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From Porto Alegre to New York City: Participatory Budgeting and Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Because of its popularity, there is now a large literature examining how participatory budgeting (PB) deepens participation by the poor and redistributes resources. Closer examinations of recent cases of PB can help us to better understand the political configurations in which these new participatory democratic spaces are embedded, and articulate the conditions that might lead to more meaningful outcomes. Who participates? For whose benefit? The articles in this symposium, on participatory budgeting in New York City (PBNYC), highlight both strengths and challenges of the largest American PB process. They focus less on redistribution, more on the dimensions of the process itself and of PBNYC's successful social inclusion, new dynamics between participants and local politicians, and the subtleties of institutionalization. The symposium also reminds us, however, that contestations over *meaningful* participation are on-going, and that of all of PBNYC's multiple goals, equity has proven to be the most elusive.

Introduction

Participatory Budgeting (PB)—a process in which community members, rather than elected officials, decide how to allocate public funds—has received tremendous attention since it first began in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989, spreading to over three thousand cities worldwide. Since 2010 alone, PB has spread from a single local process in the United States (US) to a projected forty-five district, city, or institutional processes this year. Community organizing coalitions like Right to the City have advocated for PB as one means of reclaiming the commons, and President Obama announced PB as a key element of a recent “Open Government” initiative.¹

Still, as PB continues to gain traction, there remain questions as to whether PB can sustain engagement among the traditionally disenfranchised and help engender a more equitable reallocation of public funds, as in well-known past cases.² Some researchers have argued that PB now runs the risk of becoming a buzzword-turned-fuzzword, an empowering and democratizing process that diffused and watered down into a politically malleable,

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¹See the White House press release on “Transparency and Open Government,” available online at: <http://1.usa.gov/1dLtUiU> (accessed March 17, 2014).

²Brian Wampler, *Participatory Budgeting in Brazil: Contestation, Cooperation, and Accountability* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 2010).

innocuous set of procedures.³ Given these concerns, the need for careful, empirically grounded analysis has not escaped the notice of academics. The *Journal of Public Deliberation*, for instance, published a special issue on the proliferation of PB around the world in late 2012.⁴ *New Political Science* published a preliminary analysis of Chicago's process in one ward in 2014.⁵

In this symposium, we focus on the implications of PB in North America, for both practitioners and academics. We focus on New York City because, while it may be the second oldest PB process in the US, it is also by far the largest, affecting more than 4 million city residents. And, for better or worse, New York's policies (whether Giuliani's "quality of life" policing or Bloomberg's mayoral controls of schools) receive attention nationwide, and are often emulated. Participatory budgeting in New York City (PBNYC), for both its magnitude and its potential as a model to be copied, has become a decisive case to critically examine. Substantively, the case allows us to engage critical, on-going debates on immigrant political participation and incorporation, governmental legitimacy and public trust, the institutionalization and diffusion of democratic experiments, racial inequalities, and participatory action research.

Rising Interest in Participatory Democracy

In recent decades, the largely parallel domestic and international literatures on participatory decision-making have begun to intersect more consistently and substantively. In the international development literature, examinations of participation were inspired by the need for constituents throughout the Global South to have a say in the mass-scale dam projects, economic policies, and other governmental (or government-binding) decisions being made by elites.⁶ Examinations of participatory democratic experiments grew in the 1990s, as policy-makers in post-apartheid South Africa, post-dictatorship Argentina and Brazil, and other contexts attempted to implement new forms of democratic governance; they worked to implement alternatives to the liberal, representative, electoral models with which Americans are most familiar.⁷ Yet, by the early 2000s, practitioners and scholars had already begun to call "participatory frameworks" the "new tyranny," a way for funders and institutions to pay lip service to participation while perpetuating status quo inequalities.⁸ "Community participation" might bring policy-making closer to the people, but it might also burden individuals to assume responsibilities that had traditionally been those of the welfare state.⁹

³Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Ernesto Ganuza, "Participatory Budgeting as If Emancipation Mattered," *Politics & Society* 42:1 (2014), pp. 29–50.

⁴See the "The Spread of Participatory Budgeting Across the Globe: Adoption, Adaptation, and Impacts," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 8:2, available online at: <http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol8/iss2/> (accessed October 30, 2016).

