

Engaging Citizens: Participatory Budgeting and the Inclusive Governance Movement within the United States

By Hollie Russon Gilman

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Tony Saich, Series Editor

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Letter from the Editor

Participatory Budgeting in New York City (PBNYC) was recently named the winner of the Roy and Lila Ash Innovation Award for Public Engagement in Government, a special award offered by the Ash Center's Innovations in American Government Award program. Participatory budgeting refers to processes through which citizens help to decide how to allocate public monies, empowering them to identify community needs, work with elected officials to craft budget proposals, and vote on how to spend public funds. Born in Brazil in 1989, this approach is just beginning to take hold in the United States. We bestowed this award on PBNYC in recognition of participatory budgeting's power to include the traditionally marginalized and to make government more accountable and transparent. This paper provides a brief overview of the genesis of participatory budgeting and its current incarnations in the United States. It situates the participatory budgeting process within a larger context of civic innovation strategies occurring across America. The paper outlines the institutional challenges and proposes assessment criteria to be considered when implementing civic and social innovations such as participatory budgeting. The paper's author, Dr. Hollie Russon Gilman, a fellow at the Ash Center, has also written *Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America*, which was published by Brookings Institution Press and the Ash Center in January 2016.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony Saich', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Tony Saich, *Series Editor and Director*
Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation
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The Current Moment

It is common nowadays to bemoan the state of our democracy: from growing citizen disaffection to the growing influence of money in politics. In surveys, government dysfunction continues to surpass the economy as the problem Americans' are most likely to list as the country's most serious. A recent survey found that nearly six out of ten Americans rate the health of our democracy as weak—and not getting better anytime soon.

However, partly in response to this growing disaffection, a wave of participatory policy reform has emerged in America's largest cities, capitalizing on new technology and democratic experiments that aim to improve democracy. This typically includes place-based, community-driven interventions occurring inside and outside of government. These instances, collectively known as open government, inclusive governance, or civic innovation, are engaging policymakers, citizens, and civil society, and revivifying democratic instincts that have long lain dormant.

Participatory budgeting (PB) is one of the most promising innovations, which the *New York Times* called “revolutionary civics in action.” Participatory budgeting empowers citizens to identify community needs, work with elected officials to craft budget proposals, and vote on where and how to spend public funds. If and how we make our democracy work is not just about making better citizens or changing our policies. It is about creating structures and conditions that make the effective exercise of democratic citizenship possible, which PB is uniquely poised to do.

PB represents just one example within a growing set of civic innovations to empower citizens in their communities to be more active participants in governance and decision-making. This policy paper presents a brief and condensed history of PB to situate its United States manifestations. It offers a framework for understanding civic innovation, including the current moment provided by the recent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The paper concludes with a schematic that outlines institutional challenges to deepening innovation alongside normative questions with potential criteria to guide researchers and practitioners alike.

Roots of Participatory Budgeting¹

While participatory budgeting (PB) is just now taking root in the United States, it traces its origins to a unique initiative started in 1989 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, by the leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party, henceforth PT). After twenty-one years during which Brazil was governed by a military dictatorship, participatory budgeting offered the country a means by which to reimagine the state: it "would help relegitimate the state by showing that it could be effective, redistributive, and transparent."² In its original campaign for participatory budgeting, the PT outlined its four basic guiding principles: (1) direct citizen participation in government decision-making processes and oversight; (2) deter corruption through administrative and fiscal transparency; (3) improvements in urban infrastructure and services, especially aiding the indigent; and (4) a renewed political culture in which citizens would serve as democratic agents.³ Recent research convincingly demonstrates that in the last twenty years, PB has enhanced the quality of democracy in Brazil, improving governance and empowering citizens.⁴ Other positive outcomes linked to specific uses of PB in Brazil include increased municipal spending on sanitation and health, increased numbers of civil society organizations (CSOs), and decreased rates of infant mortality.⁵

