



Between Policy Promises and Program Implementation

Abstract This chapter raises a concern about participatory budgeting in New York City (PBNYC): in the implementation stage, the city council member is also the program administrator, leading to many of the concerns that this book raises. We detail the theoretical constructs of power, clientelism, interest groups, and the possible role of experts in determining if citizens have real money and real power.

Keywords Implementation · Power · Clientalism · Interest groups

As Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) found almost 50 years ago, a program's promise and design can falter at the implementation stage. Most implementation literature from then to now focuses on the bureaucratic implementation of policies that are, at least nominally, made by a separate legislative body. This reflects the “steering” vs “rowing” metaphor later used in the reinventing government literature (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) as a nudge for privatization, but removed one step, with the legislature steering and the governmental agent rowing. Pressman and Wildavsky suggest that there actually needs to be a much closer relationship between the two, with the policy maker remaining engaged during the implementation stage.

More recent literature continues to treat the role of the policy champion as important (Hendy & Barlow, 2012; McTigue, Rye, & Monios,

2018). Yet, what if the policy maker not only steers, but also rows? How is this related to implementation? With the New York City model of participatory budgeting, implementation is never handed off to the bureaucracy; instead it is made part of the legislative office's function. Can we treat this as a policy or does it remain a political activity? For this project, the following integrates the literature with a set of research topics, looking between the ideal policy promises and the real program implementation of initiatives like participatory budgeting. These themes form a foundation for each of the multiple angles and approaches we take with PBNYC. The methods used in this study are addressed in context in the discussion and summarized in Appendix A.

WHAT PRIMARY IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES DOES PB FOCUS?

To examine this form of implementation in PBNYC, we turn to four concepts that the existence of these processes underscore. Given their important roles for our research design, we conducted this project with each of them in mind.

Power

The overt claim underlying participatory budgeting is that it provides “real power” over “real money” for “real people,” as we’ve described. We can discount the claim of real money, as PB’s relative share of the New York City capital budget is 0.1%. As the capital budget is approximately one half the size of the expense budget, PB’s net share of the total annual expenditure plan is 0.03%. While the gross sum of money, \$1 million per council district, sounds like real money, in the context of New York City’s overall budget, it’s not.

For “real power” we look to meaningful decision-making, similar to what was found in Brazil in the 1990s (Paixão Bretas, 1996; Souza, 2001). Voting seems important, but what is more important is setting the agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1993; Plott & Levine, 1978; Stone, 1980; Walker, 1977) by deciding what is on the ballot. For PB, deciding what to vote about involves several steps: suggesting items in person at meetings, through media such as idea cards, or through an online idea map—this stage is open to everyone interested; validating these items as eligible and clarifying them enough to make them genuine projects—these stages are

shared between volunteer budget delegates, a district participatory budget committee, council staff, and agency personnel; designating a cost for the project (which is managed by agency personnel); and winnowing the set to a manageable number for a ballot, also performed by the delegates and district committee. The steps between validating and winnowing can be iterative.

The term “real people” is vague, so to define it we have looked first to the South American roots of participatory budgeting where substantial resources were redirected from privileged communities to those in need. In early evaluation reports of PBNYC completed by a sponsoring organization, there are assertions such as, “A higher percentage of African Americans participated in neighborhood assemblies (30%), compared to the full population in the eight districts (17%)” (Kasdan et al., 2013, p. 16) and “21% of budget delegates and 19% of PB voters were born outside of the United States” (Kasdan & Cattell, 2012, p. 18). It was also reported that “1 out of 3 neighborhood assembly participants and budget delegates and 44% of PB voters had never worked with others in their community to solve a problem before PB” (Kasdan & Cattell, 2012, p. 18). There are numerous other, similar assertions, which are provided as evidence that PB is doing what’s expected. Thus, we conclude that “real people” refers to the underrepresented, under-engaged, and generally underserved population. As mentioned, the purpose of this project is, quite simply, to see if and how such real people have real power.

Clientelism

It is frequently argued that participatory budgeting exists to negate clientelistic (patronage) practices (Alves, 1990; Assies, 1993; Avritzer, 2010; Bremner, 1998; Wampler, McNulty, & Touchton, 2018). However, there is some evidence that clientelism might be compatible with instantiations of participatory budgeting (Pin, 2017; Wampler & Touchton, 2016). In New York City, voluntarily engaged council members use part of their discretionary funds—funds that exist as a legal form of patronage—to fund participatory budgeting. Thus, we anticipated that we might find evidence that PBNYC will reflect, rather than negate, clientelistic practices.

Interest Groups

Early participatory democracy literature distinguished between participatory practices that focus on the well-being of the population as a whole (frequently using the Rousseauian term, “general will”) and Schumpeterian pluralism focused on defending individual interests (Macpherson, 1980; Pateman, 1975). Yet, there is extensive discussion of coalitions—civil society, new grassroots organizations, etc.—within participatory budgeting (de Sousa Santos, 1998; Souza, 2001; Wampler & Avritzer, 2004). These organizations may sometimes act as interest groups (Wan, 2018). PBNYC was originally organized through the joint effort of council members and civil society groups, although the relationship between these two groups changed with the selection of the most recent previous Speaker of the Council, who was one of the original PB sponsoring council members. Nevertheless, there may be continuing involvement of civil society or new, less formal, groups, or even hidden and offline networks of influence (See Van Duyn, 2018). These groups may contribute to the participatory, democratic well-being of the whole, or they may act as interest groups through such practices as lobbying, which may appear as efforts by advocates to convince others, such as budget delegates or voters, to select their projects; agenda management, which may appear as the use of influence to receive preferential treatment, particularly at the stage of selecting items to appear on participatory budgeting ballots; and vote trading, which can appear in ballot making, where two (or more) sets of advocates agree to support each other’s projects for inclusion on the ballot, and can also appear in the voting process where supporters of two (or more) projects can agree to vote for each other’s projects. These are open questions that require critical insight.

Experts

In the context of participatory budgeting, experts may not always perceive themselves to be experts, but they may bring specific expert information and values into decision-making. Goodsell (2004) argues that the only significant way that governmental experts differ from the population at large is that they overvalue their own programs in comparison with everyone else. As an example, teachers may bring information about classrooms and more highly value education objectives, while thinking of themselves as community members.

Government by expert is part of what participatory practices aim to overcome (Fung, 2006). Yet the desired role of experts is ambiguous and may reflect an expectation of subservience (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014) or some form of joint engagement (Fung & Wright, 2001). An expectation for our research was that experts would be observed and that the role they play could be better understood relative to the question of whether citizens receive real money and real power.

With this background and these implementation issues in mind, we next turn to our research design, methodology, and the first round of observations from this research. Seeing distributions of money and power in action, our most prominent finding concerned a lack of transparency encountered in the citizen experience of PB. We'll outline many of the challenges associated with these findings and for the future of PB.

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