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By the People, For the People: Participatory Budgeting from the Bottom Up in North America

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Abstract

In the pilot year of Participatory Budgeting in New York City, around 8,000 people decided how to spend almost $6 million across four city districts. After years advocating for participatory budgeting (PB) in the US, our organization - The Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP) - served as lead technical assistance partner. In this article, we share some of the lessons learned from our work in New York and other North American cities. Two main concerns have haunted PB in the US (and elsewhere) - that it will only attract the "usual suspects" and that it will merely be a token effort. We argue for tackling these challenges by crafting PB around four key principles - strategic funds, grassroots leaders, accessible design, and targeted outreach. Through this bottom-up approach, PB can better achieve its potential to transform democracy and build social justice - in North America and beyond.

Keywords

participatory democracy, New York, Chicago, Canada, participatory budgeting, community organizing

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The humble Windsor Terrace Library may have never been so popular as on March 31, 2012. From morning to afternoon, hundreds of Bangladeshi immigrants, Hasidic Jews, and other locals waited up to an hour in a line snaking through the library. All to decide how to spend over $1 million on improvements to their schools, streets, parks, and public spaces – and to practice what *The NY Times* called "revolutionary civics."[1]

In the pilot year of Participatory Budgeting in New York City, around 8,000 people decided how to spend almost $6 million across four city districts. After years advocating for PB in the US, our organization – The Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP) – served as lead technical assistance partner. In this article, we share some of the lessons learned from our work in New York and other North American cities.

Two main concerns have haunted PB in the US (and elsewhere) – that it will only attract the "usual suspects" and that it will merely be a token effort. We argue for tackling these challenges by crafting PB around four key principles – strategic funds, grassroots leaders, accessible design, and targeted outreach. Through this bottom-up approach, PB can better achieve its potential to transform democracy and build social justice, in North America and beyond.

Democracy in America?

"Sounds interesting, but that wouldn't work here." Discussions about participatory budgeting in the US have usually ended with this line. PB might work in Brazil, but in the US, skeptics have worried that it would never engage the poor or win control over real money. Yet starting with a $1.3 million experiment in Chicago in 2010, PB in the US has spread to three processes in 2012, in which residents are deciding how to spend almost $20 million. These modest first steps resulted from a decade of organizing by PBP, and our members and allies.

Starting in the early 2000s, members of PBP supported the first wave of PB in North America, in Canada.[2] In 2001, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation launched a $9 million per year process for its public housing tenants. Around the same time, the Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition began using PB to engage grassroots neighborhood groups in collective budgeting. In 2006, the Plateau Borough in Montreal experimented with a district-level process for up to $1.5 million per year.

While engaging with these Canadian initiatives, we began to build an organization

[1] Sangha, 2012
[2] Lerner, 2006.

to promote the spread of PB in North America. After connecting to organize a session on PB in the Global North at the 2005 World Social Forum, several of our members launched a resource website (ParticipatoryBudgeting.org) and listserv. Over the next three years, we worked with a growing group of activists to organize conference sessions and workshops, publish articles, and advocate for PB in the region.

This organizing paid off in 2009, when Chicago Alderman Joe Moore volunteered to become the first elected official in the US to try PB.[3] He learned about the concept at the 2007 US Social Forum, at two workshops that we organized. With support from The Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, DC, we worked with Moore to develop the first PB process in the US, in which the residents of his ward decided how to spend $1.3 million of his ward's discretionary funds. At the same time, Toronto Community Housing contracted us to lead a participatory evaluation of its PB process.

To build capacity for the Chicago and Toronto work, we launched PBP in 2009, and then incorporated as a non-profit organization in 2011. Based in New York, we work to empower community members to make informed, democratic, and fair decisions about public spending and revenue, primarily in the US and Canada.

We pursue this goal through three main program areas: *Public Education* (talks, workshops, publications, and an annual conference), *Technical Assistance* to governments, institutions, and organizations working to develop PB processes (such as support to design the process, build community partnerships, and prepare educational materials), and *Research and Evaluation* of existing and emerging PB processes (including feasibility studies, development of evaluation frameworks and tools, and facilitation of evaluation workshops and participatory evaluations).