⁵LaShonda M Stewart et al., "Participatory Budgeting in the United States: A Preliminary Analysis of Chicago's 49th Ward Experiment," *New Political Science* 36:2 (2014), pp. 193–218.

⁶Robert Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts?: Putting the First Last* (London, UK: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997).

⁷Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Democratizing Democracy: Beyond the Liberal Democratic Canon* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 2005).

⁸Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (London, UK: ed Books, 2001).

⁹Julia Paley, *Marketing Democracy: Power and Social Movements in Post-Dictatorship Chile* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

In the American context, record low levels of trust in government, the decline of civic engagement, and the professionalization of American political participation have prompted academic interest in political participation stateside, too.¹⁰ These patterns have also led to popular pressures to experiment with alternative forms of bottom-up accountability and participatory governance.¹¹ Social movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter have spoken to the need to not just implement new policies in the US to address social inequalities, but also reform how we make decisions in the first place.¹² It is in this context that PB arrived in the US 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; as of this writing, there are currently 18 city-based PB processes in the US. PB is also striking as a prominent case of the US adopting a process developed by middle-income countries, rather than acting as the vanguard in innovative, state-of-the-art policies.

Yet, as distrust of government increases, and as participatory programs proliferate across a range of contexts in both the Global North and the Global South, tensions embedded in democratic experiments' potential for both empowerment and co-optation have only deepened.¹³ Could deliberative spaces actually reify traditional power dynamics, reflecting subtle domination by elites or legitimizing *pro forma* decisions by policy-makers?¹⁴ The case of PB is ripe for an analysis of changing dynamics between everyday constituents and government officials, especially non-elected ones.

Because of its popularity, there is now a large literature examining how PB deepens participation by the poor, increases efficiency, and redistributes resources. By far the most prominent example of participatory democracy globally and in North America, PB is usually conducted at the municipal level.^{15,16} PB attempts to give stakeholders an opportunity to draw upon their knowledge of local needs, articulate proposals, interact with neighbors, deliberate over priorities, and select—not just consult on—which proposals receive funding. Rather than prescribing universal templates for participation, this literature has moved beyond vanguard models (Kerala, Porto Alegre, et cetera) to emphasize the particular,

¹⁰Theda Skocpol, "Voice and Inequality: The Transformation of American Civic Democracy," *Perspectives on Politics* 2:1 (2004), pp. 3–20; Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001); Daniel Feldman, "The Legitimacy of US Government Agency Power," *Public Administration Review* 75:1 (2015), pp. 75–84.

¹¹Hollie Russon Gilman, *Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

¹²Occupy Wall Street and social inequalities overall were frequent topics of conversation at the PB neighborhood assemblies I attended in 2011–2012, and the Executive Director of the Participatory Budgeting Project, Josh Lerner, presented to groups such as Occupy Baltimore in 2011. The Black Lives Matter platform for policy demands, available at <https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/>, focuses on process-oriented demands in community control (including PB) and political power, alongside outcomes-oriented demands in criminal justice, economic justice, reparations, and social rights.

¹³Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 2003); Andrea Cornwall and Vera Schatten Coelho, *Spaces for Change?: The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2007).

¹⁴Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 24:26 (1990), pp. 56–80; Bent Flyvbjerg, "Habermas and Foucault: Thinkers for Civil Society?," *The British Journal of Sociology* 49:2 (1998), pp. 210–233.

¹⁵Brian Wampler and Janette Hartz-Karp, "Participatory Budgeting: Diffusion and Outcomes across the World," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 8:2 (2012) available at <http://www.publicdeliberation.net/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1241&context=jpd>.

¹⁶Josh Lerner, *Making Democracy Fun: How Game Design Can Empower Citizens and Transform Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014); Brian Wampler, *Participatory Budgeting in Brazil: Contestation, Cooperation, and Accountability* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

context-specific manifestations of discursive and contested politics in these experiments, especially in diverse and unequal landscapes.¹⁷

Peck and Theodore warn that PB risks becoming “technocratically canned ... and marketed for [mass] consumption.”¹⁸ Closer examinations of recent cases of PB can help us to not only better understand how everyday citizens can better participate in democracy, but also to examine the political configurations in which these new participatory spaces are embedded, pinpoint the tensions bureaucrats face in these new systems of shared governance, and articulate the conditions that might lead to more meaningful outcomes. Who participates? For whose benefit?

