

Participatory Budgeting in Europe

Democracy and Public Governance

Yves Sintomer, Anja Röcke
and Carsten Herzberg



PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN EUROPE

Can participatory budgeting help make public services really work for the public? Incorporating a range of experiments in ten different countries, this book provides the first comprehensive analysis of participatory budgeting in Europe and the effect it has had on democracy, the modernisation of local government, social justice, gender mainstreaming and sustainable development. By focusing on the first decade of European participatory budgeting and analysing the results and the challenges affecting the agenda today it provides a critical appraisal of the participatory model. Detailed comparisons of European cases expose similarities and differences between political cultures and offer a strong empirical basis to discuss the theories of deliberative and participatory democracy and reveal contradictory tendencies between political systems, public administrations and democratic practices.

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FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

This book was previously published in French, German, Italian and Spanish. When it was written, the financial and economic crisis had not yet modified the international hegemony of neoliberalism. Global financial capitalism had not shown so clearly its limits. The economic power had not shifted so crudely away from the old continent. In 2015, this time seems far away. The legitimacy crisis of representative regimes in the old continent has sharpened. The world has deeply changed.

For the first time since the fall of the Berlin Wall, in Spain, in Iceland, in Greece and elsewhere, huge European social movements have claimed 'true democracy', institutional innovations, citizen participation in government. In the US, Occupy Wall Street has gone in the same direction. Participatory budgeting is part of this story. It inspired some of the proposals of the Spanish movement '15-M', the Iberian equivalent of Occupy Wall Street, which in 2011 reclaimed: 'Real Democracy Now!' ('Democracia Real Ya!'), and was able to develop sophisticated methods of horizontal deliberation. Democratically controlling both the markets and public authorities is even more crucial than it was. Modernising public services, with the people and for the people, remains more than ever a compelling issue. Although participatory budgeting has suffered setbacks in some European countries (such as Italy, Spain or the United Kingdom), it significantly developed in others, most notably in Poland, Germany and Portugal. Elsewhere in the world, it also continues to expand. However, European experiments are facing huge challenges in times of public debt crises and the retrenchment of increasing parts of the population from the political arena. Up to now, most cases were top-down processes that focussed on limited issues and involved limited amounts of money. They had ambiguous social, ecological, ethnic or gender impact and did not alter the global balance of power. Nevertheless, they did change some dimensions of the everyday life of a large number of citizens and civil servants and in some cases even triggered broader political and administrative reform processes.

The authors of this book tried to analyse both the positive innovation that participatory budgeting represents and the limits it faces in Europe. Their hope is that the story so far is only the beginning of a broader learning process, that participatory budgeting will overcome its limits and contribute to the democratic revolution that is required in the 21st century. They would be satisfied if this book could modestly contribute to this movement.

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INTRODUCTION

Twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, for the first time in history, most of Europe is gathered under common institutions that are based on representative democracy and the rule of law. A shared democratic culture is beginning to emerge, in spite of the major differences that still exist, particularly between East and West and between the North and the South. While most direct political exchanges between actors from different countries take place within the national institutional arena, the main European public spheres tend to discuss issues in increasingly similar terms, as can be seen in the main European newspapers (Eder 2007). Since the beginning of the 2000s, the European Parliament has played an increasingly important role; political parties and trade unions have coordinated their European-level activities more and more closely; social forums have enabled direct communication between civil society actors; a protest movement emerged in the European economic crisis. The question of developing alternatives to neoliberal capitalism is discussed in the whole continent, although with different variations.

Discontent with Democracy

Nonetheless, the discontent is growing among citizens, together with the rejection of politics as currently practised by the continent's elite. The European project seems paralysed, torn between varying conceptions and threatened by national or even nationalistic sentiments. Parallel to the new engagement of citizens, in almost all countries, political systems face voter disillusionment or crises of legitimacy. Traditional representative democracy no longer appears capable of dealing with new challenges: increasing social inequalities, ecological crisis, xenophobic and authoritarian tendencies, the provincialising (Chakrabarty 2007) of Europe in the new world order. In many places, the idea of Europe seems unable to mobilise the energies and trust of citizens. The current problems of the European integration undermine the idea that elected representatives can find adequate solutions for society's needs. Everywhere, abstention is on the rise; citizens' faith in political institutions and politicians is declining; party membership is decreasing, in terms of both quantity and intensity of identification, and this affects strongly the traditional parties. In a parallel move, institutional participatory procedures have multiplied since

