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## Trust Matters: Enhancing Government Legitimacy through Participatory Budgeting

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### ABSTRACT

Legitimacy is a problem of contemporary governance. Communities lack trust in elected officials—in their effectiveness, fairness, and representation of the public interest. Participatory budgeting (PB)—a set of democratic processes where residents determine how to spend a public budget—helps bridge that distance by letting the public make spending decisions. Since 2011, some of New York City’s (NYC) council members have been implementing PB with their capital budget—setting aside a million dollars in their districts each budget cycle for PB. Participatory budgeting has the potential to rebuild relationships between government and communities. Using data from over eighty interviews conducted by New York University (NYU) graduate students in 2013 and 2014 with PBNYC participants over two years, this article suggests that in council districts using PB, residents have greater feelings of access to and voice in local government, and better understanding of the complexities of spending public monies, often leading to a more positive view of government officials, and bolstering legitimacy of local government.

### Introduction

*How would you spend one million dollars to improve your community? What if you had a real say in how politicians spent taxpayer money?* These are questions that residents in some New York City (NYC) council districts get to answer each year through a process called participatory budgeting (PB). Participatory budgeting empowers ordinary people to decide on public spending in their neighborhoods. Community members identify local needs, propose projects that respond to those needs, and then vote to decide which projects win funding. Participatory budgeting started in NYC in 2011, with four city council members allotting one million dollars of their capital budget to decide, through PB, how it would be spent. By 2016, the number of city council members participating had risen to thirty-one—meaning that NYC residents are deciding on how over thirty million dollars in public money is allocated.

Each budget cycle, community members are engaged at different stages of the PB process. The first phase, which occurs in the fall, consists of neighborhood assemblies, where, through meetings and online methods, members of a community district learn about what capital

funding is, and then brainstorm project ideas on how the PB-allocated capital funding in their district should be spent. Usually, these project ideas are around issues such as environment, education, public safety, transportation, housing, and parks. Residents who want to be more involved volunteer to be budget delegates in the next phase, which happens throughout the winter months. During this phase, budget delegates meet in committees (around the project idea topics) to transform the community's initial ideas into full proposals. This involves researching local problems and needs in order to better inform the project; learning about the budget funds and the budget process; discussing, vetting, and prioritizing initial project ideas; and developing full project proposals, with assistance from experts and city agencies.<sup>1</sup> In the third phase, which occurs in the spring, delegates present their final projects to the community at project expos, and post their project proposals online. Community members sixteen years of age and older then vote on which projects to fund. Voting lasts one week and residents can vote at various locations throughout their district. During the last phase, spring and beyond, the participating council members submit their spending priorities—including the winning PB projects—for inclusion in the City budget, and begin to implement the winning proposals.

Since budget delegates are usually involved in all phases of the PB process, they have significant engagement with PB because of the length of their time commitment and the amount of work required of them to move projects from ideas to full proposals. Hence, in theory, PB has the potential to have an impact on them in multiple ways: feeling more engaged with and connected to their community; developing leadership skills; and having stronger relationships with government.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, some PB researchers have suggested that PB also has the potential for social justice through more responsive and equitable budgets that meet community needs.<sup>3</sup> This article seeks to answer whether, in practice, PB improves relationships between delegates and government, and whether participation as a budget delegate can lead to improved trust in and understanding of public officials and government processes.

## The Problem of Legitimacy

Legitimacy is a significant problem of contemporary governance. In the United States, research has shown a long-term decline in trust in elected officials and public agencies,<sup>4</sup> with historically low numbers in the last decade.<sup>5</sup> Communities question governments'

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<sup>1</sup>For example, a project proposal for a local compost facility might require meeting with the Department of Sanitation and the Department of Parks and Recreation.

<sup>2</sup>Participatory budgeting was brought to New York City by the Participatory Budgeting Project, an organization that cites these outcomes in their theory of change for their work. See the organization's website for their full theory of change. Available online at: [http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Theory-of-Change-PBP\\_FINAL-41.png](http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Theory-of-Change-PBP_FINAL-41.png) (accessed October 20, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Brian Wampler, "Participatory Budgeting: Core Principles and Key Impacts," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 8:2 (2012), Article 12, pp. 1–13; Adalmir Marquetti, Carlos E. Schonerwald da Silva, and Al Campbell, "Participatory Economic Democracy in Action: Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre, 1989–2004," *Review of Radical Public Economics* 44:1 (2012), pp. 62–81.

<sup>4</sup>John R. Alford, "We're All In This Together: The Decline of Trust in Government, 1958–1996," in John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (eds), *What Is It About Government that Americans Dislike?* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 28–46; Gary Orren, "Fall from Grace: The Public's Loss of Faith in Government," in Joseph S. Nye, Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King (eds), *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 77–107.