NYC’s Participatory Budgeting Process

The PBNYC process aims to make civic engagement processes more inclusive, and in doing so, it also aims for more equitable outcomes. The breadth of its goals reflects this, so that the quality of the process itself may be considered an outcome as well. According to the Rulebook, PBNYC works to: 1. Open up government, expanding transparency, 2. Expand civic engagement, engaging more people (especially traditionally marginalized groups) in politics, 3. Develop new community leaders, 4. Build community by connecting participants with one another and with organizations, and 5. Make public spending more equitable.

PB first came to New York in 2011 in a pilot program, with four participating New York City Councilmembers devoting a portion of their discretionary funds to the process. Since then, it has grown in scale each year. In the 2015–2016 cycle, almost sixty-seven thousand NYC residents voted to help allocate more than thirty-eight million dollars in discretionary funds, across twenty-eight districts.¹⁹ In its sixth cycle in 2016–2017, thirty-one Councilmembers, a majority of the fifty-one in the city, are participating.

Individual Councilmembers opt-in to the PB process, and dedicate at least one million dollars of their discretionary funds for PB projects in their district each cycle. Many devote roughly one and a half million dollars. Together, residents in thirty-one districts are projected to allocate at least forty million dollars of funds in the 2016–2017 cycle.²⁰

This remains a small—miniscule, even—percentage of the city budget. In the 2017 fiscal year, the city’s expense budget totaled eighty-two billion dollars, and the capital budget totaled sixteen billion dollars.²¹ Although a fraction of these budgets remain uncommitted and discretionary, the point remains that PB, as a process, is the exception rather than the rule in NYC municipal budgeting.

PB funds are also largely capital funds. Such funds can be used for physical infrastructure that costs at least thirty-five thousand dollars. and has a lifespan of at least five years. In

¹⁷Hilary Silver, Alan Scott, and Yuri Kazepov, “Participation in Urban Contention and Deliberation,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34:3 (2010), pp. 453–477; Archon Fung, “Putting the Public Back into Governance: The Challenges of Citizen Participation and Its Future,” *Public Administration Review* 75:4 (2015) pp. 513–522.

¹⁸Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, *Fast Policy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 177.

¹⁹See <http://labs.council.nyc/pb/results/> on the New York City Council website for cycle 5 results (accessed October 30, 2016).

²⁰See <http://labs.council.nyc/pb/participate/> on the New York City Council website for cycle 6 information (accessed October 30, 2016).

²¹See <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/omb/downloads/pdf/sum4-16.pdf> for the NYC expense budget and http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/omb/downloads/pdf/ccp_10_16a.pdf for the capital budget.

contrast, expense funds may be used for programs or services, or smaller, one-time infrastructural expenditures. Thus, curb extensions to increase pedestrian safety and new technology for schools are considered capital projects, whereas temporary art exhibits, after-school tutoring, or other staff-dependent programming are considered expense projects. A few districts began experimenting with small pots (~ fifty thousand dollars) of expense PB funds in 2015–2016; generally, however, PB projects must be capital projects. This means that laptop computers for a school lab might be eligible, but tablets are not. These restrictions are not always intuitive; for instance, air conditioners and outdoor murals are also ineligible. Landfill closure is not, but methane collection is.

The process is governed by the PBNYC Rulebook, which lays out core goals of the PB process, a timeline, guidelines for structuring the process (such as holding neighborhood assemblies targeted to traditionally marginalized communities), and rules for eligible participants.²² The process is overseen by the PBNYC Steering Committee, with representatives from community-based organizations, Councilmembers and staff, PB participants, and other stakeholders. The Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP) and Community Voices Heard (CVH) provide technical assistance on the PB process and grassroots engagement. This steering committee supports and guides the process, conducts an end-of cycle evaluation, and revises and approves the PBNYC Rulebook annually. Since 2014, the City Council has also worked to coordinate efforts city-wide, and to host the steering committee.

A typical PB annual cycle might unfold as follows: In the fall, each City Councilmember hosts neighborhood assemblies throughout his or her district, and hundreds of New Yorkers attend to pitch proposals for community projects. Since New York's PB process is run by district, each district has a list of hundreds of project ideas to vet by November.

