Participatory Budgeting in New York City

Celina Su

Over the last four years, participatory budgeting has spread from one to more than 45 cities in the US. Reporting from New York City, Celina Su considers its promise for empowering the traditionally disenfranchised and identifies three suggestions for shoring up the process.

In 2011, at age 24, Corin Mills was not confident that he was capable of completing long-term projects, let alone attend college. He had dropped out of high school and served a brief jail sentence. Then, through an organization called Getting Out Staying Out,[1] Mills became involved in participatory budgeting (PB),[2] a process in which community members, rather than elected officials, decide how to allocate public funds. Specifically, Mills researched the need for and feasibility of project ideas pitched by his neighbors and helped to develop a proposal for a mobile laptop lab to be shared by nine public schools. When his proposal won $450,000, Mills built upon his newfound skills and sense of accomplishment to apply to and attend college; he was even able to partly cover his costs with a crowdfunding campaign[3] that movingly related his struggles.

Mills' story speaks to PB's potential to engage traditionally marginalized constituents to help them inform policymakers of their priorities and concerns. Indeed, PB has received tremendous attention since it first began in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989, spreading to over 1,500 cities worldwide. Since 2010 alone, PB has spread from one American city to a projected 45 this year.[4] Community organizing coalitions like Right to the City[5] have advocated for PB as one means of reclaiming the commons, and President Obama recently announced PB as a key element of his latest "Open Government" initiative.[6]

Still, as PB continues to gain traction, there remain questions as to whether it can sustain engagement among the traditionally disenfranchised and help engender a more equitable reallocation of public funds, as in well-known past cases (Wampler 2007).

Bowling together, budgeting together?

American political participation of all sorts—voting, writing to elected officials—has steadily declined since World War Two.[7] Further, participation is not evenly distributed among demographic

1 Website: www.gosonyc.org/HomePage.php.

2 See: http://participatorybudgeting.org.

3 Website: https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/help-corin-go-to-college.

4 As full disclosure, I have sat on the New York city-wide PB Steering Committee since its inception in 2011, and I participated in a White House convening on PB in spring 2014.

5 Website: http://righttothecity.org.

6 See the White House press release on "Transparency and Open Government" at: http://1.usa.gov/1dLtUiU.

7 See: www.apsanet.org/imgtest/democracyatrisk.pdf.

groups. For example, Latinos and Asian Americans, women, and low-income constituents tend to vote at lower rates[8] than other racial groups, men, and higher-income constituents, respectively.

PB attempts to give stakeholders an opportunity to draw upon their knowledge of local needs, articulate proposals, interact with neighbors, deliberate over priorities, and select—not just consult on—which proposals receive funding.

The New York PB process began in 2011, with four city councilmembers turning over part of their capital discretionary funds. This year, 22 of 51 councilmembers, representing roughly 4 million constituents, will do so. A city steering committee, the Participatory Budgeting Project,[9] and Community Voices Heard[10] provide input on rules, technical assistance, and outreach strategies along the way.

As a scholar who focuses on civic engagement and public policy, I have served on New York City's PB Steering Committee since its inception. As a member of the research board headed by the Urban Justice Center,[11] I work with other researchers to hone key research questions, instruments, data collection, and analysis. Each year, the research board collects information on the demographics, civic experiences, and opinions of participants. Last year, the board collected 8,000 surveys,[12] as well as dozens of interviews on potential barriers to participation. In the past two years, I have conducted over 30 one- to three-hour interviews with PB participants and allies, including outreach staff and city agency representatives, and attended numerous events to observe the quality of deliberations.

Broadening stakeholdership on an uneven terrain

New York's PB process has broadened some notions of stakeholdership, engaging traditionally disenfranchised constituents in the city. For instance, the first rulebook[13] dictated that anyone over age 16 who lives, works, attends school, or is the parent of a student in a district could participate in neighborhood assemblies and project-vetting, and residents over age 18, including undocumented immigrants, could vote on the allocations. Enthusiastic youth participation in neighborhood assemblies was instrumental in convincing adults to lower the PB voting age to 16, and the participation age to 14, in 2012.

According to the survey data, constituents from traditionally marginalized subpopulations participated in PB at much higher rates than in traditional elections. For instance, in District 8 (centered on East Harlem), the very poor—those with incomes of $10,000 per annum or less—constituted 4% of voters in the 2009 city council elections but 22% of PB voters.[14] Along lines of race and gender, PB also engaged traditionally underrepresented stakeholders.

Survey data suggest that strong outreach efforts appear to pay off; lower-income and foreign-born constituents were more likely to learn about PB through word-of-mouth or targeted campaigns, rather than online or through governmental-institutional channels. Districts that hosted assemblies specifically catering to youth or non-English-speaking constituencies saw, in turn, much higher voting rates by those constituents.[15]

Notably, half of 2014 PB voters had never worked with others on a community issue before. One third were foreign-born. In one district, over two thirds of distributed ballots were in languages

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Website: www.participatorybudgeting.org.

[10] Website: www.cvhaction.org.

[11] Website: http://cdp-ny.org.

[12] See: www.cdp-ny.org/report/pbyear2_releaseppt.pdf.

[13] See: http://pbnyc.org/content/materials.

[14] See: www.cdp-ny.org/report/pbreport.pdf.

