

Reflections on Participatory Budgeting in New York City

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ABSTRACT

In the past two decades, participatory budgeting has arisen throughout the world, most recently taking root in municipalities across the United States. This innovation in democratic governance has garnered considerable public support as it has the potential to reinvigorate civic participation, modernize local government administration, and foster social equity in the provision of public goods and services. In this essay, I posit that the success of participatory budgeting in the United States will depend heavily on the ability of public officials and administrators to tailor the implementation of this process to the contextual realities facing American cities, particularly with regards to patterns of public participation. Only by being cognizant of such patterns and adapting programs to these realities can public officials and administrators ensure that participatory budgeting accomplishes its original laudable goals, especially with regards to the advancement of social equity.

Key Words: public participation, deliberative democracy, civic engagement, collaborative governance, social equity, innovation

Introduction

In the past two decades, participatory budgeting, a tool aimed at facilitating public participation and deliberation in the budgetary process, has arisen, taking root in the governments of various nations and most recently across cities in the United States. This innovation in democratic governance has garnered considerable public support where it has been implemented, as it has the potential to deliver many benefits to local governments. For instance, participatory budgeting has the potential to reinvigorate civic participation, modernize local government administration, and foster social equity in the provision of public goods and services (Shah, 2007; Wampler and Hartz-karp, 2012; Wampler, 2012). Indeed, participatory budgeting has the potential to address and alleviate some of the more pressing problems in democracy facing local governments today.

Nevertheless, this road to progress in democratic governance needs to be taken carefully. Both theoretical and empirical research support the utilization of participatory budgeting, showing that the process can indeed act as a governance tool that delivers on the aforementioned promises with regards to governance improvements. But research findings also suggest that the ability to actualize these promises when utilizing this process in the United States will depend on the administrative ability to tailor the implementation of participatory budgeting to the contextual realities facing the localities where the process is implemented. Recognizing these contexts and adapting participatory budgeting programs and their related support services to these contexts is

critical, lest this new participatory governance approach end in working against the actualization of the original and laudable goals of participatory budgeting as set forth in its original implementation in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Experiencing Participatory Budgeting

As a resident of Brooklyn, NY, I have been able to observe the development of participatory budgeting from both a theoretical and practical perspective. My firsthand experience with participatory budgeting began in the summer of 2012, the second year when this process was implemented in selected neighborhoods across New York City. As an academic, I have written about and studied public participation in government; therefore, my interest was already piqued with regards to the subject matter when I learned about the start of a pilot project in participatory budgeting in New York City. Participatory budgeting was introduced in New York City in 2011, when the Participatory Budgeting Project, a nonprofit group devoted to expanding the use of this participatory governance approach, worked with New York City Council members to initiate a pilot project in four city council districts. While participatory budgeting was not available in the council district where I resided in 2011, by 2012, I had moved into Park Slope, Brooklyn, one of the council districts where participatory budgeting had been initiated in 2011 and was being reintroduced in 2012.

Out of a personal interest in the subject matter and a desire to become more civically involved in my new neighborhood, I became involved in participatory budgeting in the summer of 2012. I began my involvement by attending a neighborhood assembly meeting in the summer of 2012, an open community meeting where residents are introduced to the process of participatory budgeting, followed by a variety of brainstorming and public input sessions where attendees have an opportunity to propose projects that could become subject for a public vote later in the year's participatory budgeting cycle. At this open meeting, I was able to meet with fellow community residents as we collaboratively brainstormed on possible community improvement projects that could qualify for public funding through this process. The meeting also provided an opportunity for residents with a greater interest in participatory budgeting to become more deeply involved through involvement as a budget delegate, a position that is central for the operation of the participatory budgeting process and allows for a more active role for participants throughout the participatory budgeting cycle. I volunteered as a budget delegate and requested to work on the public safety committee, a policy topic I have long had a personal interest in as a lifelong resident of New York City. I was appointed to the position and worked collaboratively with several other budget delegates as we considered and processed ideas posed by community residents through various forums, including community meetings and online internet submission of ideas.

