

Re-Engaging the Disenfranchised: Participatory Budgeting in the United States

Review of *Democracy Reinvented:
Participatory Budgeting and Civic
Innovation in America*, Brookings
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BY CELINA SU

Corin Mills, a young man from New York City, was not always confident in his ability to complete long-term projects, let alone attend college. He had dropped out of high school and served a brief jail sentence. Then, through an organization called Getting Out Staying Out, Mills became involved in participatory budgeting (PB)—a process in which community members, rather than elected officials, allocate public funds. Mills vetted project ideas pitched by his neighbors, and helped to develop a proposal for a mobile laptop lab to be shared by nine public schools. When his proposal won \$450,000, Mills built upon his new skills and accomplishment to apply to and attend college; he even launched a successful scholarship crowdfunding campaign that movingly related his struggles.

These sorts of budget allocations—grants to add a computer lab to a library branch, a meal program for senior citizens at a public housing project, or a new gazebo at a park—are typically made behind closed doors. Depending on where we live, Boards of Supervisors, City Managers, or Councilmembers might make their best guesses at what their constituents want, work with the city agencies they know best, or allocate funds to the residents who have the time, means, and temerity to complain the loudest.

But in PB, community members control a portion of public funds. They know where the money will go, and why. In New York City, where Corin Mills participated, City Councilmembers allocated \$38 million to the process this year. (Full disclosure,

I have served on the New York's PB steering committee since its inception in 2011.)

Further, a lot more than \$38 million is at stake. Americans across the political spectrum are deeply distrustful of our government's ability to reflect our wishes, respect our rights, and meet our basic needs. With continued austerity cuts, it sometimes feels as if there will soon be no more metro services to cut, no more teachers to lay off. It's little surprise that Americans continue to vote at abysmally low rates, and express historically low levels of trust in governmental institutions.

In this context, experiments like PB can change how Americans critically engage in our democracy. Hollie Russon Gilman's new book, *Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America*, begins to analyze just how this might happen, by focusing on the early years of PB in the United States.

Gilman's attention to the topic is prescient. PB's popularity has grown enormously in the past three decades, and it is poised to continue to grow. PB first began in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989, after the fall of a military dictatorship, with strong civil society organizations ready to engage. PB was part of a substantive restructuring of government, aimed at not just engaging citizens, but rendering the government more accountable to citizens and redistributing public expenditures. PB has spread to more than 3,000 cities across the globe.

PB arrived stateside in 2009, when a single Chicago Alderman, Joe Moore, devoted part of his ward's discretionary funds to the process. Since then, it has spread across the country; there are currently 18 city-based PB processes in the US. Further, the Obama Administration announced it to be a cornerstone to its Open Government initiative, and Housing and Urban Development has declared it a best practice.

Democracy Reinvented highlights practical implications that speak to both researchers and practitioners. Gilman frames PB as a response to a specific problem in local governance, reviews how it arrived in the United States, and then draws upon fieldwork conducted in New York (during its inaugural year, in 2011–2012) and Boston (in 2014) to outline key contours of American PB thus far. Namely, she delves into patterns of participation, deliberation, and innovation in the case studies, to delineate her view of their main strengths, challenges, and implications.

Gilman's discussion of how PB arrived in New York emphasizes its City Council history, including criticisms against the Council's corruption and lack of transparency, confusing overlapping layers of jurisdiction (i.e., vis-à-vis community boards), and recent reforms to make discretionary funding more equitable across districts. She argues that in this context, PB has become part of "good governance agenda that brings mechanisms of greater transparency, participation, and accountability to government." (p. 55)

Civic Rewards

According to Gilman, PB's central strength lies in its civic rewards, including greater knowledge about local government, direct contact with government officials, a sense of community and "democratic ideal," and leadership development. Notably, these civic rewards outstrip even the outcomes themselves—say, a new technology upgrade in a local school—as drivers and motivators for civic engagement. Further, PB manages to engage not just "usual suspects" or somewhat engaged, already "active citizens," but also "new citizens" virtually wholly unfamiliar with governance and policy-making.

Gilman's findings dovetail well with those of the New York City research board (of which I am a member), led and coordinated by the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center and reported by A. Kasdan and E. Markman. In 2015, the board collected 22,000 and analyzed a random sample of 7,420 surveys. In typical elections, higher-income populations vote at much higher rates, and Asian Americans and Latinos vote at lower rates. In PB, nearly 60% of voters identified as people of color, and nearly 30% reported household incomes of \$25,000 or less. More than a quarter were born outside of the US. Most notably, one-quarter of those surveyed reported barriers to participating in usual elections—most likely as youth, undocumented immigrants, or formerly incarcerated stakeholders.

