Participatory budgeting and the perception of collective empowerment: institutional design and limited political interference

Sergiu Gherghina[1] · Paul Tap[2] · Sorina Soare[3]

Abstract

Participatory budgeting gains momentum around the world, and increasing evidence provides mixed results about its effects. Under these circumstances, it is unclear if citizens consider it a source of empowerment and an avenue for effective decision-making in the life of their local community. We know very little about how participants in participatory budgeting perceive the collective empowerment. This article seeks to identify the factors that shape these perceptions about the empowerment potential of participatory budgeting. It focuses on the critical case of Cluj-Napoca and uses 25 semi-structured interviews conducted in October–November 2020 with three categories of participants. Our findings indicate that participants acknowledge the potential for collective empowerment and praise the limited political involvement but identify design issues and resource allocation as weakening the empowerment potential.

Keywords Participatory budgeting · Citizens · Empowerment · Political involvement · Romania

Introduction

The theory and practice of participatory budgeting (PB) indicates concrete avenues to improve the legitimacy, transparency, accountability, and government effectiveness at local level (Sintomer et al. 2008; Wampler 2012; Brun-Martos and Lapsley 2017; Wampler et al. 2018). PB is regularly portrayed as a means

✉ Sergiu Gherghina
   sergiulor@yahoo.com

1   Department of Politics, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

2   Department of International Studies and Contemporary History, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

3   Department of Political Science, University of Florence, Florence, Italy

to enhance democratic quality and an opportunity for mobilizing a 'countervailing power' able to neutralize the power-advantages of political actors (Fung and Wright 2003a). It engages ordinary citizens in specific co-governance arrangements related to the allocation of budgets for local projects and provides more responsive and equitable budgets that meet community needs (Wampler 2012). PB allows experienced government and administrative representatives to share political power with common citizens with the overarching goal to contribute to raising the level of knowledge of the citizens and, more in general, their civic awareness and education (Smith 2009; Talpin 2011, 2012). The international organizations support PB as a model of good governance and a "citizenship school" educating, and engaging citizens in politics between elections (Shah 2007).

Several scholars consider PB as a core element among the remedies to the crisis of representative democracy and a potential successful strategy for collective empowerment (Smith 2009; Geissel and Newton 2012; Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014). However, there is also research about the unintended consequences and risks linked to the capture of the process by politicians or interest groups that reproduce social, economic, and political hierarchies (Fung and Wright 2003b; Cabannes 2004; Shah 2007; Marian 2018; Wampler et al. 2018; Williams and Waisanen 2020). This mixed evidence makes us wonder if citizens who engage in PB consider this process as a source of empowerment by learning about their rights and by expressing their views to shape policies. Or, on the contrary, the process creates the illusion of empowerment, being hijacked by political actors. In this sense, it can provide a compromised reality marked by a wide space of maneuver for "politics as usual" that transforms PB in an end in a itself (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014) and steers attention away from the need of further political innovation and institutional improvement (Röcke 2014; Peck and Theodore 2015).

We define empowerment as the possibility to tie action to discussion. That is, the process through which citizens' proposals are transformed into policies through the coupling with government actions (Fung and Wright 2003b). It is about the extent to which public deliberation, demands, and preferences—through voting on PB projects—are translated into local reforms. PB is mainly about collective empowerment although individual empowerment is also possible for specific segments in society (Hajdarowicz 2018). Earlier research points in the direction of an empowerment dimension for the PB especially linked with small discretionary budgets (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014). While this dimension is investigated as a general process embedded in a broader context (Alves and Allegretti 2012; Pin 2017), very little is known so far about how participants to PB perceive the collective empowerment. There is limited research about what makes participants to the PB consider this process as an empowering avenue that provides citizens an effective voice in the decision-making of their local community. This perception is important for at least three reasons: (1) it can provide information about what goes well and what can be improved in PB, which reflects the continuity and success of the process (Smith 2009; Åström and Grönlund 2012); (2) it serves as a point of departure to understand citizens' engagement in community issues; and (3) it complements the objective assessment of empowerment available in the literature. The focus on perception is in line with

earlier research about the importance of feelings and emotions for deliberative practices (Steiner 2012).

This article aims to address this gap in the literature and seeks to identify the factors that shape the perception of participants to PB about its empowerment potential. We focus on the critical case of Cluj-Napoca where the local political authority initiated and maintained PB for several years. The mayor, in office for many years, is a strong supporter of PB and started a pilot project at district level in 2013, which then continued at city level between 2017 and 2021 with a break in 2020 due to the COVID-19 restrictions. The city-level PB uses a digital platform on which projects are uploaded and votes are cast, with thousands of citizens getting involved over the years. Our qualitative analysis uses 25 semi-structured interviews conducted with three categories of participants actively involved in the 2019 PB: ordinary participants, applicants, and consultants. The findings of our inductive thematic analysis indicate that the context and the institutional design shape the perception about the empowerment potential of PB. On the one hand, the citizens assess positively the possibility for collective empowerment through PB and appreciate the limited political involvement in the process. On the other hand, the participants to the PB claim that the empowerment is limited due to the absence of real deliberation, the use of online platforms that excludes several segments of society and the small-scale funding. Overall, most participants have a nuanced and complex perception of the PB acknowledging both the advantages and problems of the process. Beyond their discourse, their participatory behavior on a continuous basis reflects that they value the PB process despite its downsides.

The following section reviews the literature about PB and empowerment with emphasis on potential drivers and obstacles. Next, we provide details about case selection, data, and methodology. The third section briefly describes the PB process in Cluj-Napoca, while the fourth section presents the results of our inductive thematic analysis for interviews. The discussion and conclusions summarize the key findings and reflect on the implications of this analysis for the broader field of study.

