

# WHY LET THE PEOPLE DECIDE?

A report by  
Public Agenda via  
the Yankelovich Center

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## Elected Officials on Participatory Budgeting



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## Why Let the People Decide? Elected Officials on Participatory Budgeting

A report from Public Agenda by  
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The Kettering Foundation served as a collaborator in this research. Funding for the research was generously provided by the Democracy Fund and the Rita Allen Foundation.

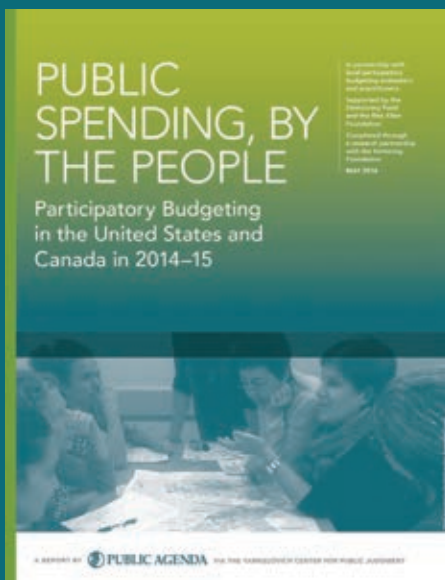
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# WHY LET THE PEOPLE DECIDE?

## Elected Officials on Participatory Budgeting

Executive Summary . . . . .	2
Introduction . . . . .	9
This Research . . . . .	13
Main Findings . . . . .	14
1. Motivations to adopt participatory budgeting . . . . .	15
2. Impacts on participants, communities and government. . . . .	21
3. Implementation challenges . . . . .	31
4. Reasons some elected officials have not (yet) adopted PB . . . . .	41
5. The future of PB in the United States . . . . .	47
Recommendations . . . . .	53
Methodology . . . . .	56
Bibliography. . . . .	59
Related Publications . . . . .	60
Acknowledgments . . . . .	61

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a democratic process in which ordinary residents decide how to spend part of a public budget. In the United States, PB is among the fastest growing forms of public engagement in local governance, having expanded from one city council district in the 2009–10 cycle<sup>1</sup> to 47 council districts or cities with active PB processes in the 2015–16 cycle.<sup>2</sup> In the 2014–15 cycle of PB alone, over 70,000 people voted on how a total of \$43 million should be spent, and 198 projects won funding.<sup>3</sup>

How PB will expand in the United States, and whether and how it will affect residents, communities and government in the long term, will depend largely on the interest and commitment of elected officials.

This report summarizes research on U.S. elected officials' views of and experiences with PB. Based on in-depth interviews with 43 officials—including 28 who had implemented a PB process and 15 who had not—the report discusses what had motivated officials to adopt or not adopt PB; how they have seen PB affect their communities, their governments and their own work; what they thought about the implementation of PB, including its challenges and opportunities; and how they evaluated the future of PB in the United States.

Sections 1, 2, 3 and 5 of this report are based on our interviews with officials who had implemented PB processes and section 4 on our interviews with officials who had not. The report concludes with recommendations for national and local stakeholders who seek to strengthen and spread PB across the United States.

The Kettering Foundation served as a collaborator in this research. Funding for the research was generously provided by the Democracy Fund and the Rita Allen Foundation.

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<sup>1</sup> Each PB process operates on its own timeline, meaning that the various phases of each PB process take place at different times from one another during the calendar year. Therefore, we describe a PB process as falling into a given "cycle" of PB if its vote was held between July 1st of one year and June 30th of the following year.

<sup>2</sup> These counts include PB that is implemented by a city council, council member or city agency. It does not include school- or college-wide PB processes.

<sup>3</sup> These figures are from Public Agenda's analysis. For equivalent analyses that combine data from 2014–15 PB processes in the United States and Canada, see Carolin Hagelskamp, Chloe Rinehart, Rebecca Silliman and David Schleifer, "Public Spending, By The People: Participatory Budgeting in the United States and Canada in 2014–15" (New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2016), <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-spending-by-the-people>.

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## How does PB work?

In current forms of participatory budgeting in the United States, residents of a city or a city council district have the opportunity to participate directly in government decision making by deciding how designated parts of the public budget should be spent. PB typically progresses through four consecutive phases:



### IDEA COLLECTION PHASE

First, residents come together in public meetings and online to discuss community needs and brainstorm ideas for projects that could be financed with the money their public representatives have allocated to the PB process.



### BUDGET DELEGATE PHASE

Second, resident volunteers work in groups (or committees) to develop the initial ideas into actual project proposals. These volunteers (commonly called budget delegates) typically work closely with relevant city agencies to assess the feasibility and cost of projects.



### VOTING PHASE

Third, fully developed project ideas are put on a ballot for residents—including youth and noncitizens—to vote on. The voting period often lasts several days.



### PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

Fourth, projects that get the most votes and fall within the cap of allocated funds win. Government commits to implementing winning projects.<sup>4</sup>

## Methodology in brief

Interviewees for this research were recruited from among all U.S. officials who were implementing PB processes in their districts or cities during the 2014–15 and/or the 2015–16 cycle of PB, as well as from neighboring council districts and nearby comparable cities without PB. All interviewees were invited to participate in two rounds of interviews. The first round was conducted between March and June 2015 and the second between October 2015 and March 2016. Fifty-three percent of our interviewees participated in both rounds of interviews. All interviews were confidential and ranged in length from 15 to 50 minutes. Public Agenda’s research team conducted the interviews and the data analysis. More details on the methodology and sample characteristics can be found at the end of this report on page 56.

<sup>4</sup> In this work, we consider only those participatory budgeting processes in which officials have committed to spending funds in accordance with a public vote. We are not considering budgeting processes that are consultative in the sense that residents are given opportunities to weigh in on how public money should be spent, but in which no official public vote is held.

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## Findings in brief

### 1. MOTIVATIONS TO ADOPT PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

**Officials who implemented PB typically saw it as a chance to get more constituents excited about local politics and to educate them about how government works. Most also said they expected PB to increase their popularity with constituents.**

Among officials who had adopted PB, virtually all worried about constituents' political apathy and lack of knowledge of how government works. Most said when they first heard about PB, they saw an opportunity to educate constituents and energize them to get more involved in local political affairs. In the process, most also expected to build trust and gain popularity in their communities. The officials we interviewed were not typically motivated to adopt PB by a desire to make budgeting decisions more responsive to community needs or to transform the political system. More often they were motivated by their interests in civic education, increasing political engagement and building better relationships with constituents.

### 2. IMPACTS ON PARTICIPANTS, COMMUNITIES AND GOVERNMENT

**Most officials felt their PB processes had succeeded in generating enthusiasm and getting constituents more engaged in political life. Many also noted their PB processes raised constituents' awareness of government inefficiencies, for better or for worse. Generally, officials said PB helped them understand constituents' needs better.**

Most officials we interviewed saw their PB processes generating excitement and engaging residents who previously were less politically involved. Some discussed examples of participants' learning how to advocate for their interests and building leadership skills through PB. Many officials noted that new alliances among residents and community groups had formed through PB, which they felt contributed to stronger civic infrastructures in their communities. A few said PB provided a forum for more frank public discussions about equity in public spending across their communities. At the same time, many officials said PB sometimes frustrated residents by revealing government inefficiencies. Some saw this as a learning opportunity for both residents and government. Talking about their own work, interviewees reflected that their PB processes had helped them understand and respond better to their residents' concerns. Some added PB had improved their relationships with city agencies. Generally, interviewees felt PB improved their political prospects, even in instances when officials encountered criticism from those residents who felt the process was not serving them.

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### 3. IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

**The need for adequate time, money and staff to implement PB was a challenge cited by most officials who had adopted it. Several discussed the challenges of ensuring their processes were not dominated by the most advantaged groups in their jurisdictions. Explaining the process effectively and responding to residents' criticisms and concerns were also common themes.**

While nearly all officials who had adopted PB agreed the biggest challenges in implementing it were mobilizing adequate time, money and staff, they felt the process was nevertheless worth continuing. Explaining the PB process and its potential value to constituents was harder than some officials expected. Several said it was a challenge to ensure their processes were not dominated by the most powerful or advantaged groups in their jurisdictions and to respond to some constituents' negative feedback or frustrations about PB. Including youth was more controversial for some than they had expected. Officials found digital tools could be useful but also described their drawbacks and limitations.

### 4. REASONS SOME ELECTED OFFICIALS HAVE NOT (YET) ADOPTED PB

**Officials who had not adopted PB often saw themselves as already sufficiently attuned to constituents' needs. They often worried about resources for implementation if they did decide to adopt it. Several said the budgets typically allocated to PB were too small for projects to have much impact.**

Typically, officials who had not adopted PB told us they were satisfied with their current public engagement efforts. They often said they could make budgeting decisions that met constituents' needs and account for budgeting realities in ways that residents could not. Many of these interviewees expected only affluent and well-connected residents to benefit from a PB process and more disadvantaged residents to be alienated by it. Many also worried PB would take up too much staff time and effort. And several of these officials criticized current PB budgets in the United States for being too small and, therefore, not allowing for projects to have meaningful impacts on communities. Some said current forms of PB in the United States give residents a false sense of empowerment.

### 5. THE FUTURE OF PB IN THE UNITED STATES

**Securing more resources for implementation is important for PB's future, most officials who had adopted the process agreed. At the same time, some suggested ways to make implementation more efficient. Several also suggested PB must expand beyond capital budgets, and that the budgets allocated to it should be larger if PB is to affect communities and government meaningfully over the long term.**

Resource challenges impeded the implementation and expansion of PB processes, most officials who had adopted PB said. Several discussed ways of making implementation more efficient, including more centralized support from their city governments. Some said they wanted more opportunities to share PB experiences with colleagues and to learn from each other. Moreover, several officials argued that, to fulfill its promises, PB needed to be applied to much larger budgets. Most officials with PB experience were looking forward to improving their processes in years to come.

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## Recommendations in brief for spreading inclusive and effective participatory budgeting

Based on findings from this study of U.S. elected officials, as well as from our ongoing research collaborations with local evaluators of PB processes across the United States and Canada, we present ideas for public officials and their staffs who are interested in participatory budgeting; for PB organizers, community-based organizations and advocates; and for foundations and other potential funders of PB. More details on these recommendations can be found on page 53 of this report. The following are these recommendations in brief.

### IDEAS FOR PUBLIC OFFICIALS AND THEIR STAFFS

- **Engage staff, implicated city agencies and broad cross-sections of the community before launching PB.** Engaging important players early on can maximize participation and minimize resistance.
- **Plan for implementation with adequate staffing, volunteers and other resources.** Implementing PB takes time, money and effort. Building a volunteer base can help support the process from year to year. Coordinating with officials and staff in neighboring jurisdictions when possible can help to share the workload.
- **Collaborate with community-based organizations and civic leaders to support implementation and make PB more inclusive.** Community-based organizations and civic leaders can bring many engagement skills to the table, including expertise in engaging traditionally marginalized communities and in building a volunteer base.
- **Coordinate your ongoing engagement strategies, including PB, to maximize their impact and efficiency.** To make PB more effective and efficient, it can be coordinated with other, ongoing public engagement strategies and technologies.
- **Get ready for messy democracy.** PB can bring out the best in community residents and create public spirit. It can also reveal conflicts and upset existing power brokers. Be prepared for these challenges.
- **Articulate goals and include evaluation.** When available, work collaboratively with independent local evaluators to gain a better understanding of whether and how your PB process achieves its goals and how to improve it over time.

### IDEAS FOR PB ADVOCATES AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

- **Keep in mind what officials care about most with respect to PB when you engage them about adopting it.** Many officials told us they see PB as a means to educate the public about how government works and to gain popularity with constituents. In engaging elected officials about PB, emphasizing these potential impacts may help.



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- **Help officials contend with their concerns and challenges related to implementation.**

The lack of resources for implementation and anticipated burden on staff can deter officials from adopting PB. Be prepared for realistic conversations with elected officials about how to make PB work, including how you can help build an inclusive base of volunteers, recruit diverse community members to participate and possibly take on other tasks that are congruent with your organization's mission and position in the community.

- **Share leadership and responsibility for PB's success with public officials.**

Community-based organizations and advocates should be part of PB steering committees and help write local versions of the rules. They should hold themselves and officials mutually accountable for meeting the goals of their processes.