<sup>5</sup>The American National Election Studies (ANES; [www.electionstudies.org](http://www.electionstudies.org)). *The ANES 2012 Time Series Study [data-set]* (Stanford University and the University of Michigan, 2012), available online at: [http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/Tab5a\\_5.htm](http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/Tab5a_5.htm).

**Table 1.** Budget delegates by NYC council district.

Council district	Spring 2013		Spring 2014	
	# of delegates inter-viewed	Total # of delegates	# of delegates inter-viewed	Total # of delegates
District 8	5	60	6	50
District 19	3	17	–	–
District 23	10	54	3	50
District 31	–	–	10	41
District 33	11	40	3	40
District 38	–	–	5	43
District 39	7	50	8	56
District 45	4	39	7	19
Total	40	260	42	299

effectiveness, fairness, and representation of the public interest.<sup>6</sup> As Fung proposed, some of this lack of legitimacy stems from unintentional rifts between government officials and their constituents, in part due to political decision-making increasingly operating at a distance from the broader public.<sup>7</sup> Some research has shown that when government officials seek and use public input into policy decisions, perceptions of governmental fairness increases,<sup>8</sup> and that when public servants use fair processes—processes that focus on equity, respect, honesty, and lack of favoritism—the public’s trust in those officials increases.<sup>9</sup>

Participatory budgeting focuses on making public spending processes more transparent and fair by giving control over those processes to the community, thereby increasing the public’s voice and authority.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, PB has the potential to improve trust in government for those constituents who have significant engagement in the process in their district, because they will have gained a better understanding of how government spending works, and because they will appreciate that their council member gave decision-making power back to the community. This article seeks to examine this hypothesis through interviews with PB participants who are most active in the process—the budget delegates.

## Interview Sample

As part of the local evaluation of PBNYC, in the spring of 2013, graduate students enrolled in a participatory policy-making class that I was teaching at New York University (NYU) conducted semi-structured interviews with forty delegates from six NYC city council districts that were implementing PB (Districts 8, 19, 23, 33, 44, and 45), and in the spring of 2014, conducted interviews with forty-two budget delegates from seven districts (Districts 8, 23, 31, 33, 38, 39, and 45). Table 1 above shows the number of delegates interviewed in each district, along with the number of total delegates in that district.

<sup>6</sup>John Gastil, *By Popular Demand: Revitalizing Representative Democracy through Deliberative Elections* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup>Archon Fung, “Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance,” *Public Administration Review* Special Issue S1 (December 2006), pp. 66–75

<sup>8</sup>Mitchel N. Herian, Joseph A. Hamm, Alan J. Tomkins, and Lisa M. Pytlik Zillig, “Public Participation, Procedural Fairness, and Evaluations of Local Governance: The Moderating Role of Uncertainty,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 22:4 (2012), pp. 815–840.

<sup>9</sup>Gregg G. Van Ryzin, “Public Participation, Procedural Fairness, and Evaluations of Local Governance: The Moderating Role of Uncertainty,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21:4 (2011), pp. 745–760.

<sup>10</sup>Brian Wampler, “Participatory Budgeting: Core Principles and Key Impacts.”

The researchers reached out to every budget delegate in these districts who had a phone number or email address to invite them to participate in an interview. The total number of delegates in the districts listed above include anyone who signed up to be a delegate, even if they did not complete the process; hence, it is a pre-attrition total. Thus, the total number of delegates who were still active at the time of the interview—which was toward the end of the delegate process—was lower. Some of the delegates we contacted stated that they had dropped out of the budget delegate process early, because of the time commitment involved in being a PB delegate and, for some, because their project did not move forward.<sup>11</sup> However, some of those delegates still agreed to do the interview. Because we did not randomly select participants, but instead interviewed anyone who could complete an interview in the one-month data collection timeframe, the eighty-two people we interviewed are considered a non-probability sample. Of these eighty-two interviewees, sixty-three percent were female and thirty-seven percent were male. Ages ranged from eighteen to sixty-eight years old. All interviews were conducted in English, though Spanish was also an option.

## Methodology

The research was designed to document the strengths and weaknesses of the PB process in order to draw conclusions and make improvements for expanded PB implementation in NYC, to identify who is participating as budget delegates and why, and to understand the impact of this unique form of participatory policy-making on civic engagement. The budget delegate interviews were a component of the larger formative evaluation of PBNYC conducted by the Community Development Project (CDP) at the Urban Justice Center. CDP developed the interview instrument, and though NYU graduate students conducted the interviews, all data were shared back with CDP to be used in their full evaluation of PBNYC.