the beginning of the 1990s and citizen participation is on the political agenda. Everywhere, citizens use the social media for new forms of activism. This is a development that does not seem merely circumstantial, but probably marks a long-term trend. The reasons are hard to decipher. On the one hand, major socio-cultural changes have fostered demand for an increasingly democratised political system. Politics cannot remain unaffected by the widespread development of education, the crises in most authoritarian structures (from the patriarchal family to school, political parties and research laboratories), more equal gender relations, the development of public discussions on science and technology, the emergence of an information model based on networks rather than top-down integration, the replacement of the Taylorist model and the collapse of economic models based on authoritarian planning. Completely out of step with these developments, the world of politics is becoming increasingly professional and inward-looking, despite the fact that some political actors have seized upon these issues to score points against those who continue to cling to traditional ways of thinking.

Expectations are not, however, universally in favour of more democratic ways of doing politics. Authoritarian tendencies are also emerging: companies seem less open to the idea of codetermination or workers' participation than they were in the 1980s; there is an increasing emphasis on security; and the far right and xenophobic parties are making significant gains in a number of places. This is due to several factors: uneasiness due to the acuteness of the social and economic crisis; the increasing inequality in the capitalist system of the 21st century (Picketty 2014); the apparent powerlessness of politicians when faced with economic globalisation and the global market; institutional inadequacy in handling the scale of current challenges; the loss of traditional identities without the appearance of new clear reference points; and the calling into question of the ambivalent effects of 'progress'. Here again, political actors seize upon these themes to distinguish themselves from their opponents and to exploit reactionary opinions.

The loss of credibility of traditional models is not a new political phenomenon: the post-1968 demonstrations; the revolutions that produced the fall of Southern European dictatorships in the 1970s; and those that produced the downfall of the Communist regimes in the 1980s, all called authoritarian and paternalistic social relations into question. The idea of 'doing politics differently' followed the emergence of issues related to self-management, new social movements, green and alternative currents and then the alter-globalisation movement, although these movements' political practices are often far removed from their rhetoric. Traditional bureaucracy has been brought into disrepute by the failure of 'Real socialism' and was then further discredited by the rise of neoliberal globalisation. Public service users' increasing discontent and public authorities' tendency to 'speak on behalf of' user or patient associations

also enhanced this trend. Of course, modernisation and reform are often euphemisms wielded to extol the virtues of the minimalist state and attack social benefits. Nevertheless, increased problems related to traditional forms of public action and politics seems more and more difficult to contain in most Western democracies. A significant trend has emerged in the past decades, characterised by increased calls for citizen participation in public policy, closer relations between users and managers and increased dialogue between the institutional political system and the rest of the population. These calls have come from social movements and from within the political system, as well as from both international organisations and their critics. Far from mere political or administrative rhetoric, these calls are in line with the expansion of new institutional procedures of citizen involvement and developments in legal standards. A ‘deliberative imperative’ (Blondiaux and Sintomer 2002) is emerging – to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the country – together with a push to increase participation.

The ‘Rue Jourdain’ Example

Participatory budgeting is distinct from other new participatory instruments, because of both its rapid spread and the political reactions it has produced. The procedure – which involves non-elected citizens in making decisions on public finances – was invented in Porto Alegre and very rapidly spread through the rest of Brazil and Latin America. A few years later, it spread to Europe and the rest of the world. It is now advocated by the alter-globalisation movement, the World Bank and the UN, as well as radical NGOs, political parties from all political camps, political foundations and administrative managers. Is this merely a passing trend or a fundamental shift that will produce radical changes in administrative and political practices?

There are many explanations for the success of participatory budgeting. First and foremost, the Porto Alegre procedure seems to have found a way of reinventing politics and redistributing resources in favour of the most disadvantaged. In addition, it is well known that money is at the heart of everything, and that budgets are key in local authorities’ functioning. Enabling citizens to participate in drawing up the budget, even if in a limited manner, is therefore highly symbolic, particularly during periods of financial squeeze. Thirdly, it is a tool that has the potential to bypass parochialism: the most widespread participatory approaches are generally limited to a specific neighbourhood or area of public policy and the people involved often tend to defend very specific interests.