Participatory budgeting gives citizens the opportunity to learn about government practices and to come together to deliberate, discuss, and substantively affect budget allocations.⁶ PB programs are implemented at the behest of citizens, governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and CSOs to give citizens a direct voice in budget allocations.⁷ Scholars have suggested that when people take part in participatory deliberative engagements, they are better equipped to assess the performance of elected officials at both the local and the national levels.⁸

Participatory budgeting is a compelling example through which to understand civic innovation more broadly, in large part because it directly ties citizens to public decision-making. It has also spread and grown across the globe. PB gives citizens opportunities to learn about government practices and to come together to deliberate, discuss, and ultimately decide on budget allocations.⁹ Through participation in PB, citizens become educated about budget processes and engaged in politics. Ideally, PB can lead to greater accountability and transparency as citizens leave the process with more knowledge and experience in governing and holding officials accountable.

The World Bank has concluded that PB, especially in developing democracies, has the potential to limit government inefficiency and curb clientelism, patronage, and corruption.¹⁰ Recent research convincingly demonstrates that in the last twenty years PB has enhanced governance, citizens' empowerment, and the quality of democracy in Brazil.¹¹

While countless participatory and deliberative engagements can be cited, even several involving budgeting, the form of "participatory budgeting" discussed and found in its current manifestations harken back to a specific process that first originated in Brazil. Thirteen Brazilian cities introduced PB programs in 1989. By 2013, this kind of PB could be found in more than 2,500 municipalities worldwide.¹²

Characteristics of Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting is highly adaptable. It has many different manifestations suited to the specific geopolitical contexts in which it is implemented. PB programs are implemented at the behest of citizens, governments, NGOs, and CSOs to give citizens a direct voice in budget allocations.¹³ The scale at which PB is implemented can range from national to local to municipal levels. The enabling organization that shepherds PB can vary as well, ranging from such actors as a political party like the PT, which brought PB to Brazil, to international NGOs such as the World Bank Institute or the Participatory Budgeting Project in the United States.¹⁴ Local, social, political, and economic environments condition the effects of PB on empowerment, decentralization of decision-making authority, and accountability.¹⁵

PB thus contrasts with standard public budget-making, in which bureaucrats or elected politicians decide the allocation of public resources. There is also a more nuanced contrast with less empowered forms of deliberation that are not binding. These include deliberative polls, structured town halls, or large-scale participatory events, such as those that AmericaSpeaks used to convene and conduct.¹⁶

Participatory budgeting can take on different forms, depending on where and how it is implemented. But PB programs share certain basic traits:

1. *Information sessions*: Citizens are given access to information about the cost and effect of different government programs.

2. *Neighborhood assemblies*: Citizens articulate local budgetary needs.
3. *Budget delegates*: Some citizens sign up to directly interact with government officials and draft viable budget proposals.
4. *The vote*: A larger group of residents votes on which projects to fund.

Throughout the PB process, citizens have unfiltered access to government information and elected officials. Where such programs work, citizens leave with new relationships with their neighbors, a new understanding of their elected officials, and a deepened sense of solidarity and community. In the United States, taking part in PB is a matter of citizen self-selection rather than elected representation.

Some forms of participatory democracy already exist in the United States, including nonbinding consultative mechanisms for citizen feedback within school boards, neighborhood policing, and urban planning, to name but a few.¹⁷

The Future of Participatory Budgeting in the United States

It took two decades for the practice of participatory budgeting to migrate from Brazil to the United States. Its official arrival can be traced to a single ward in Chicago, where an alderman used \$1.3 million of his discretionary funds to make American civic history.¹⁸ Within five years, what began in one Chicago ward is rapidly growing.¹⁹ As Josh Lerner, cofounder and executive director of the nonprofit Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP), which seeks to support the implementation of PB in the United States and Canada, noted in 2014, “in the United States, the number of PB participants and dollars allocated has roughly doubled each year since 2011.”²⁰ PBP, working with community partners, has helped introduce, advance, and sustain PB’s growth from Brazil to the United States.²¹

For 2015–2016, the process continues to grow, including with five new wards in Chicago alone.²² In 2015, nearly half of the members of the New York City Council, representing nearly four-and-a-half million residents, launched PB efforts.²³ New York residents allocated roughly \$32 million to be spent through PB.²⁴ Cities across the country have implemented PB from Vallejo, California, to Boston’s first youth-driven process.