## IDEAS FOR FOUNDATIONS AND OTHER FUNDERS

- **Create opportunities for officials to educate each other about PB.** Supporting the building and maintenance of PB learning communities among officials across the United States can help expand PB and spread best practices.

- **Support evaluation and research on PB and its impacts and the communication of findings both locally and nationwide.** Evaluating and researching PB processes is crucial to understanding how effective they are in meeting their goals. As sites experiment with different approaches to implementation, researching and sharing their practices can benefit processes nationwide.

- **Sponsor the development and use of technical assistance and trainings as well as technological tools and digital infrastructure to support PB.** Support to get access to PB trainings and technical assistance can encourage officials to adopt PB in their jurisdictions. Technological tools can make implementation more efficient, but investments are needed to take full advantage of their potential.

- **Consider brokering and financially supporting collaboration among public officials and key community players, especially community-based organizations.** Fostering collaborations between these community allies and local government can help the implementation of PB and facilitate inclusiveness. Even small grants can help these entities work together to address needs like translation, transportation to and provision of child care at meetings, printing materials and incentives for volunteers.

## AN IDEA FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS

- **Consider whether and how to use PB for different types of budgets and for larger budgets.** Officials and their staffs, PB advocates, community-based organizations, researchers and funders should consider whether and how to expand PB processes beyond current budgets and whether and how such expansions could benefit communities and government in the long term.



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# INTRODUCTION

- What has motivated U.S. elected officials to adopt participatory budgeting (PB)?
- How do officials see PB affecting participants, communities and government?
- What have been officials' greatest challenges when implementing PB?
- Why have some officials not (yet) adopted PB?
- How do officials see the future of PB in the United States?

To answer these questions, Public Agenda conducted in-depth interviews with 43 elected officials across the United States about their views of and experiences with participatory budgeting. About two-thirds of interviewees had recent experiences implementing PB processes in their jurisdictions. About one-third had not adopted PB themselves but had heard about or seen such processes in neighboring districts or cities.

This report summarizes the main findings from this research, followed by recommendations for local government, community-based organizations and funders who are working to support and spread inclusive and effective PB across the United States.

## What is participatory budgeting?

Participatory budgeting is a democratic process in which ordinary residents decide how to spend part of a public budget. PB started in Brazil in the late 1980s and has since spread to more than 1,500 communities around the world.<sup>5</sup> In the United States, PB is among the fastest growing forms of public engagement in local governance, having expanded from one city council district in the 2009–10 cycle<sup>6</sup> to 47 council districts or cities with active PB processes in the 2015–16 cycle.<sup>7</sup>

In their current form, PB processes in the United States typically start with a public official or a city council publicly designating a set amount of its budget for PB. In most cases, a steering committee—comprising local community groups, community leaders, government representatives and others—forms to decide on the goals and the rules of the process. These may include establishing the minimum voting age and other eligibility criteria, the timeline, resource allocations, targets for outreach and participation, roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders and so forth. The steering committee typically writes a rule book and meets throughout the process to monitor its implementation.

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<sup>5</sup> Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Ernesto Ganuza, "Participatory Budgeting as if Emancipation Mattered," *Politics & Society* 42, no. 1 (2014): 29–50; Josh Lerner, *Everyone Counts: Could "Participatory Budgeting" Change Democracy?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Each PB process operates on its own timeline, meaning that the various phases of each PB process take place at different times from one another during the calendar year. Therefore, we describe a PB process as falling into a given "cycle" of PB if its vote was held between July 1st of one year and June 30th of the following year.

<sup>7</sup> These counts include PB that is implemented by a city council, council member or city agency. It does not include school- or college-wide PB processes.

While communities vary in how, exactly, they implement PB, the process typically comprises a number of distinct phases, each progressing over a period of several weeks or months.



#### IDEA COLLECTION PHASE

First, residents come together in public meetings and online to discuss community needs and brainstorm ideas for projects that could be financed with the money their public representatives have allocated to the PB process.



#### BUDGET DELEGATE PHASE

Second, resident volunteers work in groups (or committees) to develop the initial ideas into actual project proposals. These volunteers (commonly called budget delegates) typically work closely with relevant city agencies to assess the feasibility and cost of projects.



#### VOTING PHASE

Third, fully developed project ideas are put on a ballot for residents—including youth and noncitizens—to vote on. The voting period often lasts several days.



#### PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

Fourth, projects that get the most votes and fall within the cap of allocated funds win. Government commits to implementing winning projects.<sup>8</sup>

### Key facts about PB in the United States

PB first came to the United States in 2009 when then (and current) Alderman Joe Moore of the 49th Ward in Chicago started a PB process with his constituents. From there, PB has spread to more Chicago wards and to council districts in other U.S. cities, most notably New York City, where 28 of 51 council districts ran a PB process in the 2015–16 PB cycle. In 2012, Vallejo, California, became the first city to implement citywide PB; it was joined in 2014 by Cambridge, Massachusetts, and in 2015 by Greensboro, North Carolina, Hartford, Connecticut, and Clarkston, Georgia. Also in 2014, Boston launched the first youth PB process, a citywide process for Bostonians ages 12 to 25. One district in Long Beach, California, and, most recently, the city of Seattle, Washington, followed suit by initiating youth-only PB processes.<sup>9</sup> The map on page 11 shows the locations of all 47 U.S. PB sites in the 2015–16 cycle.

Over the past seven years, public officials have allocated nearly \$100 million to PB, collected more than 130,000 votes and funded 500 projects.<sup>10</sup> In the 2014–15 cycle—the most recent on which Public Agenda conducted a comprehensive analysis in collaboration with local PB evaluators and implementers—over 70,000 people voted on how a total of \$43 million should be spent, and 198 projects won funding. Of these PB processes, 90 percent were restricted to capital funds—that is, funding for longer-term

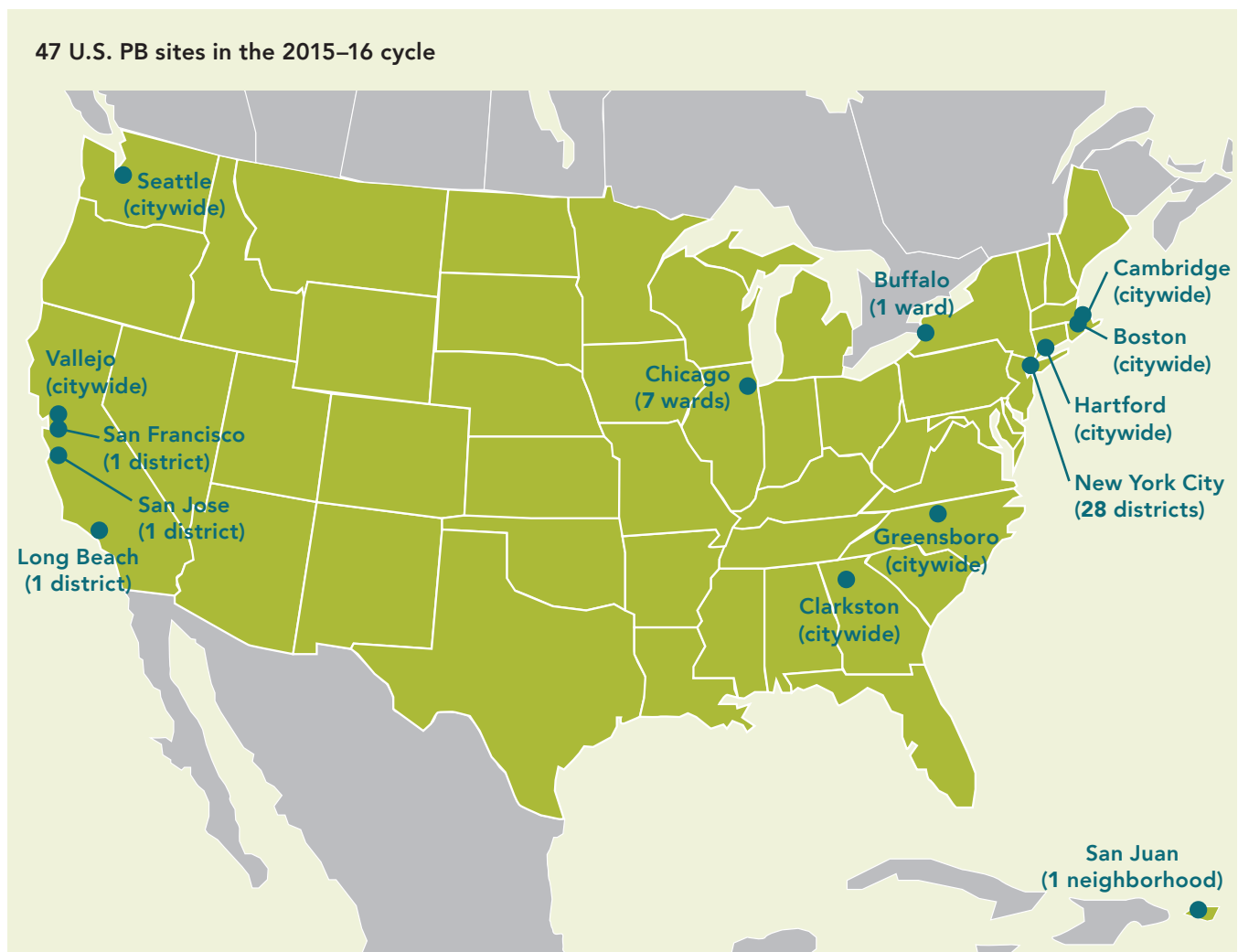
<sup>8</sup> In this work, we consider only those participatory budgeting processes in which officials commit to spending funds in accordance with a public vote. We do not consider budgeting processes that are consultative in the sense that residents are given opportunities to weigh in on how public money should be spent, but no official public vote is held.

<sup>9</sup> In addition, growing numbers of schools and universities across the United States are implementing participatory budgeting processes in which students decide how parts of their institutions' budgets should be spent.

<sup>10</sup> Participatory Budgeting Project, "Annual Report 2015–16" (Brooklyn, NY: PBP, 2016), [http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/PBP\\_AnnualReport\\_2016\\_small-1.pdf](http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/PBP_AnnualReport_2016_small-1.pdf).

infrastructure projects. In a few communities, PB-allocated money could also be spent on programmatic projects—those that can support service delivery and personnel.<sup>11</sup>

The growth of PB across the United States has been facilitated in a number of ways, including through advocacy and technical assistance from a nonprofit organization called the Participatory Budgeting Project and various local community-based organizations (such as Community Voices Heard in New York City and the Clean Air Coalition of Western New York in Buffalo, New York), as well as from individual residents. Enthusiastic early adopters among public officials have shared their PB experiences with colleagues and encouraged them to bring the process to their communities. Moreover, national and local foundations have supported the implementation of and trainings, advocacy and research for PB.



<sup>11</sup> These figures are from Public Agenda's analysis. For equivalent analyses that combine data from 2014–15 PB processes in the United States and Canada, see Hagelskamp et al., "Public Spending, By The People," 2016.

## What are the promises of PB?

Participatory budgeting means a significant shift in traditional government decision making as officials give up power to their constituents. Political theorists and practitioners argue this shift could have long-term impacts on people, communities and government.<sup>12</sup> Among the greatest promises of PB is its potential to do the following:

- Empower residents—especially those who are traditionally excluded from politics—to make decisions that will have impact, acquire civic skills and knowledge and stay politically engaged beyond their involvement in PB
- Lead to a more equitable distribution of resources and to public decisions better aligned with community needs
- Increase transparency in public spending, build trust between government and residents and increase the legitimacy of public decisions
- Foster collaborations between and among public and nonprofit stakeholders and build a stronger civic infrastructure

All these outcomes are, arguably, indicators and elements of better democracy. Ultimately, they are expected to make communities healthier, happier and more prosperous.

