

Participatory Budgeting *in the* United States: What Is Its Role?

by Daniel Altschuler, PhD

"Now is not the time to be creative," said Vallejo mayor Osby Davis, when his city became the first in the nation to use Participatory Budgeting. But judging from its success, the time seems ripe for this experimental form of local governance, in which citizens actively work together to allocate city funding to projects.

FIFTEEN YEAR-OLD JOHNNEL WHITE DIDN'T KNOW what he was getting himself into. His cousin had taken him to a neighborhood assembly in Vallejo, California, to discuss the local budget. Johnnel had never participated in a community organization or student government before, and all of a sudden he was being asked to report back for the group of residents he had joined. "We had to present what our group had decided. Everyone said I was a good leader and should present, and then afterwards they said I should become a delegate. I was scared, but after

I saw everyone smile and clap, I felt like I could get the hang of it."

With that, Johnnel became the youngest budget delegate in a municipal innovation called Participatory Budgeting (PB), a deliberative process through which Vallejo residents are proposing, vetting, and ultimately voting on capital projects to be built with a portion of citywide funds. Neighbors come together in assemblies to brainstorm ideas, form sector-specific committees to check the feasibility and cost of proposals, and vote in elections where all residents (age sixteen and over) can choose their preferred projects.

Participatory Budgeting Arrives in the United States

Participatory Budgeting is perhaps the greatest innovation in municipal governance in the United States in the last five years, and it has grown

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rapidly. Originating in Porto Alegre, Brazil—where 20 percent of the municipal budget is now allocated this way—PB has spread quickly throughout Brazil and Latin America over the past two decades. It's currently in place in roughly fifteen hundred municipalities throughout the world, but U.S. municipalities have been late adopters.

Participatory Budgeting came to Vallejo via Chicago and New York. In 2010, after hearing of PB's success in other parts of the world, including Toronto, Alderman Joe Moore of Chicago decided to allocate \$1.3 million in discretionary money via PB. Alderman Moore was thrilled with the results: residents of his ward chose a wide array of projects, including sidewalk repairs, community gardens, and public murals. He also saw a political benefit, crediting PB with his smooth reelection.

The next stop for PB was New York City. Council Member Melissa Mark-Viverito recalled, "I was invited to a presentation in Brooklyn. Joe Moore was on the panel. When I heard about the concept, it clicked with me." Mark-Viverito, a former labor organizer whose district includes East Harlem and parts of the Upper West Side of Manhattan and the South Bronx, became one of four council members to implement PB with discretionary funds, starting in 2011. A local organization, Community Voices Heard (CVH), worked closely with Mark-Viverito to make it a reality.

Mark-Viverito and her colleagues committed roughly \$6 million to PB in its first year, to widespread acclaim. Ann Bragg, an East Harlem resident, CVH member, and PB budget delegate, agrees that the process has been a success. Bragg explained that the process has been "a way for people to empower themselves. . . . You have a chance to decide what you want, as opposed to elected officials making decisions for us." Bragg was pleased when a project she supported, a new Meals on Wheels truck for seniors, was approved in PB's first cycle.

Mark-Viverito has been thrilled with the results: "It was incredible to see that the people who have been participating aren't the ones who'd been participating before." Research by the Urban Justice Center bears out Viverito's observation. Citywide, 44 percent of PB participants

had never before worked with others in their community to solve a problem. Moreover, participation from people of color and those of low income outpaced these groups' participation in city council elections.¹

Impressed by these results, four more council members adopted PB in 2012; PB now determines the allocation of roughly \$10 million in the nation's largest city.²

PB Heads West

PB's next major expansion brought it to Vallejo. Vallejo was an improbable candidate for PB. In 2008, this extremely racially and ethnically diverse blue-collar port city, tucked between Berkeley and Napa, became the largest American city to file for bankruptcy. Vallejo only fully emerged from bankruptcy in 2011, and that year voters approved a sales tax increase to help cover the budget shortfall. In 2012, with pressure from Council Member Marti Brown—who had begun looking into PB years before—a new city council majority allocated 30 percent of those funds, over \$3 million, to PB.³ Vallejo became the nation's first citywide PB process.