PB, empowerment, and citizens' perceptions

Three decades after the initiation of PB in Porto Alegre (Brazil), the procedure through which citizens can decide how to spend a share of the local budget has gained momentum (Dias et al. 2019). It emerged as a participatory innovation that intertwines state and civil society with the goal to increase citizens' propensity to pay taxes and to effectively redistribute municipal funds (De Sousa Santos 1998; Novy and Leubolt 2005). Since then, variations of PB were embraced by thousands of local communities around the world and the allocated budgets have gradually grown (Cabannes and Lipietz 2018). It is a process of community decision-making in which a share of the budget is directly allocated by residents. PB provides a voice to those who contribute to the budget and who are affected by how money are spent (Cabannes 2004). The PB can become "citizenship schools" where ordinary people develop better social and cognitive skills with notable "spillover effects" in terms of further civic society activities (Nylen 2002; Fung and Wright 2003b; Shah 2007).

Citizens can voice their view and shape the agenda, increase their abilities to understand the policy agenda, assess government performance, and keep the local authorities accountable. The PB experiences help transforming the local political culture, provide a space for sustainable forms of nonelite grass-roots activism, and foster the civic consciousness (Nylen 2002).

In the context of participatory processes, empowerment can be broadly understood as the ability to make or influence a decision that would otherwise not take place. The usual categorization of empowerment is the dichotomy between individual and collective. Individual empowerment refers to the capacity of each person to make a change. Collective empowerment brings individuals together in an effort through which they can achieve greater influence than on their own. Rowlands (1997) adds a third dimension of empowerment: the relational empowerment in which the emphasis lies on the ability to influence the relationships and decisions that are taken through these. Some communities are more oriented toward empowerment than others; they have internal or external features that impede or foster empowerment (Maton 2008).

One possibility to achieve collective empowerment is the mobilization of individuals through a common purpose. For example, female community leaders seek to persuade ordinary citizens to engage in urban participatory democracy to create a change. These leaders make an attempt to increase both inclusiveness and support for a common cause (Hajdarowicz 2018). Four specific dimensions can be used to assess whether PB projects can reach collective empowerment: the primacy of participatory forums in the decision-making process, the scope of the budget (how much is directly allocated by citizens), the degree of power allocated to PB (whether authorities retain discretion in implementing the projects), and the self-regulation of PB (if rules are established by participants) (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014, p. 49). Pin (2017) adds a fifth criterion which consists of the permanency of the PB forums, which refers to the institutionalized feature of PB and to its stability in community, based on support received from citizens. This contrasts with authorities' complete degree of agency over the establishment and existence of the PB process.

Much of the literature on empowerment focuses on the supply side, embedding it in the broader political and economic context in which PB takes place. The demand-side perspective remains somehow peripheral and limited attention is paid to the perception of empowerment. The latter motivates public participation (Kang 2014): when people feel that their efforts can make a difference, they are more likely to engage in various processes. With reference to PB, Zolotov et al. (2018) assess the effect of four dimensions of the psychological empowerment (competence, impact, meaning, and self-determination) on the intention to use online PB. While competence and meaning have a positive effect on the willingness to continue using PB, habit is a strong predictor. People who used PB are more inclined to continue using it, which is consistent with earlier findings about how people who actively used deliberative democracy are much more likely to support (Gherghina and Geissel 2020). There is empirical evidence that documents the existence of a relationship between the use of PB and perceived legitimacy of local governments. The inhabitants of the council districts that use PB have greater feelings of access to the local government and believe they understand better the spending of public money. All

these leading to a positive perception of the government officials and to higher subjective / perceived legitimacy (Swaner 2017).

Participants to PB express a variety of feelings and perceptions about the process. A comparative analysis of e-PBs in Brazil indicates the existence of both positive feelings such as the belief in political effectiveness and negative feelings that include frustration or indignation. The perceptions oscillate between approval for what is done through PB to perceptions of poor representation or low political effectiveness (Barros and Sampaio 2016). Over time, the participants appeared to lose trust in the process and in local level representatives. In other instances, the engagement in deliberation during the PB leads to a reflection of people's opinions in the budget or policy decision-making. The offline is more effective compared to the online participation because of higher levels of representativeness and deliberation (Lim and Oh 2016).

This literature review indicates the importance of institutional design in shaping the perceptions of participants about the PB. Although much research focuses on the perceptions about the authorities that implement the PB decisions and about who gets involved, they can be used as a point of departure for this study. The experience of participants with the PB and the existence of deliberation in the PB are two main drivers for perceptions. This study isolates the variable of experience in using the PB because it focuses exclusively on people who have participatory experience. In doing so, it tries to reveal what other issues—related to institutional design or beyond—can shape participants' perceptions about the PB's collective empowerment potential. Due to the limited research on the topic, we use an inductive approach in which the reasons are derived from interviews.

Data and method

To investigate this perception, we use a case study approach (George and Bennett 2005) that focuses on Cluj-Napoca as the first city in Romania to use PB. The city is a critical case for three reasons. First, there is continuity in terms of local administration: the mayor, who is a supporter of PB, is in office uninterrupted since 2012. Before that, he was elected as a mayor of the city in 2004 and re-elected in 2008, but his second term in office was ended after roughly half a year because he served as country prime minister between 2008 and 2012. Second, the experience of PB in Cluj-Napoca achieved an emblematic status in Romanian politics. The party to which the mayor belongs used it during election campaign as a benchmark of innovation and good democratic governance. Third, the PB meets partially the minimum characteristics of the process (Sintomer et al. 2008, p. 168). It includes the component of proposal design and submission, information about ideas, final vote, and implementation of projects at the city—as opposed to neighborhood—level, and it is organized regularly. However, it misses the component of debate and deliberation, and the accountability / monitoring of implementation (Stortone and de Cindio 2016) is only passive. As such, this PB includes some design particularities that could influence the perceptions and the interviews will show whether

the participants identify these elements as drivers for their opinion on the collective empowerment potential.

