

City of Saratoga Springs

# Participatory Budgeting: An Overview

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## General History of Participatory Budgeting

“Participatory budgeting (PB) is a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend part of a public budget. It gives people real power over real money. PB started in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989, as an anti-poverty measure that helped reduce child mortality by nearly 20%.”

<https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/what-is-pb/>

“Participatory budgeting was invented in Porto Alegre as a response to the city's rapid growth and inability to provide basic services to its residents...The process gave a voice to the poor whose interests were usually ignored. They now had a say in which projects should be funded and built. Participatory budgeting contributed to a more equitable distribution of city services.”

<https://www.wri.org/insights/what-if-citizens-set-city-budgets-experiment-captivated-world-participatory-budgeting>

“...PB innovations have improved conditions... for some of the poorest citizens... Between 1988 and 1997, water connections in Porto Alegre went from 75 percent to 98 percent of all residences. The number of schools has quadrupled since 1986. New public housing units, which sheltered only 1,700 new residents in 1986, housed an additional 27,000 in 1989.”

<https://www.lincolnst.edu/publications/articles/participatory-budgeting-power-politics-porto-alegre>

“PB programs tend to be implemented by local and state governments. The elected governments tend to be progressive, with a focus on citizen participation and social justice.”

<https://www.internationalbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/A-Guide-to-Participatory-Budgeting.pdf>

“A city’s broader political environment is an important factor that conditions the success of PB programs. Pre-existing networks of social movements, community organizations, and other voluntary associations provide important support for the experimental programs.”

<https://www.internationalbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/A-Guide-to-Participatory-Budgeting.pdf>

## Participatory Budgeting in the United States

“Participatory policy reform has emerged in America’s largest cities, capitalizing on new technology and democratic experiments that aim to improve democracy. This typically includes place-based, community-driven interventions...”

<https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/participatory-budgeting-paper.pdf>

“Some forms of participatory democracy already exist in the United States, including nonbinding consultative mechanisms for citizen feedback within school boards, neighborhood policing, and urban planning, to name but a few.”

<https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/participatory-budgeting-paper.pdf>

“Participatory budgeting was launched in the U.S. in 2009 in Chicago, Illinois, by a member of the city’s Board of Aldermen (the city council) who used \$1 million of his discretionary funds to bring his constituents directly into the local budget decision-making process. By 2018, there were 23 more U.S. jurisdictions with a PB process in place... five with an initiative to allocate specific pots of money, e.g., CDBG funds, and six with an initiative to bring young voters or high school students into budget decisions”

<https://cpar.net/index.php/cpar/article/download/248/148>

## US Cities with Participatory Budgeting

Cambridge, Massachusetts: <https://pb.cambridgema.gov>

Chicago, Illinois: <http://www.pbchicago.org>

Denver, Colorado: <https://risetogetherdenver.org/hub-page/denverPB>

Freehold, New Jersey: <https://www.freeholdboroughnj.gov/participatorybudgeting/index.html>

Greensboro, North Carolina: <https://www.greensboro-nc.gov/departments/budget-evaluation/participatory-budgeting>

New York City, New York: <https://council.nyc.gov/pb/>

Seattle, Washington: <https://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/programs-and-services/your-voice-your-choice/history>

Vallejo, California:

[https://www.cityofvallejo.net/city\\_hall/departments\\_divisions/city\\_manager/participatory\\_budgeting](https://www.cityofvallejo.net/city_hall/departments_divisions/city_manager/participatory_budgeting)

## Participatory Budgeting in New York City

“In 2015, nearly half of the members of the New York City Council, representing nearly four-and-a-half million residents, launched PB efforts. New York residents allocated roughly \$32 million to be spent through PB”.

<https://cpar.net/index.php/cpar/article/download/248/148>

“The program has grown from four initial City Council districts to more than 27 in just four years, and affects four million people in the city. Of those who participated in PBNYC’s most recent cycle, 23% had a barrier to voting in regular elections... More than a quarter were born outside of the US, and nearly half earned under \$50,000 a year. The majority of participants – 57% – identified as people of color.”

<https://ash.harvard.edu/news/participatory-budgeting-new-york-city>

## Outcomes of Participatory Budgeting

“The World Bank... emphasizes the democratic and transformational nature of PB, stating that it: ‘represents a direct-democracy approach to budgeting... an opportunity to learn about government operations and to deliberate, debate, and influence the allocation of public resources. It is a tool for educating, engaging and empowering citizens and strengthening demand for good governance. (World Bank 2007 p.1)”

<https://www.oidp.net/docs/repo/doc215.pdf>

New York City was able to engage 58,095 participants to allocate \$31.9 million dollars. There were 179 neighborhood assemblies held across the city within participating districts to solicit project ideas from community members. Roughly one-third (35%) targeted particular communities, such as public housing residents, youth, and seniors. The majority of voters (57%) identified as people of color, in comparison to 47% of local election voters...”

<https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/participatory-budgeting-paper.pdf> and

<https://www.peoplepowered.org/university-content/pb-impacts-civil-society-political-participation>

“Vallejo’s PB is often seen as a model... The city has won several awards for its PB, including the Top 10 Innovations in Public Engagement Award from the Ash Center at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government in 2015, and the League of California Cities 2014 Helen Putnam Award for Enhancing Public Trust, Ethics, and Community Involvement...”

<https://cpar.net/index.php/cpar/article/download/248/148>

## Notes on the Participatory Budgeting Process

“There also needs to be effective marketing of the PB process to ensure everyone is aware of what is happening, how they can be involved and the impact that can be made. Finally, additional resources are often required to target those who are hardest to reach to ensure broad participation.”

<https://www.oidp.net/docs/repo/doc215.pdf>

“Participation must be well-structured and include capacity building to ensure active and informed participation by diverse segments of the population.”

<https://pbscotland.scot/blog/2018/6/22/porto-alegre-lessons-from-the-birthplace-of-pb>

“It is easy for the loudest people to appear to speak for the majority, winning the most money. But safeguards can be built in.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/local-government-network/2011/aug/12/participatory-budgeting-localism-big-society>

“People with resources are more likely to lobby for projects that serve their communities, and to run successful campaigns...The pleasure of making choices can’t make up for stark inequalities and scarcity.”

<https://shelterforce.org/2018/06/05/participatory-budgeting-why-not-fix-everyones-sink/>

“It requires citizens to commit time to obtaining the necessary information, understanding the information, and then engaging local leaders throughout the process. This time requirement will likely result in a smaller, less representative population of involved citizens, and leaders will need to be especially conscious of the needs of underrepresented population segments.”

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/26383382?seq=7#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26383382?seq=7#metadata_info_tab_contents)

## For More Information

*The Participatory Budgeting Project* <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/>

This is the leading organization for participatory budgeting advocacy in the United States.