Do institutions promote democratic deepening or is it a previously-organized civil society that accounts for such deepening? *Bootstrapping Democracy* engages a polarized debate between those who define democracy as a set of representative institutions (aggregative theories fixated on elections, individual focused, empirically oriented); and those who define democracy as a set of qualitative practices that approximate normative ideals of democratic opinion-and-will formation (deliberative theories, strong on theory but weak on empirical testing). Past empirical studies have not been able to isolate participation’s specific impact on how it makes a difference, nor to examine the relationship between participatory practices and state institutions.

Gianpaolo Baiocci, Patrick Heller, and Marcelo Silva report on a complex qualitative study of four pairs of similarly-sized cities in Brazil. In each pair, one city experienced the process of participatory budgeting (PB) while the other did not. Each pair was drawn from a different region to capture Brazil’s socioeconomic and political diversity. PB started in Brazil in the 1980s to promote a direct role for organized citizens in shaping the budgets of their towns and cities. It was Brazil’s Workers Party (PT) that first promoted and implemented the PB process. Understood as both outcome and starting point of development, bootstrapping democracy is the dialectical process by which organized collective agency promotes institutional reform, which in turn has a feedback effect of enhancing civil-society organization and empowerment: how do civil-society organizations become empowered to get invited into state institutions so as to help shape them while retaining their autonomy from the state? In turn, how has this interaction of state and civil society effected changes in governance and local democracy?

The PB process addresses the concerns of both institutionalists and associationalists by giving citizens a direct role, introducing rule-bound procedures, improving transparency, and incentivizing social agency with tangible returns to grass-roots participation. *Bootstrapping Democracy* makes three main contributions, offering (1) new evidence on the impact of institutional reforms promoted from the bottom up on civil society’s capacity to influence democratic governance effectively, (2) new insights into the state of actually-existing civil society, and (3) a typology of specific configurations of civil and political society and their impacts on democratization.

The authors make an analytical distinction between “modes of civil society engagement” and its “capacity for self-organization.” Of their eight cities, four introduced PB, and four did not. Among the latter, though, there was Diadema, an already “mobilized democracy,” which is the deeper form of democracy discussed in this book. The other three cities without PB presented “little evidence of change” (p. 16). One crucial finding: “whether civil society had the capacity for autonomous organizing before the reforms is crucial to the type of democratic regime that emerged” (p. 17). Against civil-society boosterism, however, the authors argue for the need to take institutional reform more seriously to explain the relational configuration of civil society and state: “simple, blueprint, or ‘best practices’ replications of Participatory Budgeting models are unlikely to succeed” (p. 17). Clear specification must be given on how subordinate classes become empowered and autonomous from the state.

Actually-existing civil societies harbor association and dialogue, but they are “also shaped by power and inequality” (p. 22). Pragmatically this means that we need to understand that civil-society organizations can just as well become “vehicles of clientelistic control and hierarchy” as “schools of democracy” (p. 22). Put in Gramscian terms, civil society is both the terrain of legitimation and contestation—the terrain where consent to the dominant order is organized, but also where new claims that challenge established hegemony emerge.
In Brazil, propositional practices from civil society were grounded in ideologies of the 1970s and 1980s, demanded dialogue with the state, challenged limits of representative democracy by calling for participatory reforms, and expanded visions of traditional rights. In short, they promoted participatory democracy while directly engaging with the state (p. 44). One of the most notable changes in Brazil’s democratic transition, expressed in its 1988 constitution, “was the degree to which it sought to decentralize and empower local democratic government” (p. 45). Local governments “became free to institutionalize channels of direct popular participation in public life” (p. 47). Participation thus became “central to a strategy of good governance” rather than a destabilizing factor for bourgeois politics (p. 55).

Bootstrapping Democracy’s substantive key findings are as follows. Participatory budgeting resulted in increased municipal spending on health, improved fiscal standing of municipalities, improvement of service provision in areas like access to drinking water, improvement in human development outcomes such as poverty and school enrollment rates, and improvements in the quality and inclusiveness of governance (pp. 56–57). Variation depended on civil-society strength.

Noninstitutionalized empowerment continued in Diadema, “where citizens have significant voice but largely through contentious politics” rather than an institutionalized PB (p. 66). On the contrary, in Maua, “the adoption of PB resulted in a form of dependent participation that led to a weakening of the agency of civil society” (p. 66). This is the only pair of cities where the PB city fared worse than the non-PB case, lending credit to Diadema’s autonomist route to empowerment.

Crucially, though, in all PB cases “…poorer areas received a greater share of resources,” thus contributing to lowering inequality (p. 84). The actually-instituted PB process in the four cases “has in effect expanded the demos” (p. 103). Yet, mobilized civil society also implied some exclusion of the unorganized (p. 105). Furthermore, “the extent to which civil society had the capacity for autonomous organizing before the introduction of reforms makes a measurable difference to the type of state/society relations that emerge” (p. 107). With this finding we may conclude that the capacity for self-organization is the key independent variable in institutional innovation. We need further research into how such empowerment is obtained.

One of the main challenges for civil-society organizations lies in becoming government. In all cases, Workers Party victories led many civil-society leaders to move into city hall, “initially weakening organizations” (p. 81). The problem with this transfer is that civil society may become vacated.

My critiques regard the long concluding chapter. The Brazilian case is compared with two other highly inequitable societies: Kerala in India and South Africa. This adds wider relevance to the book, but the concluding chapter was not the place to do it. It would have been better to wrap up some theoretical discussions started earlier in the book (e.g., institutional innovation). A serious inconsistency was introducing the concept of “social capital,” which does not belong in this book. This concept promotes an individualistic view of organization, favored by institutions like the World Bank; which is at great odds with the collectivist perspective of associationalism presented in the book.

Notwithstanding these limitations, Bootstrapping Democracy is an excellent contribution to democratic theory. Its strongly sociological research design skillfully adjudicates between institutional and associational perspectives. While the authors clearly favor associationalism as the indispensable ingredient, they also acknowledge how essential it is to engage with the state to introduce institutional innovation in order to bootstrap democracy into a virtuous circle toward its deepening.