Interviews lasted between thirty and sixty minutes and were conducted either on the phone, in-person, or via skype.<sup>12</sup> Interviews took place between February and April in 2013 and 2014, toward the end of the budget delegate cycle, but before the vote on which projects to fund took place. The interview instrument was qualitative and semi-structured, with no quantitative items except for basic demographics. Respondents were asked questions about: previous community involvement and reasons for participating in PB; the usefulness of the budget delegate orientation; the committees and their decision-making processes; necessary skills and skill development; community needs; challenges to serving as a budget delegate and recommendations for future PB implementation processes; and the impact PB has had on perceptions of government, elected officials, and the local community. It is this last topic that is the focus of this article. This included questions such as, “How has PB changed the way you think about government and your elected officials?” and “How smooth has the process of vetting your proposal(s) with relevant public agencies been? How much direct interaction did you have with agencies?”

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<sup>11</sup>Because of non-response to the interview invite by some people, it is not possible to quantify how many budget delegates dropped out. Additionally, demographic data were not available for those delegates who did not respond to a request for an interview, so it cannot be determined whether those who dropped off from being a budget delegate had significantly different characteristics than those who stayed on for the full cycle.

<sup>12</sup>For those budget delegates who chose to be interviewed in person, the interviewee chose a location convenient to them—most often a local coffee shop in their district.

**Table 2.** Overall changes in perceptions of government or elected officials.

More positive	64%
Mixed (both positive and negative)	10%
More negative	3%
No change	23%

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data. Given that the original purpose of the interviews was not to test a hypothesis, but to inform and improve PB implementation, a grounded theory approach was used for analysis.<sup>13</sup> Coding categories were derived directly and inductively from the raw data, with theme as the coding unit. Constant comparisons of the budget delegate interview data were made across interviewees in order to highlight the similarities in themes and make any differences across districts apparent.

## Findings

Overall, major findings show that after participating in a PBNYC budget cycle as a budget delegate, interviewees report: (1) more positive attitudes toward their council members; (2) greater feelings of government legitimacy, transparency, and access; and (3) improved understanding of complex government (including budgeting) processes. Table 2 provides a quantitative summary of interviewees' responses to questions about how being involved in PB has changed their attitudes toward their council members and being involved in politics. A response was coded: (1) "positive" if the interviewee described having experienced one of the three outcomes listed above; (2) "negative" if the interviewee described having more negative views of their council member after serving as a budget delegate; (3) "mixed" if the interviewee had both positive and negative views; and (4) "no change" if participating in PB did not change their attitudes at all.<sup>14</sup>

### More Positive Attitudes Toward Council Members

Interviewees were asked if and how serving as a budget delegate changed the way they view their council member and local politics. A majority of the budget delegates stated that they had more confidence in, a greater appreciation of, or new respect for their district representative.

Sometimes this change was influenced by now having direct interaction with their council member and seeing their physical presence at PB-related events. For example, one delegate stated she was "very impressed" with her council member, who has been very responsive to them and comes to most meetings.<sup>15</sup> Another stated,

It's good for the council people. People get to see them who aren't close to them. People come and see them and I think that's important. It is a very positive feeling at the meetings, a ... good sense of solidarity.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Barney Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New York, NY: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967).

<sup>14</sup>An additional eighteen percent of interviewees did not provide responses that address the impact PB has had on their perceptions of government or elected officials; they are excluded from the table. The percentages in the table reflect a denominator that does not include these eighteen percent.

<sup>15</sup>Interview with District 23 Budget Delegate, 20 March 2014.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with District 33 Budget Delegate, 17 March 2013.

Some budget delegates felt that their attitudes toward their council members became more positive after learning about fellow delegates' own positive experiences. For example, one interviewee discussed interacting with delegates who lived in public housing. He stated that he "didn't know anything about [the council member] before, but he is much admired by people in public housing. He is visible in public housing, not scared by it," and that made him view the council member more positively.<sup>17</sup>

The majority of those who had greater admiration for their council member came from their council member's decision to do PB—and the commitment to community participation, and democracy in general, demonstrated by that decision. They appreciated that the capital money would no longer be allocated based on "political favors" or friendships, and that the community would have control over funds.<sup>18</sup> As one person stated, "At least here people are making some of the decisions. That's key, getting back to the roots of our democracy. Very exciting."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, another stated:

It made me happy and optimistic to see that [my council member] and others are trying to give the people more direct control. It makes me think that giving people more control will be something that politicians campaign on, and we will see an increasing amount of direct control over time. The fact that this process works reasonably well makes me wonder what else could be run directly by the citizens.<sup>20</sup>

Another delegate from a different council district said that she really admires her council member for choosing to do PB: "It is a powerful statement when someone wants the community to be involved, and involved with the money."<sup>21</sup> One interviewee stated that PB "gives the council member a great boost—he didn't have to do this, and he did, and that's meaningful."