Over each winter, residents volunteer to become budget delegates, curating the proposals that will end up on the ballot. City Councilmembers' staff might also help budget delegates to vet out ineligible project ideas. Budget delegates work in teams, mostly organized by policy arena (and the relevant city agencies implementing these policies)— such as parks, education, or libraries. Some districts boast of committees organized by demographic groups, like youth. Beyond ascertaining eligibility, budget delegate teams might conduct formal needs assessments, work to “bundle” smaller projects, and conduct site visits to perform due diligence on proposed ideas to help their vetting process. Budget delegates might also consider political factors, such as which projects are likely to garner votes as ballot items; a well-vetted project that would consume most of the individual Councilmembers' respective one million to one and a half million dollar PB budgets, for instance, might not succeed when most residents wish to see multiple projects funded. Finally, they also work to flesh out details on proposals, so that they may then attain accurate cost figures from city agencies and vouch for feasibility before the proposals land on ballots. In the 2015–2016 cycle, City Council adopted a new policy stating that each city agency would only closely examine five project proposals per district. Thus, budget delegate teams might be sifting through as many as one hundred fifty ideas, to forward just five to the next phase of the process.

Each spring, residents vote on the project proposals; those that garner the most votes win funding. Every year, several Councilmembers also choose to fund runner-up projects with discretionary funds they did not originally allot to PB. Beyond this timeline and minimum Rulebook guidelines, individual city council districts have great discretion in how many

²²The 2016–2017 Rulebook is available at http://labs.council.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/PBNYC-2016_2017-Rulebook.pdf.

neighborhood assemblies they host, how much hand-holding or training the budget delegates receive, or what the voting sites look like.

Contestations in PBNYC

At least some of the most prominent, earlier PB cases were built upon strong civil society organizations; in Porto Alegre, for instance, community associations that helped to mobilize for democratization in Brazil were also participants in PB there.²³ American PB, in contrast, has focused on individuals, rather than community associations or organizations, as participants. In NYC, community organizations such as CVH and Arts & Democracy Project play integral roles in PB as organizers, trainers, and facilitators serving individuals, but not as representative membership organizations themselves. In a context of great racial and economic diversity, low levels of trust in government, and low levels of membership in formal civil society organizations,²⁴ PBNYC faces particular challenges in engaging stakeholders, especially those from traditionally marginalized communities.

In their article, Hayduk, Hackett, and Folla specifically focus on the successes and challenges of immigrant participation and political incorporation in NYC PB. Both documented and undocumented immigrants are eligible to participate in PB, and targeted outreach and language access have helped the process to engage foreign-born residents at impressive rates; twenty-eight percent of all voters in the 2014–2015 cycle, for instance, were foreign-born.²⁵ Nevertheless, Hayduk, Hackett, and Folla's analysis suggests that language access, material and logistical constraints, and fear of exposure related to immigration status shape the immigrant PB experience in compounded ways, both affectively and materially.

Research on PBNYC's first cycle in 2011–2012 suggests that American PB's central strength lies in its civic rewards, including greater knowledge about local government, direct contact with government officials, and leadership development.²⁶ Contextualizing PB in on-going debates about declining public trust in government, Swaner's article in this symposium argues that in communities that practice PB, local residents *did* express trust in government and in elected officials. Strikingly, this was not because they thought that more equitable decisions were being made. Rather, they expressed feeling connected to one another and better understanding the complexities of local government in meaningful ways. In Swaner's analysis, participants also articulated contrasts between elected and unelected officials in the PB process, pinpointing how PB increases public legitimacy for some governmental actors but not others.

Whereas the articles by Swaner and Hayduk, Hackett, and Folla focus on the participation of individuals in PBNYC, the articles by Jabola-Carolus and Su in this symposium ask questions regarding contestations over the institutional design and prevailing logics of "good projects" in PBNYC, respectively. These two articles particularly raise questions about the tensions that arise when PBNYC, a social justice project, operates within a larger administrative state. These tensions are perhaps particularly acute in PBNYC because the process did not come

²³Baiocchi and Ganuza, "Participatory Budgeting as If Emancipation Mattered."