We conducted 25 semi-structured interviews in November 2020 with citizens who took part in PB in different roles. The interviewees were (1) ordinary participants by casting a vote on the projects that raised their interest, (2) project applicants who submitted projects in the PB competition or (3) consultants, i.e., they provide support to those who did not have access to the Internet or did not know how to use the online platform. We used a snowballing technique to select the participants and the selection sought to maximize variation on several key variables such as gender, area of residence, and profession (Appendix 1). We interviewed eight women and 17 men, with age between 20 and 47 years, living in different neighborhoods of the city. Their professions ranged from private corporation employees or public clerks to school and university teachers. We also tried to get variation in terms of education but that was not possible since all the respondents we contacted had university degrees. This is not surprising since the city is the home to the largest university in the country and less than 0.5% of the residents engage with the PB. Quite likely, there is self-selection bias in terms of education and the complexity of their answers regarding the empowerment component is related to the fact that many are middle-class and educated participants. We stopped at 25 interviews because that is where we reached the saturation point.

The interview guide includes eight main questions. The first two questions were related to the overall satisfaction toward the development of Cluj-Napoca in the last 10 years and the benefits of participating budgeting. The next two questions were more specific and asked about how and why the interviewees involved in the PB and questions five and six asked the interviewees to describe the PB process and to explain if they believe that participating budgeting is a real tool for citizen empowerment (they were asked to elaborate their answers also). The last two questions were about the PB potential to reduce the involvement of the political factor in the decision-making and about directions for future PB improvement. We used ad-hoc follow-up questions when more details were required from respondents. The interviews were made by telephone, with an average length of 15 min, and recorded with interviewees' consent.

We use inductive thematic analysis that relies on themes identified in the answers provided by respondents (Nowell et al. 2017). In the absence of pre-established themes / determinants of perceptions that could be identified in the literature, the inductive thematic approach provides the appropriate avenue to interpret meaning from the answers. We read all the answers and sought to assign sentences to sub-themes and then larger themes (Table 1). The latter are preferable since they make the interpretation of results straightforward and substantial. The process of collecting, grouping, and analyzing the data was divided into five phases: 1) Identify the respondents and schedule the interviews; 2) Conducting the interviews; 3) Interview transcription; 4) Independent reading (of the authors) of the interviews and outlined the initial themes; and 5) Comparison of the themes, stylization, final version, and interpretation. Based on the interview, we could formulate two broad themes: the inappropriate format of the PB and the limited funds allocated to it, each of these with three sub-themes (Table 1).

✳

Table 1 An overview of the themes derived from the interviews

Themes of PB	Sub-Themes
Inappropriate format	Lack of communication between participants and organizers
	Online format that limits the involvement of elders
	The absence of debates aiming and improving projects
Limited funds	Little control over the public funds
	Limited influence of the political factor in decision-making
	Small funds limit the advancement of large-scale projects

PB in Cluj-Napoca

Cluj-Napoca is the fourth most populous in Romania (slightly over 300,000 people) and uses PB at city level on a continuous basis since 2015. PB was adopted for the first time in 2013 as a pilot project for the largest neighborhood in Cluj-Napoca that includes roughly one third of the city's population. The main idea of the pilot project was to allow the inhabitants to discuss ideas and propose projects related to the improvement of the quality of their lives in the neighborhood. The City Hall organized discussion sessions, which were also joined by the mayor, in specific locations where people exchanged ideas between them, public clerks and officials. The PB expanded to the level of the entire city and continued in 2015 and 2016 as a project dedicated to informal groups of individuals aged between 14 and 35. The participants proposed projects aimed at changing the Cluj community overall. The winning projects were financed from the budget of the City Hall (Cluj-Napoca 2017) and implemented the subsequent years.

In 2017, the City Hall created an online platform dedicated exclusively to the project. Cluj-Napoca became the first city in Romania to ground PB as a stand-alone project opened for its inhabitants of at least 18 years.[1] It provides the participants with the opportunity to shape and observe the implementation of projects concerning their communities, to transfer their ideas into projects, to signal the authorities the main concerns and shortcomings of their neighborhoods, to find solutions for their problems, and to take part in the process of setting priorities in spending local money.

Until 2022, the Cluj-Napoca PB funded 15 projects annually with a maximum value of 150,000 € for each project. In 2019, the city had a budget of 326 million € out of which the PB received 2.25 million €, which is roughly 0.70% of the total city budget. In 2020, the PB was allocated the same amount of 2.25 million €, roughly 0.65% of the total municipal budget that which was 344 million € (Gherghina and Tap 2021). The 2020 PB was not organized due to the COVID-19 pandemics, but

---

[1] In practice, since 2017 the process is an e-PB, but for the sake of consistency, we use the PB label throughout this article.

the process was continued in 2021. In 2022, the number of funded projects was reduced to five, but the maximum value increased to 400,000 € for each project. All the accepted projects are implemented the next calendar year and the stage of project development can be accessed on the PB's platform.[2] All those who live, work, or study in the city can submit projects or cast a vote on existing proposals. They must access the PB platform, create an account, and proceed with the application or vote. All submitted projects are analyzed by the technical departments of the City Hall, and if the project is eligible, (i.e., it can be implemented by the authorities, does not exceed the maximum budget), it will be placed in the competition.