[15] See: www.cdp-ny.org/report/pbreport_year2.pdf.

other than English. Further, census block groups served by PB allocations had 20% higher percentages of minority residents and families with income below the poverty level (Goldberg and Finkelstein 2014).

The survey data cited above have already helped to inform some changes. For instance, because "pop-up" or mobile voting sites are more likely to reach lower-income and undocumented immigrant stakeholders, the steering committee has increased the minimum number of such voting sites in each district.

Beyond top-down and bottom-up governance

Still, as the city council expands and continues to institutionalize the New York PB process, several tensions remain prominent. I discuss three key ones below.

1. Training for PB participants. In order to encourage participation, interpreters and childcare are available at most PB meetings. One element that remains lacking for participants, however, is consistent and high-quality training. Without an understanding of the capital budget and PB eligibility (such as why laptops are eligible but iPads are not), budget delegates can lack the familiarity with governing rules they need to talk easily with city agency representatives, feel flummoxed by technicalities, and be unable to question the larger regulations and implications. Some leadership development and related trainings likely to edify and empower budget delegates might seem surprising to the uninitiated, yet commonsensical in retrospect. Formerly incarcerated youth, for instance, testified to the terror they felt in speaking to school principals during site visits to project proposals. They had previously only interacted with such authorities and institutions in punitive ways. Training in public speaking and poster-making, during preparations for the pre-vote expos, were as important as literacy and quantitative needs assessment training.

2. Balancing local knowledge with technical expertise. In a related tension, governmental officials act as simultaneous facilitators and gatekeepers in the process, helping to define which project proposals are "feasible" and "appropriate." Interviews with representatives from various city agencies—such as transportation, health, and libraries—suggest that many feel like they are doing a good job, performing needs assessments, and working within limited budgets. They thus wonder why they should take time out from their "real" jobs to help ordinary citizens pitch proposals that will only add work. Just as PB participants need training on budgeting and city planning regulations, agency representatives may require advisement on how playground designs, library spaces, and other expenditures might improve with public input, and how agencies can welcome and make good use of such input.

Although many of the agency representatives present themselves as value-neutral, their vetting process profoundly shapes PB participants' experiences and the sorts of project ideas participants decide to prioritize and forward in future years. As PB participants begin to master technical rules, it becomes tempting to forward whatever proposals they now know to be most palatable to city agencies and receive approval,[16] rather than proposals that reflect the concerns and local knowledge that compelled them to participate in the first place.

3. Scale and equity. Finally, there remain perennial questions of breadth and scale. City agency representatives also lamented PB's limited scope. Roughly $25 million is a tiny fraction of the city's $75 billion operating and $6 billion capital budgets, and significant capital projects—new building developments, sewer systems, public transit—inevitably require cross-district coordination and economies of scale.

[16] See: http://pas.sagepub.com/content/42/1/29.abstract.

The current system in New York—small pots of money, organized by city council district—also limits PB's potential to address issues of equity in the city. For example, at one neighborhood assembly, a white, middle-aged man from Manhattan's Upper West Side (a higher-income neighborhood) withdrew his proposal for a stop sign at an intersection near his home, stating that laundry rooms for primarily Latino senior citizens in public housing in East Harlem (a lower-income neighborhood) should receive higher priority. This speaks to PB's ability to facilitate constructive dialogues[17] between people living in disparate socioeconomic conditions. But this exact exchange—and the small-scale attendant redistribution of funds from one area to another—was an exception to the rule, and is not possible under new configurations. District lines have been redrawn, and East Harlem is now districted with higher-poverty stretches of the South Bronx. Because city council districts tend to be relatively small areas with concentrated wealth or poverty, PB's potential for redistributive impact remains limited unless city-wide portions of the budget become subject to PB.

With mixed results, an evolving project

Ideally, PB allows stakeholders to draw upon a keen sense of real-life, street-level problems and help to craft better policy decisions. At one East Harlem neighborhood assembly, youth identified specific spots in the neighborhood that felt unsafe during after-school hours, contributing information that urban planners or working adults might not have noted otherwise. But PB also runs the risk of romanticizing the role of the individual and reifying a neoliberal logic, enlisting "citizens in measuring, auditing and monitoring… in a depoliticized technical process that defuses conflicts and treats them as consumers," rather than political stakeholders (Hickey and Mohan 2004). After all, should it really be the job of busy, working New Yorkers to research and address which schools need basic repairs, or to "choose" which curbs require extensions to be safe and, by extension, which do not?

Given its limited scope, our research in New York City suggests that PB's greatest potential impact lies not in PB budget allocations but in spillover effects, prompting participants to demand more from the state via other channels. For instance, many constituents were upset that they were funding "basic needs" like elementary-school bathroom stall doors with discretionary funds, and their experiences with PB prompted them to question education budgets at large. This past year, city councilors were able to convince the Department of Education to increase their budget allocations to school bathrooms because related proposals had garnered such large shares of past PB votes. And Corin Mills, whose story opened this article, is now applying the skills he developed in PB to college. Thus, we cannot adequately analyze PB's sustainability and impact (or lack thereof) without also examining other governmental institutions like community boards, community groups, and *non*-participation in the larger ecosystem of participation in New York (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012).

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[17] See: www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol8/iss2/art1.

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