and allocations are deployed at levels of collaboration and empowerment, in accordance with the IAP2 Spectrum or the concept of "delegated power" provided by Arnstein's ladder. In this sense, a comprehensive governance design that

articulates various participatory mechanisms can positively influence territorial equity, provided that continuous feedback throughout the process is ensured.

Moreover, the openness of budgetary information and monitoring of local government performance constitute essential enabling conditions for citizen participation. Additionally, political impetus to broaden participation through digitalization represents a significant opportunity, although it is critical to consider factors such as technological accessibility, the implementation of appropriate measurement mechanisms, and, above all, the effective feedback of results within digital governance models.

The evaluation of participation must transcend simple attendance, focusing instead on quality and actual incidence, aspects that are crucial for the creation of public value, as evidenced by empirical studies linking citizen participation positively with fiscal performance.

Overall, citizen participation translates into public value when local governments promote mechanisms designed to achieve effective incidence, manage transparently through open and accessible data, strengthen technical capacities, and continuously evaluate the quality and impacts of participation. Lastly, it is recommended that future research prioritize quasi-experimental designs that allow for comparisons among municipalities, incorporate equity indicators, and standardize public value metrics to facilitate the adaptability of findings to diverse international contexts.

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