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DIALOGUES WITHOUT BORDERS

Youth Participatory Budgeting in the Americas *Research Report*

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OVERVIEW¹

Opportunities for young people to participate in local governance have blossomed in the past fifteen years. Many scholars and policy-makers from around the world praise these innovations as vital sites for the development of democratic citizens. However, while these local programs for youth participation encourage civic-political learning and skill development, some research argues that they too often fail to give youth meaningful power, positioning them only as citizens-in-the-making, rather than citizens-in-the-present.

Young people regularly experience versions of political democratic participation that are “tokenistic, unrepresentative

in membership, adult-led in process, and ineffective in acting upon what children want.”² This is especially true of programs for youth consultation, such as children’s and youth councils, in which young people are asked for their opinions, but frequently feel unheard or ignored by decision-makers.³ One potentially innovative alternative to the consultative model, and to youth civic engagement programs that merely “train” youth for future political participation (such as mock voting), can be found in youth participatory budgeting. A democratic and deliberative process where young people make real and binding decisions about the use of city or school funds, youth participatory budgeting programs are being developed and implemented in large and small cities around the world, including Boston, Lima, Buenos Aires, Belo Horizonte, Lisbon, and Newcastle (England).

¹ The authors also thank Ginny Browne of the Participatory Budgeting Project for sharing some of the information presented in this report.

² John Davis and Malcolm Hill, “Introduction,” in *Children, Young People and Social Inclusion: Participation for What?*, ed. E. Kay M. Tisdall et al. (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2006), 6.

³ Hugh Matthews, “Citizenship, Youth Councils and Young People’s Participation,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 4, no. 3 (2001): 299–318; Michael Wyness, “Children Representing Children: Participation and the Problem of Diversity in UK Youth Councils,” *Childhood* 16, no. 4 (2009): 535–52; Jessica K. Taft and Hava R. Gordon, “Youth Activists, Youth Councils, and Constrained Democracy,” *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 87–100.

What is Youth Participatory Budgeting?

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a deliberative process in which communities decide how to spend some portion of a public budget. It aims to engage community members in multiple ways in the development and selection of projects that will be executed with public funding. It is a model for direct and participatory democracy that was created first in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989 and has since expanded to over 1500 cities, towns, or regions worldwide.⁴ While there is substantial variation in exactly how participatory budgeting operates, a common approach uses the following general steps in an annual budgeting cycle:

1. Community members engage in brainstorming and idea generation for possible ways to spend the designated funds.
2. A smaller group of volunteer community members develops the ideas into more specific and feasible proposals through research and dialogue.
3. The entire community (whether it be a school, neighborhood, or city) votes on the proposals, determining which will be funded in a given year.
4. The government or public institution implements the community-selected projects.

Youth inclusion in participatory budgeting can take a variety of different forms. Some processes simply include youth as part of the larger community, either by not setting minimum ages for participation in some phases of the process or by setting minimum ages that allow older children and youth to participate. For example, Cambridge, Massachusetts allows children as young as 12 to vote on budget proposals and does not have an age limit for participation in the other phases, and the PB process in Oakland, California has no minimum voting age.⁵ Within these processes, which we identify as “youth-inclusive PB,” a substantial subset create specific spaces where youth voice is meant to be amplified, such as youth committees within the proposal development phase or explicit idea generation activities with youth-serving organizations. This is distinct from those processes or sub-processes where *all* of the decision-making participants are young people, or what we refer to here as “youth PB.” Youth PB processes, in our definition, are those that have been designed such that young people are the entirety of the population making the decisions on at least some portion of a public budget.⁶ These may be tied to municipal or neighborhood budgets or located within schools or school districts.

⁴ Yves Cabannes, “Basic Tools for Navigating the World of Participatory Budgeting,” in *Participatory Budgeting*, ed. Yves Cabannes and Cecilia Delgado, *Another City Is Possible: Alternatives to the City as Commodity 1* (Lisbon, 2014), 23.

⁵ Many PB processes also include non-citizens as full participants; one does not have to be a registered voter to be part of the PB process, including the voting.

⁶ While we are able to identify the age range of youth who are invited to be part of a given process, there is minimal information available on the demographics (age, gender, race, class, etc.) of which young people are actually participating in each of these processes. This is one of many areas where further research is needed.