## What has PB accomplished in the United States so far?

Research on and evaluations of PB in the United States have shown some promising results. Most notably, PB processes have typically engaged large numbers of low-income residents, people of color and youth. In the 2014–15 cycle, 52 percent of residents who voted in PB (and completed a demographic survey) were people of color, 46 percent reported household incomes of less than \$50,000 per year and about 1 in 10 were under 18 years of age. By engaging large proportions of traditionally underserved communities, PB is expected to bring attention to areas of greatest need and to result in more equitable distribution of resources in the long term.<sup>13</sup>

Not all communities are successful at engaging traditionally underrepresented populations, however. Many struggle to bring in non-English speakers and immigrant communities. In the 2014–15 cycle, residents with university degrees were highly overrepresented among PB voter survey respondents in nearly all communities. Moreover, communities vary greatly in their implementation of PB, with some investing significantly more time and effort in outreach than others. Person-to-person outreach (such as canvassing or door knocking) and outreach by community-based organizations have been associated with a higher representation of traditionally underrepresented groups during the PB vote.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See Gianpaolo Biaocchi, “The Porto Alegre Experiment and Deliberative Democratic Theory,” *Politics & Society* 29 (2001): 43–72; Archon Fung, “Putting the Public Back into Governance: The Challenges of Citizen Participation and Its Future,” *Public Administration Review* 75, no. 4 (2015): 513–22; Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, vol. 4 (London: Verso, 2003); Celina Su, “Whose Budget? Our Budget? Broadening Political Stakeholdership via Participatory Budgeting,” *Journal of Public Deliberation* 8, no. 2 (2012): 1–14; Carolina Johnson and John Gastil, “Variations of Institutional Design for Empowered Deliberation,” *Journal of Public Deliberation* 11, no. 1 (2015): 1–32; Hollie Russon Gilman, *Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016); Lerner, *Everyone Counts*, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Public Agenda’s internal analysis. To learn more about equivalent analyses that combine data from PB processes across the United States and Canada, see Hagelskamp et al., “Public Spending, By The People,” 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

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The quick expansion, current scale and great variability in PB implementation and participation across districts and cities raise important questions about whether and how PB will have an impact on communities and government in the long term. They also raise immediate questions for local government, advocates and community groups, as well as funders, about how best to implement and support inclusive and effective PB. The current research seeks to illuminate national and local dialogues on these questions with an in-depth exploration of the views of and experiences with PB of diverse elected officials in the United States.

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## THIS RESEARCH

Public Agenda set out to obtain a better understanding of elected officials' views of and experiences with participatory budgeting. The way in which PB will expand in the United States and whether and how it will affect residents, communities and government in the long term will depend largely on the interest and commitment of elected officials. These officials have to be motivated to give up some of their budgetary decision-making power, and they and their teams need the means and skills to implement PB in inclusive and effective ways. Furthermore, the attitudes and experiences of elected officials who have experienced PB are likely to shape its reputation among elected officials more generally.

The current research consisted of 66 in-depth interviews with a total of 43 different officials representing 11 U.S. cities. Twenty-eight interviewees had personal experience with implementing PB processes in their jurisdictions, including 26 who were doing so at the time of the interview. Another 15 interviewees had no personal experience with implementing PB, but their districts or cities neighbored other districts or cities with PB processes. To capture officials' potentially evolving views as they experience PB or learn more about neighboring processes, we invited each participant to be interviewed twice over the course of 12 months. Fifty-three percent of participating officials were interviewed twice. Interviews took place between March 2015 and March 2016. All but one of the interviews were conducted by phone.

In conducting this research, Public Agenda sought to gain a better understanding of how officials view and experience PB, both as a democratic practice and as a process in action; their motivations for adopting or not adopting PB; how they had seen the impact of PB on their communities as well as on government and their own work; what they thought about the implementation of PB, including its challenges and opportunities; and how they evaluated the future of PB in the United States.

This report summarizes the main observations from this research, augmented by illustrative quotes from our interviews. Sections 1, 2, 3 and 5 of this report are based on our interviews with officials who had implemented PB processes and section 4 on our interviews with officials who had not. It concludes with recommendations for national and local stakeholders who are seeking to expand inclusive and effective forms of PB.

This research is the first national, comprehensive, in-depth and confidential study of its kind. Public Agenda brings an independent, nonpartisan perspective to this work. We assured all interviewees of full confidentiality. For more details on the research methodology, see page 56.

The Kettering Foundation served as a collaborator in this research. Funding for the research was generously provided by the Democracy Fund and the Rita Allen Foundation.



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# MAIN FINDINGS



# 1

## MOTIVATIONS TO ADOPT PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Officials who implemented PB typically saw it as a chance to get more constituents excited about local politics and to educate them about how government works. Most also said they expected PB to increase their popularity with constituents.

Among officials who had adopted PB, virtually all worried about constituents' political apathy and lack of knowledge of how government works. Most said when they first heard about PB, they saw an opportunity to educate constituents and energize them to get more involved in local political affairs. In the process, most also expected to build trust and gain popularity in their communities. The officials we interviewed were not typically motivated to adopt PB by a desire to make budgeting decisions more responsive to community needs or to transform the political system. More often they were motivated by their interests in civic education, increasing political engagement and building better relationships with constituents.



Most interviewees implementing PB said they had heard about it from other elected officials, either from their own cities or others. Several also mentioned they learned about PB from the Participatory Budgeting Project. Some first heard about PB in other countries and had been curious about it before they knew about PB processes in the United States. We asked officials what had motivated them to try PB in their own districts or cities and what had made them think it could benefit their communities.

**Officials who had adopted PB typically saw it as a means to get more residents excited about local political affairs and to educate them about how government works.**

The officials we spoke with often discussed their concerns about low voter turnout in regular elections; mistrust in government, including local government; and what they felt was a lack of knowledge among their constituents of how government works, especially budgeting. Many said they were looking for new ways to engage with the public that could incite residents to be more involved in political and civic affairs. PB, they felt, provided this opportunity:

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I've been frustrated in the past in that it's really hard to get people out and comment or give input into our budget. I thought PB was a great way to get people engaged and realize how their tax dollars translate into the city's initiatives.<sup>15</sup>

I thought PB was a great opportunity to really incorporate the community. And then, hopefully, it also increases participation in local government as a whole.

The number one goal is to bring people back into the governmental process. If you look at our election returns, they're embarrassing. PB brings in a wide cross-section of people for a lot of different reasons. And in doing that they become re-energized and re-believing in the governmental process.

There is a real lack of political and civic engagement, and I see PB as a vehicle for building a culture of civic engagement.

Many of these officials described PB as a means "to educate" their constituents about the complexities of budgeting and governing. They expected that, given a chance to understand government decision making and the work of their local officials better, constituents would also have more appreciation of their representatives:

The more people understand budgets, the more knowledge they have, the more informed they become about the true costs of providing government services and the compromises that need to be made. The public education component of this is huge. It's invaluable.

We're educating people on the work that we do, which is great because people appreciate you a lot more when they see the amount of work that's being done by the city council.

PB is a broader public education tool. That residents understand their own government and their own taxes and how those taxes are implemented, that is one of the most important things we are doing here.

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<sup>15</sup> Quotations have been minimally edited for clarity.

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## Many officials implementing PB expected it to make them more popular with their constituents.

Many officials admitted they were looking at PB as a means to demonstrate their responsiveness to community concerns and build a reputation for being in touch with their communities. Some interviewees had promised to do PB during their election campaigns. Others hoped to increase their popularity for the next elections. Among the interviewed officials who had adopted PB, 37 percent had faced another election since doing so; all won reelection:

As any politician, you want to be seen as responsive to their constituents. PB is an effective way of showing that.

People oftentimes see the elected official as the one person who makes decisions, and sometimes they get frustrated. I wanted to send a signal out to the community that their input was very important.

PB helps define me as somebody who cares about democracy and civic participation and transparency.



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**Very few officials said they wanted to do PB because they expected it to generate original project ideas and more responsive funding decisions, although some began appreciating this aspect of the process as they gained experience with it.**

Political scientists and public participation advocates have argued government decision making is more likely to address the most pressing issues in communities if constituents weigh in and share local knowledge.<sup>16</sup> In our interviews, however, only a few officials mentioned the opportunity to learn about community needs and to fund unexpected projects as reasons for them to do PB. More typically, officials seemed to have started valuing PB as a tool to improve government decision making only after they had gone through the process (see section 2):

We thought PB would be pretty awesome to apply to our infrastructure spending, to really see the value and the need. To see if what we assume as a priority for the community is the same as what the community sees as a priority.

There were some things that I was, like, “Oh, wow, that’s an interesting idea.” A lot of the projects that were put out there weren’t really that expensive, and they were things that when you look at them you think, “Ha, why aren’t we doing that anyway?”

What I discovered in PB is that people who aren’t particularly engaged in the electoral process might be park lovers. They come up with ideas about parks that they would not have had any other inclination to communicate to me.

**A minority of officials said they sought to use PB to empower constituents and initiate long-term change in public budgeting decisions.**

Some of our interviewees emphasized they were motivated to do PB because of its potential to shift relations significantly between government and local residents—a potential that political theorists and practitioners consider among the greatest promises of PB (see Introduction). These officials were actively looking to affect their residents’ expectations of government and to empower residents to take control over their communities in the long term. They said they wanted to use PB as means of including traditionally marginalized communities, especially low-income residents and people of color, in the political process in a meaningful way:

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<sup>16</sup> Fung, “Putting the Public Back into Governance,” 2015; Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger, *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

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I came up as a reformer. People in my community used to allow for elected officials to do work for them, without any accountability. Any newly elected official could come in and take advantage of what I consider a vulnerable community. That formula is conducive to elected officials that want to maintain power. I saw that there were a lot of issues in the community, but I had no space to address them because it was purposefully built that way. With PB, I am making sure that, long after I'm gone, this community can fend for itself.

Most of my colleagues look at me and say, "Why would you give up all that power?" And kind of laugh it off. I tell them I'm building a neighborhood, and I'm letting the neighborhood be the architect.

With colleagues in the council, we had led a community empowerment model, really challenging people to be involved at city hall. We did a lot of system-changes work that helped to build a stage for a larger process like PB. In my opinion, PB was the next natural step in the community development of our engaged community.

We asked ourselves, how do we do things that allow young people to be empowered, to have their voice heard and to make real decisions in their city? So we started talking about PB.

Some officials also talked about PB as a means to eventually make city budgeting more equitable and less corrupt. They stressed that they were looking to challenge the status quo, and that PB was one promising way of doing that:

I had been working on budgets for a long time—with agencies, with the different organizations that were applying for funding, and then also with the elected official at the time who was making the decisions. When I was in the middle of that, I thought there had to be a way to have more connection with the community. I saw an inherent need for something different than the process that existed. PB is an opportunity to open up the door to something new. It does not necessarily solve the problem, but it opens up opportunities to challenge the status quo.

PB was a welcome opportunity to avoid the corruption involved in current discretionary funding allocation.



# 2

## IMPACTS ON PARTICIPANTS, COMMUNITIES AND GOVERNMENT

Most officials felt their PB processes had succeeded in generating enthusiasm and getting constituents more engaged in political life. Many also noted their PB processes raised constituents' awareness of government inefficiencies, for better or for worse. Generally, officials said PB helped them understand constituents' needs better.

Most officials we interviewed saw their PB processes generating excitement and engaging residents who previously were less politically involved. Some discussed examples of participants' learning how to advocate for their interests and building leadership skills through PB. Many officials noted that new alliances among residents and community groups had formed through PB, which they felt contributed to stronger civic infrastructures in their communities. A few said PB provided a forum for more frank public discussions about equity in public spending across their communities. At the same time, many officials said PB sometimes frustrated residents by revealing government inefficiencies. Some saw this as a learning opportunity for both residents and government. Talking about their own work, interviewees reflected that their PB processes had helped them understand and respond better to their residents' concerns. Some added PB had improved their relationships with city agencies. Generally, interviewees felt PB improved their political prospects, even in instances when officials encountered criticism from those residents who felt the process was not serving them.



Most U.S. communities with participatory budgeting processes have only experienced PB for one or two years. In the 2014–15 PB cycle, for example, 56 percent of PB processes were in their first year.<sup>17</sup> More years of PB are needed before evaluations will be sufficiently robust to examine whether it indeed builds civic skills and leadership among residents, increases government transparency, leads to more equitable distribution of resources or improves community well-being in the long term. In the meantime, however, we sought to capture how individual PB processes might have already affected specific participants and communities and the work of local governments. For this purpose, we asked elected officials who had adopted PB to reflect on what PB meant in their jurisdictions and to describe what they had seen change since implementing it.

<sup>17</sup> Public Agenda internal analysis. To learn more about equivalent analyses that combine data from PB processes across the United States and Canada, see Hagelskamp et al., "Public Spending, By The People," 2016.