In 2013, the White House issued a pledge to support the growth of PB, using existing federal community funds at the end of 2013 as part of its international effort to support open government initiatives.²⁵ The 2015 National Action Plan reaffirmed this commitment to PB.²⁶ Cities, such as Buffalo, New York, are already exploring how to use Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development to fund PB programs.²⁷ PB can leverage political support on the local and federal level to strengthen existing practices and work to make ad hoc processes into routine practice.

PB in the United States has worked to empower traditionally marginalized residents, including non-citizens, seniors, people of color, and youth. According to the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center, the 2014–2015 cycle of PB in New York City was able to engage 58,095 participants to allocate \$31.9 million dollars.²⁸ There were 179 neighborhood assemblies held across the city within participating districts to solicit project ideas from community members. Roughly one-third (35%) targeted particular communities, such as public housing residents, youth, and seniors.²⁹ The majority of voters (57%) identified as people of color, in comparison to 47% of local election voters and 66% of the total population.³⁰

As PB continues to grow and evolve in the United States, it can move from pilot projects to becoming embedded in how governments make policy decisions. Institutionalizing PB includes expanding where a process is enacted and who can participate, as well as the types of monies decided through it. PB projects across the country—from Cambridge, San Francisco, and St. Louis, to name but a few—show that PB is increasing its geographic reach. Meanwhile, New York City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito called for PB to be applied to parts of the Tenant Participation Activity funds within New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) dollars in her “State of the City” address in early 2015.

Incorporating PB into the structure of public decision-making is critical but also challenging. Because PB creates more entry points for citizens to engage with government, it necessarily requires public officials to spend more time directly engaged with constituents. Some in government note that it takes up time they could use for other pressing tasks. Implementing PB means that other projects will not be pursued given finite resources. In addition, elected

officials may fear the potential electoral costs. There are also barriers to entry for participants who find the process overly cumbersome.

Moving a process from a pilot to an institutionalized norm brings its own challenges. Part of the reason that PB has generated considerable attention in the United States is because it is “new.” If budget-makers integrate more participatory approaches into their daily operations, new challenges will emerge—those of maintaining the excitement, devoting the necessary resources, and sustaining participation.

Beyond PB: The Sustainable Development Goals and Civic Innovation

PB can be understood as part of a global agenda for deepening inclusive governance and coordination with civil society accordingly. In 2013, the White House included a commitment to promote community-led PB among its National Action Plan’s international commitments to the Open Government Partnership. The United States helped to launch this international multi-stakeholder partnership in 2011 together with seven other countries (Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa, and the United Kingdom). The group has since grown to sixty-six member countries. The member countries pledge themselves to work toward greater government transparency and accountability as well as increased citizen participation. Each member country puts forth a National Action Plan listing its open government pledges to these core principles. Importantly, the Open Government Partnership is also a pact between civil society and government—it empowers civil society as co-producers of the agenda.

Discussions for greater civic engagement in governance are increasingly a part of international conversations. The post-2015 Development Agenda of the United Nations Development Program have led to an ongoing international effort to formulate sustainable development goals (SDGs).³¹ Unlike the millennium development goals, which were conceived in a top-down process, the SDGs aimed for broader stakeholder engagement and participation. The UN conducted the largest consultation³² in its history to shape these goals, including door-to-door surveys, and thematic and national discussions.³³

Perhaps reflecting this more participatory process, SDG Goal 16 declares: “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development,

provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” to “ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.”³⁴

This global discussion on inclusive governance and its relationship to issues of civic participation offers an opportunity for us in the United States to take stock—both of the exciting innovations happening in the field and the challenges we continue to face. The SDGs could provide an important leverage point for diverse stakeholders to share best practices, lessons, and generate innovative approaches. In particular, there are four distinct characteristics of the SDGs that are instructive for building inclusive governance:

- Multi-scalar, applying to multiple levels of government, including cities;
- Multi-stakeholder, requiring the engagement of civil society as well as government;
- Integrated, addressing social, ecological, economic dimensions simultaneously, with governance goals providing a supportive skeleton;
- Evidence-based, requiring metrics, monitoring, and evaluation.