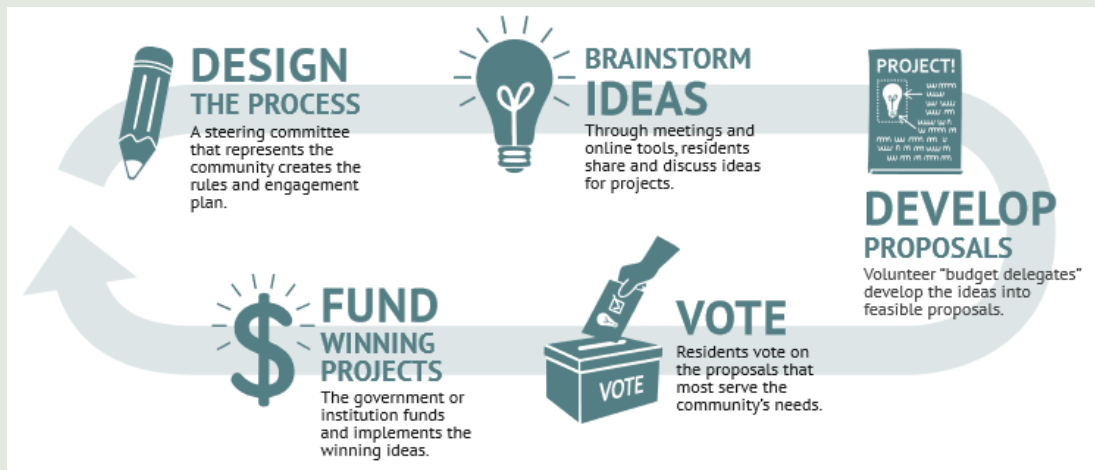


Image courtesy of the Participatory Budgeting Project.

Building A Youth PB Database

While there are a handful of articles and reports that document individual cases of youth PB, there is little information on the larger landscape of this work. However, Yves Cabannes, an expert in the field, estimates that there are somewhere between one and two hundred youth PB processes happening in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁷ The [Participatory Budgeting Project](#), a non-profit working to support the development of PB in the United States and Canada, has also identified approximately fifteen cases of youth PB in these countries. In order to begin to gather and consolidate information on some of the patterns in youth PB, we decided to create a database of these youth PB processes in the Americas. While we may expand our assessment to youth-inclusive PB in the future, we decided to start by focusing just on those processes made up entirely of young people.

We began to build this database by starting with some of the most well-known and well-documented cases, and then building out from there by consulting with academic and professional experts and doing extensive online searching for news stories, reports, or municipal documents. We used a combination of search terms for youth, children, adolescents, teens, students, schools, and participatory budgeting in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. We also followed out any leads referring to other examples of youth participation in PB. While several of the North American cases and processes were well-documented on dedicated websites, much of the information on youth PB in Latin America was gathered from governmental press releases, local newspaper articles inviting people to attend PB meetings, and other more ephemeral sources. The database continues to grow as we encounter new information and examples, and we invite anyone with knowledge of any cases of this work to get in touch with us. However, while our information is certainly still partial, with a total of 46 cases at this time, it provides an emerging picture of the diversity and range of some of the most visible types of youth participatory budgeting processes.

⁷ Personal communication with co-author Jessica Taft, May 31, 2018.

WHAT DOES THE YOUTH PB DATABASE TELL US?

Diffusion and expansion across the Americas.

Youth Participatory Budgeting, like Participatory Budgeting in general, first developed in Brazil and has spread throughout Latin America and the rest of the world.⁸ The city of Barra Mansa, Brazil is regularly cited as the first municipality to engage children and youth in their own separate participatory budgeting process, beginning this work in 1997. Looking at the initiation dates for the forty programs in our database, we find several other programs created in Brazil in the early 2000s. Following on these experiences, approximately one new program was created in Latin America each year from 2004-2010. The first youth-oriented PB program in the United States appeared in 2013 in Boston. Since that time, youth PB has undergone a rapid expansion throughout the hemisphere, with at least twenty new processes developed in the past five years. Many of these newest processes are in Argentina where they have been supported by a national conference and government initiative to expand youth PB, and inspired by the very successful example of Rosario, which began its youth PB process in 2004 and has involved as many as 28,000 youth in a given year. In addition to this significant growth in Argentina, several new youth PB programs have been created in the United States, as well as Mexico, El Salvador, Ecuador, Brazil, and Peru.

Substantial diversity in terms of budget, size, and age of participants.