This was the case in the French city La Rochelle, for example, at the beginning of the 2000s, when the members of a neighbourhood committee asked for a

no-entry sign to be placed at one end of the Rue Jourdain. Those present at the meeting were almost unanimous in denouncing the problems caused by traffic driving down the street and, after looking into the request, the town's technical department judged it reasonable and put up the sign as requested. The measure, however, resulted in some unexpected effects: part of the traffic went through the adjacent neighbourhood instead, which led their committee to ask for a no-entry sign too, this time to be placed at the other end of the Rue Jourdain. The technical department and local politicians discussed the matter and decided to accede to the new request as well, given that the Rue Jourdain was far from being a main street. The street was now completely closed to traffic and was used as a prime example to justify politicians' oft-repeated view that 'involving ordinary people in setting out public policy is certainly important, but should not be taken too far and the different roles in the process should be respected. Residents should look out for their specific interests and politicians should uphold the common good and therefore retain a monopoly over decision-making. Failing this, there would be a decrease in the common good and an irrational increase in specific interests'. Participatory budgeting would appear to provide a way of overcoming the 'Rue Jourdain example'. There are no question marks hanging over the good will of local politicians in the La Rochelle neighbourhood committee system: they are genuinely convinced of the importance of participation and have been highly enthusiastic in its implementation. However, while the result is undeniably illogical, is it the methodology or citizens' short-sightedness that is to blame? When participation consists of a series of vertical discussions between decision-makers and residents, without the latter being able to exchange ideas with other neighbourhoods, is it not inevitable that they find it difficult to develop an overall perspective? If, on the other hand, citizens are asked to deal with the overall budget and justify to their peers why a certain request has more legitimacy or urgency than another, participatory budgeting would appear to produce a model that runs counter to the Nimbyism¹ that characterises the 'Rue Jourdain example' (see Figure I.1).

At least part of the reason why participatory budgeting Porto Alegre-style appear able to contribute to social justice and public service modernisation, therefore, is that citizens are urged to compare their situation with that of their peers; take an interest in overarching political choices; and get involved with the issues at the heart of the administrative process. These approaches seem likely to produce both bottom-up and top-down modernisation. This is a significant advantage at a time when purely managerial models, such as those initially proposed by international organisations, are being increasingly called into question. They may even prove as attractive to international consultants who are concerned with ensuring that money distributed is put to good use as

1 NIMBY is an acronym for 'not in my back yard'.

INTRODUCTION

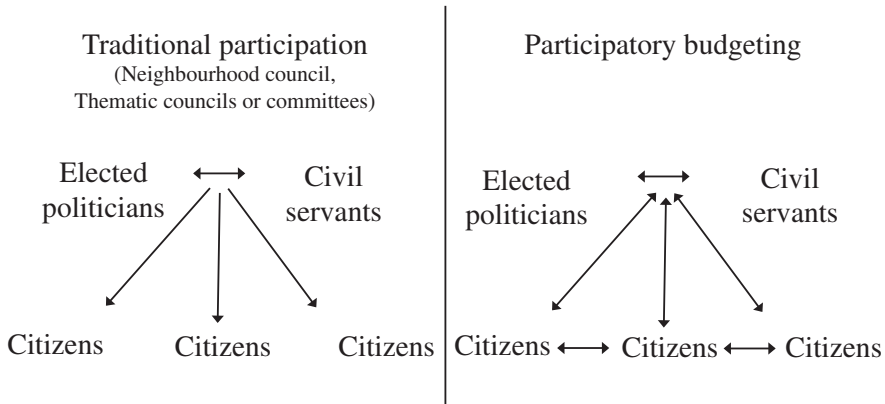


Figure 1.1 Traditional participation and participatory budgeting

Source: authors' elaboration

they are to activists who believe that ‘another world is possible’. The success of participatory budgeting is in no small measure due to this unexpected convergence between widely differing actors.

However, is a procedure that is the result of such highly divergent expectations not destined to be engulfed in confusion? The fact that participatory budgets have been tried out in a wide variety of different contexts and the different forms they have taken could lead to the various procedures being linked only by highly superficial elements. A cursory examination of the development of this process in Europe appears to yield a diversity that makes it very difficult to reach any overall conclusions. On which concrete procedures are European participatory budgets based? Who are the actors involved and what are their ideological and theoretical frames of reference? Aside from political rhetoric, what are the actual effects of these experiments? Can an overall conclusion be drawn? In alter-globalisation circles, many saw participatory budgeting as the foundations upon which to build an alternative to neoliberalism. Some German foundations, on the other hand, viewed them as a politically neutral way of producing administrative modernisation, whereas some critical sociologists and radicals said that they merely distract citizens’ movements from real issues and integrate those involved into a subordinate role in the system, thereby legitimising the status quo. Where does the truth lie? However they are interpreted, can participatory budgeting be considered symbolic of a ‘new spirit’ blowing through public institutions (Bacqué, Rey and Sintomer 2005)?