Yet, many working in “fields” affected by this issue—from civic tech to participatory decision-making—are unaware of the SDGs or are disconnected from the global conversation around them.

Below, I offer a framework for civic innovation that situates PB within a broader set of efforts designed to foster inclusive governance.

Economy—Resources, Goods, Services

Economic services, goods, and resources are being divided, organized, and reorganized by a variety of types of large and small communities. Innovations are changing the way people share, acquire, and effectively produce resources and goods. This is occurring along several tracks:

Collaborative Funding

- *Citizeninvestor*: An online platform that crowdfunds public-sector projects.³⁵
- *Cash mobs*: Groups of people who assemble at a local business to make purchases.³⁶

- *The Awesome Foundation*: Pools \$1,000 grants from self-organized “micro-trustees” to give to “awesome” creative projects in technology and the arts, and for the social good.

Sharing Economy

- *Capital Bikeshare*: A public-private partnership that runs a bicycle-sharing system in Washington, DC.
- *Popuphood*: A small-business incubator that revitalizes neighborhoods in Oakland, California.
- *Time-banked currency*: Alternative currency where the unit of exchange is person hours.³⁷
- *Tool libraries*: Communities investing in shared tool collections.³⁸

These innovations represent shifts in ways that communities conceive of and deploy their common economic resources. As with PB, many of these innovations do not include a required gadget or app. Rather, the innovation consists of changing a process, bringing people together in a new way, and ushering in a culture shift in how governance is conducted.³⁹ They involve public as well as private partners and require new thinking, new technology, and new collaborations in order to bring new services to the community.

Government—Institutions and Process

Government institutions are exploring ways to increase participation, transparency, and collaboration both internally and externally. Elected officials are devolving decision-making opportunities back to the very citizens who elected them. Agency officials are donating their time, after hours, to work with their constituents. Changes are happening throughout all levels and branches of government, and they include governance institutions in the broadest sense.

Collaborative Decision-Making

- *Participatory budgeting*: Empowers citizens to make binding recommendations on spending public money.
- *Citizen juries*: Groups of randomly selected, representative citizens who deliberate on an issue.⁴⁰
- *Citizens’ Initiative Reviews*: In Arizona, Colorado, and Oregon, these panels of randomly selected representative voters are called upon to fairly evaluate ballot measures.⁴¹

Process Improvement

- *Regulations.gov*: An online portal created by the US government to make public regulatory review during notice and comment periods more transparent and accessible.⁴²
- *City Hall to Go*: A refurbished truck in Boston that delivers city services directly to people where they live.⁴³
- *Citizens Connect*: A mobile app for citizens of Boston to report and track service-delivery complaints, with a collaborative component.⁴⁴

These innovations directly involve government actors, and they open up governance processes to new audiences via new technologies and new means of organization.

Communities—Local, Online and Off, and Context-Specific

Communities are networks formed around shared interests, resources, locations, and needs. The currency of communities is communication—the creation and exchange of goods and knowledge. As locality reemerges as a sphere for civic life, community-based innovations increasingly tie place-based interventions—whether digital or physical—to the needs of individuals and collectives.