While getting our organizational feet on the ground, we sought to raise awareness of the Chicago PB experiment, and explore pathways for expansion in the US. In 2010, we worked with allies at Pratt Institute and the grassroots group Community Voices Heard (CVH) to organize two speaking events for Moore in New York. These discussions soon inspired four New York City Council Members – Brad Lander, Melissa Mark-Viverito, Jumaane D. Williams and Eric Ulrich – to launch a PB process for their own discretionary resources. Since then, we have worked with CVH and dozens of partners around the city to implement Participatory Budgeting in New York City (PBNYC), the largest PB process in the US to date.

PB gained a foothold in the US by starting with an atypical pot of money – sub-

[3] Lerner and Wade Antieau, 2010.

municipal budgets controlled by individual elected officials. This strategy has proved contagious, because it allows interested officials to start PB without securing broader political support – PBNYC is growing from four to eight districts in its second year, and we are expanding PB in Chicago from one ward to four. Success with these smaller budgets has quickly led to interest at the (more typical) municipal level. In 2012, City Council in Vallejo, California, approved the first city-wide PB process, with PBP serving as lead partner. We are also collaborating with officials and organizers in over a dozen other cities in the US and Canada to develop new processes.

In response to the skeptics that we first encountered when advocating for PB, we have shown that deeper democracy can even work in the US. But in a sense, the skeptics were right. PB does not automatically live up to its often-romanticized ideal as a transformative social justice project. The experience in Chicago's 49th Ward illustrates two main reasons why.

First, poor people in developed countries do not necessarily turn out in droves to discuss basic infrastructure. Street paving may be a top concern in the *favelas* of Brazil, but low-income people in the US are usually more worried about issues such as jobs, safety, and housing. PB participation in Chicago's 49th Ward has been no more representative of the community than turnout in typical local elections. In other words, participants have been disproportionately white and more affluent.

Second, small-scale PB initiatives do not necessarily transform government more broadly – they may not grow beyond token local efforts. PB has spread widely in the UK, for example, but citizens are often only able to allocate a few thousand pounds. Even after Chicago's 49th Ward PB had completed three cycles, there were no significant local efforts to expand the process to new wards or budget funds – a potential danger of starting with hyper-local budgets. (Since then, however, PBP has partnered with the Great Cities Institute to develop a broader process.)

We have faced both challenges in each of our projects, and we are continually asked to address them. Over the years, we have devised a few tentative answers.

Transformation by Design

PB can be designed to be more or less transformative and inclusive. We have found these two issues to be deeply intertwined, and best addressed in tandem. If PB engages more poor people, it is more likely to transform power relations. And if it is structured as a deeply transformative process, it is more likely to interest

poor people. In our experience, four main strategies can help address these challenges, each one paving the way for the others.

1) Strategic Funds

Do PB with money that matters to low-income people. Although PB can work with any pot of public money – and community control over any public funds should be applauded – certain pots are of more interest to low-income communities. Money for housing, jobs, and schools has attracted more interest from low-income people than money for street or park improvements. More generally, operating or program funds tend to be more interesting than capital funds. And of course, more money gets more attention – we have used one million dollars as a minimum threshold to initiate the process.

We saw how much the pot of money matters in our work with Toronto Community Housing and Chicago's 49 ward. In Toronto, PB started with funds for public housing improvements, which are overwhelmingly for low-income people. As a natural result, the majority of participants are low-income, and PB has empowered those with the least power in the city. Because the housing authority put $9 million on the table each year, the process carried more weight.

In Chicago, the available discretionary funds were only $1.3 million per ward, and they could only be used on a limited range of capital infrastructure improvements. When community organizations working with low-income and marginalized groups learned of these restrictions, several of them opted out, because the funds could not address the main needs of the communities they serve. These organizations' early apathy toward the process has limited the engagement of marginalized communities ever since.