## PB AND PARTICIPANTS

**Many officials saw PB generating enthusiasm among participants and engaging constituents who had not previously been involved in government.**

Officials often cited energizing and engaging constituents in community issues and local politics as a main motivation to adopt PB (see section 1). Many nonetheless described being surprised by how enthusiastically residents engaged with one another and with government through PB and by the large numbers of people who participated. Interviewees often noted the participation of people whom they had not previously seen involved in local politics. A few mentioned seeing members of communities that are traditionally underrepresented in the political process participating in PB:

What surprised me most is how much this process engaged people. I have some of the lowest voter turnout in the city. A lot of people were saying PB is not going to turn people out, but it literally has. On various occasions I've seen new faces. It shows there is interest in working with local government and meeting your neighbors. It may not be voting for an elected official, but PB has opened my eyes, that there are people out there who are interested.

Different segments of the community participated that we don't normally hear from, including segments of the community that are normally diametrically opposed to each other. It was really exciting to see everyone come to the table and try to hear and understand what everyone else's perspective was.

We were able to engage people who weren't normally engaged. People were becoming very active at PB who we had never met or seen at committee boards or precinct meetings or block associations or other regular forums. That was refreshing, because we got to include new voices and new people in the decision-making process outside of the regular institutional groups that already exist.



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Officials were often especially excited about the enthusiastic participation of youth in PB and felt it could shape young people's civic engagement over the long term. Youth participation was also sometimes controversial for some officials, however (see section 3):

One of the huge moments for me was when we sat down with young people who were really interested. They told us, "We want to sit down with the folks that do the city's capital budget. We want to sit down with the capital planners and understand the city's budget better."

It's really great to see the kids get involved and to capture them at a young age and get them thinking about their community in a broader sense, instead of just their individual lives. They're looking at it from a bigger picture and taking ownership of that. I think it's great.

The first place youth did outreach was at the farmers' market, and just seeing them out there, working on behalf of the city, was a really cool experience. To see them walking up to residents and talking to them and explaining the process, it was like seeing a future generation of leaders out there, in training.

### **Several officials had seen PB fostering civic skills among some participants and increasing engagement beyond the PB process itself.**

Officials provided a number of concrete examples of how they had observed PB building civic engagement skills among some participants. One interviewee felt his PB process had taught participants how to represent their interests in their local government and had increased residents' confidence to do so. Another described how participants gained leadership skills over time by taking on increasing responsibilities in the PB process each year:

Previous events in our community left a wake of politically charged and politically minded people. With PB, almost overnight, we were able to transform that into more civic participation. With PB we were building on those civic skills. These residents have been going now nonstop for two years, because they know that their voices are being heard, they now know how to incorporate their voices into government, even if they can't speak English.

One great thing is the expanded network of delegates. The first year, you reach out to more traditional community leaders. Then as time goes on it brings in new leaders; people whose leadership develops through engagement in the process get more involved. One year they volunteer to work at a poll site, and the next year they serve on a delegate committee.

One interviewee described how PB participants, seeming motivated by their PB experiences, had gotten significantly more involved in political life beyond the process:

The other spinoff is that we've seen a larger number of people applying for commission positions. We see a larger number of people watching and tracking what's going on, writing to the council and the city staff. That has been a major advantage, more than anything else. You know that they are involved because they make reference to PB, like, "This is how I first started doing this with PB and now I've grown and I've done this and that, and I'm motivated to do even more."



## PB AND COMMUNITIES

**PB had strengthened several officials' communities, they said, by fostering new alliances across diverse interests and by increasing residents' trust in government.**

Several interviewees spoke about community groups' having formed alliances over multiple PB cycles. These officials felt such alliances lasted beyond PB and were contributing to a stronger civic infrastructure in the community. One felt vindicated when a skeptical former elected official complimented him on his PB process, saying it had built community across diverse interests:

It really integrated communities that had not been integrated before. Two immigrant communities are now working together when they were for many, many years working against each other. Now they are working on one project in one school together. We knew immediately that those things are going to be very important for us in stitching the community together. And that's what it did.

Initially people were skeptical. I had a former official say, "You're crazy. This will never work." He apologized to me and said, "It was brilliant. It was a fantastic process. The residents loved it. It's great how you took that many interests and turned it into a process that ultimately built more community."

According to some officials, PB had improved relations between residents and government. The officials felt constituents trusted and respected government more as a result of PB:

It enhances the morale of your district. There are constituents who are deeply cynical about elected officials, who think elected officials only show up during election time. When they see you actively seeking participation in a process of budgeting, it reinforces their confidence in their elected officials and in political institutions. That's been the greatest benefit that I've seen.

We gain so much more respect from the community for giving them the opportunity to be engaged in this process. People had faith in me before, but it even built more of a rapport with the community, a trust.

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## A few officials described PB as providing a forum for more frank public discussions about equity in public spending across their communities.

We asked officials about the potential for PB to lead to more equitable spending across communities within their jurisdictions. Some said they were committed to ensuring their processes included consideration of how to make spending more equitable:

When people are concerned that some groups in their community take advantage of PB and will receive undue benefit, I try to explain that PB was founded in order to address those very concerns of social inequity. With proper safeguards put into place in the process, you can mitigate the concern that certain people will have disproportionate influence on the outcome of the process.

In the years that I've worked on PB, there has been a conscious effort that we do not overly concentrate a high percentage of the money in any one neighborhood. It is a fundamental part of the mission of PB to create an equitable distribution of the money.

Officials gave examples of how they saw voters and other participants grappling with spending equity and, in some cases, thinking beyond their own interests or needs:

One school is no longer participating this year because they won a project last year. Their system is so strong that they could win every year. I think they know that and were able to step back and allow for other members of the community to get an opportunity. They get that they're empowered, and instead of taking advantage of the system, they contribute positively to it.

There was a concern that tight cliques of people would dominate the PB process. But that has turned out not to be the case. This was a process that really encourages people to rise above their own selfish, parochial interests and look out for the interests of the many.

A few interviewees cited budget delegate and steering committee meetings as sites for in-depth conversations about equity. In these committees, officials had seen participants discussing how the rules and implementation of their processes were alleviating or exacerbating spending inequities. Interviewees also described having observed discussions about outreach to traditionally marginalized communities, critical assessments of which projects should make it on the ballot and the implementation of voting:

The delegate committees and the steering committee are very deliberative. They are thoughtful about equity issues, about geographic spread, about need, about why things should make the ballot and have a lot of really good and sometimes hard conversations about it. There is extensive dialogue. Not everyone's always happy with where we land, but these have been very inclusive conversations.

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**According to some, PB had highlighted needs for which officials then worked to secure additional funding, hence bringing new resources to their communities.**

Some officials explained that, after seeing the same types of projects repeatedly on PB ballots, they worked toward finding funding for them outside the process. They argued that, by highlighting community concerns that were less obvious to officials before PB, the process had brought additional resources to their communities:

We organized and campaigned to get the school construction authority to put a lot more money into fixing up decrepit school bathrooms, and the council was able to add \$50 million to their budget to do it. That led to a campaign to win resources for a priority that grew out of PB.

I'm a lot more intentional of going after art money now. The city has mini grants for local artists to do things around their neighborhood. So I'm a lot more intentional about getting local artists into that program and trying to leverage the resources so it's not only coming out of the discretionary funds.



## PB AND GOVERNMENT

**Many officials explained that PB improved how they engage with constituents and helped them be more responsive to community needs.**

A number of interviewees—especially among the 64 percent of our sample who had more than a year's experience doing PB—said PB had become more than a single engagement process; it was, rather, part of their set of larger strategies for connecting with constituents and learning about community needs. Several said PB gave them access to the concerns and ideas of a wider cross section of constituents. A few interviewees reported that their communities were beginning to expect PB each year and had started to look to it as a vehicle to interact with government to advocate for their needs:

I strive to find out what projects or improvements people want to see, but I used to have to rely on the mechanisms that are already in place, like the community boards and the civic groups. The PB process really is a way for other people and other voices to be heard.

PB does open the conversation up, and it formalizes it more. If you have a savvy constituent who says, "I want to see this playground get done," they could petition their state representative for the money. They could go to the park district. They could go to the elected official. But to have a central structure like PB that is already inviting everybody to the table, that didn't exist before.

People have really begun to expect it. They are familiar with it, talk about it, understand about the discretionary fund, what it can be used for, what it can't. So, there's a much greater awareness now.

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Although very few officials said they had been initially motivated to do PB because of its potential to generate new project ideas and lead to more responsive budgeting (see section 1), many seem to have started valuing PB as a tool to better understand community needs after they had experienced PB in their jurisdictions. Many interviewees said community concerns and projects that came up in the PB process had informed other areas of their work:

Before PB, there was a limited pool of ideas. I got ideas from organized groups primarily, but there was no sort of broad net. Now I am tapping into ideas that were not available to me before.

The ideas we are generating in PB, we only use a small percentage of them for PB. There is so much other valuable data that we are getting for legislation ideas, for policy changes, for community organizing opportunities.

Over the long term, the city might wind up funding more projects than even win in the PB election. It has given the city ideas about what we should be dealing with for the long term.

It's an opportunity to get ideas that maybe don't make it through. They may not be chosen in the PB vote, but they will make us look at some things that just weren't on the radar and say, "Oh, this is actually a good idea, let's just fund it in another way."

**Several officials noted that PB can expose constituents to inefficiencies and problems in government. While some framed this negatively, others saw it as a learning opportunity for constituents.**

Interviewees spoke about instances in which constituents became frustrated with government as a result of participating in PB. For example, officials spoke about participants complaining that projects are implemented too slowly, and that city agencies are uncooperative and unresponsive. Some officials worried that PB could thereby sour relations between residents and government:

The capital process is so dysfunctional. I'm worried that when people opt for projects and then see no immediate results, it is only going to add to their disenchantment.

I love that the community gets engaged, but I wish that they would also take away from it that there's a process to how government works that needs to happen. Instead they keep trying to ignore that, rather than to embrace it and to understand it and to try to help us with that.

A lot of residents are beginning to view the staff as adversarial, because they are saying, "You need to consider this, you need to consider that, you can't do this, we can't do that."

Many officials, however, saw residents' frustrations with government and with the PB process itself as educational opportunities. These officials said PB allowed residents to learn more about how government works and become more realistic about their expectations and complaints:

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PB budget committees have to go through the complexities of getting the quotes, getting the definition of costs, and they then have to engage in conversations with these sister agencies. All this again is education.

In the parks department, there are 70 steps that have to happen after something gets funding in order for it to get built. A lot of the PB projects are Parks Department projects, so more people now see the warts of government. That's a good thing, because that's part of democracy or part of transparency and openness.

### **Generally, officials felt PB improved their political prospects, but some encountered criticism.**

Adopting PB means officials willingly give up budgetary decision-making power and create substantial work for themselves and their staffs. Many hope that, in return, their popularity with constituents will grow (see section 1). Most interviewees said PB had helped improve their reputations among residents of their jurisdictions and expected this would contribute positively to their political prospects. One official explained PB can help officials understand their communities in ways that can contribute to their future electoral success:

I've had about three thousand people vote. That's three thousand people that have been engaged directly with my office, with my name, with my brand. All that is extremely valuable to anyone that's an elected official.

By giving up power over spending you end up becoming more powerful, in the sense that you are a more popular official, and it will make your reelection that much more likely.

From a reelection standpoint, it's a really great tool and strategy to think through: How do I build public support in a meaningful way that is going to last for a long time?