PB, then, has been especially impressive at expanding notions of stakeholdership, from both the individual's perspective and the community's. From the individual's perspective, folks who did not think their voices mattered before became motivated by a process that would result in binding budget decisions. From the community's perspective, PB enabled large categories of constituents who were previously not seen as political stakeholders, such as youth, to engage in public forums and deliberate community affairs. As Gilman writes, youth were not eligible to vote in New York City during the period she observed. Nevertheless, youth could participate in other ways, pitching ideas for neighborhood assemblies in the fall (justifying specific concerns, grievances, and needs they saw in the community) and acting as budget delegates over the winter (spending hundreds of hours sifting through ideas collected, researching the feasibility and costs of proposals, and helping to select the ones that appear on the ballot in the spring). In 2012, elected officials and steering committee members lowered the eligible voting age after interacting with youth in neighborhood assemblies and as budget delegates. In subsequent years, the eligible voting age lowered to 16, then to 14.

These changes in youth participation speak to the civic rewards Gilman analyzes. They also support her point that these rewards only come from deep participation, embedded in deliberative spaces. This work is time- and labor-intensive, but well worth

it. In the New York PB experience (PBNYC), for instance, the impressive turnout rates (especially by traditionally marginalized groups) were hard won. They were a result of targeted outreach, materials translated into eight languages, targeted neighborhood assemblies (with discussions primarily in Yiddish, Bangla, Spanish, and other languages dominant in individual neighborhoods), and door-knocking. We saw significant variations in turnout among districts, and these variations appear to be at least partly correlated with how many targeted assemblies those districts hosted, and how much in resources were put in.

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Tensions in Implementation and Impact

While PBNYC's track record on civic rewards is quite strong, its impact on other outcomes, such as redistribution of resources, is not as evident just yet. Fittingly, one of the main tensions Gilman raises in PB is that between practicality and innovation in project outcomes. She dubs innovative projects as those that "incorporate communal ingenuity" and go beyond "traditional... local infrastructure needs." (p. 44) She determines that in PBNYC's first year, "practicality triumphed": 62 percent of projects funded were conventional, and 38 percent were innovative. Listing a sample of the latter, she writes, "Though none depart radically from capital projects in previous years, they would not have been implemented without PBNYC." (p. 64) Given the fieldwork Gilman conducted, an expansion of how she came to these conclusions, and what the data looked like, would have been helpful.

The penultimate chapter, on "Civic Innovation in America," contains a section on the potential of information and communications technologies—especially for disseminating information easily to the public, for facilitating peer-to-peer communication

(such as deliberations over project proposals among budget delegates), and for reporting concerns or solutions based upon local knowledge to government. In what can be read as a companion piece on the Brookings Institution blog, "Digital tools enable citizen budgeting," Gilman forwards that digital ballots in New York can "serve as an exemplar for other cities working to modernize and foster citizen-centric government."

But implementing such digital tools is sure to come with hiccups. Indeed, a 2016 ballot usability study by Whitney Quesenbery and Taapsi Ramchandani for the Center for Civic Design suggested that people liked the idea of digital ballots, but paper ones worked better in real polling places. Time-saving benefits of digital ballots, such as scanning technology, came with trade-offs, like limited room for important information like project descriptions. More fundamentally, these ballots have limited reach in a landscape of unequal access to technological infrastructure (such as wifi network hotspots, which vary across polling sites), as well as a real and pervasive digital divide among stakeholders. The ballot usability study's findings echo research coordinated by the Community Development Project and reported by A. Kasdan and colleagues, which found that those who learned about PB via word of mouth were more likely to be lower income. In contrast, those who learned about or engaged with PB online were more likely to be white and higher income. In fact, Gilman herself describes an illustrative, rapid, fourteen-email exchange among budget delegates on competing criteria for projects. This exchange "provided an opportunity for discussion without the pressure and tension of a face-to-face argument," but also risked stifling participation, especially among those less confident in their rapid-fire English-language email composition skills. (p. 103)

As Gilman asserts in her book, "digital tools alone simply cannot replace face-to-face interactions." (p. 151, 153) Our New York experiences suggest that low-tech approaches must take precedence, and digital technologies are most useful when they rely on public infrastructure and ubiquitous technologies (such as SMS, rather than smartphones or wifi-dependent tablets), and accommodate ballots and survey instruments carefully

tailored to fit the local context and speak to diverse populations.

On Power and Equity

Gilman's analysis also raises questions on the power dynamics between different constituencies—of different social classes, racial backgrounds, or neighborhoods—as well as between participants and other stakeholders. For example, what role do private entities, such as third-party vendors in civic tech initiatives like the one above, have? In another example, city agency representatives emerged as simultaneous facilitators and gatekeepers in the process, guiding participants along and helping to determine which project proposals were deemed feasible. Whose needs are ultimately served by the projects? Whose criteria are upheld along the way? Who has the power to shape what projects become normalized (or, as Gilman phrases it, institutionalized) in American PB?