PBNYC has fallen somewhere in the middle. Council Members have capital and program funds, but have only dedicated capital funds to PB so far. Unlike in Chicago, however, the NYC capital funds are often used for public housing and schools, which has fueled more grassroots interest. And while each district has only pledged a minimum of $1 million, the total ($6 million in year one, $10 million in year two) sounds more impressive.

2) Grassroots Leaders

Empower community members – especially the most marginalized – to design and lead PB. Typically, elected officials and city staff decide the rules of PB and are responsible for implementation. Community members are sometimes called on to revise the process, but rarely to shape it in the first place. For PB to more deeply transform government, citizens must have the power to write the rules of the game

from the start. And for PB to more deeply engage those who are usually left out, these groups should be invited to lead the process.

In New York and Chicago, we made PB participatory from the beginning by bringing together a local Steering Committee to design the process. In Chicago, this group included organizations and volunteers in the 49th Ward. In New York, the Steering Committee brought together representatives of each participating district and organizations focused on good government, research, policy, community education, and organizing. We guided the Steering Committee through workshops to map out the PB cycle, decide its rules, and agree on roles and responsibilities. Through games, exercises, and small group discussions, participants drafted the basic structure and rules, which we then formalized in a Rulebook.

To inspire even more local ownership over PB in New York, we established a District Committee in each participating district. Composed of volunteers from local organizations, institutions, and Community Boards, the District Committees were tasked with managing PB locally. Working with Council Member staff, they planned and ran the neighborhood assemblies, facilitated budget delegate committees, and coordinated the vote. They also developed and implemented outreach plans, to engage more people in PB.

These multiple levels of decision-making opened up more opportunities for leadership development. In one New York district, local leadership was so strong that it kept PB going – scheduling and running meetings, doing outreach, facilitating budget delegate work – even when the Council Member office was left without any staff coordinator for most of the process.

At the end of the PB cycle, we coordinated evaluation workshops, in which participants reflected on what worked well and what needed improvement. The Steering Committee then reviewed this feedback and adjusted the process based on the lessons learned. Giving community leaders – at both the district and city-wide level – real power over the process fueled more interest and investment in PB. It also transformed local governance, as elected officials, city staff, non-profit organizations, grassroots groups, and individual citizens worked together to design and implement a new political process.

Grassroots leadership does not, however, guarantee inclusive participation. Political participation in North America is not neutral – whites and more affluent people tend to turnout more. To level the playing field, we have tried to especially recruit leaders who are already mobilizing marginalized communities. In Chicago, we began by engaging several non-profit organizations that worked with low-income residents. But over the following years, the Steering Committee ended up

being led by the "usual suspects" – primarily people who were homeowners, white, and middle to upper class. Without support funding or a say over money that mattered most to their constituents, the non-profits who had the strongest relationships with low-income communities scaled back their involvement.

This impeded the participation of low-income people in two ways. First, it created the perception that PB was business as usual – a space where those with the most power continued to dominate, rather than an opportunity for marginalized groups to make their voices heard. Second, because the process was not designed with low-income people in mind, it was often not so accessible for them, as we will discuss below.

Our experience in New York has been different. The larger and more flexible pot of money allocated through PB made the process more interesting to larger grassroots groups, and made it easier (though by no means easy!) to raise support funds for organizing. Securing the participation of Community Voices Heard (CVH) as lead community engagement partner was critical. A non-profit with a long history of organizing low-income women of color and a previous commitment to PB, CVH ensured that its members and allies played a lead role throughout the process, always putting the needs of marginalized communities front and center.

3) Accessible Design

Design the PB process to reduce the obstacles to participation and to make participation more appealing. Our work in Toronto, Chicago and New York has shown us several ways that process design can boost the participation of marginalized groups.