Some delegates indicated that they were proud that their council member was an early adopter of PB in NYC, and it increased their respect for those members doing PB, "since it's a choice other elected officials don't make."<sup>22</sup> Some even questioned why others had not implemented PB. One stated that she now has "lower regards" for council members who do not participate in the PB process.<sup>23</sup> Another stated:

PB should definitely grow. It should be used more widely in city budgets and agencies, and by all council members. I'm planning to write a letter to all council members to ask them why they're not using PB. Also, I don't understand why we didn't use this any earlier, why we waited until only recently to start using PB.<sup>24</sup>

Some delegates had positive attitudes toward their council members prior to becoming a budget delegate, but said that PB strengthened their existing feelings, and made them proud of their council member. One stated that he is not one to be "down on the politicians" because he thinks "they work really hard," but he likes his council member "more than ever because of PB." He stated that his council member usually devotes the large majority of his capital budget to things having to do with education, and by giving that designated money to the community to decide how to spend, he risks not being able to fund the projects he would

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<sup>17</sup>Interview with District 33 Budget Delegate, 15 March 2013.

<sup>18</sup>Interview with District 38 Budget Delegate, 6 March 2014.

<sup>19</sup>Interview with District 23 Budget Delegate, 2 March 2013.

<sup>20</sup>Interview with District 39 Budget Delegate, 3 March 2014.

<sup>21</sup>Interview with District 45 Budget Delegate, 24 March 2014.

<sup>22</sup>Interview with District 8 Budget Delegate, 28 February 2014.

<sup>23</sup>Interview with District 8 Budget Delegate, 19 March 2013.

<sup>24</sup>Interview with District 31 Budget Delegate, 19 March 2014.

normally focus on. The delegate stated that he was “very impressed that he would do that and that PB means that much to him.”<sup>25</sup> Another interviewee from a different district said, “Well I always saw [council member] really positively, but this made me feel more confident.”<sup>26</sup>

Other positive things that interviewees noted included an appreciation of how council members tried to get more people to participate, especially people who were not traditionally civically engaged. Additionally, a few delegates also appreciated that the staff at the council districts were extremely helpful, especially when it came to helping delegates find meeting space, connect with city agencies, provide food and coffee at events. While “liking” a council member does not always equate with feelings of government legitimacy, the attitudes expressed by the delegates highlighted an appreciation for the council member *because* of their involvement with PB. As the research discussed above shows, procedural fairness and transparency in the decision-making processes—a key tenant of PB—does often lead to increased legitimacy.

Though many budget delegates improved their opinions of their council member because of their involvement with PB, for a smaller number, attitudes did not change. This was most often the case when the delegate had long been active in their community—either through community-based organizations or local political campaigns—and already had a working relationship with their district’s council office.

Four delegates who were interviewed stated that they wished their council members had more of a presence during the different community-wide PB meetings such as the neighborhood assemblies, delegate orientation, and project expo. In turn, some felt that even though their council member was implementing PB, it was not a priority for them.

I wasn’t expecting the council member to be involved in this process and I hand it to him, the only thing is when I felt a twinge of “you gotta be kidding me” was during the poster process [project expo]. I mean I’m paying a babysitter \$18 an hour, and they said I think [the council member’s] going to show up, like he was the Wizard of Oz or something ... I think I do hand it to him to be doing PB, I think it is a smart political move.

But don’t not show up to the poster thing.<sup>27</sup>

He only came to one or two meetings, but his presence is a really big deal to the community. If he could come by more often, shake hands with people, and get to know people more, it would make a difference.<sup>28</sup>

Participatory budgeting is just one thing council members do, and what they do outside of PB affects perceived legitimacy as well. In the most extreme case, for example, one council member who was implementing PB was arrested on corruption charges during the PB cycle. Two interviewees from that district stated that they did not have improved attitudes toward their council member after serving as a delegate. One stated that given the “secret, behind-your-back” dealings of her representative in particular, she remains cynical and skeptical about the ways in which things get done and whether they are actually in the genuine best interest of the constituents of the district.<sup>29</sup> Another delegate from the same council district said that

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<sup>25</sup>Interview with District 23 Budget Delegate, 1 March 2013.

<sup>26</sup>Interview with District 45 Budget Delegate, 14 March 2013.

<sup>27</sup>Interview with District 33 Budget Delegate, 14 March 2013. When the interviewee referenced “the poster thing,” she was referring to the project expo where delegates present their final projects to the community to introduce projects that are on the ballot to community members.

<sup>28</sup>Interview with District 45 Budget Delegate, 7 March 2013.

