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Budgeting for Equity: How Can Participatory Budgeting Advance Equity in the United States?

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Budgeting for Equity: How Can Participatory Budgeting Advance Equity in the United States?

Abstract

Participatory budgeting (PB) has expanded dramatically in the United States (US) from a pilot process in Chicago's 49th ward in 2009 to over 50 processes in a dozen cities in 2015. Over this period, scholars, practitioners, and advocates have made two distinct but related claims about its impacts: that it can revitalize democracy *and* advance equity. In practice, however, achieving the latter has often proven challenging. Based on interviews with PB practitioners from across the US, we argue that an equity-driven model of PB is not simply about improving the quality of deliberation or reducing barriers to participation. While both of these factors are critically important, we identify three additional challenges: 1) Unclear Goals: how to clearly define and operationalize equity, 2) Participant Motivations: how to overcome the agendas of individual budget delegates, and 3) Limiting Structures: how to reconfigure the overarching budgetary and bureaucratic constraints that limit PB's contribution to broader change. We suggest practical interventions for each of these challenges, including stronger political leadership, extending idea collection beyond the initial brainstorming phase, increasing opportunities for interaction between PB participants and their non-participating neighbors, expanding the scope of PB processes, and building stronger linkages between PB and other forms of political action.

Author Biography

[Madeleine Pape](#) was a Research Associate for the Participatory Budgeting from 2013-2016. She is currently a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Originally from Melbourne, Australia, Madeleine has published [research](#) with colleagues from RMIT University on the role of state-led consultation forums and civil society groups in Australian regional development. For her Masters thesis, she analyzed the dynamics of inclusion and social justice in participatory budgeting in Chicago. Her current work (and dissertation) explores how gender and sex differences are defined and contested with the institutional contexts of science, sport, and law. [@Madeleine_Pape](#)

Josh Lerner is co-founder and Executive Director of the [Participatory Budgeting Project](#) (PBP), a non-profit organization that empowers people to decide together how to spend public money, across the US and Canada. Through programs that PBP has launched and supported, 100,000 people in 12 cities have directly decided how to spend \$98,000,000. This work has been recognized by The White House as a model for open government, and by the Brown Democracy Medal as the best practical innovation advancing democracy around the world. Josh completed a PhD in Politics at the New School for Social Research and a Masters in Planning from the University of Toronto. He is the author of [Making Democracy Fun: How Game Design Can Empower Citizens and Transform Politics](#) (MIT Press, 2014), [Everyone Counts: Could Participatory Budgeting Change Democracy?](#) (Cornell University Press, 2014), and over 20 articles. [@joshalerner](#)

Keywords

Participatory budgeting, participatory democracy, equity, equality, goals, leadership, civil society

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In 1989, the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre undertook a radical experiment to alter the chemistry of democracy. After decades of dictatorship and thin representative democracy had cemented Brazil's economy as one of the most unequal in the world, the newly elected Workers Party government attempted a new variant of democracy, one that mixed participation and equity. Its experiment in "participatory budgeting" aimed to redirect resources to those with the greatest needs – and it succeeded.

Over 3,000 cities have since tried to replicate Porto Alegre's success by empowering residents to directly decide how to spend part of a public budget. Many processes have inspired high participation, but struggled to engage or redistribute resources to marginalized communities. Participatory budgeting (PB) has recently grown dramatically in the United States, from a pilot process in Chicago's 49th ward in 2009 to over 50 processes in a dozen cities in 2015. The once obscure concept has been heralded by the White House as a best practice of civic engagement and by scholars as the lynchpin of a "new wave of democratic innovation" (Stoker et al., 2011, p. 38; White House, 2013).

As PB has expanded in the US, scholars, practitioners, and participants have made two main claims about its impact: that it can revitalize democracy *and* advance equity. First, proponents argue that PB builds the trust, accountability, and effective decision-making necessary for democratic governance (Lerner 2014). Second, they suggest that PB makes participation and funding more equitable, by bringing marginalized groups to the table and allocating more money to their needs (see Baiocchi, 2001; Fung & Wright, 2003; Nylén, 2002). In the US, PB processes have experienced relative success in including the voices of less politically empowered residents, but there is less data on how PB is making funding more equitable (Kasdan et al., 2015; Great Cities Institute, 2015).