I once again volunteered and was able to experience firsthand the participatory budgeting process in the 39th Council District of New York City throughout the 2013 – 2014 participatory budgeting project cycle. Throughout my time serving as a budget delegate, I found the process enjoyable, as I was able to meet and socialize with community residents and work collaboratively with them developing proposals for capital improvement projects that could benefit the community. I had the fortune to enjoy the immaterial benefits Gilman noted in her

article on participatory budgeting, the sense of community inclusion and deeper, more organic relationships with my fellow participants, elected officials, and other neighborhood residents (Russon Gilman, 2012). As I worked with budget delegates on developing project proposals, I noted how the process could indeed strengthen one's sense of commitment to the civic community and strengthen one's concern for the greater public good (Benhabib, 1996; Fung and Wright, 2003; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). The experience was a first-hand experience of street-level democracy in action, as residents could propose, debate, and finally vote on funding for public projects that could benefit the community, unfettered by the qualifying mechanisms and filters of formal municipal legislatures. But in addition to my role as a participant in the process, I was still a professor, and I also found my involvement in the process to also be an opportunity for theorizing with regards to the effectiveness of this new governance process.

As a result of my work as a citizen participant in this process, I found myself developing insights based on my a priori reading and writing on the subject matter as well as on my observations of the process. I found that my personal experience working on participatory budgeting committees over this two-year period, along with my personal interactions with people involved in the process including fellow budget delegates as well as committee facilitators and other neighborhood public participants, were providing me insights that warranted closer personal reflection. Moreover, the various news media and evaluation reports released by sponsoring not-for-profit agencies gave me additional insights and sources of empirical data that I could use to corroborate some of my reflections. Taken together, I found that the knowledge and experience I gained serving as a budget delegate allowed me to reflect on my experience in a way that enabled me to form the findings included in this case study report.

Active and Fluid Collaboration

While this was my first time being involved in participatory budgeting, I had some professional experience with participatory governance, having participated in such processes in the past. In my college years, I interned in both the New York State legislature and in the United States Congress, giving me some exposure to participatory governance as it occurs through our state and federal legislative bodies. And prior to working in academia, I worked as a legislative policy analyst for the New York City Council, New York City's local legislature, and therefore had some familiarity with participatory governance as it occurred through the legislative committee hearings that I organized and facilitated as a city council staffer.

So I was surprised when I became involved as a budget delegate at how different my experience was from my prior experiences observing and facilitating public participation in legislatures. As a budget delegate serving on the health and public safety committee, I was struck by how immediately budget delegates were drawn into the work and the deliberations of the participatory budgeting process. At the neighborhood assembly meeting, attendees had the opportunity to offer specific project ideas that could themselves become proposals for later community votes, regardless of their tenure or formal positions in the community and its civic institutions. Later as a budget delegate, participants had an opportunity to offer more ideas for potential public funding and were entrusted with reviewing, revising, and developing proposals submitted by community residents. The work and responsibility of budget delegates on the

committee felt immediately substantial and members of the committee communicated and collaborated fluidly to complete the tasks charged to the committee. There was little sense of hierarchy and no formal bosses, only budget delegates and committee facilitators working fluidly together and with the public to research, conceptualize, and finally complete project proposals. This differed greatly from my prior experiences, as the process of participation in legislative committee hearings is typically less fluid, more formal, and perhaps hampered by the norms and hierarchies inherent in more traditional public participation processes. In short, participatory budgeting felt decidedly modern, a product of 21st century forms of decentralized communications and flexible project management, a contrast from the procedural norms and hierarchies I was accustomed to working with.

I could not help but think that this new participatory process had considerable potential to encourage public participation in a new audience. For one, I rather quickly recognized the appeal this process could have to younger audiences less familiar with, and perhaps less tolerant of, traditional processes of participation in civic and governmental institutions. The millennial generation, having grown up during the digital age, has been criticized for exhibiting lower levels of participation in traditional civic life (Zukin et al., 2006). Many have noted millennials' lower levels of engagement in public life as illustrated by lower voting rates, lower levels of party affiliation, and less involvement in the work of traditional civic institutions; nevertheless, millennials exhibit their own forms of participation, volunteering at a higher rate than other generations, utilizing social media to engage in political debates, and exhibiting a pragmatic perspective on public problems that focuses on solutions (Gilman & Stokes, 2014). Given the fluid organizational structure and patterns of communication that generally typify participatory budgeting, it is possible that this new approach will find a receptive audience in the millennial generation that may find such fluid and flexible work arrangements and communication patterns more natural than traditional participatory methods.