<sup>29</sup>Interview with District 19 Budget Delegate, 4 April 2013.

though he liked working with his community, he still believes that politicians are “liars, thieves, and incompetent at their jobs.”<sup>30</sup>

## Improved Government Transparency and Access

When asked how PB in NYC changed their opinion of their council members and local government, some budget delegates talked about how the process made policy decision-making more transparent, providing accountability and information to communities about what the government is doing and how those decisions are made. One delegate stated that she believes that PB makes government and government officials more accessible, whereas prior to PB, she thought officials were just “power mongers at the expense of public interest.”<sup>31</sup> Another delegate simply stated that, “It has given me a clear way to hold elected officials accountable,”<sup>32</sup> while another still, said, “I feel government is more democratic after joining PB.”<sup>33</sup> Others described further the impact that PB has had on their belief that government officials who do PB are more accessible and transparent in their work:

You can call your city council office because you have a relationship with them, you have the phone number of [council member] and you can call him at 3 am to tell him that you think there is a building across your street, which is being built illegally because you are hearing noise at 3 am.<sup>34</sup>

You have the opportunity to select different projects that are better needed in the area versus an elected official, or only the people in their ears. The issues are thrown out there and people get the chance to vote. It’s more transparent.<sup>35</sup>

[PB] was very empowering—having a voice and being able to impact how the city spends money. The link and relationship between the city’s money and people’s money is more apparent.<sup>36</sup>

Some delegates noted that they were especially impressed when they discovered that their council member or one of the local city agencies funded their project even though it did not win in the vote—an indication to them that government officials were listening to them, and making funding decisions based on what the community asked for. Because participants felt that they have had a fair opportunity to voice their concerns and be part of budget choices, they were more likely to see the policy decision processes of government as transparent, accessible, and fair.

## Improved Understanding of Government Processes

In addition to greater feelings of government legitimacy because of the PB process, many of the budget delegates also discussed how participating in PB gave them a greater understanding of the complexities of government, which led to increased empathy toward what their council members have to go through in order to get things done. As one delegate who had previously had almost no involvement in politics before said:

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<sup>30</sup>Interview with District 19 Budget Delegate, 3 March 2013.

<sup>31</sup>Interview with District 33 Budget Delegate, 7 March 2014.

<sup>32</sup>Interview with District 45 Budget Delegate, 6 March 2013.

<sup>33</sup>Interview with District 23 Budget Delegate, 19 March 2014.

<sup>34</sup>Interview with District 33 Budget Delegate, 10 March 2014.

<sup>35</sup>Interview with District 31 Budget Delegate, 20 February 2014.

<sup>36</sup>Interview with District 33 Budget Delegate, 7 March 2014.

Suddenly you find yourself in the world of politics. Not talking about electoral politics, but about the root word “politics”—being in a city and getting people to sit together and agree to a plan. Never had to do that before. It was an eye opener. Never realized how difficult it was.<sup>37</sup>

The same delegate discussed how, before serving as a budget delegate, he felt that when the council member, state assemblyman, and borough president showed up in his neighborhood to help save a local supermarket that was in danger of closing, they were just politicians “pandering for our votes.” But after he started doing PB, he saw what his council member “has to deal with every single day, walked a few baby steps in his shoes,” and this changed his thinking about what politicians are going through, the difficult processes and the amount of work that goes into even a small amount of change. Similarly, others highlighted their increased understanding of the budget process and the impact it has had on their view of government officials.

It has been helpful in understanding the intricacies and complexities of how things get approved. [Experiencing] the complexity of the system and [understanding] how some of the rules might be bad, but you need to inevitably have them in place. Ultimately, [the PB process] has humanized the people behind government.<sup>38</sup>

It’s given me more respect for [the council members]. I already had respect for them. The contingencies they have to hear are daunting. Much more daunting than I [previously thought].<sup>39</sup>

The PB process was ... good insight into elected officials’ job and the challenges they face in terms of multiple demands and limited budget. I now have perspective and understanding of the budget process and continue to respect any politician committed to this process.<sup>40</sup>

It makes me less likely to criticize and throw stones. It is easy to criticize the work that politicians do, but now I have a better sense of the complex set of issues. I have more respect for that process. I’d be less quick to criticize until I know more.<sup>41</sup>

Other delegates discussed their increased knowledge about how much capital projects cost—much higher than they had assumed, or how much the cost would be if non-governmental agencies implemented the projects. One stated that she found it “disheartening” to learn but good to understand how much it costs to run parks.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, three others stated:

It’s interesting and it’s good for people to get to know government and the way things work on the brick and mortar level, to actively understand funding for things through PB. It would be great if more people were involved and knowledgeable especially about how things are priced. Parents were shocked at the costs of renovating [the local school], compared with how much it would cost to contract themselves versus contracting through the School Construction Authority. It was a shock to the system.<sup>43</sup>

How do you overcome and try to make common sense when things are crazy. Seeing a park where you could put a fitness area, which you wouldn’t think would cost that much, but they tell you it would cost half a million.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Interview with District 39 Budget Delegate, 28 March 2013.

<sup>38</sup>Interview with District 38 Budget Delegate, 6 March 2014.