Since 2017 the City Hall established an office where its employees organize the PB. This office collects the project proposals, coordinates the technical check, communicates with the applicants, organizes the voting, communicates the results, and maintains the online platform. Between 2017 and 2021, the time frame covered by our analysis, the project competition included six domains of submission: (1) alleys, sidewalks, and pedestrian areas; (2) mobility, accessibility, and traffic safety; (3) green spaces and playgrounds; (4) arrangement of public spaces (urban furniture, public lightning); (5) educational and cultural infrastructure; and (6) digital city. The projects that passed the technical check became eligible for the voting process which was divided in two stages: the vote according to the domains and the final one. In the first stage, 30 projects were chosen from all domains and every citizen has the right to vote six proposals (i.e., one belonging to each domain). The top three projects according to the voting share went directly to the second stage and the rest were selected based on the number of votes they gathered. In the second stage, every citizen could vote for one project (irrespective of its domain) and a total of 15 projects are selected. The project with most votes in each domain will be automatically selected and the rest of the winning projects will be decided according to their voting share. The projects that gather the highest number of votes will be implemented by the City Hall in the following calendar year; usually the PB is over in November.

Those who wish to vote or submit projects but do not have access to the Internet or do not know how to use the platform can benefit from the help of City Hall's employees in specific locations in Cluj-Napoca during the entire process.[3] The number of projects submitted to PB decreased from 383 in 2017 to 103 in 2021, while the number of eligible projects decreased from 126 in 2017 to 20 in 2021.[4] Out of the 20 eligible projects in 2021, 15 got funded and would be implemented, three of them with as few as 29, 45, or 50 votes. The decreasing trend in the number of submitted proposals and citizens' participation could have several possible explanations such as demotivating competitiveness, understanding that projects must meet certain standards to be accepted for voting, loss of interest in the PB process, the migration of those who engaged before, or different priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

---

[2] The platform available at https://bugetareparticipativa.ro/, last accessed 18 August 2022.

[3] Data available at https://primariaclujnapoca.ro/informatii-publice/comunicate/bugetare-participativa-cluj-napoca-2019/, last accessed 11 November 2020.

[4] Data for the 2017–2019 PB in Cluj are available in Gherghina and Tap (2021).
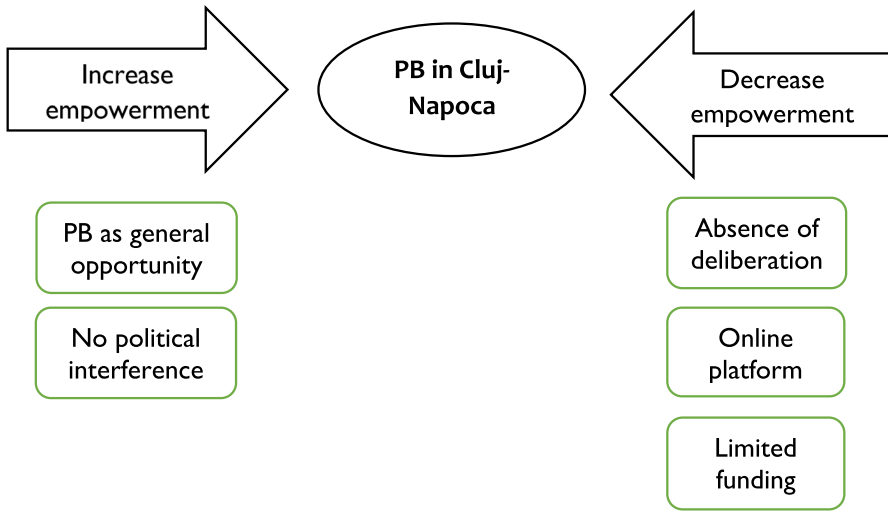
Fig. 1 The perception of citizens' empowerment according to PB participants

How citizens perceive empowerment

Overall, the 25 interviews emphasized that PB in Cluj-Napoca is perceived as a form of citizen empowerment in decision-making for two reasons (Fig. 1). First, the openness of City Hall for PB creates opportunities for citizens to engage directly in the decision-making. Second, there is no political interference in the PB process. At the same time, the participants signaled that the collective empowerment of PB in Cluj-Napoca is limited by three elements. First, the absence of discussions, debates, and communication with the organizers and project applicants complicates the process of voting, writing, or improving projects before the competition. Second, the online format of PB discourages specific age groups (i.e., elders) from participating. Since senior citizens are usually active in political participation, a format that is friendly to this age category is likely to increase the feeling of empowerment and inclusiveness. Third, the funds allocated to PB are too limited. The sum is tiny compared to the overall budget of the city and thus PB cannot make a real influence on the community decision-making; the participants cannot propose expensive projects due to financial constraints. The following sub-sections cover each of these issues.

General opportunity and no political interference

Many respondents perceive the Cluj-Napoca PB as a possibility to empower citizens and provide them a voice in the decision-making process at local level. A large share of interviewees (20 out of 25) stated that PB brings plenty of benefits to the overall development of the city, neighborhoods and stressed that the voices of mere citizens are heard by the authorities via PB.