Our organization, the Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP), has served as lead technical assistance partner for most US PB processes, helping over seventy cities, districts, and institutions develop PB processes that advance local priorities and goals. Although equity has often been a local goal, it has proven difficult to define, measure, and prioritize. In this article, we present the findings from a study of equity in PB that we conducted in 2015. Through semi-structured interviews with 17 PB facilitators and administrators, we explored two main questions: First, what common challenges to equity do practitioners face? Second, given these challenges, what can be done to make PB and its impacts more equitable?¹

We identified three key equity challenges and strategies to address these challenges. First, unclear goals shift focus away from equity, a challenge that can be addressed through stronger political leadership. Second, participants' self-interest often goes against equity goals, but this can be at least partly addressed by altering the process for idea collection and facilitating interaction between participants and other residents. Third, the limiting structures of budgetary and administrative rules constrain the potential of PB to address broader equity concerns, but expanding the scope and linkages of PB can help to overcome some of these constraints. By unpacking these challenges and interventions we hope not only to deepen the equity impacts of PB, but also to uncover new ways that participatory democracy can empower and support communities with the greatest needs.

Equity Goals in PB

The equity discourse surrounding PB in the US reflects the long-standing association between PB and social justice (Fung & Wright, 2003). Starting in Porto Alegre, the Workers Party and scholars branded PB as a "pro-poor" process that aimed to achieve an "inversion of social priorities" by redirecting capital funds to residents with the greatest needs, and especially those living in impoverished neighborhoods (de Sousa Santos, 1998). The outcomes in Porto Alegre were dramatic: In 1989, only 49 percent of the population had basic sanitation service. After eight years of participatory budgeting, 98 percent of households had water and 85 percent were served by the sewage system. In the same time span, half of the city's unpaved streets were paved and the number of students in elementary and secondary schools doubled. New public housing units were built at increasing rates and bus companies expanded service to previously neglected neighborhoods. These changes made service provision more equitable by especially benefiting communities with the greatest needs.

As PB has spread around the globe, it has often been implemented without the broader structural changes that empowered residents and enabled PB to be so transformative in Porto Alegre (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014). In the US, however, PB has been a grassroots initiative focused on empowerment and structural change from the start (Lerner & Secondo, 2012). With social justice a prominent goal of many advocates, equity has always been at stake in US PB.

PB processes in the US have generally followed a basic common approach. The public stage begins with idea collection, where local residents are invited to learn about PB and suggest project ideas. Next, volunteer "budget delegates" meet regularly over several months to review the ideas suggested during idea collection and develop formal project proposals. Finally, residents vote to determine which

projects to fund. In most cases, the process has been open to all residents age 16 and over (and often younger), regardless of their eligibility to vote in typical elections. A “steering committee” of local community groups and civil society organizations is typically appointed to oversee the process, deciding its goals, timeline, and rules. US PB processes have allocated between \$100,000 and \$32 million, and have usually centered on capital infrastructure improvements.

Part of our role at PBP has been to help stakeholders embed equity in their local process. Organizationally, we define equity in relation to PB as 1) decision-making that is accessible to, inclusive of, and empowers the most disenfranchised members of a given community; and 2) spending decisions that allocate resources to communities with the greatest need. This definition has been reflected to varying extents in the stated goals of PB processes that we have supported. Some processes have referenced equity explicitly in relation to participation and allocation, while others have implied equity as a characteristic of the decision-making and inclusion they wish to achieve (Table 1).