<sup>39</sup>Interview with District 38 Budget Delegate, 13 March 2014.

<sup>40</sup>Interview with District 31 Budget Delegate, 11 March 2014.

<sup>41</sup>Interview with District 39 Budget Delegate A, 14 February 2014.

<sup>42</sup>Interview with District 45 Budget Delegate, 6 March 2014.

<sup>43</sup>Interview with District 39 Budget Delegate B, 14 March 2014.

<sup>44</sup>Interview with District 38 Budget Delegate, 9 March 2014.

It bothers me when people talk badly about government spending, but when people come to the meeting and see projects costing ten times more than they should cost ... there should be more transparency and communication for that not to happen. We're not in Communist Russia where you need something to get stamped forty times before something gets anywhere, though sometimes this process makes it feel like it.<sup>45</sup>

The sentiment expressed by the previous quote suggests that while PB has improved transparency in some ways—by making the *process* of selecting projects open and clear—it has also shed light on the inefficient nature of government spending. The delegate was left asking for even more transparency to understand why projects have to cost so much when administered by the government.

One interview stated that PB “gave me more understanding of what it takes to address basic issues—more expensive than you think it will be.”<sup>46</sup> She discussed learning how many agencies need to be involved, even for simple tasks such as installing a sidewalk or traffic circle. “To have day-to-day experience, learning how complicated the process is, but that people are motivated to do it. There are factors involved that you don’t see—getting permits, contracts, et cetera. Recognizing complexities of the system.”

Another delegate compared participating in PB to a civics course, where he was given “a reality check about funding constraints,” became informed about the “hoops to impact change,” but also the importance of making your voice heard:

The only way to know how the process works is to have deep knowledge of it. Need to assert your voice to be heard and be involved. If you show up, and show up often, and speak up often, things get done. People need to learn that.<sup>47</sup>

Often delegates connected this increased knowledge of government processes to their own increased ability to participate in these processes:

I learned a lot from [the Department of Transportation]. I learned what project ideas were not possible. I learned to research, investigate facts and costs. I learned to summarize information for our presentations, and to hold back from saying certain things, diplomacy.<sup>48</sup>

Still others pointed to learning about what government can and cannot do—and why—as their favorite part of being a budget delegate. This new understanding has made them feel more connected to government. One summed up this feeling by saying:

The best thing about being a budget delegate is feeling connected to government. Being a delegate has lessened the distance I feel between myself and government and made me feel like I’m doing something tangible. Another good thing about being a budget delegate is having the opportunity to learn a lot about how the budget process works, how much things cost, and how council members make budgetary decisions.<sup>49</sup>

## Working with Government Agencies

While participating in PB led to positive attitudes toward council members and a greater understanding of government processes, it did not always translate into appreciation for the government agencies that would most often be involved in implementing winning

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<sup>45</sup>Interview with District 39 Budget Delegate C, 14 March 2014.

<sup>46</sup>Interview with District 45 Budget Delegate, 7 March 2014.

<sup>47</sup>Interview with District 45 Budget Delegate, 6 March 2014.

<sup>48</sup>Interview with District 23 Budget Delegate, 20 March 2014.

<sup>49</sup>Interview with District 31 Budget Delegate, 1 March 2014.

projects. Rather, many delegates expressed frustration with these agencies, and felt that the biggest challenge to budget delegate work was working with them. This was particularly true for delegates whose proposed projects required them to interface with multiple agencies. Delegates cited several reasons for difficulty with trying to get agencies to help with their PB proposals: the bureaucratic nature of the way the agencies are run, lack of constructive feedback, no communication, and lack of timely responses—particularly important given the relatively short amount of time—a few months—delegates have to develop their proposals before the community vote.

Some delegates' frustration with city agencies developed early on in the project vetting process. Some stated that it was simply because they could not get representatives from some of the relevant city agencies to communicate with them, and that "getting in touch with the agencies was the biggest challenge."<sup>50</sup> We had a bunch of [Department of Environmental Project (DEP)] projects and met with DEP once, and the person who was supposed to get back to us on the feasibility of these projects never got back to us. We sent emails, called, contacted the city councilman office, and we couldn't really compel this person to follow up.<sup>51</sup>

One team of delegates that were on a committee to develop PB projects related to the environment came up with ideas that needed information from the Department of Parks and Recreation as well as the Department of Sanitation. A delegate from this team said that "Sanitation wasn't responsive," and that "the Parks Department was really responsive initially, but getting back info from them was difficult."<sup>52</sup> Some delegates hypothesized that the lack of communication by some agencies was because they were not used to having to interface with the members of the public, though sometimes council member staff who tried to get answers on behalf of budget delegates were not able to get a response either.