Some of them emphasized that PB "allows the accumulation or gathering the ideas from the citizens which might not otherwise have reached the table of the local administration (…) allows the administration to see where citizens say that there is a need to invest public money" (I9) or associated the project with a "channel for collecting people's demands, so prioritizing investments according to public opinion because the citizen sees best in the vicinity of home or workplace (…) which are the problems and if they are sufficiently addressed" (I13). PB was described as "one of the best collaborative tools that Cluj-Napoca provides and it is (…) an example of good practices for several cities in the country. It is a unique and interesting way (…) to consult citizens regarding the projects in their neighborhood that directly affect them" (I14). It could stimulate "(…) the involvement of citizens in direct decision-making (…) crates an involved civic community that find local solutions to their problems, much closer than the general opinion of the Local Council and the City Hall" (I6). PB was described as a "democratic exercise" (I12), "a form of democratic consolidation" (I11), "a proof of democracy" (I4) or a "right of direct democracy" (I9).

All respondents outlined that PB is directly related to the right of citizens to decide how public money should be invested. Some responses highlighted that "we are the main contributors to the local budget (…) we should have a very big word to say not only once every four years when we vote for the Mayor or the Local Council but in the decisions taken by the City Hall in these four years. First of all, decisions that directly affect us" (I6) or "(…) man is the most important, democracy and the whole public administration revolve around him and somehow you give him power through this issue of participatory budgeting" (I16). PB was not related only to a right but with a "privilege (…) there are not so many cities that do this project so it seems to me that it is a very useful tool (…) this public consultation and the whole process because you are practically included from start to finish" (I14) as well as "an obligation to get involved in the decision-making process in the localities in which we live (…) this would be a key factor for me in consolidating Romania's democratic tradition after the post-December Revolution" (I11).

All these are potential outcomes when the citizens realize how much power they have and get more involved in these processes (I12). One interviewee stated that "no one gets involved and there is no advantage in participatory budgeting (…) very few people get involved and very few people think that they have power (…) without people you cannot do anything" (I2). However, the interviewee's dissatisfaction was related to the little number of individuals who get involved in PB and not with the program itself.

The interviewees described PB as a tool to increase citizen empowerment in decision-making and as an avenue for greater social cohesion and civic engagement. For instance, one respondent emphasized that he made lobby for a project that was advanced via PB. The interviewee said that he had no linkage with its initiator, but the project aimed at issues concerning his neighborhood. The interviewee found very useful the ideas of the project and promoted it around the neighborhood and on social media (I16). Similarly, other interviewees emphasized that promoted PB projects on social media with the aim of mobilizing new voters (I1) and others stressed that were contacted by friends or other individuals to vote for specific projects (I17).

Several interviewees said that PB stimulates collective decision-making because "as long as hundreds of votes are collected (…) maybe there were over 1000 (…) means that it is a collective decision" (I16) or said that "I see a collective decision because any citizen in Cluj-Napoca can vote for projects that seem more suitable for the city" (I19) and underlined the idea that "through the votes on the PB website it is a collective decision because everyone has a say in choosing the projects" (I21). PB goes beyond the individual empowerment and enforce the collective decision-making because the votes mirror the desire of the collectivity and increase social cohesion and civic engagement of individuals.

Several answers explicitly underlined that PB reduces the political influence in decision-making, and the process itself is not influenced by political interference. Apart from three interviewees who said that politicians could use the implemented projects via participatory budgeting as electoral gains (I1, I6, I11),[5] the other interviewees explicitly stated that the political actors do not get involved in the process. The mayor and his team created the institution of PB but do not intervene politically during its functioning. There is illustrative evidence in this sense. There is no biased promotion of some projects on the PB platform and citizens have access to the same type of information about all submitted projects. All the 15 projects that get voted through the PB are implemented by the City Hall and the information is publicly available online. No interviewee mentioned that some communities' projects were favored over other communities. On the contrary, many mentioned that the projects in their neighborhood made it on the list of voted projects and that they knew that even the applicants were surprised by this. All the interviewees stated that they did not feel any kind of political influence and pressure when participating in participatory budgeting and referred to the process as free from political interference. Some of the respondents explicitly appreciate this as a positive feature since the independence of PB increases the confidence that changes can be made, and thus increases the feeling of empowerment.

Poor communication and no possibility for deliberation

Despite the positive perceptions toward PB, interviewees stressed certain shortcomings of the project and suggested avenues for improvement. For instance, some outlined that "(…) in the future the second point that should be improved would be a diversification (…) of the types of projects (…). At the moment, the projects are divided into categories, but they could go further for each one, somehow (…) more personalized for each part of the city" (I7) or "(…) given that the process has been going on for several years now, some new domains could be introduced, for example, the social domain that is now missing or sports field" (I14). Similarly, some interviewees noted that PB "should be more marketed,

---

[5] The three interviewees said that certain projects (e.g., the one concerning public transport for students) that were implemented via participatory budgeting were claimed as successes of the administration and the officials did not say that the projects were framed by citizens and implemented through participatory budgeting.

made more public (…) posted in the city (…) the City Hall can make posters to put them in the city and they could also promote it on social networks" (I8) or that the project needs "more visibility (…) I would (…) recommend putting up banners around the city as we see in election campaigns (…) banners with 'Participate in participatory budgeting' (…) to make the process much more attractive or (…) and use online paid ads" (I4). Also, one interviewee noted that it takes quite a long time until the projects are adopted and implemented, and faster development of the projects could be an advantage for streamlining PB (I21).

Inappropriate format

Despite the transparency, accessibility, inclusiveness, and openness of PB interviewees emphasized that lack of public or online debates represents one of the major problems of the program, it was stressed that

> There are no meetings, deliberative forums where the proposed projects can be debated (…) many projects are very succinct, it is very difficult to figure out what the project proposes and I think you need to give citizens the opportunity to debate those programs via online forums or face to face meetings (I12).