Knowledge Transfer

- *Makerspaces*: Workshops that provide space with industrial equipment for communal use.⁴⁵
- *TEDx*: Independently organized events to spread innovative ideas, granted permission to use the branding of the TED organization.⁴⁶

Co-creating

- *Parklets*: Small plots of land converted into parks in urban areas.⁴⁷
- *OldWeather.org*: A crowdsourcing project that began by enrolling citizens to collectively transcribe old British ship logs to determine climate patterns.⁴⁸
- *Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs)*: Local organizations of parents improving education.⁴⁹

Community-based innovations frequently focus on how knowledge can be produced, distributed, and accessed more efficiently or creatively by people and groups with shared interests, practices, and needs.

More inclusive and collaborative governance involves taking existing institutions of government and redefining how citizens can take part in them. There is a wide range of opportunities for more participation in governance, beyond discretionary budgets.⁵⁰

Regulations represent just one arena in which citizens could have more direct decision-making power. Regulations.gov is a federal government website with an easy-to-use interface that enables individuals to submit comments on proposed regulations. The website also enables users to search and view original regulatory documents and previously submitted comments. In addition, Regulations.gov released an application program interface (API) that allows programmatic access to regulatory data.⁵¹ Developers and programmers alike can use the API to create easily accessible tools for a variety of civic stakeholders.

Institutional Challenges

Understanding the current institutional constraints to civic engagement evinces the unique opportunities to build up a stronger civil and social sector aimed at reengaging citizens. The following factors contribute to a general lack of public institutional experimentation, with a focus on government:

Lack of Capacity: public institutions lack resources and capacity to engage;

Lack of Political Will: public institutions lack political will to experiment, including conducting independent impact assessments;

Fear of Failure: especially vulnerable to criticism as it relates to experimentation and potential failures;

Lack of Agility: typically, large, bureaucratic structures are not well designed to execute on the lean, agile approach;

Communication Gaps: not well suited for conveying complex, nuanced information that can result from nascent experimentation and innovation.

These institutional challenges underscore the necessity of tapping into existing civic networks to organize and mobilize. Sometimes governments

actually want citizen data—not empowered or informed participation. Not every instance of inclusive governance need involve traditional institutions. Instead, some instances may involve citizens self-organizing and communities identifying and acting on their own governance priorities. It is worth recalling that institutions are not monolithic; rather, they have varied functions and properties. Nonetheless, the overarching principles outlined can help practitioners to guide and to operate individual efforts.

Assessment Criteria

As researchers and practitioner's think about implementing and understanding a civic innovation, here are three potential criteria areas to guide further analysis:

Community, Social Impact, and Transformative Activity. This sample assessment criterion is targeted toward practitioners, primarily local level civic groups, but can be broadly applied. Instead of being exhaustive, it is rather a sample normative framework articulating core values to measure.

Three Assessment Criteria Areas for civic engagement:

Community:

- Who is the intended beneficiary of this project?
- Are you part of the beneficiary group?
 - If not, at what point do you intend to introduce the project to the beneficiaries?
- Have you discussed this project with the beneficiaries?
 - With which community partners, leaders, or other stakeholders have you spoken?
- How will you structure your execution team?
 - Which community partners, leaders, or other stakeholders have endorsed or offered to help execute?

Social Impact:

- What was the inspiration for your project?
 - What is the community need or problem it addresses?
 - How was the community need identified?
- What systems, projects, or initiatives are already in place that affect or involve the beneficiaries on this issue?

- If specific location of the project matters, how did you choose the location?
- What is the intended impact or transformation your project will trigger?
 - How?
 - Have you articulated your goals or framing criteria for your work?
 - What is the time frame in which this impact will occur?
- How will you structure the implementation of your activity?
 - Would testing smaller scale iterations of your project benefit its intended impact?
 - Does your project have an end date?
 - Are there any activities after the end date?
 - If this is a one-off effort, elaborate as to why.
 - If this project is ongoing or part of other activities, elaborate as to why.