Others had luck contacting city agencies, but only after many follow-up calls and emails. One delegate stated that interacting with public agencies was her favorite part of being involved with PB, despite them being unresponsive to emails. She said that she went to a meeting with the School Construction Authority, which was "really great and helpful," but then followed up with emails and received no answers. She stated that she "sent follow up emails and finally got an answer that was a result of being consistent. They should have someone whose job it is to exclusively answer these PB questions."<sup>53</sup> Another stated:

Vetting our proposals with relevant public agencies has been challenging in terms of hearing back, setting meetings, and figuring out how much we were going to put towards projects. Overall we were able to connect with city agencies and get rough cost estimates, but only because we followed up a lot to get responses.<sup>54</sup>

Some of the frustration related to the budget delegates being told that their projects were too expensive, too inexpensive, or not feasible for other reasons. As one delegate noted, "The proposal can break at the city level—they have the power to say if they will 'ok' the project."<sup>55</sup> Another stated:

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<sup>50</sup>Interview with District 45 Budget Delegate, 30 March 2014.

<sup>51</sup>Interview with District 23 Budget Delegate, 5 March 2013.

<sup>52</sup>Interview with District 23 Budget Delegate, 13 March 2013.

<sup>53</sup>Interview with District 38 Budget Delegate, 6 March 2014.

<sup>54</sup>Interview with District 31 Budget Delegate, 11 March 2014.

<sup>55</sup>Interview with District 33 Budget Delegate, 3 April 2014.

City agencies control everything that gets done. Even if the district has the money, physical structure of the district is not the delegates' to modify—even if everyone in the district wants something, they can't modify the district as they see fit, even if the money is there. Understanding which agencies control which physical components of the districts, and which things seem simple on their face span so many agencies that it's impossible to get the change made.<sup>56</sup>

This interviewee also stated that the Department of Transportation (DOT) “shot almost everything down,” referring to their ideas for capital projects. Another, who was on a transportation committee in his district, stated that his committee could not put forth any projects at the upcoming vote:

We have no projects because MTA says bathrooms are open, DOT says fixing the street is a million dollars when basic math says it's not, and they won't do repaving, putting up signs or any of the other things that we think should be done, so the transportation committee has no projects.<sup>57</sup>

Another delegate discussed having a few meetings with the Department of Parks and Recreation, but was told that their projects were too costly, and the agency, “didn't want to waste their time with proposals that would be too expensive.”<sup>58</sup> However, the frustration he felt did not translate into negative attitudes toward the agency; rather, the delegate appreciated that the Parks representatives were realistic. Another delegate stated that even when agencies were resistant to supporting their projects, she appreciated that they were honest about it. Others, however, did develop negative attitudes toward certain agencies.

We met with [the Department of Environmental Protection], and they get an F-. Said thanks but no thanks and asked to step out of the process. They have a PR problem and always have, and they could've used this experience to connect, and they failed.<sup>59</sup>

[The Department of Environmental Protection] had one guy come and speak to us, very personable. But then they showed no accountability and didn't help at all.<sup>60</sup>

Still, others had positive experiences with city agencies. For example, one stated that “working with the DOT and MTA was great, they were very professional and interesting,”<sup>61</sup> while another said,

We had to work with School Construction Authority and they were very helpful, and we found out in middle of process that a lot of the things [the delegates were proposing] had been funded already. A learning experience and helpful to work with agencies.<sup>62</sup>

Another stated, “It's given me more respect for the various government agencies and the work they regularly do. I wish they had more resources to do the things they need to do.”<sup>63</sup>

A few delegates stated that their interactions with city agencies went smoothly because their council member's staff helped facilitate the communication:

It's great that the council office staff is there and functions almost as a mediator between the delegates and the agency. This is very important because we—the delegates—don't know about the costs, while the agency has a lot of knowledge about this. So, we're facing an unbalanced, shady situation that could be a problem for costing the project.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Interview with District 39 Budget Delegate, 3 March 2014.

<sup>57</sup>Interview with District 31 Budget Delegate, 20 February 2014.

<sup>58</sup>Interview with District 38 Budget Delegate, 9 March 2014.

<sup>59</sup>Interview with District 33 Budget Delegate, 21 March 2013.

<sup>60</sup>Interview with District 23 Budget Delegate, 2 March 2013.

<sup>61</sup>Interview with District 33 Budget Delegate, 5 March 2014.

<sup>62</sup>Interview with District 31 Budget Delegate, 4 March 2014.

<sup>63</sup>Interview with District 39 Budget Delegate, 20 February 2014.

<sup>64</sup>Interview with District 31 Budget Delegate, 19 March 2014.

Another person who had served as a budget delegate for multiple years stated that communication with agencies had improved from previous PB years, a reminder that this process is new for all parties involved. There are agencies that are not used to working with constituents, and for those agencies in particular there may be an adjustment period as they begin to do things differently because of PB. As these government agencies have greater exposure to PB—because PB has been implemented in more and more budget cycles; and because more districts are involved each cycle, leading to an increase in number of delegate committees contacting the agencies for support—the communication between delegates and agency representatives may improve.

