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Review of Everyone Counts: Could Participatory Budgeting Change Democracy by Josh Lerner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014) and Making Democracy Fun: How Game Design Can Empower Citizens and Transform Politics by Josh Lerner (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

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Abstract

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Keywords

Josh Lerner, Executive Director of the Participatory Budgeting Project, has recently published two books that are meant to educate and excite readers about citizen engagement and democracy in an era when both are deeply flawed. The books mostly tackle the growing movement of participatory budgeting, a practice that brings together citizens in their towns and cities to discuss, debate, and vote for the infrastructure projects that are best suited to their communities. The value of participatory budgeting, according to its advocates, lies in the ability to engage citizens in democratic procedures, while also educating them about the tough spending choices that communities need to make. Both books are sound contributions to our understanding of participatory budgeting specifically and other participatory institutions more generally.

In the first book, *Everyone Counts: Could Participatory Budgeting Change Democracy?,* Lerner provides a succinct and highly readable account of participatory budgeting. Lerner wrote the piece after winning the Laurence and Lynne Brown Democracy Medal, an award which recognizes individuals who undertake innovative ways of deepening democracy. In this essay, Lerner details his own introduction to participatory budgeting—which first emerged in Porto Alegre, Brazil and now exists in thousands of cities around the world—and his non-profit organization's efforts to diffuse it around North America. In detailing his experiences, he also teaches the reader about many of the benefits of participatory budgeting, its history, and why he is passionate about teaching others about the process.

Considering how rapidly participatory budgeting is spreading around the world, this book solves an important problem: How do we briefly explain this idea to the average reader without going too deeply into the technical details? This very quick read will be useful to anyone who wants to learn more about participatory budgeting as well as those of us who teach about participatory governance and/or institutions. This reader proves to be the sort of resource that can be used in the classroom—and beyond—to get people thinking about direct participatory experiences. It is highly accessible; both undergraduate and graduate students would benefit from reading it. Advocates of participatory innovations will also find it useful for helping educate their own support base and/or their community partners.

His second book—which is much more comprehensive—moves beyond the particular institution of participatory budgeting to a discussion of how we can make the practice of democracy more, well, *fun. Making Democracy Fun: How Game Design can Empower Citizens and Transform Politics* is a unique contribution to the literatures on democracy, deliberation, and community

engagement. Noting that community meetings and deliberative forums can often get tiresome and long, and sometimes lead to frustration and burnout, Lerner advocates for incorporating game design into these events. In other words, Lerner argues that making these meetings more engaging and entertaining will enhance their long-term success.

The book weaves together the literatures on democratic engagement, deliberative democracy, game design, and play to make the argument that democratic practices could benefit from "designing participation like a game." He encourages us to ask ourselves: why not incorporate puzzles or theater into the participatory budgeting process? Lerner documents several examples of games that he witnessed around the world through his research and work. For instance, in Rosario, the third largest city in Argentina, children were invited to imagine the city of their dreams. City officials also invited them to play in spaces where they learned about utopias and democracy. This program eventually led to radio shows, monuments, and public service efforts—all including and initiated by engaged youth.

After describing these efforts, Lerner then explores his own attempts to incorporate games into participatory processes. In 2009, Lerner worked with residents and officials in Toronto Community Housing to conduct a participatory evaluation of the participatory budgeting practices in this agency. Lerner incorporated games into many aspects of the process, from the better-known matching puzzles, Jeopardy, and speed dating, to his own games called "Help Sheila" and "What Changed?" For example, the people participating in the evaluation played "Help Sheila" when debriefing the day's work. He writes, "I put an empty chair at the front of the room and pointed to it. 'This,' I announced 'is Sheila.'…I explained that Sheila was nervous about the research and desperate for advice, and asked if the tenants could share a few suggestions and lessons learned" (180).

While one might worry that this game playing could come off as condescending or paternalistic, after reading the book these concerns are assuaged. Lerner himself is incredibly open and honest about the shortcomings of these efforts as well. For example, he and his team were often interrupted during games when other groups needed their rooms. Lerner notes that this is common when "working with cash strapped agencies" (177). During a speed dating exercise, the team noticed that older participants and non-English speakers struggled to keep up the fast pace. There are as many lessons learned as success stories in this book.

Lerner is careful to note that the success of these games depends on how well they incorporate game mechanics, which are very carefully outlined in Chapter Three. Professionals who develop games have certain principles that guide their efforts. One is that successful games will involve conflict, which "creates dramatic tension and challenges," as well as collaboration (54). A second is rules – all games must have internal structures that dictate the play. Third, there must be an outcome defined by clear goals and objectives. Usually this is winning, but not always. Finally, a successful game must be engaging and rewarding. It can be "aesthetically pleasing, emotionally gripping, or intellectually stimulating" (72).

Lerner's arguments and his description of his own experiences woven into this book are refreshing, insightful, thorough, and entertaining. However, one might read the book and end up paralyzed. The complicated nature of designing successful games combined with his honesty about how hard they are to implement might hinder the reader's desire and ability to implement his suggestions. Does it have to be this hard to "make democracy fun"? To overcome this, it might be beneficial to include some very specific "how-tos" for those readers who want to avoid the occasional tedium of participatory institutions. One could imagine a companion website with some very practical tips for people to use (in a multitude of languages, of course). This might help readers feel like they too can achieve these goals.

In sum, these books make useful—albeit distinct—contributions to our knowledge of participatory governance. *Everyone Counts* provides a short introduction to participatory budgeting that will help educate people about this practice. While most of the discussion in *Making Democracy Fun* centers around participatory budgeting, its themes are transferable to most deliberative or participatory projects. It will be of interest to some scholars of participatory governance and democracy, while also very useful to practitioners who are looking for ways to engage citizens in policy decisions. Both pieces reflect Lerner's passion for trying to improve democracy in this era of disenchantment.