Similarly, other interviewees emphasized that "some debates should be held, either in real or virtual way (…) meetings on Zoom, Skype or other possibilities because (…) apart from the project that appears on the site, participants do not know a lot of information about it, only if they know the initiator and ask for additional information" (I19) or "I would like to have a mix between the online and face-to-face meetings (…) for discussing topics of participatory budgeting (…) I say this from the perspective of reaching as many people as possible" (I16). Also, some interviewees highlighted that

> Apart from submitting projects and consulting after a project is submitted, I do not know to exist public debates (…) where these projects are raised from time to time (…) I do not know to be open discussions or chats or messages directly with the organizers (…) probably if you contact the Facebook page or the platform by e-mail, those interested will probably receive answers, but so far it has not been the case to send an e-mail to request any clarification or something like that (I14).

Therefore, interviewees stated that PB lacks centralized forums of discussions even though interactions between participants could improve the quality of the projects. In this sense, it was emphasized that "any dialogue can bring improvements and bring projects to a much better form, which will better meet the needs and form synergies with other needs (…) would also stimulate people's desire to propose projects" (I13) or "I think there should be a much broader debate, especially in the final project categories (…) or a top three in each project category and an online debate or poll for each project (…) a SWOT analysis with what the project brings positive

to the whole community" (I6). Also, interviewees signaled the need for organizing debates related not only to the proposed projects and how these can be improved but for helping people to understand what PB is, how to write a project or what kind of projects could be implemented easily, are necessary for the overall development of the city and could be improved before the initiators advance them. In this sense, interviewees noted that PB needs better communication between organizers and citizens (I1, I4, I7, I8, I9, I11, I13, I21).

Another line of argumentation emphasizes that the predominant online format limits the involvement of elders in the program. Some interviewees highlighted that older generations could face difficulties when it comes to accessing the online platform, use it or even writing a project. Also, they are not aware of the possibilities in which projects targeting their interests are available on the platform and how they can vote for them (I2, I11, I16, I17, I20). Even though there were City Hall's employees who "offered support by creating an account, by helping the demanders to find the project they wanted (…) there were older people who did not have the opportunity to vote, to make an e-mail address, an account and in this way I helped them" (I21), the lack of skills in using the online platform explains why PB is somehow problematic for this social group.

These shortcomings transform PB in a limited form of empowerment of citizens in decision-making because they have no opportunities to debate the projects, improve their quality, and find real solutions for the pressing problems of their communities. They can only vote for the projects that are uploaded on the platform without the possibility of discussing how these can be improved and how can be transformed in valuable investments for the city. Also, elders are underrepresented in PB and they cannot benefit properly from this form of empowerment because the program itself is based mainly on online procedures and not all the elders are literate in the Internet using or eager to go to specific points in the city where they could benefit from the help of PB organizers.

Limited funding

PB reduces political influence in decision-making "because not politicians decide here but citizens (…) the collective that vote for certain projects decides, nobody intervenes (…) let us say Mayor, Deputies, Ministers" (I18) and "I say that practically the strongest voice is the voice of the citizens and it is practically the citizens who have the strongest word to say in this project, so I say that it is a rather big reduction of political involvement" (I19). Other interviewees stated that "I agree with this type of process because it gives a sign to the political parties that they are not really in control of the budget and they cannot do exactly what they want (…) they must be kept account of what citizens say (…)" even that the voted project or idea is contrary to their interests (I3) or emphasized that political influence is diminished "(…) quite a lot (…) considering that people (…) talk freely and present their ideas, come up with proposals and promote them (…) here I think it is the gain that there is no political involvement, people can simply decide their priorities" (I16).

Many interviewees stressed that their empowerment is limited by the funds that are allocated for the process. They referred to the limited funding provided to PB, which is reflected also by objective statistics. One interviewee argued that the City Hall should allocate 10% of the city's budget for PB. When the funds of the program increase, citizens will gain much more power in decision-making because the authorities "can no longer influence the allocation of funds on clientelism or for electoral or sociological purposes where they think they have a more favorable electorate" (I6). Other interviewees used examples from Western societies to underline that "A project like participatory budgeting should allocate much more resources and much more funds (…) the cities in Latin America, in Brazil (…) allocate 20% or even 30% of local government funds in support of projects started or proposed by citizens" (I11) or "I think it should be a much more important part of the local budget (…) authorities should reflect on and borrow from the practices of other cities where are much more substantial budget allocations (…) I mean the countries of Western Europe" (I12).

Similarly, some interviewees outlined that due to the low funds allocated for PB, their empowerment and influence in decision-making is limited because they can decide only how a little amount of public money are invested. Consequently, they stressed that political influence in decision-making is not significantly reduced because projects of a maximum of 150,000 € cannot produce major changes inside the society and affect the overall budget of the city. In this sense, the interviewees stated that the budget allocated for PB should be raised to improve their empowerment and significantly reduce the political influence in decision-making (I3, I4, I8, I13, I14, I17). Moreover, interviewees highlighted that the allocated funds must be raised according to the interest of the citizens. They said that many good projects are not implemented due to the fact that their expenses surpass the allocated funds, and this represents a limit for citizens who should have good ideas, but they cannot propose them due to the financial limits (I4, I14, I17).

Discussion and conclusions

This article analyzed the factors that shape the perception of participants to PB in Cluj-Napoca about its collective empowerment potential. The results indicate the existence of a complex picture in which participants acknowledge the potential for collective empowerment but also identify several obstacles. The political interference is not among these obstacles. On the contrary, the limited involvement of political actors is a characteristic that enhances the collective empowerment of the PB. The mayor and his political party are behind the project, they support it and organize it on a regular basis, but this is where the involvement of politics in PB appears to stop according to our interviewees. The limited presence of political actors in the PB process is broadly appreciated by respondents and perceived as an important avenue that allows an effective engagement of citizens in the decision-making process at community level.

