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Participatory Budgeting: Diffusion and Outcomes across the World

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Abstract

In this special issue of the *Journal of Public Deliberation*, multiple faces of Participatory Budgeting programs are revealed. The articles demonstrate that there is no standardized set of “best practices” that governments are adopting, but there are a broader set of principles that are adapted by local governments to meet local circumstances. Adopt and adapt appears to be the logic behind many PB programs.

Keywords

Participatory Budgeting

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Participatory Budgeting (PB), known to many through the Porto Alegre, Brazil initiative, has now spread to all corners of the globe. From rural Australia to NYC to Albania to the Congo to India, governments, international funding agencies, and civil society organizations are experimenting with PB programs to overcome poorly entrenched policy and social problems. The impetus behind these programs is varied—some governments are required to implement them by constitutional fiat, other governments are induced by international funding agencies, while other governments are led by reformers seeking to generate change. Some governments are seeking to spark better forms of deliberation, others to mobilize the population, and others to bring transparency and accountability to local governments. These programs fit into a growing world-wide effort that seeks to use civic participation, deliberation and oversight to improve the process through which policies are made as well as the outputs generated by governments.

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One purpose of this special issue is to serve as a bridge between two academic literatures and two policy debates that are seemingly on parallel tracks— Participatory Budgeting and Deliberative Democracy. Both aim to elicit more effective citizen participation in policy development and decision-making. Participatory Budgeting does this via diverse civic groups developing budget proposals, which are voted upon by the broad public, with the preferences expected to influence resource allocation. Deliberative democracy does this by encouraging participation of diverse, everyday citizens in discourse that is respectful, open and egalitarian, aiming to arrive at a coherent voice that will influence policy and decisions.

Participatory budgeting includes deliberative processes, although most observers would agree that they are not as robust as programs that primarily focus on deliberative processes. PB programs delegate some decision-making authority directly to citizens, enabling citizens to use their political rights to direct how state authority or resources will be used. Conversely deliberative processes, expected to result in political influence, have been criticized for not achieving substantive change. As the articles in this special edition indicate, both fields have successfully pioneered ways of more meaningful and diverse participation of everyday people, there is still an elusive gap between these initiatives and more radical substantive change to governance.

Participatory Budgeting and Deliberative Democracy: Bridges and Divides

Many of the articles in this edition note that PB initiatives are ‘deliberative’. The difficulty of using this term is that it covers a wide range of communicative processes, from café conversations to discussions in legislative bodies, often being indistinguishable from the general term, ‘discussion’. However, it is not the generic notion of ‘discussion’ that political theorists are referring to when stating that democracy has taken a “deliberative turn.” -- the periodic aggregation of votes in an election or even official rights is no longer accepted as representing the “essence of democracy” (Dryzek, 2).

Rather, it is “deliberation” referring to the collaborative discourse between diverse participants, which has the potential to influence policy and decision-making. Such discourse is described as being informed, with participants’ differing views having an equal voice, where values are surfaced, options are carefully considered, and a coherent voice is sought. In terms of PB then, it is not known the extent to which the ‘deliberativeness’ referred to in descriptions of various PB processes reflects the above description, or alternatively, reflects more general discussion, debate, advocacy or even coercion by influential others. Regardless, many PB advocates do identify the crucial role of deliberation within PB as a means to improve democratic legitimacy.

In this special issue of the *Journal of Public Deliberation* it has been noted that the deliberative practices associated with PB often fall short of the standards set in the academic literature for high-quality public deliberation. However, in our view, the deliberative practices within PB should be of great interest to “deliberative” scholars due to the widespread proliferation of these programs. Hundreds of thousands of individuals are now engaged in PB on an annual or biannual basis, making it one of the most widely used forms of deliberative, participatory policymaking in the world.

Based on the papers in this special edition, it appears that PBs have a unique capacity to foster “social capital”, the ‘glue’ in social life that enables “participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam 1993, 167). During this process, participants develop “trust, norms and networks.” Research over the decades has shown that social capital is important to the wellbeing of a society in that it has been correlated with increased economic success, political health, and individual health and wellbeing. There are two types of social capital, both of which are important: “Bonding capital”, consisting of homogeneous groups with much in common who develop trust and reciprocal relationships; and “bridging capital”, involving heterogeneous groups, typically with divergent views and different demographics who nonetheless develop generalized trust. It is argued that the latter networks, ‘bridging capital’, are more likely to produce these positive social outcomes than bonding capital.