## Conclusion

Overall, the interviews show that participating in PB as a budget delegate leads to greater admiration of and respect for local council members who have chosen to implement PB in their districts. The main reasons for these improved attitudes included greater access to their council member, and an appreciation of the council member's decision to do PB in order to increase community voice and transparency in decision-making. This confirms the part of the PB theory that states that PB brings people closer to government.<sup>65</sup> Given that previous literature suggests that when government officials seek and use public input in their decision-making processes, and that when these processes are fair, perceptions of governmental fairness increases, as does trust in those officials,<sup>66</sup> council members participating in PB may experience greater legitimacy in the eyes of their constituents.

The data did not show, however, that this improved trust in government was due to participants' feelings that PB led to greater social justice through more equitable budgets. Participants did not talk about improved trust in government being due to a redistribution of how the money was allocated or spent, or because the projects that were chosen were a more effective way of meeting community needs than had PB not been present. This may be for two main reasons. First, interviews took place right before the vote, so unless the delegate had participated the previous year, he or she could not speak to whether or not the winning projects helped to redistribute capital funding toward more marginalized communities; indeed, they were not directly asked about this given the timing of the interviews, and given the formative nature of the qualitative research. The research was not designed to test a social justice hypothesis. Second, even after projects are voted on, they can take years to actually be implemented and completed, so even if delegates were aware of results from previous years, they may not have seen the tangible impact of the reallocation of funds.

The findings do show a link between PB and trust in government that had not been previously outlined: delegates gained a better understanding of government processes. This greater understanding of the complexities and challenges to implementing capital projects strengthen their appreciation for what their representatives have to go through in order to spend capital funds. This increase in trust of local officials serves to bolster public perceptions of government legitimacy.

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<sup>65</sup>See the Participatory Budgeting Project theory of change, available online at: [http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Theory-of-Change-PBP\\_FINAL-41.png](http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Theory-of-Change-PBP_FINAL-41.png).

<sup>66</sup>Van Ryzin, "Public Participation, Procedural Fairness, and Evaluations of Local Governance"; Herian, Hamm, Tomkins, and Pytlik Zillig, "Public Participation, Procedural Fairness, and Evaluations of Local Governance."

Taken together, this indicates that budget delegates' trust in government was expanded by participating in the PB process itself, and not as a result of what that expanded participation achieved at a policy level (for example, redistribution of resources). Therefore, outcomes do not appear to matter for legitimacy and trust in government as much as the inclusive PB process, which involves community voice, transparency in decision-making, and an understanding of processes. Indeed, this is analogous to what other researchers have found in other areas of government. For example, research has shown that when defendants and litigants perceive the court process to be fair, they are more likely to comply with court orders and follow the law in the future—regardless of whether they “win” or “lose” their case;<sup>67</sup> that is, procedural justice (fairness of justice procedures and interpersonal treatment) is important for building legitimacy, regardless of distributive justice (fairness of the final outcome).

While PB seems to be boosting legitimacy of the elected officials, the same does not necessarily hold true for the unelected ones. PB delegates clearly outlined some of the challenges to working with city agencies, and the concerns highlighted in the interviews show that there is room for improvement. PB delegates need greater access to city agencies and more responsive communication from agency representatives. Agencies need better understanding of how PB is changing how capital funding is allocated, and training on how they could best support the new processes. They would then be in a better position to take advantage of the opportunity to interface with communities in order to boost their own legitimacy. As PB NYC expands and agency staff become more used to interacting with budget delegates, the process may become smoother. And, the impact will be worth it. As one delegate summarized:

This was so much work, there was a lot more work than I expected, but ultimately I think PB could be amazing for the city. So I think it's still just starting out, so a lot of, rough edges, particularly with the city agencies getting used to work with smaller projects, but that ultimately can be so powerful for the people living in here to finally have a voice. How else do you have access to the machinery of the city? You don't, really. So I think that is really powerful.<sup>68</sup>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Rachel Swaner** is the deputy research director at the Center for Court Innovation. She is currently the principal investigator on multiple research projects related to gun violence, children's exposure to violence, and sex work and human trafficking. She is on the advisory board for the Participatory Budgeting Project. Rachel received her PhD in Sociology from the CUNY Graduate Center, and has been an adjunct professor at NYU's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service since 2007, teaching courses in Participatory Policymaking and Program Evaluation.

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<sup>67</sup>See, for example, Tom R. Tyler and Yuen J. Huo, *Trust in the Law: Encouraging Public Cooperation with the Police and Courts* (New York, NY: Russell-Sage Foundation, 2002).

<sup>68</sup>Interview with District 33 Budget Delegate, 3 April 2014.