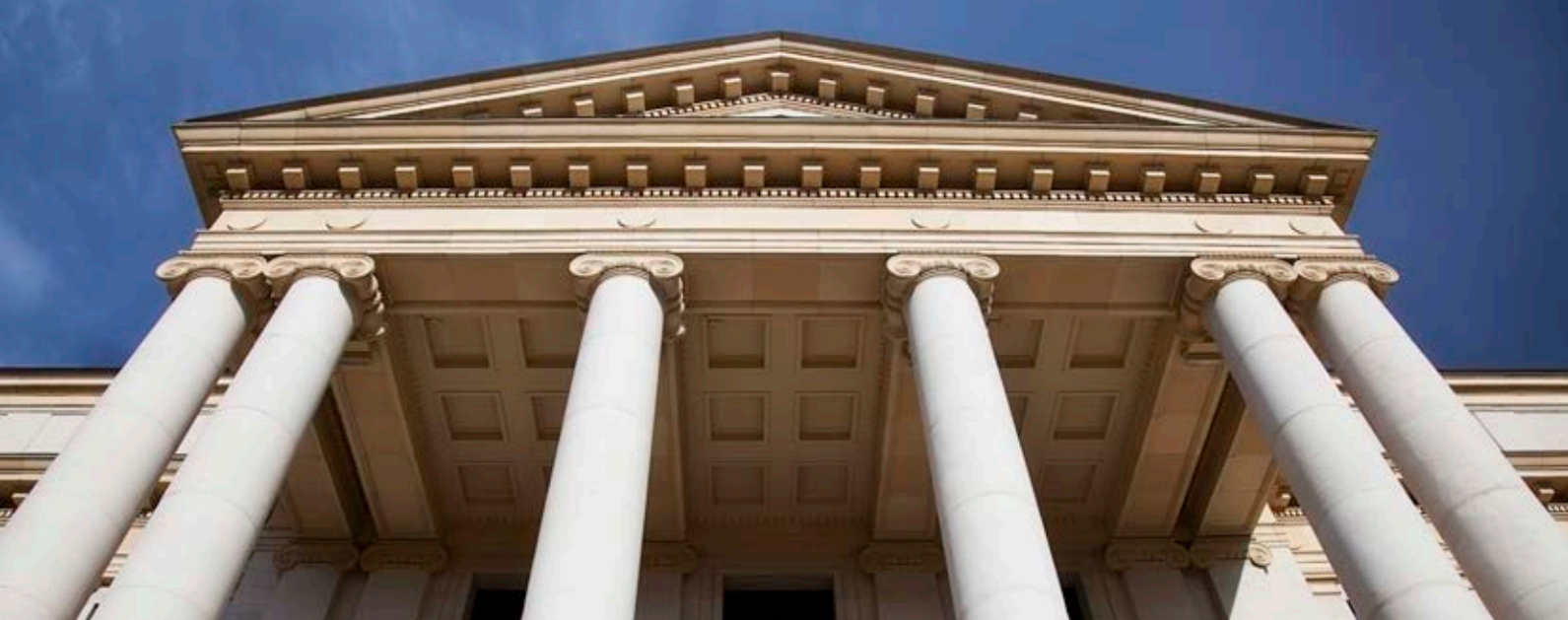
Several officials, however, encountered criticism from groups who felt PB threatened their established power, access to government and funding streams. Others talked about instances in which residents whose projects did not win in PB tried to advocate against them politically:

There are old-school factions of power that are incredibly intimidated by PB. They have thrown so many bricks at PB. I just didn't realize that there is so much fury with people that didn't want to lose power with this less hierarchical positioning that PB brings.

People with PB projects on the ballot literally threatened me and said, "We will take you out of office if this doesn't work in our favor. We will engage in political advocacy against you as an elected official."

At least one official concluded that alienating some constituents was worth it because PB helped him gain popularity with other, previously disengaged constituents:

The big question for me is, why am I doing this if I'm going to lose the authority to deliver for some of my neighbors? And the obvious answer there was, because I'm going to gain a whole bunch of other friends who are going to be excited and engaged in PB.



### Several interviewees said PB strengthened their relationships with city budget offices and other city agencies, despite some frustrations.

Some interviewees said PB provided opportunities for them to learn more about and build relationships with various city agencies or departments. Several noted, however, that working with those other agencies could also be frustrating:

PB has been a chance to strengthen relationships across departments and across the city. I had the opportunity to meet with a lot of individuals that our work doesn't normally intersect with, various budget individuals and capital planners. There have been a couple of instances where someone's opinion was, "We don't think PB is a priority." But those instances have been few.

PB has definitely brought me closer to the budget office. We want this to be truly publicly driven, but we can't build a space elevator. I've been working with our city manager to get the word out to the public to make sure that people understand ideas are going to be vetted to make sure they are feasible.

Moreover, some said PB gave opportunities to city agency staff to work more closely with residents and revise some negative perceptions they held about the public:

City departments are going to have to get on board if PB is going to get to the next level. But I think really beautiful things have already happened. Relationships are created where they were not before. That's what PB does, it brings that kind of human element to things that look so mundane and are actually not. City department people are basically like bean counters, but they're not, they're transforming neighborhoods in a better way. I hope that these departments over time get that message. It's happening slowly, but truly.

A lot of city staff were apprehensive about PB until they actually saw us do it. Now they say, "This is fantastic." I think the apprehension before was, "Hey, they want to take over the cities' budget process." After they went through the process they said, "That was such a great process to be able to mix and mingle with your residents. It's such a great experience."





# 3

## IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

The need for adequate time, money and staff to implement PB was a challenge cited by most officials who had adopted it. Several discussed the challenges of ensuring their processes were not dominated by the most advantaged groups in their jurisdictions. Explaining the process effectively and responding to residents' criticisms and concerns were also common themes.

While nearly all officials who had adopted PB agreed the biggest challenges in implementing it were mobilizing adequate time, money and staff, they felt the process was nevertheless worth continuing. Explaining the PB process and its potential value to constituents was harder than some officials expected. Several said it was a challenge to ensure their processes were not dominated by the most powerful or advantaged groups in their jurisdictions and to respond to some constituents' negative feedback or frustrations about PB. Including youth was more controversial for some than they had expected. Officials found digital tools could be useful but also described their drawbacks and limitations.



Understanding the challenges encountered by officials when implementing PB is important for anyone who is seeking to help sustain and spread inclusive and effective forms of it. We therefore asked interviewees to elaborate on their experiences in implementing PB. We probed about the challenges they experienced and what they did to overcome them.

### **Time and money are the biggest implementation challenges but are not reasons to discontinue PB, nearly all officials agreed.**

To date, no systematic assessment has been conducted in the United States of the money, time and people power necessary to implement a PB process successfully. Implementation costs, however, are likely to vary across different types of PB processes, community demographics and already existing local government resources.

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Virtually all of our interviewees emphasized that finding the time, money and staff required to implement PB was a major challenge for them. Resource constraints, many officials said, limited their capacity to reach traditionally marginalized and, therefore, hard-to-reach communities. Resource constraints also limited the ability of implementation teams to process project ideas, provide materials and support for delegates, translate materials into languages other than English, hold project expos, and prepare and staff voting sites:

Challenges included the extraordinary amount of work that is required of my staff—probably more than one full-time equivalent position year round. We have a small staff, and all of them were overtaxed even without PB.

Some neighborhoods were overrepresented. That is why the resource question is so critical, because without more resources committed to outreach throughout the district, those disparities of representation are going to persist.

PB is costing us more than what you see because it's not just the PB budget with the projects and the PB staff in that department. It's stuff that's not just getting charged. It's being paid for by the general fund, but it's supporting PB. There's an unseen burden.

Many officials noted that PB was so resource intensive that, to implement their PB processes well, their staffs had to neglect other projects and priorities:

The first year, I basically had to shut down my office during vote week. We didn't understand the need for staffing. This year, I brought in someone part time to help on vote week. I actually used a part of my budget. I anticipated it. I am willing to invest so that we get it right.

My staff did all the outreach with existing resources. It came at a cost. More time spent canvassing the community for PB was less time spent on day-to-day constituent service.

Our interviewees agreed implementation needed to be funded properly for PB to be done well. Several warned officials should not start PB without sufficient implementation resources:

My colleague did it for one year. It didn't work too well. They didn't devote a lot of staff time, and it just didn't work out there. A horrible turnout.

Colleagues have tried the process and walked away because it is cumbersome. Democracy is messy, it takes time, it takes engagement, it takes resources, and they've tried and felt that resources are better expended somewhere else.

Many interviewees emphasized that greater financial commitments from cities were needed to support district-level officials in implementing PB, a concern that was also prominent for officials not doing PB (see section 4):

Elected officials are taking on a whole new function with the same resources, which is insane. It requires a huge expenditure of resources and time. We value PB to the extent that we're allowing members to do it, but not to the extent that we are actually providing those members with the resources to do it effectively.

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Despite these constraints, with very few exceptions, the officials we spoke with concluded that its popularity among residents made the large investments of time and resources into PB by themselves and their staffs worthwhile:

I don't sugarcoat it to my staff. It does take a lot of time. But I try to explain to them that the amount of time devoted to it is worth the political payout.

I kept on hearing from other officials that every ounce of energy, and money, and whatever staff time was put into it, you get three- or fourfold back.

I have lost one of my staff people to PB in a way. He's my constituent services director, and I'd like him to be spending full time helping constituents, but he can't because he is doing PB. We're losing our ability to serve our constituents 100 percent. That's disappointing. But the benefit of increasing civic participation far outweighs the toll it takes.

### **Explaining the PB process to constituents was harder than some officials expected.**

Several interviewees said that explaining PB to their constituents, such as helping them understand how the different stages of the process work and what kinds of projects are eligible for funding, was a challenge. Interviewees agreed that explaining the process well up front helped make it run smoothly and averted frustrations and criticism from residents later on, and one hinted that doing so could be necessary for increasing rates of participation:

Residents were a little confused, because it was all very new to them. They didn't really know how this process worked. I would have wanted more information for my residents about what is PB and how it works exactly on the front end.

How do we communicate about PB, how do we talk about it? That is something I see as a learning process for myself. I was criticized for not bringing more residents out to vote in PB. But with a complicated process like municipal funding for infrastructure projects, you wouldn't expect to get 20, 30 or 40 percent of the electorate to come out. PB takes time to understand, more so than it does to go out and vote on one day for one candidate.

One official told us that explaining the process and its rules costs him and his staff a lot of time, especially since they have to do it year after year due to a high turnover in participants. He also said, however, that this kept the process fresh:

There is a lot of turnover. Every year, we have to essentially educate new people. But it's good in a way, because it keeps it fresh. We've had a nice mix of people with institutional knowledge and then new people, who have new energy and a fresh approach.

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## Responding to constituents' negative feedback and frustrations posed challenges for several officials.

Officials often described constituents' feeling frustrated or disappointed with PB when the projects they proposed and developed did not win. Many saw these kinds of disappointments as normal parts of the process, and some even saw such frustrations as opportunities for residents to understand better how government works (see section 2).

In several cases, however, officials described difficulties that residents' frustrations presented to successfully implementing their processes. Some, for example, said such frustrations were accompanied by complaints that the process was fraudulent and unfair. A number of officials were criticized by residents who had worked hard to get projects on the ballot that did not win:

Some residents got upset that their street that needed to be repaved wasn't paved because they didn't get enough votes. They said, "That's not fair. Our street has more potholes and you, as the elected official, need to be doing your job. Your job is to make wise decisions. That's why we elected you."

A school project didn't win because they didn't get the votes, so instead of participating next year and being more motivated, the PTA changed their tactic and said, "We just want you to give us the money. You have more money, we don't need to go through this process and put in all this work." Now parents don't understand why they have to do PB. They don't understand the value of PB. And now those parents are all like, "He's a terrible official."

People were threatening me left and right over how they didn't think the process was right and how they wanted the money anyway. They wanted me to go around the democratic process that I created for them.

Project eligibility criteria were a common cause for frustrations, and one official talked about losing PB participants once they learned their ideas were not eligible. Another spoke of projects that had made it on the ballot and won votes but were later deemed ineligible, leaving both constituents and officials frustrated:

In the beginning residents get out for an idea that's theirs, and they want to push it. After they find out that the idea can't work or can't be done, they get turned off and might not want to stay. So keeping those people on is very difficult.

There are still projects that we haven't completed from year one because there's problems with how they were approved. That was frustrating, to have monies just sitting there carried over year after year and not implemented when there are so many services in the community that we're not able to take care of.



### Ensuring PB was not dominated by the most advantaged groups was a challenge, several officials said.

Several officials admitted that their PB processes had been dominated by the best organized and most advantaged groups in their jurisdictions. While some interviewees suggested PB was no different than other public engagement efforts in this respect, others felt that with sufficient resources their staffs could have made their processes more inclusive of a wider cross-section of the public:

The process still did not engage a whole lot of people from minority communities. The most vocal groups got their projects on the ballot. And they normally were already participating, they were at council meetings, they were very active in their nonprofits.

PB was no more fair and probably no less fair than the typical election. People that were well organized and creative and maybe had money had a leg up on someone who isn't as well organized or isn't as creative or as well connected.

If I had staff to send people door to door canvassing the district, I could draw a lot of people out. If I had money to offer refreshments at meetings, it would draw a lot of people out, but we're facing resource constraints.