Transformative Activity:

- How did you come up with the structure of your project?
- How involved are beneficiaries in your ideation, creation, implementation, and evaluation?
- What does success look like for your project?
 - What counts as a successful initiation of the idea?
 - What counts as successful implementation?
 - How and to whom do you intend to communicate success?
- What part of your project is “essential”? If some factors were to change, what are the most basic components of your plan that would need to stay intact to see your intended outcome come to life?
- Are you documenting your activity—from design to execution to post-activity?
 - If so, are you sharing your documentation? How?
 - Are you tracking questions, problems, or self-review of your activity?
- How could this idea be strengthened?
 - What are the strengths/weaknesses of this approach?
 - How would you structure or incorporate feedback?
 - Who else can articulate what your project is and what its intended outcome will be?

Next Steps

Citizen engagement with governance can take a variety of forms. There are some basic underlying conditions:

First, citizens need information in order to understand how decisions are made. Ideally, this will also involve creating or improving information systems that allow citizens to better monitor their government. It may include identifying and addressing current deficiencies in the information environment.

Second, public institutions can provide two-way opportunities for citizens to engage. This can include citizens collaborating with other citizens to formulate solutions to public problems.

Finally, engagement works best when it aims at more sustainable systems for greater transparency, accountability, and long-term engagement. This is why internal and external validation is critical. International partnerships between multiple stakeholders can hold local governments to account by providing another pressure point and an international context for civic engagement at the local level.

Ideally, information to shape policy choices would be accompanied by structured opportunities for civic participation. Without this, citizens could simply feel inundated by information and further disillusioned or disenfranchised.

Many reasons can be cited to engage citizens in more inclusive governance and decision-making. Decisions made through collaborative processes can improve effectiveness and legitimacy. Involving more voices in governance makes it easier for traditionally marginalized groups to work cooperatively with entrenched actors and can help government capitalize on diverse expertise diffused throughout society.⁵²

Tracking civic engagement is a moving target, as there are constantly new pathways, by design. Data on millennials suggests they are using non-traditional outlets. While the forms and levels of engagement vary among different education, race, and income cohorts, millennials volunteer at a higher rate than other generations, engage in consumer activism more often, and are spearheading civic uses of social media.⁵³

Despite gravitating away from institutional forms of participation, this generation is finding other, more accessible avenues for contributing to their communities and engaging in the world.⁵⁴ For example, 44 percent of millennials who use social networking sites use them to “like” or promote political material, 42 percent to post their own thoughts on issues, and 36 percent to

encourage others to act.⁵⁵ This generation will continue to look for innovative opportunities to express their civic identity.

The political moment is ripe to think about exploratory models to deepen democratic engagement. The rise in conjunction with international efforts such as the Open Government Partnership and Sustainable Development Goals provide a moment that practitioners and researchers can leverage to share best practices and lessons learned. Perhaps these international partnerships and goals can provide the necessary political air cover to incentivize greater experimentation with new models.

Endnotes

1. The author thanks Harvard University's Ash Center for Democratic Innovation and Governance including Andrea Batista Schlesinger, Tim Burke, Jessica Engelman, Archon Fung, Elizabeth Guernsey, Daniel Harsha, Josh Lerner, Christina Marchand, Sandra Youdelman; research support from the Open Society Foundation, including June 2015 participants and Aris Iliopoulos, Erin Britton, and K. Sabeel Rahman.
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38. The tool library in the neighborhood of Atwood in Madison, Wisconsin, is one such example (<http://sustainableatwood.org/tool-library/>).
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41. Healthy Democracy, “Citizens’ Initiative Review: Background” (<http://healthydemocracy.org/citizens-initiative-review/>).
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44. City of Boston, “Citizens Connect” (www.cityofboston.gov/doit/apps/citizensconnect.asp).
45. MakerSpace.com sponsors public events promoting do-it-yourself technology tinkering called Maker Faires and maintains a directory of shared workshops (<http://spaces.makerspace.com/>).
46. TED, “TEDx Program” (www.ted.com/about/programs-initiatives/tedx-program).
47. ParkletDC.org demonstrates how one group in Washington, DC, is trying to bring these microparks to the nation’s capital.
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