It is these questions that the present book aims to answer. We believe that this assessment of participatory budgets – which covers the first decade of their emergence, spread and functioning – can contribute to establishing a vision of

the similarities and differences between the political cultures, legal frameworks and institutional contexts of different European countries that is both all-encompassing and detailed. Participatory budgets are a lens through which the partly contradictory developments in the political system, public administration and democracy at the start of the twenty-first century can be studied. What does the future hold? Is the development of participation not just one facet of the emergence of an ‘audience-’ or ‘opinion-based democracy’ (Manin 1995) dominated by demagoguery, media manipulation, charisma and depoliticisation? Or, on the other hand, is it the first sign of a ‘democratisation of democracy’ through more flexible, collective and less hierarchical decision-making procedures? Could it lead to a more balanced, less party-machine and administration dominated form of democracy? Is this something that is common to ‘old’ and ‘new’ Europe and which includes Latin and Nordic countries, countries marked by French-style republicanism and those that follow the Anglo-Saxon tradition? Is it something that the ‘Rhineland’, liberal and Scandinavian models all share? To reach the heart of the matter it was necessary to carry out a close examination of all the European countries involved, using methodologies that would cut through political discourse and proclamations of good intentions.

The Research

This book is part of a dynamic and developing field of study. The past decades have seen a huge increase in studies of participatory democracy in Britain, Europe and the world, spanning a range of very different issues, disciplinary approaches and objectives. Initially, these were mainly monographs or comparisons dealing with two or three areas. A second phase enabled the comparison of a variety of sites (Font 2001, Fung and Wright 2001, Bacqué, Rey and Sintomer 2005, Dias 2014). However, these comparisons faced the problem that the research upon which they were based had been carried out using a wide variety of different methodologies, concepts and categories (Font, Della Porta, Sintomer 2012). The research was heterogeneous and this it made more difficult to produce cumulative outcomes and comparisons. The aim of this book is to contribute to a new phase in the development of participatory research; in other words, to carry out integrated assessments that are not limited to local effects and national contexts, thereby enabling the construction of a general overview (Smith 2009; Font, Della Porta, Sintomer 2014). To this end, we have based our work on the results of the previous phases and other similar attempts that dealt with Brazil or Latin America (Avritzer 2002, 2009, Cabannes 2003, 2006). Our research did, however, come up against a lack of empirical information: unlike those working on areas such as the welfare state or education, we were unable to rely on pre-existing sets of comparable data. We were therefore obliged to both produce

the data and interpret it, at one and the same time. Also, most of the processes assessed are very recent and still under way, which explains why some of our arguments have been left as hypotheses.

This first comparative continent-wide study on participatory democracy is centred on the first decade of European participatory budgets, which are among the most innovative participatory procedures today. This gave us a focus for our research, through which we could achieve a better understanding of local democracy in Europe and of democracy as a whole. The idea was to look at the European construction from a different angle, raising the issue of the convergences and differences between different national models from a specific starting point. This enabled an analysis of a wide variety of different relations: that is, between the state and the market; the institutional political system, the network of associations and social movements; politics and the administration; and public service modernisation, the defence of the status quo and privatisation.

During several years, our study considered over 250 participatory budgets that existed in 2010 in a dozen (mainly Western) European countries, as well as a few experiments that were similar in nature. Seventeen researchers of eight different nationalities were directly involved, while many other colleagues were involved in an indirect manner. Our fieldwork was based on four concentric circles. The first, which was the heart of our work, involved ethnographic research and comprised long stays in the respective places of concern, participatory observation of interactions that were key to local social and political life, and deep-rooted knowledge of political-institutional and cultural context. This was carried out in twelve places in five different countries.² The second circle comprised in-depth studies based on at least two visits to the place in question, observation of interaction, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with local politicians, administrators, association members and, where appropriate, others (foundations, NGOs and so on); and the systematic gathering of quantitative and qualitative data on the political, financial, economic and urban situation of the town concerned, as well as on the participatory model itself (through questionnaires that were common to all the locations). In some cases, questionnaires were also handed out to participants. On each occasion we worked with researchers from the country in question, in order to reach a better understanding of the socio-political context in which the participatory experience was taking place. The second approach was used in thirteen local authorities in eight different countries.³ The third circle was

2 This included France (Morsang-sur-Orge, Poitou-Charentes, Saint-Denis), Germany (Berlin-Lichtenberg, Rheinstetten), Italy (Grottammare, Pieve Emanuele, Rome XI, Venice), Spain (Cordoba, Puente Genil), United Kingdom (Salford).