Table 1. Explicit and Implicit Equity Goals for PB Processes in the US

PB Process	Explicit Equity Goal	Implicit Equity Goal
PB Cambridge, 2014-15		Make democracy inclusive: Engage all community members, particularly those who are not the “usual suspects,” in the process to improve their city. Expand and diversify participation in the decision-making process.
PB Chicago, 2014-15	Equity: We aim for our process to be fair and just and to lead to a more equitable distribution of public dollars in the city of Chicago.	Inclusion: We aim to include the entire community - especially those who are often excluded from the political process, who face obstacles to participating, or who may feel disillusioned with politics ...
PB Long Beach, 2014-15	Empowerment: Empower District residents and stakeholders with the skills and knowledge	Inclusion: Increase and diversify participation in local government, particularly by those who are traditionally

	needed to collaborate with government, ensure equitable spending, and to shape our City's future.	underrepresented in politics, who face obstacles to participating, or who feel disillusioned with the political process.
PBNYC, 2014-15	Make public spending more equitable: Generate spending decisions that are fairer, so resources go where they are needed most.	Expand civic engagement: engage more people in politics and the community, especially young people, people of color, immigrants, low-income people, the formerly incarcerated, and other marginalized groups.
PB Vallejo, 2015		Engage our community: Engage those who are traditionally underrepresented in politics, who face obstacles to participating, or who feel disillusioned with the political process. Open up government: Support a framework within government for decision-making that promotes a more just and equitable city.
Youth Lead the Change, Boston, 2014		Allow all voices to be heard: include all community stakeholders in the democratic process. Build stronger, safer, and healthier communities: bring neighborhoods together, solve community problems, and develop projects that will improve the wellbeing of all members of the community.

Sources: City of Vallejo, 2015; Hytrek and Temblador, 2015; PB Cambridge, 2014; PB Chicago, 2014a; PBNYC, 2014b; Youth Lead the Change, 2014.

Equity Challenges and Interventions

Practitioners, including those in our study, have long recognized that making government decision-making more participatory does not necessarily make it more equitable. As in any civic engagement process, there are significant barriers to equitable participation in PB, especially at the budget delegate level and for less politically empowered residents. Analyses in the US and elsewhere have already suggested two common equity challenges for PB: facilitating inclusive deliberation and inaccessible processes (Fung & Wright, 2003; Kasdan, et al., 2014; Lerner & Secondo, 2012). In response, practitioners have often attempted to recruit and train skilled facilitators and reduce barriers to participation, such as by offering transit cards to participants in PBNYC and conducting idea collection in schools and retirement communities in Vallejo. There is some convincing evidence that measures like these make participation and decision-making more equitable (see Kasdan et al., 2014). Many such interventions, however, are severely constrained by available resources.

Although these two themes were significant for our interviewees, we focus on three additional challenges that we think can extend practitioner and academic understanding of equity: 1) Unclear Goals: how to clearly define and operationalize equity, 2) Participant Self-Interest: how to overcome the agendas of individual budget delegates, and 3) Limiting Structures: how to reconfigure the overarching budgetary and bureaucratic constraints that limit PB's contribution to broader change.

Challenge One: Unclear Goals

Interviewees described three problems with unclear goals. First, key decision-makers –particularly steering committee members and elected officials – often failed to develop consensus around a clear definition of equity. Second, decision-makers struggled to determine how much of a priority equity should be relative to other goals. Third, goals were often not translated into practical guidelines that could inform the work of participants, especially budget delegates.

PB processes have often used discourses of “equity” and “equality” interchangeably without specifying or discussing the differences between them. The 2014-15 PBNYC process, for example, included the explicit equity goal in Table 1 but also named “equality” as a guiding principle, defined as ensuring that “every person can have equal power over public spending” (PBNYC, 2014b, p.6). The Steering Committee further defined “equitable” as “the quality of being fair and impartial” (p.3).