Scheduling: Low-income people are often more reliant on public transportation and less likely to travel far for a meeting. Holding assemblies in diverse locations – ideally so that everyone is within walking distance – and near public transit reduces transportation obstacles. Youth and seniors are less able to attend evening meetings, so scheduling assemblies and voting at diverse times – including during the day and on weekends – lets more of them fit PB into their plans. Organizing meetings around events that marginalized groups already attend can also help. In New York, some of the assemblies that attracted the most low-income participation were held after services in a religious institution, during an immigrant cultural event, and after school in the school building. In Chicago, the most diverse voter turnout came at mobile voting stands at train stations, during rush hour.

Amenities: Interpretation and translation – or hosting specific non-English

language events – are essential to engaging many immigrant populations. Providing childcare decreases the costs of participation for families who would otherwise struggle to take time out or to pay for childcare. Serving food provides an extra incentive to participate, especially for low-income people. The New York districts that provided these amenities had higher turnout from immigrant groups, low-income people, and people of color.

Facilitation: Even when marginalized residents show up at assemblies, their voices are often drowned out by more privileged citizens. Skilled facilitators can help level the deliberative playing field, encouraging silent voices to speak and loud voices to listen. But not all cities and neighborhoods have a surplus of experienced volunteer facilitators. In New York, we found that the quality of facilitation depended on the resources of the district, and districts with little organizational infrastructure were often left with novice facilitators. Without funding, it is difficult to recruit and maintain experienced facilitators.

Safe Spaces: In Chicago and New York, organizers have successfully engaged some target populations by creating special spaces for their participation. After failing to reach many Latinos, Chicago organizers planned a special voting day at a church catering to the Latino community. Some districts in New York held special assemblies for youth, seniors, and immigrant populations, and created delegate committees for these groups to specifically work on projects that interested them. In districts that organized these special events and committees, marginalized populations participated at higher rates.

Make it Fun: Integrating games and cultural activities into PB can make participation more enjoyable. We included trivia games and music in assemblies in New York. Participatory video-making helped engage youth in some of the districts. Encouraging delegates to make creative project displays increased their energy levels, and one district attracted its largest assembly crowd by holding the event after a school concert.

4) Targeted Outreach

Focus outreach efforts on traditionally underrepresented populations.

Even when PB is designed to be accessible, marginalized residents will only participate if they are invited. And then invited again, and again. The 49th Ward PB struggled to engage low-income people, people of color, immigrants, and youth. These populations participated some when they were directly recruited, but this did not happen often.

In New York, CVH worked with the Council Member offices to develop targeted outreach plans and hire special canvassers to focus outreach on key

underrepresented communities. Teams of volunteers and canvassers then dedicated hundreds of hours phone banking, door knocking, flyering, meeting with local groups, and using other tactics to engage low-income New Yorkers, public housing residents, and immigrant populations in each district.

This work proved invaluable, as targeted populations turned out to vote in PB at higher rates than in the local elections. For example, in District 8, where targeted outreach focused on public housing tenants, 22% of PB voters had household income less than $10,000, compared to 4% of the district's voters in the 2009 City Council election.[4]

Unfortunately, there were only enough resources to focus on one main population in each district. Which brings us back to the snaking line of voters at the Windsor Terrace Library. This district – the 39th – focused its targeted outreach on a small but distressingly poor Bangladeshi community. The outreach worked, as Bangladeshis turned out in droves. Yet while 10% of voters cast ballots in the Bangla language, less than 1% cast ballots in Spanish – even though the district is home to many more Latinos than Bangladeshis.

With greater resources, targeted outreach could have better engaged marginalized groups. Yet even with limited funds, we were able to build a bottom-up PB process, one that has effectively engaged some low-income communities and that is growing in size. We have begun to establish PB in the US as a transformative social justice project by starting with money that matters to low-income groups, by empowering grassroots groups to lead the process, by making participation more accessible, and by targeting outreach on underrepresented communities. Each step helps pave the way for the following – starting with money that is substantial and relevant to low-income communities makes it easier to attract grassroots groups to lead the process, which in turn generates more interest in accessible design and targeted outreach.

It took a decade of organizing to come this far, and many challenges remain. But hopefully the wait will be worthwhile, in Windsor Terrace and at libraries across North America.

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[4] All data from Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center, 2012.

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