Some people can interact better or have a more compelling story to get certain budget priorities moved forward. And I saw the same thing happening with PB. It is not giving us anything different or new or additional to the regular budget, it is just an extra way of getting to what is arguably the same place.

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One official told us the project that won the most votes in his process benefited the more affluent neighborhood in the district, frustrating other constituents. He explained that he had used his remaining discretionary funds to make up for spending inequities resulting from the PB process:

My district is not homogeneous. The neighborhoods are very different racially, ethnically and economically. I was concerned PB was feeding into a narrative where one neighborhood gets everything. If I hadn't had the extra capital money to make it all right that narrative definitely could have gotten out of hand.

These experiences stand somewhat in contrast to those of officials who reported significant participation from residents they had not seen before and groups they said were typically less involved in civic and political affairs (see section 2).

From local evaluations we know that PB processes in the United States indeed vary substantially in how inclusive they are of diverse groups of residents. For example, in the 2014–15 PB cycle, residents from low-income households were underrepresented in a quarter of PB communities that collected demographic surveys from voters and overrepresented in 29 percent of such communities compared to the local census. Also, in 46 percent of communities that surveyed voters, blacks were overrepresented among voter survey respondents, while 11 percent of communities reported an underrepresentation. Virtually all U.S. PB communities that assess voter demographics report overrepresentation of residents with college degrees.<sup>18</sup>

Local evaluations further suggest outreach methods and efforts may matter for who participates in PB. In 2014–15, local governments that invested in person-to-person methods – namely, canvassing and door knocking – to tell residents about PB tended to see greater representation during the PB vote of lower-income residents, residents of color and residents with less formal education. Outreach by community-based organizations was also associated with a higher representation of traditionally underrepresented groups during the PB vote. In contrast, the more frequently PB voter survey respondents reported hearing about PB online and through digital tools, the more likely that district or city was to have an overrepresentation of white and affluent residents during the PB vote.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Public Agenda internal analysis. To learn more about equivalent analyses that combine data from PB processes across the United States and Canada, see Hagelskamp et al., "Public Spending, By The People," 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid; Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center with the PBNYC Research Team, "A People's Budget: A Research and Evaluation Report on Participatory Budgeting in New York City" (New York: Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center, 2015), [https://cdp.urbanjustice.org/sites/default/files/CDP.WEB.doc\\_Report\\_PBNYC\\_cycle4\\_ndings-district\\_20151021.pdf](https://cdp.urbanjustice.org/sites/default/files/CDP.WEB.doc_Report_PBNYC_cycle4_ndings-district_20151021.pdf).

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## Several officials grappled with how actively they should be involved in their PB processes.

A number of our interviewees described giving careful consideration to their own roles in their jurisdictions' PB processes. They wanted to show their enthusiasm and thank participants but did not want participants to feel that officials were monitoring the process:

It is super important to ensure participation and building trust in government. Too often, officials want to make all the rules and then say okay, now engage with us. We find that that doesn't work well and it's really one-sided.

This issue often manifested itself, in particular in officials' decisions about whether to attend various meetings associated with their PB processes:

I purposely refrained from going to meetings because I wanted the community to know that they own this process. The elected official wasn't going to be at every meeting. I had my office there, but I told them to be very hands-off.

## Digital tools were useful in PB implementation, but officials also saw their limits.

Officials described a variety of ways in which digital tools—including social media, email, online participation and digital voting—had been useful in implementing their PB processes. They generally did not see digital tools as transformative and often spoke about their limitations as well as their advantages.

Some officials' processes used digital voting at physical voting sites, and some used remote online voting. They noted that verifying residency and identity were key challenges in both types of digital voting:

A lot of people choose to vote electronically because it's so user friendly, and just helps you know exactly what you're voting for.

The weakness in the system was that the verification for the voting was actually providing them a cell phone number, so if someone wanted to utilize multiple voting they could have come up with multiple cell phone numbers.

Officials often cited the actual and potential exclusion of certain groups, particularly low-income, older and middle-aged people, as a downside of digital voting at physical voting sites and online:

We struggled with that. The young kids from high school caught on, no problem, and really offered a kind of positive rapport with the technology. Everyone else struggled with it. I'm talking about our seniors and even our parents.

The people who did vote online thought it was excellent. It's just so easy. People who aren't tech-savvy struggled with it, and it made them mad.

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One official suggested the ease of online voting was perhaps undermining the civic learning opportunities of PB and the potential to engage residents beyond the PB process:

If all you do with participatory budgeting is send a text or go online and vote, sure you've vote and you've participated, but then you went home. I think that's not so useful. How do we make them more active and involved citizens overall?

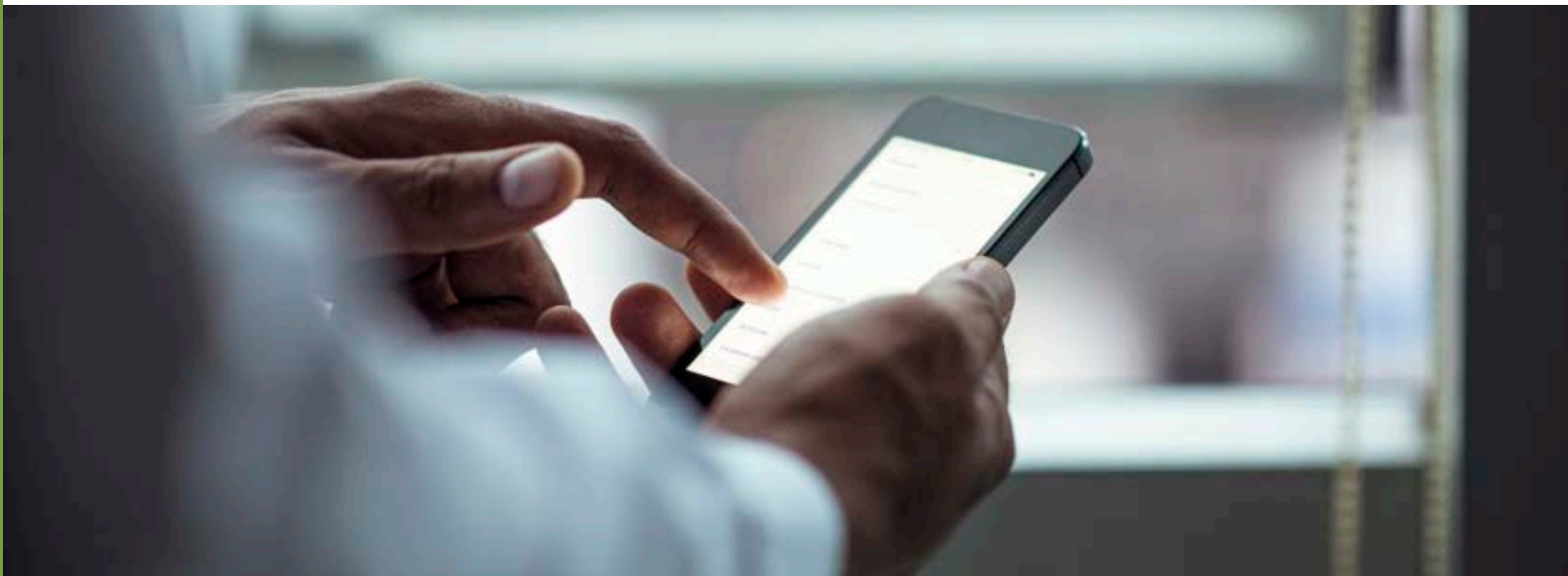
Many officials' PB processes included online engagement tools, such as interactive maps where residents could locate and share project ideas or learn which PB projects won in previous years and where they are located. Again, officials tended to see advantages and disadvantages to such online tools:

We have digital tools that are relatively advanced for the limited resources of our office. They can help give people the context of how we've spent PB money, whether and how it's been equitably distributed and give them a context going forward as to the type of project that they might want to help lead.

I think they're helpful to see all the other ideas and have a graphical map. I think the shortcoming is that it can be very overwhelming. There's so much data available.

Many interviewees described using Facebook, Twitter and email for outreach. Typically officials described this kind of outreach as an obvious part of the many ways in which they engage with their residents, but they also noted that these means of communication do not make up for person-to-person outreach and people coming together physically to vote. The few interviewees who had used custom or proprietary platforms for outreach tended to describe them as expensive and not of obvious value:

Using digital tools is very efficient. But if you really want to get participation there's no shortcut for grassroots organizing, knocking on doors and making phone calls. I think there isn't one or the other. You have to do them all.





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**Officials were typically excited to include youth in PB, but several realized youth participation was more controversial than expected with some residents.**

A number of our interviewees said they had constituents who questioned the wisdom of allowing people under age 18 to vote in their PB processes. They said some questioned whether teenagers had sufficient knowledge and sophistication to make spending decisions, and whether they should be allowed to make those decisions since they do not pay taxes:

Opening it up to teenagers was criticized by some: “Why should they get to vote, because they don’t pay taxes?” That is an incredibly narrow-minded point of view.

But, generally, officials had been impressed and encouraged by young people’s level of engagement in PB. Many stressed youth participation was essential to their processes and a way to engage future voters in local politics and develop their civic skills (see section 2).

Because officials saw youth involvement in their processes as so valuable, they often spoke about seeking ways to boost it. Officials said they collaborated with schools, set up youth committees of budget delegates focused on youth-centered projects and invited youth as delegates:

The youth were very excited last year, and this year were very engaged, because we specifically had a youth committee created.

One official told us he had experimented with making voting in PB a class activity in one high school in his district, leading to substantial representation of youth among PB voters. Yet he and his staff decided not to repeat in-class voting the following year but instead only to have a voting station inside the school, so students had to actively choose to vote:

Last year, we had a vote in the classroom, but the whole point was to encourage students to get something out of it—not make it a class assignment. This year, the students will physically need to go out of their classroom and cast a ballot on campus at some kiosk. They have to actually take some intentional action.



# 4

## REASONS SOME ELECTED OFFICIALS HAVE NOT (YET) ADOPTED PB

Officials who had not adopted PB often saw themselves as already sufficiently attuned to constituents' needs. They often worried about resources for implementation if they did decide to adopt PB. Several said the budgets typically allocated to PB are too small for projects to have much impact.

Typically, officials who had not adopted PB told us they were satisfied with their current public engagement efforts. They often said they could make budgeting decisions that met constituents' needs and account for budgeting realities in ways that residents could not. Many of these interviewees expected only affluent and well-connected residents to benefit from a PB process and more disadvantaged residents to be alienated by it. Many also worried PB would take up too much staff time and effort. And several of these officials criticized current PB budgets in the United States for being too small and, therefore, not allowing for projects to have meaningful impacts on communities. Some said current forms of PB in the United States give residents a false sense of empowerment.



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We sought to find out about the views of elected officials who had not adopted PB but had likely seen or heard about it in a neighboring council district or city. We were interested in their perceptions of PB and their potential interest in adopting it in their jurisdictions. Notably, many of these “non-PB” elected officials' concerns about or criticisms of PB were also brought up by interviewees who had adopted PB. Yet for the latter these concerns and criticisms were not reasons to discontinue their PB processes.

### **Officials who had not adopted PB typically said they already engaged constituents in budgeting but could make wiser decisions without a popular vote.**

Non-PB elected officials we interviewed were generally satisfied with their current public engagement efforts. They felt well connected to various resident groups and community organizations. They typically lauded their residents for being engaged in civic and political affairs but also said that many did not have the time to become more engaged. Many of these interviewees said they could make spending decisions that took into account the big picture of budgeting and community needs in ways PB participants could not:

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I was elected to represent my community. I speak with my civic leaders and to my constituents every single day through Twitter, Facebook, meetings, letters, calls. I have the pulse of my district. I'm here to take my community input, to use my experience, my knowledge of the inner processes of government and my judgment and make decisions that I think will have the best bang for taxpayer dollar.

If people elect you into office, they need to trust that you have the capacity to manage that kind of budget and make sure that it spreads equitably and that everyone is getting served equally.

I'm going to do the right thing, not the popular thing.

Non-PB officials often argued they had more efficient ways than PB to assess constituents' needs, or that their public engagement was already similar to PB:

I don't need to put on meetings and hearings and have a display and have my staff take attendance and have ballots and have people vote and then have my staff count all the ballots for me to determine what the priorities are. There are other ways to make sure that your voice is heard in my district.