3 These were Belgium (Mons); Finland (Hämeenlinna); France (Bobigny, Pont-de-Claix, Paris 20th district); Germany (Emsdetten, Esslingen, Hilden); Netherlands

merely a ‘looking glass case’: a single case whose purpose was to provide greater clarification of the object of our research.⁴ In this case, the investigation was not carried out as fully or systematically. Finally, the outer circle comprised those processes which we only studied via secondary literature, the Internet and telephone interviews.⁵ The analysis and interpretation of the empirical material is based on circle one and two; we used the other two circles as complements to back up our hypotheses and ‘test’ the ideal-type models.

* * *

In order to answer the questions raised in this introduction and to ensure coherence with the research programme set out above, we proceed in three parts. Part I consists of a cross-cutting analysis that looks at the context in which European participatory budgets emerged and explains their development. Moreover, it presents a typology of six participation models that includes participatory budgeting, but also other participatory instruments. Its goal is to assess the effects, strengths, weaknesses and scope of participatory processes in Europe as well as the relations between participatory democracy and administrative reform, social justice and changes taking place in the political system. In this first part, we will answer the following series of questions: How can we explain the simultaneous development of participatory budgeting in such diverse contexts? Is there convergence between the various approaches and do they belong at all to the same political phenomenon? What is the social and political meaning of these developments? Part II provides a more detailed analysis of twenty participatory budgets in the 2000s, setting them in their national contexts and highlighting their similarities and differences. This will enable us to provide a detailed picture of the different models of participation set out in Part I. Part III deepens our cross-cutting analysis by focusing on three types of impacts of participatory budgeting: managerial, social and political. This analysis serves as springboard for a general discussion about the challenges and outcomes of citizen participation. Our conclusion summarises the results set out throughout the work and raises pragmatic issues related to the specific nature of the ‘British’ model of citizen participation and democracy in general. A glossary placed at the end of the book contains the most important technical terms we use throughout.

(Utrecht); Spain (Albacete, Seville); Poland (Plock), United Kingdom (Bradford).

4 This was the city of Palmela in Portugal.

5 For an overview, see Sintomer, Herzberg, Röcke 2005.

PART I

THE RETURN OF THE CARAVELS

The history of participatory budgeting is still young, but nevertheless astonishing. The procedure was invented in the late 1980s in Porto Alegre and just fifteen years later there were hundreds of examples spread across Latin America. By 2005 it had been adopted by 55 European towns. Five years later there were more than 250 participatory budgets and at the end of 2012, between 474 and 1317 (this large difference is due to the fact that in some cases, and especially in Poland (see Figure 1.3, p. 23), it is difficult to get reliable data on how exactly or whether at all the process is still working). Traditionally, complex products such as democratic constitutions and mass political parties, were invented in Europe or North America before being exported to the rest of the world. This is perhaps the first time that an institutional innovation has travelled from South to North and a procedure invented in Latin America imported into Europe. It could be described as a ‘return of the caravels’. But what exactly are the caravels bringing with them? Given the different national and continental contexts, are European participatory budgets comparable to those in Latin America? How far can they be considered a single phenomenon? Does participatory budgeting represent nothing more than a fashionable terminology, or is it instead a slogan only used by a restricted number of political actors?

To answer these questions, we will start this first Part by systematically taking stock of the current situation in order to obtain a better idea of the scope, forms and reasons behind the procedure. We will make an initial diagnosis, then begin to tell the story of and explain the puzzling phenomenon that is participatory budgeting. The big question is: what conclusions can be drawn from the procedure’s remarkably rapid spread? Chapter 1 enables us to take stock of developments since participatory budgeting was invented in Porto Alegre, going from prior experiences in other Brazilian towns to its arrival in Europe during the early 2000s. We will also provide a precise definition of participatory budgeting as we understand it, for the purposes of this investigation. The second chapter looks into the factors that explain the launching of participatory budgeting experiments in Europe. It also tackles the issue of the convergence of these various processes in Europe, as well as looking at local institutions and

approaches. For this purpose we will be obliged to deal with the question of comparative research. Chapter 3 goes beyond the mere process of participatory budgeting in that it presents a general typology of citizen participation. It is only at this point that we will be in a position to undertake a more concrete assessment of the wide variety of participatory budgeting processes in Europe without risking getting lost in the almost infinite number of local shapes it may take.