The existing obstacles can be addressed through several reforms of the PB process, which are relevant for policy makers. One important change would be the

introduction of a deliberative component, which provides the possibility to discuss, debate, and decide about the most appropriate projects. Many participants complained about the absence of such possibilities and the absence of deliberation brings the entire process much closer to e-voting on projects rather than to an actual PB. A deliberative component is crucial for PB processes around the world and earlier analyses—coming from academics, observers or even organizers—indicate the benefits of open discussions for the quality of approved projects. A second change could include physical meetings with citizens that could complement the online presentation of projects. Finally, an important reform refers to a larger budget allocated to projects, to increase the impact on community development along citizens' priorities. All these changes are likely to increase the perception of empowerment, the visibility of the process, and the number of participants. Overall, this study illustrates a complex web of perceptions and shows how several elements can lead to different perceptions. People pick on the PB design issues and consider these to weaken the empowerment potential, which can be a valuable lesson for further implementation of the PB in this city and in other similar settings.

The limited decision-making power, reflected mainly in design flaws, is in line with earlier results from West and Southern European countries where it led to a general disappointment on the side of citizens with the PB process (Talpin 2011). In addition to decision-making, our results indicate that the objectives and resources are crucial elements that could enhance citizens' approach toward PB as it happens in other European cases (Lehtonen 2022). In essence, we illustrate that the ideas linked to citizens' participation in the PB are mainly institutional in nature, with little emphasis on the individual or policy dimensions (Röcke 2014). All these indicate that the Cluj-Napoca PB has characteristics that are comparable with PB processes conducted elsewhere, and thus the implications of our study reach beyond the single case analyzed here.

At theoretical level, the analysis illustrates how citizens use a combination of personal and community-based features to assess the PB's empowerment potential. Such features can form the basis of a framework for analysis to be used in further research. At empirical level, our analysis identifies several themes that allow a better understanding of how the participants see PB. Its functionality and obstacles to a larger impact may be defining factors to explain further processes such as the desire to become an applicant in the process or the willingness to continue spending time resources with the project. There is a convergence of opinions between three different categories of participants—ordinary citizens, applicants, and consultants—which increase the robustness of observations. At policy level, and essential for the goal of this article, the findings illustrate that the limited political interference in the PB process has a positive effect on the citizens' perception regarding their empowerment. The Romanian political parties can use this piece of information to decide on future implementation of PB in the same city or in other cities around the country. These findings can be generalized to other settings where PB takes place under similar circumstances.

Our analysis yields several findings that open the door to future research. One immediate avenue could be a closer investigation of the causes leading to the formation of perceptions about empowerment. Our paper focuses on attitudes and

experiences, but we do not touch upon the ways in which these are shaped. Further studies could explore this causal mechanism to better understand citizens' expectations when engaging with PB. It could investigate, for example, to what extent participants' satisfaction after participating altered their initial expectations. Alternatively, a comparison with other political contexts would be useful both in the East European region and more broadly in Europe. This would allow understanding whether the context could influence the perceptions of empowerment. As such, the analysis can be replicated to compare results and reach broader implications for the field of study. Another avenue for research could include a more quantitative approach in which more PB participants are recruited, with different socio-demographic characteristics, to identify whether and how the perceptions of empowerment are shaped by who the participants are.

Appendix 1: List of interviews

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Occupation	PB role	Interview length (min.)
I1	30	Female	IT consultant	Applicant	18
I2	47	Male	Restaurant manager	Participant	21
I3	20	Male	Student	Participant	19
I4	20	Male	Student	Participant	20
I5	20	Male	Student	Participant	15
I6	34	Male	Project manager	Applicant	17
I7	24	Male	Student	Participant	15
I8	37	Male	Programmer	Participant	12
I9	33	Male	IT worker	Participant	10
I10	40	Female	School teacher	Participant	12
I11	23	Male	Student	Participant	19
I12	40	Female	University lecturer	Participant	23
I13	42	Female	Policy councillor	Participant	18
I14	24	Male	Marketing specialist	Participant	12
I15	38	Male	Inspector	Participant	15
I16	34	Male	Clerk (local authority)	Participant	15
I17	35	Male	IT technical analyst	Participant	15
I18	32	Female	Economist	Participant	9
I19	23	Male	Student	Applicant	14
I20	27	Female	Contractor employee	Participant	10
I21	47	Female	Clerk (local authority)	Consultant	10
I22	31	Male	Teaching assistant	Participant	15
I23	33	Female	Quality assurance inspector	Consultant	19
I24	33	Male	University lecturer	Participant	10
I25	28	Male	Clerk (central authority)	Participant	10