²⁴Stephen Macedo et al., *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Have Undermined Citizenship and What We Can Do About It* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

²⁵Alexa Kasdan and Erin Markman, "A People's Budget: Cycle 4: Key Research Findings," (New York, NY: Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center, 2015).

²⁶Gillman, *Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America*.

about in a moment of democratization and profound administrative changes, as in some of the earlier cases in Latin America. At the same time, the decisions in PBNYC are binding and have more consequences than many of the European PB processes, which tend to be largely consultative.²⁷

Jabola-Carolus examines the institutional design of PBNYC's administrative functions, specifically through a close analysis of the cross-district Steering Committee. He asks how and why the shift in coordination from civil society organizations to central City Council offices impacted the mechanisms of popular control over PB and the prospects for PB expansion. Amidst bureaucratic institutionalization, Jabola-Carolus reveals on-going contestations of politics and power. Administrative capacity increased, but civil society influence decreased; this prompted new calls for reform regarding the governance of PBNYC itself. The evolution of PBNYC governance in its first five years thus points to the need for continued political will and repeated *re*-negotiations in collaboration—involving both cooperation and contestation—in successful state-civil society co-governing participatory institutions.

Su's article examines how the New York PB process has worked to simultaneously disrupt and maintain racial hierarchies, using a Critical Race Theory lens. I argue that while PBNYC has successfully reached out to and effectively enfranchised traditionally marginalized constituents, current criteria for "good projects" limit PB's transformative potential to problematize larger funding formulas and further address racial inequalities. To truly pursue racial equity, PB must enable participants to trouble the larger logics in which municipal budgeting and related policy regimes (including policing, for instance) operate.

Because all of the symposium authors are past or present members of the PBNYC research board, our articles are reflective not just of our respective efforts, but also collective ones. In their article, Kasdan and Markman outline the participatory action research (PAR) principles that shape the research board's work. In PBNYC, a PAR approach demanded constant re-negotiations on division of labor and priorities in the co-production/collection, co-analysis, and co-ownership of data, rather than a specific set of methodologies. Informing and helping to improve the process, rather than speaking to theoretical literatures, served as the primary goal. Kasdan and Markman underline the importance of adhering to PAR principles in such policy-oriented work. They examine questions of reflexivity in emphasizing impact validity in this work,²⁸ as well as tensions regarding what constitutes community-based and participatory research along the way. They argue that as PBNYC continues to expand, meaningful and inclusive participation in research and evaluation becomes more difficult without substantive resources.

In the conclusion, PBP founder and Executive Director Josh Lerner reflects upon the symposium's practical implications, emphasizes the impacts of PB as a movement, and re-contextualizes the PBNYC case in PBP's national work. Lerner argues that to address the challenges presented in this symposium, political leaders must take "bold steps" to deepen PB in New York and elsewhere. In addition to suggesting expanded project eligibility and funding, and scaling up to the city level, he calls for specific, crucial investments in equity.

²⁷Yves Sintomer, Carsten Herzberg, and Anja Röcke, "Participatory Budgeting in Europe: Potentials and Challenges," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32:1 (2008), pp. 164–178.

²⁸Sean Massey and Ricardo Barreras, "Introducing 'Impact Validity,'" *Journal of Social Issues* 69:4 (2013), pp. 615–632.

Emerging Themes and Questions

Taken together, these articles assure us that PBNYC, the largest American PB process, is not implementing PB as a watered down, good governance exercise in the name of social justice. Whereas previous iterations of PB focused on redistribution, we know a lot more about dimensions of the process itself and of social inclusion, of dynamics between participants and local politicians, and of the subtleties of institutionalization. PBNYC focuses our attention on who gets to exercise citizenship. The symposium also reminds us, however, that contestations over *meaningful* participation are on-going, and that of all of PBNYC's five goals, the last—equity—has proven to be the most elusive. A particular puzzle lies in how and why inclusion does not necessarily lead to redistribution.