Patterns of Participation and Social Equity

But as a skeptical academic, my experience working in participatory budgeting also prompted me to raise questions about the potential for problems to arise. While I found the participatory budgeting process to be rather modern and fluid with regards to its organizational structure and patterns of functioning, I still was concerned about some aspects of the process, especially its ability to overcome the problem of underrepresentation of communities of lower socioeconomic status. Perhaps my recognition of this problem comes from my own background; as a New Yorker of Hispanic descent, I could not help but notice the seeming underrepresentation of Hispanics and other minority groups at district participatory budgeting meetings, at least relative to my understanding of their presence in the district population. While I am well aware of the changing demographics of New York's neighborhoods and the impact of gentrification, I was intuitively aware that the neighborhoods of New York City's 39th council district still had a sizeable Hispanic population, a population that did not seem to be represented at the various participatory budgeting meetings I attended.

This initial impression seems to be borne out by the findings of research reports that have been released on New York City's participatory budgeting process. As part of the

implementation process, the Urban Justice Center, a New York-based not-for-profit antipoverty advocacy organization, has released a series of evaluation reports documenting the implementation of the participatory budgeting process in New York City. The 2014 Participatory Budgeting Project Evaluation reported that while participation by various racial and ethnic groups was generally consistent with the 39th District's demographic, there was still a pattern of underrepresentation in the participation of minority groups. For instance, while the 39th District does have a majority white population, people identifying as white were somewhat overrepresented as participants in the process while minority groups were underrepresented relative to their population in the district. The report revealed that people who identified as white made up 65% of the district's voting age population but were 81% of the participatory budgeting voters in 2013 (Kasdan, Markman, and Convey, 2014). Conversely, the report notes that in the this same cycle, 5% of participatory budgeting voters identified as Hispanic compared to 16% of voting age residents; this was a slight increase from 4% in the previous year's cycle. In this year, a similar dynamic occurred with people who identified as black or African-American, as 3% of participatory budgeting voters identified as black or African-American while comprising 6% of the district's voting age population. A similar dynamic occurred with regards to participation at neighborhood assemblies; for instance, only 5% of neighborhood assembly participants identified as Hispanic despite composing 14% of the overall district population (Kasdan and Cattell, 2013).

Certainly, this problem is not unique to participatory budgeting, but rather is persistent across social and political contexts in the United States. Having written about and studied public participation processes in the past, I was aware that the original purpose of participatory budgeting, at least as it was implemented in Porto Alegre, Brazil, was more than just providing a new avenue for public participation for populations that are already politically active and civically engaged. Rather, the original purpose was to create a mechanism that allowed governments to go beyond traditional patterns of representation by providing a new participatory pathway for underrepresented and/or disenfranchised populations, a pathway that could surmount or circumvent forces impeding their political action and participation in government decision-making. It is important for us to recognize that the key pathway by which participatory budgeting has been able to accomplish the goal of fostering social equity in the provision of public goods and services in other countries has been through its ability to provide new channels for public participation that, when utilized by poor and disenfranchised communities, can result in their political empowerment and the shifting of public resources in their direction. But for various reasons, the patterns of participation in government is different in the United States and the redistributive dynamic that more naturally occurs when participatory budgeting is utilized in other world contexts may not happen in the United States; in fact, the dynamic may be quite the opposite.

As we implement participatory budgeting, we must recognize that the lack of civic participation in America is an entrenched problem with multiple causes and unlikely to be solved by any single policy initiative. Academics and practitioners highlight a host of causes for the decline in American civic participation, ranging from suburbanization to rising economic pressures to the distractions of television and other forms of electronic entertainment, all which discourage many Americans from becoming involved civically in their communities (Putnam, 2001). Some scholars even note that public participation mechanisms, with their deliberative

emphasis, inherently favor wealthier and more educated populations skilled in the art of rhetoric and thus able to steer the communal conversation, and ultimately community resources, in their direction (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). While a novel mechanism for civic engagement, participatory budgeting cannot directly address these factors and the degree to which citizens avail themselves of participatory budgeting is still likely to be driven by these conditions.