Interviews coordinated by the PBNYC research board, with both participants and city agency representatives, suggest that underlying criteria for what is considered “high need,” “feasible,” or “practical” should not be taken for granted, or as neutral. In fact, they are actively contested. While all of the participants we interviewed appreciated the chance to deliberate with neighbors about community needs, some expressed frustrations about the limits of PBNYC, in both size and scope. In terms of size, they lamented that the pot of money allocated to PB constitutes a miniscule fraction of the city's municipal budget. In terms of scope, some participants stated that the funds' strict eligibility criteria virtually guarantee that the proposed projects looked largely like what the city agencies typically fund, anyway. Together, one interviewee claimed that these limits encouraged him to “think small,” to abandon community priorities such as affordable housing and instead focus on projects he knew would breeze through the selection process. Some city agency representatives, too, stated that they looked towards PB funds as a way to complete existing projects cut back by budget shortfalls. Both government officials and participants also debated PBNYC's decentralized, district-by-district organization, which hampers its economies of scale and redistributive potential.

These testimonies suggest that future studies might further examine issues of not just power, but also political economy in PB—looking at tax revenues and larger-scale inequalities, for instance, as well as budget allocations. Although Gilman does not mention Occupy Wall Street in her book, Occupy and social inequalities overall were frequent topics of conversation at the assemblies I attended during the period of her fieldwork, and the Executive Director of the Participatory Budgeting Project, Josh Lerner, presented to groups such as Occupy Baltimore that year. Much of the deep-seated, public disillusionment with government Gilman discusses is tied with specific critiques to economic and racial inequality in U.S., and to policies that reify these inequalities.

Gilman writes, “[M]y terminology is far removed from the common language used in contemporary American politics, which is much more comfortable with discussions of good governance than discourses on power and civic engagement.” (p. 164) Still, compared to transparency, these tensions and questions regarding power and equity—listed as one of PBNYC's main goals in its rulebook—receive relatively little attention in the book. Thinking back to Gilman's assertion that American PB is part of a good governance agenda of transparency, participation, and accountability, then, there is plenty of evidence regarding the first two agenda items, but the third merits further inquiry. Are PB participants (including youth and undocumented immigrants) being socialized into educated citizens adept at navigating municipal budget processes? Or can they, through PB, address issues of equity and hold government accountable to community-defined needs, as their Brazilian counterparts did?

Conclusion

Ideally, as Gilman argues, “PB fosters opportunities for citizens...to use speech and reason to combat traditional power dynamics.” (p. 23) Her reviews of the theoretical literature consistently emphasize the importance of speech and reason in democratic life, citing Hannah Arendt; throughout the book, she also draws upon Jürgen Habermas's work to frame her analysis. This framework is quite helpful for understanding PB, and Gilman includes a useful

and robust discussion of the importance of strong facilitation in ensuring that fair deliberations take place. Nonetheless, this framework also raises questions of subtle domination by elites. Could such deliberative spaces actually reify traditional power dynamics, benefiting well-organized parent groups or legitimizing *pro forma* decisions by policymakers? In an era of resurgent populism, to what extent are the public's policy preferences shaped by elites, let alone social identities, such as race or gender? When are disagreements necessary or generative, and when are they harmful to the process? These questions merit close examination.

Now that PB has so impressively engaged traditionally disenfranchised constituents like Corin Mills, whose story opened this piece, what conditions are necessary to ensure that PB sparks *further* engagement and bottom-up accountability of government? These questions will only become more urgent as PB continues to gain traction, and they have already received academic notice. Ernesto Ganuza and Gianpaolo Baiocchi argue that PB's communicative dimensions, focused on transparency and "demand-making" in civil society, have traveled well, but that PB's empowerment dimensions—focused on decision-making—have not. Likewise, Archon Fung contends in a recent issue of *Public Administration Review* that recent proliferations in participatory governance advanced effectiveness and legitimacy more than social justice. And in a new book called *Fast Policy*, Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore warn that PB risks becoming "technocratically canned... and marketed for [mass] consumption."

The evidence from the U.S. thus far assures us that American cities are not implementing PB in shallow, cookie cutter ways. Far from it, many are using PB to prompt critical dialogues on how to raise awareness on or tackle large-scale challenges, like affordable housing and environmental justice. In Buffalo, New York, mobilization for a local PB process began when a judicial court found the Tonawanda Coke Corporation to be guilty of violating the Clean Air Act, and local residents impacted by the pollution mobilized to have a say in how resulting fines were spent. Boston and Seattle boast of youth-*led*, not just youth-inclusive, PB

processes, and in Seattle, more than 3,000 youth (ages 11 to 29) allocated more than \$700,000 of funds, choosing to spend almost half of their budget on homeless services, and sending policy-makers a clear message to address local housing issues.

Gilman, for one, is certainly optimistic about PB's potential to "reinvent democracy," as her title suggests. I am as well, with a plea for accompanying mobilization and a focus on racial and economic inequalities. (Notably, as I write this book review, Black Lives Matter has just released its platform of policy demands, and the platform highlights PB as one of its three demands of community control and racial justice.) Peck and Theodore's warning in *Fast Policy* reminds us that a focus on institutionalization, ease of implementation, and replicability must not come at the expense of deep-rooted, context-specific processes. For PB to remain substantive and political, practitioners must maintain vigilant attention to collaborations with existing civil society groups, targeted outreach to marginalized populations, and deep leadership development and participation. Indeed, one of Gilman's strongest points is that there are no short cuts to empowerment and democratic innovation.

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