Declarations

References

Alves, M.L., and G. Allegretti. 2012. (In)stability, a key element to understand participatory budgeting: Discussing Portuguese cases. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* 8 (2): 1–19.
Åström, J., and Å. Grönlund. 2012. Online consultations in local government: What works, when, and why? In *Connecting democracy: Online consultation and the flow of political communication*, ed. S. Coleman and P.M. Shane, 75–96. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Baiocchi, G., and E. Ganuza. 2014. Participatory budgeting as if emancipation mattered. *Politics & Society* 42 (1): 29–50.
Barros, S.A.R., and R.C. Sampaio. 2016. Do citizens trust electronic participatory budgeting? Public expression in online forums as an evaluation method in Belo Horizonte; do citizens trust electronic participatory budgeting? Public expression in online forums as an evaluation method in Belo Ho. *Policy and Internet* 8 (3): 292–312.
Brun-Martos, M.I., and I. Lapsley. 2017. Democracy, governmentality and transparency: Participatory budgeting in action. *Public Management Review* 19 (7): 1006–1021.
Cabannes, Y. 2004. Participatory budgeting: A significant contribution to participatory democracy. *Environment and Urbanization* 16 (1): 27–46.
Cabannes, Y., and B. Lipietz. 2018. Revisiting the democratic promise of participatory budgeting in light of competing political, good governance and technocratic logics. *Environment and Urbanization* 30 (1): 67–84.
Cluj-Napoca, P. 2017. *Bugetare participativă la Cluj-Napoca (Participatory budgeting in Cluj-Napoca)*.
Dias, N., S. Enríquez, and S. Júlio, eds. 2019. *Participatory budgeting world atlas*. Cascais: Municipality of Cascais.
Fung, A., and E.O. Wright. 2003a. Countervailing power in empowered participatory governance. In *Deepening democracy: Institutional innovations in empowered participatory governance*, ed. A. Fung and E.O. Wright, 259–290. London and New York: Verso.
Fung, A., and E.O. Wright, eds. 2003b. *Deepening democracy: Institutional innovations in empowered participatory governance*. London and New York: Verso.
Geissel, B., and K. Newton, eds. 2012. *Evaluating democratic innovations: Curing the democratic malaise?* London: Routledge.
George, A.L., and A. Bennett. 2005. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Gherghina, S., and B. Geissel. 2020. Support for direct and deliberative models of democracy in the UK: Understanding the difference. *Political Research Exchange* 2 (1): 1809474.
Gherghina, S., and P. Tap. 2021. Ecology projects and participatory budgeting: Enhancing citizens support. *Sustainability* 13 (19): 10561.
Hajdarowicz, I. 2018. 'Does participation empower? The example of women involved in participatory budgeting in Medellin. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 44: 22–37.
Kang, M. 2014. Understanding public engagement: Conceptualizing and measuring its influence on supportive behavioral intentions. *Journal of Public Relations Research* 26 (5): 399–416.
Lehtonen, P. 2022. Policy on the move: The enabling settings of participation in participatory budgeting. *Policy Studies* 43 (5): 1036–1054.
Lim, S., and Y. Oh. 2016. Online versus offline participation: Has the democratic potential of the internet been realized? Analysis of a participatory budgeting system in Korea. *Public Performance & Management Review* 39 (3): 676–700.

Marian, C. 2018. The Social Democrat Party and the use of political marketing in the 2016 elections in Romania. *Sfera Politicii* 26 (3–4): 70–82.

Maton, K.I. 2008. Empowering community settings: Agents of individual development, community betterment, and positive social change. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 41 (1–2): 4–21.

Novy, A., and B. Leubolt. 2005. Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre: Social Innovation and the Dialectical Relationship of State and Civil Society. *Urban Studies* 42 (11): 2023–2036.

Nowell, L.S., et al. 2017. Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16 (1): 1–16.

Nylen, W.R. 2002. Testing the empowerment thesis: The participatory budget in Belo Horizonte and Betim, Brazil. *Comparative Politics* 34 (2): 127–145.

Peck, J., and N. Theodore. 2015. *Fast policy: Experimental statecraft at the thresholds of neoliberalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Pin, L. 2017. Does participatory budgeting lead to local empowerment? The case of Chicago, IL. *Alternate Routes* 28 (1): 114–140.

Röcke, A. 2014. *Framing citizen participation: Participatory budgeting in France, Germany and the United Kingdom*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rowlands, J. 1997. *Questioning empowerment. Working with women in Honduras*. Oxford: Oxfam GB.

Shah, A., ed. 2007. *Participatory budgeting*. Washington DC: World Bank.

Sintomer, Y., C. Herzberg, and A. Röcke. 2008. Participatory budgeting in Europe: Potentials and challenges. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32 (1): 164–178.

Smith, G. 2009. *Democratic innovation: Designing institutions for citizen participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

De Sousa Santos, B. 1998. Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre: Toward a redistributive democracy. *Politics & SocietySociety* 26 (4): 461–510.

Steiner, J. 2012. *The foundations of deliberative democracy empirical research and normative implications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stortone, S., and F. de Cindio. 2016. Styles of online participation in the Monza participatory budgeting. In: *2016 Conference for E-democracy and open government (CeDEM)*, pp. 17–24.

Swaner, R. 2017. Trust matters: Enhancing government legitimacy through participatory budgeting. *New Political Science* 39 (1): 95–108.

Talpin, J. 2011. *Schools of Democracy: How ordinary citizens (sometimes) become competent in participatory budgeting institutions*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Talpin, J. 2012. When democratic innovations let the people decide. An evaluation of co-governance experiments. In *Evaluating democratic innovations: Curing the democratic Malaise?*, ed. B. Geissel and K. Newton, 184–206. London: Routledge.

Wampler, B. 2012. Participatory budgeting: Core principles and key impact. *Journal of Public Deliberation* 8 (2): 1–13.

Wampler, B., S. McNulty, and M. Touchton. 2018. *Participatory budgeting: Spreading across the globe, transparency and accountability initiative*. https://www.transparency-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/spreading-pb-across-the-globe_jan-2018.pdf.

Williams, D., and D. Waisanen. 2020. *Real money, real power? The challenges with participatory budgeting in New York City*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zolotov, M. N., T. Oliveira, and S. Casteleyn. 2018. Continued intention to use online participatory budgeting: The effect of empowerment and habit. In: *Proceedings of the 11th international conference on theory and practice of electronic governance*, pp. 209–216.