How I handle my budgetary process is no different than PB. We have different types of forums, we have different types of discussions in the community, we have different types of projects. Each of them has a process and the communities' voices are part of those decisions.



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## Many non-PB officials expected PB would be dominated by already engaged and affluent residents and upsetting to less powerful constituents.

Many non-PB interviewees expected people who are already organized and have ample time and money to control a PB process and win most of the funds, thereby alienating other, less powerful residents. Several interviewees did not expect low-income or otherwise marginalized residents to participate. These interviewees' expectations were based on their own public engagement experiences, as well as on what they had heard about PB processes run by their colleagues:

The affluent and engaged people are always at the table determining things.

If PB is not managed properly, the squeaky wheel could monopolize the dialogue.

My concern with PB is, who is the most organized? There are disenfranchised individuals who, no matter how much you do, won't come out because they are trying to figure out how to live and how to put food on their table. They live paycheck to paycheck. If you are a parent at a school and you are very organized and you can get all the parents to go out and vote, you can get your project funded.

Folks feel disenfranchised because they may want to see one project, and some individuals may have a louder voice or may organize and shift the priorities to something that was not an interest to them.

A non-PB official described hearing the following from the president of the tenant association in a low-income housing development in a neighboring district that had PB:

The association president said, "PB has gotten my tenants really upset because I got them to come out and participate. What they wanted was barbecues in each segment of the development. What they got back was money for cameras for one building." Her tenants, her neighbors, pressed her: "Why did you get us involved in this," they said, "if this is what was going to happen? We said we wanted this, and what we got back was that." She was in tears.

## Many officials who had not adopted PB said they would worry about the added burden on staff if they were to decide to do so.

Most interviewees were deterred by the time, effort and resources PB implementation requires. Several non-PB officials had observed PB in their colleagues' nearby jurisdictions and expressed concern, especially about the burden PB would place on their already busy staffs:

I've had a colleague tell me that he regrets participating because it's so time consuming that it takes away from other things he needed to do.

I've heard elected officials who do PB complain about how much work it takes. That they have to assign a staff member who does nothing else.

I have other things my staff needs to be doing than going out and setting up these events.

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Some interviewees governed jurisdictions where they had no or very few staff, which they said seriously limited their capacity to adopt PB:

I have no staff and this is a part-time job, so I can't do all that much in terms of initiatives besides the big issues I'm already working on.

I came on board with no staff, no database, nothing, and had to scramble to interview and hire people and get the office set up. So the reason we didn't do PB was not philosophical but circumstantial.

### **Some non-PB officials complained that the budgets currently used for PB do not allow for meaningful community improvements and resident empowerment.**

Several non-PB officials we interviewed argued that the budgets their colleagues have so far been willing to give to PB were too small and too limited to lead to meaningful community improvements.

To date, PB in the United States has nearly exclusively been done on parts of a city's or an individual council member's capital budget—that is, using money earmarked for physical infrastructure improvements, such as renovating schools, building parks, carrying out longer-term technology updates for public or community services and so on. In the 2014–15 PB cycle, officials gave on average \$1 million, or \$10 per resident, to a PB process—but this ranged broadly from \$61,000 in one process to \$2.5 million in another.<sup>20</sup>

Some interviewees said the money did not allow for interesting and effective capital projects, and they worried residents would get frustrated when they realized how little could be achieved. Others went further to say that, with the current budgets allocated to PB, processes gave residents a false sense of empowerment and distracted them from bigger problems and inequities in their districts and cities:

The amount of money available doesn't get you very far. It doesn't allow you to do real significant improvements in the community.

What I've seen is, projects don't get fully funded. But they throw some money at it to say, "Hey, we've listened to your voice." Then people may need to wait years because the project isn't moving anywhere. That's very disingenuous.

I considered it. But my critique is that it has to be on a large scale, and it can't give people false hopes that they have more power than they really do. If it was implemented on a broad scale, with large amounts of money, it could be extremely democratizing of how people see government.

My initial thought was, this is not going to work. Some communities have higher needs than others, and you are only going to offer a million dollars. To do what? I mean, a million dollars is not enough for any capital improvement. I didn't want to be involved in it.

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<sup>20</sup> Public Agenda's internal analysis. To learn more about equivalent analyses that combine data from PB processes across the United States and Canada, see Hagelskamp et al., "Public Spending, By The People," 2016.

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One interviewee argued that simply by being limited to council districts rather than run citywide, many current PB processes were not allowing residents to consider solutions to larger inequities:

We have huge citywide social justice issues. The huge attention on PB district by district could have the negative impact of pulling people to make decisions on stop signs versus seeing the bigger picture on issues like displacement or economic justice.

Another interviewee described a public engagement process in his city that he felt was much more comprehensive and meaningful than the PB process in a neighboring city:

Our city government engaged people in a real hands-on process of planning for neighborhood development and massive change that's going to happen. A million dollars in participatory budgeting, compared to the future of the district and maybe \$10 billion of investment, it's kind of small potatoes.

Interviewees who raised the above criticisms further explained that because they, too, did not have larger and potentially more effective discretionary funds for a PB process, they would rather not run a process at all. Some added they would support a citywide PB process that involved larger funds.







# 5

## THE FUTURE OF PB IN THE UNITED STATES

Securing more resources for implementation is important for PB's future, most officials who had adopted the process agreed. At the same time, some suggested ways to make implementation more efficient. Several also suggested PB must expand beyond capital budgets, and that the budgets allocated to it should be larger if PB is to affect communities and government meaningfully over the long term.

Resource challenges impeded the implementation and expansion of PB processes, most officials who had adopted PB said. Several discussed ways of making implementation more efficient, including more centralized support from their city governments. Some said they wanted more opportunities to share PB experiences with colleagues and to learn from each other. Moreover, several officials argued that, to fulfill its promises, PB needed to be applied to much larger budgets. Most officials with PB experience were looking forward to improving their processes in years to come.



Finally, we asked officials who had adopted PB what they thought the future of PB was, both in their jurisdictions and in the United States overall; we asked about their personal priorities for their PB processes; and we asked them to speculate about whether and how PB would continue to spread in the United States.

### **Overcoming the lack of resources for implementation is crucial to the future of PB, according to many officials.**

The officials we interviewed frequently said the future of PB depends on more resources for implementation. Many said they were committed to continuing the process but expressed strong concerns about being able to afford it:

I continue to be an ardent fan and would be delighted for it to be used for other types of decision making. It's just the amount of resources that it takes to successfully implement PB are many, and it has to be prioritized as a funding item in order to get it done.

I will maintain PB so long as I'm in office. I will always do it, to the detriment of my staff. I'm hoping that we get more resources, but at the moment we'll do what we can with what we have.

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## Cities should devote more centralized support to district-level PB, several officials argued; some wished for more opportunities to share best practices with other officials.

More support from their cities could make PB implementation more efficient and help ensure processes are more equally resourced across districts within a city, several officials said. But some cautioned against centralizing the implementation of PB at the city level at the expense of grassroots energy and local problem solving:

Through more centralized support and more resources provided outside of the elected officials' local offices, you could reduce the burden on local council offices and therefore make it easier to justify.

The missing piece is the city getting behind the concept. Or some tool within the central office to educate and engage the district offices to say, "This is a process that works, it's good for you, here are resources that can help you get it done." I just don't see that kind of offer being made throughout the city to elected officials that don't participate.

You want the grassroots energy and excitement, but if it doesn't get somewhat sufficiently institutionalized it can't last. That balance is not simple. I'm hopeful that we can build the infrastructure to make it last and keep its grassroots energy but also be sufficiently institutionalized that we can keep doing it and you don't have to reinvent the wheel each time.

One official suggested spreading the process out over an entire year to make implementation less hectic:

Rather than treating it as a project apart from day-to-day operations, is there a way we can make it maybe a year-long process rather than a nine-month process? It was very compressed and very overwhelming. So is there a way to extend it across the year?

Some officials wanted opportunities to educate or to learn from other elected officials about PB:

I would expect to see an invitation from the central office to be an evangelist to other officials or other communities and say, "Why do you do this?" "How would you do it better?" or "Why should we do it here in this part of the city?" There isn't that kind of use of us as spokespeople.

I'd be curious to know how it's being done elsewhere. I'm curious to know about the formality of the elections and to what extent they validate participants' residency to vote. I'd be curious to know about the formal structures that have emerged in places that have done it longer, and whether there's permanent year-round staffing.



Photo provided by the Participatory Budgeting Project  
www.participatorybudgeting.org

Typically, officials we interviewed whose processes had been running for more than one year—64 percent of our sample—described implementation getting easier over time:

PB has become a strategic initiative in our office. Over time, as you do it repeatedly and continuously, you get better at it, you learn to use resources more efficiently, and it will become so woven into the fabric of our office that it will no longer feel like a burden. It will feel part and parcel of the operations of the office.

**Many officials argued that PB needed to expand to larger and more important budgets for it to affect communities and democracy meaningfully in the long term; at the same time, many were hesitant to advocate for such an expansion.**

With some exceptions, PB processes in the United States are limited to relatively small capital budgets—that is, budgets with which to fund infrastructure but not services or programs. Moreover, the vast majority of PB processes in the United States right now aren't citywide processes but instead take place on the council district level.<sup>21</sup> Several officials we spoke with, including interviewees with and without PB experience, questioned whether the current scope of most PB processes could lead to the kinds of changes theorists and advocates discuss, such as more equitable distribution of resources, greater government transparency and more empowered communities (see section 4):

It's tempting to romanticize PB as democracy at the local level or the democratization of budgeting, but it's far from it, because it's only nibbling at the margins of budget. The notion of PB as a democratizing or equalizing force overstates the impact.

<sup>21</sup> Public Agenda's internal analysis. To learn more about equivalent analyses that combine data from PB processes across the United States and Canada, see Hagelskamp et al., "Public Spending, By The People," 2016.

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Some officials argued PB needed to expand from district-level to citywide budgets to be more meaningful. Others discussed the possibility of applying PB to different budgets, including those for transportation, public safety, public housing and others. Some said that simply allocating a larger amount of capital funds to PB could increase its impacts on communities:

Perhaps there would be more equitable distribution of resources if we said to residents, "Instead of just handing you the money that's left in the change drawer, we're going to give you a portion of our transportation budget. We're going to give you a portion of our human service budget. We're going to give you a portion of our public safety budget, and have you guys prioritize it." Then you move to where the people are actually making decisions that the elected officials typically make. If we were able to get to a point like that, I think we would start to see some real, substantial shift in how government works, how government funds its projects.

I wish members who engage in PB would receive more capital funding, because for it to be meaningful you need a substantial sum. You want to aim to have districtwide projects so that everyone can feel the potential benefit to their vote.

Not only should residents have the ability to fund the renovation of a community center, but they should have the ability to allocate some operating funds to pay for programming in the center.

Some officials, however, worried that if PB were applied to other types of budgets, a majority vote would not necessarily serve the needs of vulnerable groups. Some noted that voters would be focused on whatever issues were most salient in the news and would therefore not make spending decisions that take the big picture into account:

There are issues like affordable housing. That's an incredibly difficult thing to say, "Let the popular vote drive that." Racism, classism. Those are things that are visceral to people and, unfortunately, those emotions override good policy. It's the out-of-sight-out-of-mind mentality. Those are things that are very difficult to surmount.

You have to be very careful when you open that up. For example, during a time when police issues are very important to a community, we might see an overcompensation of resources going to one department over another because of the times. The mayor is able to see it more pragmatically, look at the bigger picture, in a way that maybe a community, an entire city might not.

An official who was cautious but generally in favor of applying PB to citywide budgets said that doing so would require even more resources for implementation and a higher level of commitment from the mayor and other officials:

My goal is that we can do PB at a larger scale through the city budget. But the amount of resources it takes to do this work, at the moment it is not efficient. Maybe after the technology takes its pace or takes its form, I can see it getting better, but right now? No way. Unless there's a huge influx of resources.

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**Finally, officials with PB experience typically said they were committed to doing PB for the long term and looked forward to improving their processes each year.**

Most officials we spoke with expected their jurisdictions would need to go through several more years of PB processes for PB to hit its full stride. These officials typically stressed their commitment to PB. They were focused on improving the implementation of their processes and expected to see the benefits they had already seen deepen over time:

You can't just implement things once or a couple of years. You have to let things play out in the public's mind. You have to reorient people completely toward this idea. You're trying to break a culture. And that is never easy to do in a short period of time. You need multiple years and multiple cycles to continue let that filter in.