Several interviewees also described a lack of clarity around how to prioritize different goals. For example:

We could just as easily say, ‘how do you put transparency at the center?’ ‘How do we put accountability at the center?’ ‘How do we put real community engagement at the center?’ And I don’t mean to say that these things are trade-offs and that it’s a zero sum game involved here, but I do think that equity ends up competing with other types of outcomes. (DS)

An additional tension was setting equity guidelines for participants:

There are two values butting into each other. One is equity and the other is people making decisions for themselves, and not having a council member or a district committee say ‘no, I don’t like your decision.’ (TW)

Some interviewees suggested that budget delegates lacked the “objective information” and instructions needed to consistently assess the equity dimensions of project ideas:

Without getting the information [the budget delegates] did not feel that they could accurately assess equity because it would be sort of just a personal gut feeling. (CM)

Overall, we detected unhelpful fluidity and hesitation by decision makers around the place and content of equity goals, along with an absence of clear guidelines for putting equity goals into practice.

Practical Intervention: Political Leadership

Beyond committing more resources and energy to engaging less politically empowered residents, interviewees called on steering committees and elected officials to more strongly commit to and prioritize “equity” over “equality.” “When you have everybody have an equal voice,” one interviewee said, “you’re going to have a harder time advancing an equity agenda.” Efforts to include *all* residents with an equal voice can lead to many different priorities and concerns being tabled, some of which are heard more loudly than others.

The distinction between equity and equality should encompass both *whose* voices are amplified and *how* funds are distributed. Some processes emphasized directing funding toward underserved neighborhoods:

Certain parts of the ward have been underinvested in in previous years ... So we really tried to define ... equity [as] different to equality. Not every part of the ward should get the same amount or resources, or ... a proportion of resources based on their population in relation to the ward [population]. (AT)

With support from elected officials, steering committees are in a position to introduce specific design features for each stage of a PB process to guide resident participation towards overarching equity goals. For example, officials may require that an equity rating be assigned to every project that is presented to voters on the ballot. We describe this form of practical intervention as “political leadership” since it requires steering committee members and elected officials taking a firmer stance on equity than has often been the case. As one interviewee put it, the barrier to moving from “equality” to an “equity” framing is a political one:

I mean I think it’s politics, right? There’s just a lot of different things being navigated by those in the city and what people will put pressure on versus not, what people will take a stand on versus not, and how that aligns with the political landscape. I think it’s easier to move from an unequal distribution to an equal one than from an unequal distribution to an equitable one. (BT)

More specific guidelines and positive reinforcement could help officials and steering committee members prioritize equity in the face of competing demands. Materials that better articulate the distinction between “equity” and “equality” and give concrete examples of how equity interventions have worked in practice can make it easier for leaders to follow through on equity goals. Awards or public recognition for equity leaders could also help inspire and reward bold leadership.

Challenge Two: Participant Self-Interest

A common strategy for attracting residents to participate in PB is some variation of “How would *you* spend \$1 million?” (emphasis added, see PB Chicago, 2014b; PBNYC, 2014a; PBP, 2014). Given this framing, many residents who participate come to PB with specific project ideas in mind. One of the most striking findings in our study was the regularity with which interviewees described the personal agendas of budget delegates as compromising the equity impacts of PB. Self-selected budget delegates often get involved because of “their own causes that they wanted to really fight for.” Their passion for particular project ideas provides the motivation and energy to keep them committed throughout the often-lengthy proposal development phase. But it has also served as a source of resistance to equity considerations:

One struggle that we've encountered ... was the inclination for delegates to arrive with a predetermined project that they want to advance, and so I think what we struggled with from an equity perspective was actually getting people to the table who are somewhat open-minded about the projects they ... are willing to develop that would respond to a community need [and] to allow that need to be defined through the process. People typically arrive with an idea about what the project is and afterwards they try to justify the way in which it satisfies a need. (DS)

Many efforts to refocus the priorities of budget delegates around equity occur *after* delegates have committed to the process. For example, facilitators often seek to direct conversation among budget delegates to the needs of their local community. PBP encourages the use of a “project evaluation matrix” to help budget delegates assess the equity (and other) dimensions of proposed projects in a standardized way. But such interventions can be ineffective when the expectations of budget delegates are already formed:

I would say that often forcing them to think in certain ways, or to try to come from a certain perspective, wasn't really successful. It ended up causing a lot of conflict... I had a very determined group, and so they sort of knew how they wanted to approach it. ... They just wanted to talk it through and rely on their experiences to come up with how to do things (SA)

This recurrent challenge points to inconsistencies between the initial messaging that motivates residents to participate in PB and the equity lens promoted during budget delegate discussions.