This reality of the dynamics of civic participation in the United States puts programs of participatory budgeting in a potentially precarious situation with regards to their ability to serve as avenues for the advancement of social equity. Simply stated, if this mechanism for public participation is utilized primarily by individuals of higher socioeconomic status, then it only stands to reason that the proposed projects, and ultimately the winning projects, will be more likely to reflect the interests of these parties. In this situation, the redistributive dynamic is minimized and the pursuit of social equity is curtailed due to the lack of a political dynamic moving the process in a socially equitable direction.

Another possible obstruction to participatory budgeting's ability to promote social equity is more structural in nature, stemming from the fact that the politics of participatory budgeting as implemented in New York City and other American municipalities occur within the confines of local legislative districts. As the process presently stands in New York City, individual city council members join the participatory budgeting process by pledging to commit a portion (typically \$1 million) of the \$5 million they are annually apportioned in discretionary funds to projects voted upon by residents of their districts. We must note that legislative districts tend to be socioeconomically homogenous and drawn with political expediency in mind, creating situations where populations of common race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are clustered into distinct legislative districts. In some cases, this may make the redistribution of resources in accordance with the principles of social equity difficult. Municipal legislators, as representatives of their districts, can only be expected to utilize this process in a manner that responds to their constituents' needs, creating a situation where districts with residents of higher socioeconomic status utilize the process in a matter that reflects the interests of those who are richer, more educated, and more politically skilled, without any dynamic prompting resources to be redirected towards people of lower socioeconomic status within a legislative district, much less to other legislative districts that are in greater need of improvements in public goods and services. A program administered across the entire municipality, and funded with monies from the municipality's larger budget, would provide a structure where funding could flow across areas with different socioeconomic characteristics as needed, thus allowing for the aforementioned redistributive dynamic.

This configuration stands in contrast to participatory budgeting programs as implemented in the past in Porto Alegre, Brazil, configurations that had many programmatic features that steered the process, and its final outcomes, in more socially equitable directions. For instance, Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting program is a citywide program, with up to 20% of the annual budget being made available for investments across the city's 16 regions, making redistributionary public investments from this common source of funding possible. This is not to say that Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting program has not rewarded political mobilization, even on the part of affluent communities. Democracy, regardless of its final policy outcomes, has stood at the center of Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting program as the political

dynamics of the process has rested on the will of the popular assemblies representing each of the city's 16 regions in its earlier iterations. These popular assemblies, composed of residents of each of the geographical regions of the city, voted for neighborhood and regional priorities for infrastructure investment and elected the budget delegates for each of 16 regional budget forums that further developed and prioritized these project proposals.

However, we should note that in addition to this regionally based political activity, there have existed various mechanisms that sought to balance this natural political dynamic with a countervailing one that could steer public goods and services toward areas of greater need. For instance, alongside the activity of the regional popular assemblies and the regional budget forums stood a "parallel process" of thematically based assemblies and budget forums (Baiocchi, 2003). These thematic assemblies were organized according to policy areas that affected the entire city, rather than reflecting the concerns of specific geographical regions (e.g. health, education, the environment, or social services). These assemblies deliberated with respect to these themes and developed projects with the needs of the entire city in mind, creating another mechanism where projects that particularly address the needs of the poor could be developed and ultimately funded.

Another mechanism that helped steer the participatory budgeting process in the direction of social equity was the Council of the Participatory Budget (COP), the organizing body charged with applying a set of distributional rules to the investments prioritized by the regional budget forums. While the regional budget forums developed the *priorities* for public investments, the COP developed rules and principles that guided the *distribution* of these public investments across the city, creating another balancing mechanism that could help steer public resources toward poor citizens, enhancing social equity. In his case study on participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, John Gaventa notes that the rules developed by the COP to guide the distribution of resources among the various regions of the city "have always included at least one criterion related to relative poverty and infrastructure and services deficiencies of regions"; he goes on to note that in the absence of these mechanisms "it is the middle classes and professionals that dominate" (Gaventa, 2009).