One of the most notable differences between PB and other forms of youth civic engagement is that young people get to make actual decisions, rather than simply be consulted for their opinions. However, the impact of those decisions, and young people's sense that these decisions are important, is at least partially (but certainly not entirely) influenced by the size of the budget, or the amount of money that they control in this process. Looking across the cases we have gathered so far, we find budgets ranging from a few thousand US dollars to a million US dollars, with many sitting near an equivalent of one hundred to two hundred thousand US dollars.

Similarly, we find significant diversity in the total number of youth participants. Some cities primarily involve young people as representatives of their peers, but do not engage a larger population of youth at any stage. Others have substantial preliminary involvement of youth via large idea collection assemblies and open voting processes that include entire schools or communities. The processes with the highest numbers of participants are all those that organize the final voting through the school system, making it much easier for young people to vote on the proposals.

While we don't have complete information on the age ranges of all processes in our database, we do have several examples of processes that include primary school children as young as five years old. Those processes that tend to include children this young are often implemented through schools, including primary or elementary schools, and usually have an upper limit around fifteen or sixteen at the oldest. On the other end of continuum, some processes that identify themselves as being "youth" processes, or as a "*presupuesto participativo joven*," involve any community member under the age of thirty. This is more common in Latin America where the idea of *juventud* is a more expansive category than is typically associated with youth in the English-speaking world. However, even in the United States, several "youth" processes have involved people up to the age of twenty-five. Finally, we have

⁸ Many PB and Youth PB processes exist beyond the Americas, but our research database focuses just on this region.

also identified multiple examples of participatory budgeting in universities, where participants are mostly, but not entirely, young adults. It is important to acknowledge this substantial range for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, there is a significant difference in the context of participation for those who are below the age of majority, and thus usually have much more partial and limited access to political authority and representation. Meanwhile, for the implementation and improvement of youth PB, what works with seven year olds may be quite different from what works for those in their twenties.

Common challenges in youth PB.

Reading the wide-ranging material on youth PB processes across the Americas, we identified several commonly referenced challenges for the effectiveness of these programs as sites for meaningful democratic power and authority. First, many documents complain about the slow, inefficient process of project implementation, noting that governments don't often act as quickly as PB participants would like to enact the community's proposed projects. For young people, this may be particularly frustrating as they expect more immediate action in response to their concerns and have a distinct sense of time and urgency in relation to their status as youth. Second, we noted significant discontinuities in many youth PB processes, with processes appearing and disappearing quickly in relation to changes in local political leadership or school administration.

If such processes are going to have long-term impacts for either individuals or communities, they will need to be better institutionalized and maintained across time. Third, we found many examples of discursive enthusiasm about youth PB from politicians, but less evidence of substantive institutional investment in developing and maintaining these processes. Youth PB appears to give politicians an opportunity to proclaim their support for young people and their democratic engagement, but its effects can be overstated when this enthusiasm is not accompanied by the necessary staff support, training, or programmatic development required to make youth engagement meaningful.

Future Research

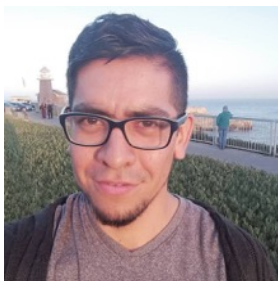
As with much other work in the field of youth civic engagement, there is a tendency to assume that youth PB is inevitably and always beneficial for both young people and democracy. While we believe that such processes certainly have substantial potential to enhance young people's political power and to produce more just and equitable communities, we also note a need for further scholarship to explore these questions empirically. Indeed, the challenges listed above suggest that it could also be



Boston youth PB participants promoting the process. Photo courtesy of Participatory Budgeting Project.

possible that youth PB processes, if they do not effectively implement young people's ideas, could decrease young people's participation in formal governance and state-based politics. And if young people experience the state as ineffective and inefficient, how might this dovetail with and support the ongoing neoliberal project of hollowing out the state? If the outcomes and possibilities of youth PB processes feel too constrained by adult politicians and policy-makers, do youth give up on political action completely or do they direct their political energies into other contexts? And, importantly, what factors shape the likelihood of a youth PB process being experienced by youth participants as impactful and beneficial for their communities? These are questions to which we do not yet have answers, but future research that expands the database, that surveys youth participants in a diversity of PB processes, and that generates in-depth ethnographic case studies is vital to understanding and amplifying young people's political power in their schools and communities.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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