Not everyone was convinced. The mayor, Osby Davis, was quoted as saying, "Now is not the time to be creative."⁴ Brown disagreed. At a time of great disenchantment with and distrust of government, she felt that PB would "open up the process and give more control to residents."

In the ensuing months, Vallejo followed steps similar to PB elsewhere. In the summer, a citywide steering committee deliberated on rules and procedures, including voting eligibility. The city council ultimately approved most of the committee's recommendations—all residents sixteen years old and above, irrespective of citizenship or immigration status, could vote. Then came a series of neighborhood assemblies, in which residents brainstormed project ideas and volunteered to be budget delegates. The budget delegate phase, still ongoing in Vallejo, involves assessing the feasibility and eligibility of projects (only capital projects are eligible) before putting proposals on the ballot.

Johnnel has been assessing youth mentoring projects with his neighbors. He noted that the

process has “been very educational. We talked to the school board and the mayor about projects we could do.” Like many involved in PB elsewhere, Johnnel has also been impressed by the respectful tone of discussions. He explained, “It’s been pretty cooperative. People agree or disagree, but they still have a positive tone.” Council Member Brown similarly observed, “It’s been a very respectful, cooperative dialogue—they’ve done a very good job of wrapping their arms around the projects and weeding out the ones that weren’t possible.”

According to Josh Lerner of the Participatory Budgeting Project—a nonprofit organization that has led PB implementation in Vallejo, New York City, Chicago, and elsewhere—in Vallejo over eight hundred people have submitted 819 project ideas through neighborhood assemblies and online forums, higher per capita participation than in the New York or Chicago districts.⁵

Moreover, citizens seem to be developing new political capabilities, applicable beyond PB. The same Urban Justice Center report found a majority of low-income and low-education New York participants reporting increased comfort in making demands on government, speaking in public, and negotiating and building agreement.⁶ Mark-Viverito put it simply: “[PB] is empowering people to think that it’s possible to demand things from elected officials.”

Explaining Success and Ongoing Challenges

Of course, PB has not been universally successful. Even in Brazil, participation has lagged in certain localities, and certain processes have not adequately incorporated residents’ input. But, Lerner explained, two key factors seem to explain where PB succeeds best: “political will from above and community support from below.”

Where political leaders are supportive of the process, and existing community organizations can mobilize residents to participate, PB can best achieve what Lerner calls “a joint governance process between community and government.”

Sondra Youdelman, executive director of CVH, the lead community engagement partner for PB in New York City, noted, “In the best districts, you’ve got a real commitment from the city council office to dedicate staff time and energy to this process.

And it’s far more effective when there’s a community organization in the district that’s focused on targeted outreach and is interested in broader-based community engagement.”

The importance of strong existing civil society raises perhaps PB’s biggest challenge: it is resource intensive and particularly challenging to accomplish in places where little organizing is already happening. PB requires extensive outreach and organizing, including phone and door-knocking canvasses, careful meeting planning and facilitation, and work to help residents vet projects. Mark-Viverito noted that the process has been “very labor intensive,” with roughly one full-time council staff person devoted to it.

In Vallejo, \$200,000 was allocated for PB implementation, with most resources going to community outreach and engagement. This was particularly important, because, unlike Mark-Viverito’s New York district, Vallejo lacks base-building community organizing groups. Council Member Brown explained, “In a city that’s a 60 to 70 percent commuter town, it’s always challenging to get people to come out and participate in any type of public meeting.”

The lack of an existing civic infrastructure can also make attracting diverse participants more difficult. In New York City, strong community organization outreach led to African Americans being slightly overrepresented in neighborhood assemblies in New York’s four districts. Meanwhile, in Vallejo, final data are not yet available, but one active Latino resident, Jaime Guzmán has noted that outreach to “the Latino community is difficult—it’s hard to get people to participate.” Brown observed that, in terms of racial and ethnic diversity, PB meetings are “better than your typical planning meeting, but there’s still room for improvement.”