The first clue to why equity is so challenging to achieve lies in the diversity of experiences and outcomes thus far; the diversity is itself a finding. In such a decentralized, council district-driven system, it is difficult to confidently report city-wide findings. That, combined with long timelines for project implementation and frankly, meager research budgets (and in many districts, a scarcity of data on where project proposals come from), has rendered longitudinal studies on outcomes much more difficult to conduct than studies on process and participation. The federalized system also prevents residents from addressing inequalities in a segregated landscape or address economies of scale across districts. Indeed, the relative small scale of PBNYC is another recurring motif; stakeholders repeatedly asserted that PB cannot operate meaningfully as a marginal exercise in the city budget. Without careful expansion, PBNYC can act as a release valve for frustrated residents and help some to address small-scale needs, but it will not necessarily help to address redistribution or equity.

The articles in this symposium challenge academics and practitioners to re-evaluate the contours of PB, to examine what constraints are helpful, and to pinpoint where we should open up the process and broaden the possibilities of PB in our popular imagination. In Brazil, capital funding constraints aided the process in making outcomes more concrete and more likely to be redistributive;²⁹ such constraints may not be so helpful in the US. To address these concerns, PBP, Steering Committee members, and other key stakeholders have begun to discuss alternative ways of organizing PBNYC, such as implementing cross-district, themed (focused on public health, for instance, or the arts) processes.

Second, the articles suggest that the small budgets mentioned above work in tandem with neoliberal austerity economics. Given limited budgets, it makes sense that the public might want to signal their priorities to elected officials, and to work towards bottom-up accountability. Politicians see this frustration, and several newly elected NYC Councilmembers ran on platforms promising to adopt PB in their respective districts.

At the same time, neoliberal logics of welfare retrenchment are pervasive. Combined with small PB budgets, this has emphasized “bang for the buck” discourses and criteria regarding which projects move forward and get funded. At its extreme, this dynamic embodies almost a market, consumer choice model rather than a deliberative one, with representatives giving pitches for PB funds, and telling delegates exactly what projects need funding in their neighborhoods. In interviews I conducted with city agency representatives, some made statements

²⁹Rebecca Abers, “From Clientelism to Cooperation: Local Government, Participatory Policy, and Civic Organizing in Porto Alegre, Brazil,” *Politics & Society* 26 (1998), pp. 511–538.

such as, “We jumped in right away, [be]cause we already had a well-oiled machine when it came to soliciting funds, so we just tailored that towards PB.”³⁰

A crucial next challenge for PBNYC thus lies in directing public attention towards questions of political economy, so that constituents confront public officials with questions of tax revenues and larger-scale inequalities, as well as budget allocations. The articles in this symposium suggest that in order to reach such macropolitical goals, practitioners of PB must attend to the micropolitics of PB—that is, in addressing the material conditions and logistical barriers to immigrant participation, how bureaucrats (such as city agencies) can earn public trust alongside elected officials, how decisions are negotiated between government officials and civil society organizations in the steering committee, and whose expertise and knowledge are valued in deciding what “feasible” and “good” projects look like.

Third, these micropolitical contestations suggest that designs of participatory democratic process are far from fixed. Rather, they are dynamic, continually constructed and contested by multiple sets of actors, with changing goals, cultural practices, and material conditions and resources. The institutional location of both the process and each set of key players matters; “communities” and “governmental actors” should not be homogenized.

Through its challenges, PBNYC has helped to create a new arena of politics in the city. Rather than aiming for resolutions to these contestations or “perfect” institutional designs, the articles in this symposium suggest that further research be devoted to how this new arena of politics, between top-down and bottom-up governance, operates.

With the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, such democratic experiments have only become more urgent. Amidst secrecy, large-scale privatization, and demagoguery in a seemingly post-truth world, processes like PB aim to bring back transparency, notions of community and the commons, and discussions rooted in concrete experiences and facts. Amidst toxic bigotry, how can such processes help communities to adjudicate disagreements in constructive ways, and to shift analyses from individuals (or demographic groups) to policies and institutions of power? How can stakeholders mobilize to further open this arena of participatory democracy, and to multiply generative contestations for power in decision-making? What practices, under what conditions, can then empower PB participants to question larger logics and systems of governance and political economy? We hope this symposium contributes to such research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Celina Su is Marilyn J Gittell chair in Urban Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center and associate professor of Political Science at Brooklyn College. She has served on the PBNYC citywide steering committee since its inception in 2011.

³⁰Interview with city agency representatives, 5 August 2014.