I think the process of doing it is beneficial in and of itself. Projects will win, projects will lose. And then next year we'll do it again, and then the people that lost this year will be more motivated for next year to get more people out to vote for their projects. I think this is the kind of thing that builds over the years. I don't think it's the kind of thing where you expect it to blow out success in year one.

As we evolve on this process it becomes a more refined product which I'm sure over the years will become very, very effective.



Roles & Responsibilities

City-Wide Steering Committee

District Committees

Community Boards

Council Member Offices

Project Leads

RESEARCH EVALUATION TEAM

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

## for spreading inclusive and effective participatory budgeting

Based on findings from this study of U.S. elected officials, as well as from our ongoing research collaborations with local evaluators of participatory budgeting processes across the United States and Canada—as reported, for example, in “Public Spending, by the People: Participatory Budgeting in the United States and Canada in 2014–15”<sup>22</sup>—Public Agenda proposes recommendations for a variety of stakeholders who are working to support and spread inclusive and effective PB. We present ideas for public officials and their staffs; for PB advocates and community-based organizations; and for foundations and other potential funders of PB.

The goal of these recommendations is not to advocate for every jurisdiction or elected official to adopt PB; but for those who wish to bring PB to their communities and implement it effectively, and for funders looking to support PB, findings from our research provide some specific ideas and lessons.

### IDEAS FOR PUBLIC OFFICIALS AND THEIR STAFFS

- **Engage staff, implicated city agencies, and broad cross-sections of the community before launching PB.** PB will be more successful when people understand it well, view it as legitimate and worthwhile and understand their respective roles. Engaging important players early on can maximize participation and minimize resistance.
- **Plan for implementation with adequate staffing, volunteers and other resources.** Implementing PB takes time, money and effort. Building a PB volunteer base can help support the process from year to year. Coordinating with officials and staff in neighboring jurisdictions when possible can help share the workload. National organizations, like the Participatory Budgeting Project and Public Agenda, provide resources to support the implementation and evaluation of PB.<sup>23</sup> Many local and national organizations offer advice and tools for public engagement that can be applied to PB and its evaluation.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Hagelskamp et al., “Public Spending, by the People,” 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Public Agenda, the Participatory Budgeting Project, and the North American Participatory Budgeting Research Board, “15 Key Metrics for Evaluating Participatory Budgeting: A Toolkit for Evaluators and Implementers” (New York: Public Agenda, 2015), <http://publicagenda.org/pages/research-and-evaluation-of-participatory-budgeting-in-the-us-and-canada>; The Participatory Budgeting Project, “Organizing for Participatory Budgeting” (Brooklyn, NY: The Participatory Budgeting Project, 2014) <http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/toolkit/>.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center, “Research for Organizing Toolkit” (New York: Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center, 2016), <http://www.researchfororganizing.org/>. Other potentially helpful organizations include the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, Everyday Democracy, the Institute for Local Government, the International Association for Public Participation and the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation.

- **Collaborate with community-based organizations and civic leaders to support implementation and make PB more inclusive.** Community-based organizations and civic leaders can bring many engagement skills to the table, including expertise in engaging traditionally marginalized communities and in building a volunteer base. But be careful to avoid reinforcing existing and potentially exclusive power structures by partnering only with longstanding community groups, who may not be well connected to new and less organized residents.
- **Coordinate your ongoing engagement strategies, including PB, to maximize their impact and efficiency.** PB can be made more effective and efficient by coordinating it with other, ongoing public engagement strategies and technologies. In turn, the excitement and networks PB creates can help support other efforts to engage constituents in community problem solving and to build civic infrastructure.
- **Get ready for messy democracy.** PB can bring out the best in community residents and create public spirit. It can also reveal conflicts and upset existing power brokers. Be prepared for these challenges. Some officials told us that, over the long term, these challenges can have positive impacts on constituents and government.
- **Articulate goals and include evaluation.** Goals might include engaging youth or immigrant communities, encouraging cross-class dialogue in economically heterogeneous districts or advancing constituents' civic education. PB process kickoffs, debriefs and postmortems can help you understand who participated and how the process went. When available, work collaboratively with independent local evaluators to gain a better understanding of whether and how your PB process achieves its goals and how to improve it over time.

## IDEAS FOR PB ADVOCATES AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

- **Keep in mind what officials care about most with respect to PB when you engage them about adopting it.** Many officials told us they see PB as a means to educate the public about how government works and to gain popularity with constituents. In engaging elected officials about PB, emphasizing these potential impacts may help. Few officials in this study said they were looking to fundamentally change the way government works. In advocating with elected officials for PB, consider how different officials are likely to respond to different framings of your message.
- **Help officials contend with their concerns and challenges related to implementation.** The lack of resources for implementation and anticipated burden on staff can deter officials from adopting PB. Be prepared for realistic conversations with elected officials about how to make PB work, including how you can help build an inclusive base of volunteers, recruit diverse community members to participate and possibly take on other tasks that are congruent with your organization's mission and position in the community. Be explicit about the resources and skills needed to ensure a PB process that is inclusive of non-English speakers, youth, low-income residents and other traditionally underrepresented groups.
- **Share leadership and responsibility for PB's success with public officials.** Community-based organizations and advocates should be part of PB steering committees and help write local versions of the rules. They should hold themselves and officials mutually accountable for meeting the goals of their processes.



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## IDEAS FOR FOUNDATIONS AND OTHER FUNDERS

- **Create opportunities for officials to educate each other about PB.** Officials who decided to try PB in their jurisdictions often reported learning about it from other officials. Several said they wanted more opportunities to learn about how other PB processes work and to advocate with other officials for PB. Supporting the building and maintenance of PB learning communities among officials across the United States can help expand PB and spread best practices.
- **Support evaluation and research on PB and its impacts and the communication of findings both locally and nationwide.** Evaluating and researching PB processes is crucial to understanding how effective they are in meeting their goals and can help those doing PB to identify areas for improvement. Documenting successes through compelling stories can encourage replication and experimentation. As sites experiment with different approaches to implementation, researching and sharing their practices can benefit processes nationwide.
- **Sponsor the development and use of technical assistance and trainings, as well as technological tools and digital infrastructure, to support PB.** Many PB processes benefit from technical assistance from, for example, the Participatory Budgeting Project. Support to get access to PB trainings and technical assistance can encourage officials to adopt PB in their jurisdictions. Technological tools can make implementation more efficient while also reaching more residents, but more investments are needed to take full advantage of their potential for PB. Implementers have more to learn about how to use digital tools in ways that make PB more, rather than less, inclusive.

- **Consider brokering and financially supporting collaboration among public officials and key community players, especially community-based organizations.** Community-based organizations, as well as schools, religious institutions and individual civic leaders, are often better connected than local government and have greater expertise in engaging traditionally underserved and underrepresented populations. Fostering collaborations between these community allies and local government can help the implementation of PB and facilitate inclusiveness. Even small grants can help these entities work together to address needs like translation, transportation to and provision of child care at meetings, printing materials and incentives for volunteers.

## AN IDEA FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS

- **Consider whether and how to use PB for different types of budgets or for larger budgets.** What would it mean to use PB for more citywide budgets, for program and service delivery budgets, for budgets of individual city agencies or departments or for budgets to address specific problems or development challenges in communities? Several officials interviewed for this project said expanding PB to a greater variety of larger budgets might lead to more meaningful impacts for constituents, communities and governments over the long term, while others were hesitant to argue for such expansions. Officials and their staffs, PB advocates, community-based organizations, researchers and funders should consider whether and how to expand PB processes beyond current budgets and whether and how such expansions could benefit communities and government in the long term.

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# METHODOLOGY

## Summary

“Why Let the People Decide?” synthesizes findings from one-on-one phone interviews<sup>25</sup> conducted by Public Agenda with United States elected officials who had adopted participatory budgeting in their districts or cities and with elected officials in neighboring districts or cities who had not adopted PB.<sup>26</sup>

We interviewed 43 elected officials across 11 U.S. cities. Twenty-eight interviewed officials had adopted PB, and 15 had not. All interviewees were invited to participate in two rounds of interviews. The first round was conducted between March and June 2015 and the second between October 2015 and March 2016. Fifty-three percent of our interviewees participated in both rounds of interviews. All interviews were confidential and ranged in length from 15 to 50 minutes.

The Kettering Foundation served as a collaborator in this research. Funding for the research was generously provided by the Democracy Fund and the Rita Allen Foundation.

## Selection and recruitment of interview participants

First, we built a list comprising all elected officials currently in office in all U.S. districts and cities where PB processes were taking place or took place in the 2014–15 cycle of PB. In addition, we built a list of all elected officials currently in office in neighboring districts (for comparison with district PB processes) and cities (for comparison with citywide PB processes) who had not adopted PB. We deemed a non-PB comparison district to be all other districts within a city where at least one district had PB. We deemed a non-PB comparison city to be a city that was close geographically to a city that had a citywide PB process, and similar based on population size, government structure and other salient political factors. For all districts, the council member or alderman was contacted, and for all cities, all members of the city council and the mayor were contacted. We revised and updated the list before the second round of interviews in the fall of 2015 to account for any changes in office that had occurred since the first round and to expand the list to include officials in districts and cities where PB was adopted in the 2015–16 cycle.

For the first round of interviews, the list included elected officials from eight cities where district officials or city councils had adopted PB and from two comparison cities where PB was not taking place. For the second round, the list was expanded to include one additional PB city and one additional comparison city. For both rounds, elected officials were invited to participate via email, with reminder calls made and reminder emails sent up to four times during the interview round. We invited 186 elected officials to participate in the first round of interviews and 194 in the second.

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<sup>25</sup> With the exception of one interview that was conducted in person at the request of the interviewee.

<sup>26</sup> While Public Agenda’s research activities on PB focus on both the United States and Canada, this report was funded specifically to focus on the experiences and perspectives of U.S. elected officials only.

In total, we completed 66 interviews with 43 elected officials in 11 cities from March 2015 to March 2016. These included 28 officials who had adopted PB and 15 who had not. Thirty-four of these interviews were completed in the first round, an 18 percent response rate, and 32 were completed in the second round, a 16 percent response rate. Fifty-three percent of the interviewees were interviewed twice. See Table 1 for characteristics of our interview sample.

**Table 1: Characteristics of interviewees**

	Interviewees who had adopted PB (n=28)	Interviewees who had not adopted PB (n=15)	Total (N=43)
Number of interviews in Round 1	23	11	34
Number of interviews in Round 2	23	9	32
% of interviewees who completed a follow-up interview	78%	45%	53%
% of PB interviewees representing a citywide process	32%	--	--
% of PB interviewees representing a district-level process	68%	--	--
% of PB interviewees who were in their first PB cycle at the time of the first interview	36%	--	--
% of PB interviewees who did or had done PB within their first year in office	64%	--	--
% of PB interviewees who faced reelection since doing PB	37%	--	--
% of interviewees who had won reelection since doing PB, among only those who had faced reelection	100%	--	--

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## Interview procedure, interview guide and data analysis

The research was designed to be a longitudinal interview study. It included two interviews with each public official scheduled about 8 to 12 months apart, so that for those officials who were doing PB, each interview took place at a different time in one PB cycle (for example, during the idea collection phase and immediately after the vote) or across two consecutive PB cycles. The longitudinal aspect of the study encouraged more nuanced and deeper conversations with officials than a single interview would have done, and it allowed us to explore how officials' views and experiences evolved over time and across PB processes.

Interviews were scheduled at times most convenient to participants and conducted by telephone, with the exception of one interview conducted in person at the interviewee's request. Participants were assured of their confidentiality.

Guides for interviews with PB and non-PB officials were semi-structured and aimed to gain a better understanding of elected officials' views on and experiences with PB. Copies of the full interview guides for both PB and non-PB officials, with questions from both interview rounds, can be obtained by emailing [research@publicagenda.org](mailto:research@publicagenda.org).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Public Agenda's research team analyzed the interview data thematically with the aid of the qualitative analysis software, Dedoose.

All quotes used in the publication and other presentations of the research were carefully reviewed to avoid including identifying information about research participants. In addition, in an effort to protect the anonymity of our participants, we have adjusted the language in some of the quotes, such as replacing the word "council member" or "alderman" with the neutral "elected official" and using the word "district" instead of "ward" in all cases. Some quotes have also been edited for clarity and brevity.

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