Another related challenge has been the size of the pot. In its first year in New York City, PB touched less than one hundredth of 1 percent of the \$68.5 billion city budget and roughly 1 percent of the city’s \$489 million capital discretionary budget.⁷ According to Peter Marcuse, professor emeritus of urban planning at Columbia University and research advisory board member to PB in New York City, “It has not been as widespread

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as it would need to be to make a real impact on what happens in the city.”

This challenge of scale is why elected officials and civil society leaders involved in PB are pushing for expansion. Lerner noted that, elsewhere in the world, including the poster-child case of Porto Alegre, PB “starts small and gets bigger,” both in terms of citizen participation and budget allocations, once people perceive success.

Sondra Youdelman added, “When people engage with the \$10 million on the table now, they start to understand the budget as a whole and begin to think about engaging in it. It gives them an understanding and expertise that makes taking on the bigger battle more likely.” And the New York advocates have started to do just that, pushing for more council members to adopt PB (four new ones acceded in 2012) and working to get city agencies like the Housing Authority on board. Mark-Viverito noted, “The ideal is to figure out if there’s a way to have this be included in the citywide budget.” City council and mayoral elections in 2013 may provide the greatest opportunity yet for pushing for increased commitments from elected officials and candidates.

Professor Marcuse reflected, “If it were to stop [with a few council districts], I would not consider it that important. But it is also pathbreaking—setting an image of what might be done at a larger scale and leading the way there. And that’s what makes it important.”

What’s Next?

The big questions now are whether municipalities that are already participating will choose to continue with PB and invest greater resources, and whether new cities opt in to the program. The good news for advocates is that they now have success stories and templates from which to draw. The ongoing challenge will be attracting sufficient resources from municipal governments and private sources to ensure smooth implementation, particularly for outreach to disengaged communities.

In the meantime, Lerner argues, the several million dollars currently on the table in Chicago, New York, and Vallejo matter: “These projects do make a concrete difference in people’s lives.

Having functional bathrooms in your school, having intersections that are less likely to kill people—those make a difference in people’s lives.”

Back in Vallejo, Johnnel would agree. As budget delegates finalize the list of eligible projects for this year’s ballot, Johnnel is excited about a proposed center for troubled teens. Johnnel can’t vote in PB elections yet, but he will be able to next year. In the meantime, he’s glad to be participating and “learning about what we could accomplish if we put our minds to it.”

NOTES

1. Alexa Casdan and Lindsay Cattell, *A People’s Budget: A Research and Evaluation Report on the Pilot Year of Participatory Budgeting in New York City* (New York: Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center, 2012), 18, www.cdp-ny.org/report/pbreport.pdf.
2. Steering Committee for Participatory Budgeting in New York City, *Participatory Budgeting in New York City: 2012–2013 Rule Book* (New York: PBNYC, 2012), 4, www.participatorybudgeting.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Rulebook.pdf. (Disclosure: one of these council members, Stephen Levin, is a relative of this author.)
3. Jessica A. York, “Vallejo Approves Public Budgeting Process for Portion of New Sales Tax Revenue,” *Vallejo Times-Herald*, April 19, 2012, www.timesheraldonline.com/news/ci_20431788/vallejo-approves-public-budgeting-process-portion-new-sales.
4. Claudia Cowan, “After Bankruptcy, California City Experiments with Letting Voters Make Budget Decisions,” Fox News, November 12, 2012, www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/11/12/after-bankruptcy-california-city-experiments-with-letting-voters-make-budget/.
5. See also Ginny Browne, “Vallejo Launches Participatory Budgeting,” *The ELP Blog*, February 18, 2013, theelpblog.wordpress.com/2013/02/18/vallejo-leads-civic-participation-in-california-with-launch-of-participatory-budgeting.
6. Casdan and Cattell, *A People’s Budget*, 24.
7. Ibid., 8.

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