



Introduction to Participatory Budgeting

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What is Participatory Budgeting (PB)?

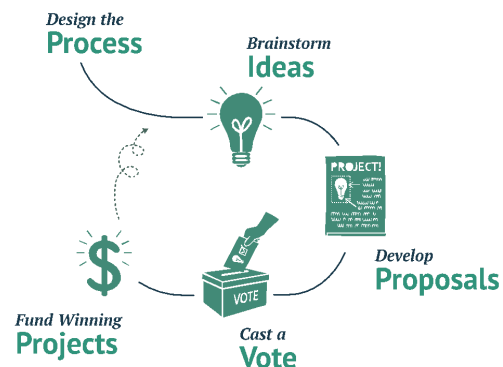
A democratic process where community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget.

- Started in 1989 in Porto Alegre, Brazil
as 50,000 residents have decided how to spend up to 20% of the city budget.
- Successfully used with many types of budgets
 - Municipal
 - State
 - local schools
 - colleges and universities
 - CDBG; public housing
 - Organizational
 - capital funds
 - operating funds
- Enables residents to direct public money to their priorities
Once they are invested in budgeting, people make sure that tax dollars are spent wisely and efficiently, and they find ways to attract more resources to their community.



How Does PB Work?

PB involves an annual cycle of meeting and voting, integrated into the broader budget decision-making process. Each city, school, or organization that does PE B adapts it to their specific needs, but PB generally follows these steps:



1. Design the Process

A steering committee, representative of the community, creates the rules in partnership with city officials to ensure the process is inclusive and meets local needs.

2. Brainstorm Ideas

Through meetings and online tools, city residents share and discuss ideas for projects.

3. Develop Proposals

Volunteers, usually called budget delegates, develop the ideas into feasible proposals, which are then vetted by city experts.

4. Cast a Vote

Residents vote to divide the available budget between the proposals. It's a direct, democratic voice in their city's future.

5. Fund Winning Projects

The city implements the winning projects, such as laptops in schools, Wi-Fi in public parks, or traffic safety improvements. The city and residents track and monitor implementation.

6. Iterate the process and spread the word for next year!



Why Do PB?

Deeper Democracy: Ordinary people have a real say—and they get to make real political decisions. As a result, PB tends to engage many people who are otherwise cynical about government. Politicians build closer relationships with their constituents, and community members develop greater trust in government.

Transparency & Accountability: Budgets are policy without the rhetoric—what a government actually does. When community members decide spending through a public process, there are fewer opportunities for corruption, waste, or backlash.

Public Education: Participants become more active and informed citizens. Community members, staff, and officials learn democracy by doing it. They gain a deeper understanding of complex political issues and community needs.

More informed decisions: Budget decisions are better when they draw on residents' local knowledge and oversight. Once they are invested in the process, people make sure that money is spent wisely.

Fairer Spending: Everyone gets equal access to decision making, which levels the playing field. When people spend months discussing project ideas, they end up prioritizing projects that address the greatest community needs.

Community Building: Through regular meetings and assemblies, people get to know their neighbors and feel more connected to their city. Local organizations spend less time lobbying and more time deciding policies. Budget assemblies connect community groups and help them recruit members.

What Is Required for PB to Work?

Political Will: Support from the top and community support from below. You need someone with control over budget money (an elected official, agency head, department director, etc.) to agree to let the public decide how to spend part of the budget.

Community Organizations: In particular those working with marginalized communities, to engage people and push the process forward.



People Power: PB is time intensive. Many governments don't have the human infrastructure in place to support deep civic engagement. You will need to commit staff time, administrative resources, draw upon relationships with community organizations and build capacity amongst your residents to support an ongoing PB process.

What Are the Downsides?

It's hard work

- Creating a new experiment in democracy is not easy. It requires months of planning to design a sound process and build community buy-in. Successful PBs draw on the expertise and resources of dozens of organizations and agencies. Bringing all these people to the table is not easy—and getting them to agree on a plan is even harder.
- It's a departure from business as usual. You may need to change the way you work internally to do PB well. This will take collaboration and buy in from multiple agencies and departments within government.

Done poorly, you can damage relationships

- Democracy is not inherently equitable. Setting up a process where everyone can participate doesn't mean they will. Equity and inclusion should be at the heart of all planning in your process to make sure that it doesn't just reinforce systemic inequities.
- You can't change the rules mid-game. In order to maintain integrity in your process and the trust of the people, you need to establish clear guidelines for the process and stick with them. Remember, you can always change rules for the next round if necessary, but doing so in the middle of the process can destroy it. If you must change something in the middle of the process, do so with full transparency and explanation and include the public in your decision-making process. Perception matters.