Since most PB initiatives researched have relied upon civic organizations with common objectives developing a proposal together, more or less in competition for scarce resources with other civic organizations, it is more likely that bonding capital is being enhanced than bridging capital. It should be noted, however, that advocates of the ‘normative’ PB model have highlighted the willingness of participants to bridge divides in pursuit of the common good. It does remain questionable though whether this is the norm, the exception or simply the ideal. A different model of PB included in this special issue appears to focus clearly on bridging capital, using population random sampling to maximize diversity and intensive discourse to determine the budget priorities. However, this model often excludes the broader public vote, seen by others to be essential to the PB process to maximize participation and in so doing, to foster overall social capital.

As with adopting any approach, it’s likely to involve trade-offs. It would be seductive to suggest that all that’s needed is an amalgamation of the two approaches – with the normative model becoming more deliberative, the deliberative model also including a public vote. While such an amalgamation could well offer improvements, it does ignore that each model is based on a different set of principles. For example, deliberative

democrats might argue that if the PB process was to be more ‘transformational’ by including the entire available budget, given the complexity this would involve, neither easily understood nor easily resolved, it is doubtful whether reliance upon civic groups, each developing a proposal to be put to a public vote, would result in the wisest decisions for the broad public good. On the other hand, advocates of the normative model might argue that without a ‘vote’ there is no popular voice, which undermines the credibility and legitimacy of the PB process. No solutions are offered here, but rather, by raising the issues, including the similarities and differences between approaches, it is hoped this edition will add value to the field of PB research and practice.

In sum, PB is distinct from other participatory or deliberative formats in a couple of ways. First, most PB programs use an open format, whereby any interested citizens can participate (distinct from citizen juries or a random sample of citizens). Second, citizens exercise specific votes in favor of projects, with governments making a commitment to implementing projects selected by citizens. This is often not legally binding but is part of a political commitment to adhere to citizens’ votes. Third, PB programs often have a specific normative orientation, often times associated with social justice concerns or addressing the policy needs of groups that are politically weak.

Articles in this special edition by Avritzer, Hartz-Karp and Russmon Gilman specifically focus on the role that deliberation plays in different PB programs. However, there does not appear to be a set format for how deliberation should be applied. Indeed these articles do not appear to rely upon a common set of underlying principles of deliberation. However, there is an obvious connection in terms of the perceived usefulness of citizen deliberation directed toward specific policy outcomes

PB as practical enterprise

PB is the modern day, urban version of the New England Town Hall meeting process. It is a practical response to pressing political and policy problems. It involves the reorganization of how public officials and citizens negotiate the allocation of public resources to solve these problems. Given the complexity of policymaking as well as the stickiness of previous budgetary agreements, it is generally only a small percentage of the budget that is allocated to Participatory Budgeting.

There is no singular set of voting mechanisms associated with PB. Some cities use a secret ballot, others use a show of hands. Some use a majority-based system, whereas others distribute resources based on a proportional system. This allows local governments to craft voting rules that correspond to local practices. Rules sometimes mirror existing electoral rules, which helps governments and citizens to stay within their comfort zone regarding how vote choices should translate into outcomes. At other times, voting rules diverge from the rules used in representative democracy, to allow citizens and governments to experiment with different ways of aggregating citizens’ choices.

As a result of the expanding numbers of PB programs across the globe, and the ensuring adaptations, it is unsurprising that there is a wide range of processes and outcomes. Three

articles in this special issue focus on the spread of Participatory Budgeting across the globe. Sintomer, Herzberg and Röcke, develop a typology to categorize the different experiences. Goldfrank examines the role of the World Bank as a key disseminator of these PB programs. Baiocchi and Ganuza examine which facets of the original PB programs and rules are being adopted.

Complementing these three articles are a number of case studies of key issues in the debate. Articles focusing on PB experiences in Australia, Peru, Portugal, and the United States move us far beyond the well-known case of Porto Alegre. In order to sort the proliferating number of PB programs, it is incumbent upon researchers and activists to identify the range and depth of changes produced by specific programs.

This special issue is divided into three sections:

The first section is more conceptual and theoretical. Articles by Wampler, Avtizer, and Russon Gilman. The second section includes three articles that focus on the worldwide diffusion. This includes articles by Sintomer, Herzberg, and Röcke, Goldfrank, and Baiocchi and Ganuza. The third section includes a really nice mixture of cases—Australia (articles by Hartz-Karp and Thomson), Peru (McNulty), Portugal (Alves and Allegretti), and the United States (Lerner and Secondo, and Su).

Dryzek, J. 2000. *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics and Contestations*. NY. USA, Oxford University Press, p 2.

Putnam, R. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. New Jersey, USA, Princeton University Press.