Practical Interventions: Extending Idea Collection, Connecting with Neighbors

As a means of addressing this disconnect, we propose expanding the research role of budget delegates. PB processes should continue collecting project ideas from the community and providing these to budget delegates. But they should also empower budget delegates to build on this initial community input by researching and developing new projects. As one interviewee noted, this deeper research by delegates can lead to stronger and more equitable projects:

Sometimes projects that come up [during PB] are based on who comes to a meeting and lifts up an idea, versus a team of delegates or a team of separate community researchers [first] going out and talking to all the schools and getting all the ideas together, and then advancing those. (BT)

Although many PB processes in the US permit budget delegates to deviate from the projects proposed during the idea collection phase, delegates often don't feel comfortable doing so. Administrators could more strongly encourage and authorize budget delegates to reassess proposed project ideas as the process unfolds and information is collected on community needs. The idea collection phase could be reframed as "advisory," although budget delegates would need to follow clear procedures and communicate their decisions to alleviate concerns about transparency and accountability.

Site visits are another means of helping budget delegates reach more equitable decisions. In almost all of our interviews, we heard that the most powerful way to shift the perspective of budget delegates away from their own personal agendas was *not* a change to the internal dynamics of budget delegate meetings, such as improving facilitation techniques or increasing diversity among budget delegates. Rather, it was to put "boots to the ground" and have budget delegates undertake *multiple* site visits and interact with the residents in those neighborhoods. As one interviewee put it, "there's nothing like being able to talk to community residents."

Several interviewees described the value of interactions that took place during site visits:

When young people had a chance to go and visit the parks, and they were physically standing there and could look and see oh this is something that's working, or this needs to be fixed ... When someone actually visits the park they were able to see some of the people there who were actually using this park and get some feedback from them. (JD)

But site visits come with no guarantee that budget delegates will meaningfully interact with the residents they encounter:

I have to say I was a little bit disappointed in their lack of engagement with residents and businesses in the areas they were observing, and I'm not sure if they just felt intimidated or uncomfortable at approaching people that way, but they didn't seem to do much of that. They sort of drove around in an area, they walked around a little bit, but they didn't engage folks on that level. (SA)

To create the conditions for equitable decision-making, PB processes need to not only encourage deliberation and diversity among budget delegates, but also take them to the physical spaces that will be affected by their decision. Even then,

budget delegates may not necessarily have the skills, confidence, or will to approach the residents they encounter. Practitioners should therefore provide training and tools that prepare budget delegates for interaction with residents during site visits. To increase buy-in, budget delegates should be informed up front about why such site visits and interaction are valuable and, even more importantly, how they will be supported in that process.

Challenge Three: Limiting Structures

Though PB has grown rapidly in the US, most processes are still limited to relatively small and constrained budget funds. Many PB processes in the US limit eligible projects to capital infrastructure improvements in relatively narrow cost ranges, and often to projects confined to arbitrary geographic areas, such as City districts. Interviewees argued that PB processes must also be part of a “bigger equity conversation,” one that promotes a broader agenda of change:

Just figuring out how to fit within the current rules isn't enough. Yeah, you'll get a couple of things through like we did this year, but they are few and far between. (TW)

Existing structures thus pose a challenge in two directions. The bureaucratic and budgetary structures of local governments constrain the scope and hence the potential equity impacts of PB. At the same time, mechanisms to bridge PB and other forms of public budgeting and participation are underdeveloped. PB needs to influence broader budgets and policies to have greater impacts on equity:

We were really interested in the overall city budget, too, in thinking about how can we get more of a voice from residents in the overall budget and how can we get priorities shifted from things like policing to services and schools and job creation and things like that. ... I don't think that the [PB] process the way that it is set up has really addressed that issue, because of the part of the budget that we're dealing with. (BT)

Practical Interventions: Expand the Scope, Build Linkages

Changing the larger structures of government is no small feat. But, elected officials committed to the cause of equity could increase the impacts of PB by expanding the scope of eligible projects. They can include both capital projects and programs, increase the pot of money allocated through PB to include larger projects, and partner with additional agencies to open up PB to more diverse budgets, and particularly those of greatest concern to less empowered residents (e.g., schools, universities, public housing, federal funds).