Evolutions, Adaptations, and Conclusion

As with any public administrative innovation, there are bound to be problems and difficulties along the way. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the councilmembers involved in the process and the managing project staff remain committed to a process of experimentation and adaptation and are regularly seeking new ways to improve the process. One simple change that I noticed was the development and distribution of a project evaluation matrix, a tool developed by the Participatory Budgeting Project to aid in the development of project proposals. The purpose of the matrix is to help budget delegates propose participatory budgeting projects that reflect the value of social equity, resulting in spending decisions that are fairer and focus resources where they are needed most (Participatory Budgeting Project, Community Voices Heard, and National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, 2015). The matrix guides budget delegate deliberation by prompting them to evaluate project ideas based on four main criteria: community need, project need, impact, and feasibility. Budget delegates are asked to score projects on a scale of 1 to 4,

with one being lowest and four being highest, with respect to each of these criteria. Projects with the highest total project scores should be given priority for further research and development. The matrix can also be used later in the process when budget delegates on each of the committees decide which projects will be selected for placement on the final ballot. While the matrix should not be considered a restriction on projects, it is intended to guide discussion in a manner such that more socially equitable projects will be formed and submitted for a public vote. Other changes, such as new rules limiting the number of proposals that can be submitted by any individual committee, similarly has the effect of diversifying the types of submitted projects, helping reduce the likelihood that a single set of interests with disproportionate power in one policy area will dominate the funding available through this process. Also, to encourage the development of project proposals that affect the broader community, most of the 2014 – 2015 neighborhood assembly meetings have been reconfigured and restructured around policy areas rather than geographical location, similar to what was done in some of the earlier iterations of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre (Baiocchi, 2003; Lander, 2014).

Other adjustments have also been made to further facilitate broad-based public participation to help ensure that project proposals reflect the wants and needs of the greater community. For instance, the participatory budgeting process is now more receptive towards the presentation of various types of citizen concerns, regardless of whether or not a particular problem can be addressed through the participatory budgeting process. In previous years, citizens might come to participatory budgeting meetings to seek redress for a community problem, only to be informed that the issue could not be addressed through the participatory budgeting process; now, citizens are invited to attend participatory budgeting meetings and project staff and volunteers make more concerted efforts towards working with constituents to address issues through the public channels deemed most appropriate (Lander, 2014). Other proposed changes would similarly broaden the scope of public input into the process. For instance, the PBNYC steering committee has recommended that participating districts seek to further reduce barriers to the submission of project ideas, allowing submissions through channels such as civic group meetings, community events, or email and/or physical mail-in forms; barriers to voting could also be further reduced by allowing online voting or voting by SMS (Kasdan, Markman, and Convey 2014).

It is apparent that participatory budgeting has experienced some success and as a result, it continues to garner community interest. In its 2014 – 2015 New York City iteration, we have seen a growing interest in this process, with 24 councilmembers now adopting participatory budgeting within their districts. Moreover, the new Speaker of the New York City Council, Melissa Mark-Viverito, has pledged to provide more resources and the technical support of city council central staff (Avila, 2014; Meriwether, 2014). In the 2014-2015 cycle, more resources will be available to help boost participation in neighborhood assemblies and voting in hard to reach populations. Taken together, these and other programmatic changes show a spirit of experimentation and innovation that is essential for ensuring that participatory budgeting, when utilized within the American context, can indeed serve as a tool that stimulates civic engagement and modernizes local governance while remaining true to its original vision of advancing social equity.

About the Author:

Dr. Castillo's research focuses on public participation in the administration of government. He has conducted research on this dynamic in the urban educational environment, analyzing how participatory bodies can produce policy and administrative change within the context of mayoral control. He is also interested in the relationship between deliberative democracy and public administration, social equity in the provision of public services, the politics of homeland security, and representations of government in popular culture. Previous to Dr. Castillo's entry into academia, he worked as a legislative policy analyst for New York City's local legislature, the New York City Council. He can be reached at: marcocastillophd@gmail.com

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¹ Instructions to access document: If prompted to log into dropbox when accessing this link, please exit out of the prompt by clicking on the "X" on the upper right hand corner of the prompt box. This will take you directly to the document.