Several interviewees also suggested creating new pathways to channel the energy and skills of PB participants into other forms of civic engagement:

I would like to take advantage of the engagement and find a way to address some of the larger needs, while using a PB process to bring people together. If we had a group of [budget delegates] who wanted to start filling out [applications] ... to get a nice chunk of money for an art center or ... some real major infrastructure, we can give people the skills and the resources and the ability to address some of these larger improvements that we really can't address through [PB]. Then I think that would be a real step in the right direction. (CP)

Research has shown that participation in PB boosts the civic skills and knowledge of budget delegates (Great Cities Institute, 2015; Lerner & Schugurensky, 2007). PB processes can also provide delegates with information about other funding opportunities, such as government grants and contracts, foundation grants, and crowdfunding programs. Staff can channel ideas that are ineligible for PB funding to city agencies and departments that might be able to implement them through other means, as often happens for small proposals such as speed bumps and street signs. Organizers can invite participants to serve on other boards and commissions, and sign up for local campaigns and organizations.

To further reconfigure limiting structures and realize the equity potential of PB, processes must intersect with organizing campaigns happening outside of the structures of government. This may also be a key strategy for expanding the scope of PB:

I feel like you need an organizing campaign to be focused on trying to transform broader budgeting. ... I think if you're really talking about pushing back bigger, you need more people involved in that and it needs to be sort of external. (BT)

Grassroots organizations are thus vitally important to realizing the equity potential of PB. Not only do PB processes need greater equity leadership from elected officials, but also increased *ownership* from civil society. For PB to break out of the limiting budgetary structures of government, grassroots organizations must see and *claim* PB as a cause worth fighting for. The subsequent challenge for civil society organizations is to build or leverage existing alliances with elected officials.

Maximizing PB's Role within a Broader Equity Agenda

There is no guarantee that PB makes democratic governance more equitable, even if it increases public participation (Lee, 2007; Walker et al., 2015). This is one of the key challenges faced by advocates of participatory and deliberative democracy: how to transform democracy in a way that reverses current inequities. Reducing barriers to participation and facilitating inclusive discussions are critical pieces of the puzzle, as others have noted.

Our research, however, also reveals several less visible challenges: unclear goals, participant self-interest, and limiting structures. Based on the experiences of our interviewees, and our own insights as practitioners, we suggest that these challenges can be at least partly addressed by stronger political leadership, extending idea collection and the research role of budget delegates, deepening the quality of interaction between participants and other residents, expanding the scope of PB processes, and building better linkages between PB and other forms of political action. These strategies could help focus participation and funding on communities with the greatest needs, suggesting new ways that participatory democracy can contribute to a more equitable society.

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NOTES

1. We conducted 17 semi-structured interviews: 13 with facilitators or administrators directly involved in implementing PB, and four with representatives of other non-profit organizations in North America who are familiar with PB and engage with equity in their work. The six facilitators and seven administrators were drawn from the following PB processes: PBNYC, PB Chicago, PB Vallejo, PB Long Beach, PB Cambridge, and Youth Lead the Change (Boston). While this purposive sample allowed us to directly access the perspectives of individuals involved in implementing PB over an extended period (minimum four months), it did not allow us to incorporate the experiences of PB participants and other stakeholders. Before commencing the interview, we explained to interviewees how our organization defines equity in the context of PB (as described on page 2). Following our analysis of the interview data, we asked several study participants to review the challenges and practical interventions that we had identified. To protect interviewees' anonymity, we identify them only by pseudonymous initials when quoting from interviews.