CITIZENS ENGAGING GOVERNMENT: PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

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ABSTRACT

Local governments are responding to growing pressures to increase transparency and citizen engagement, particularly in light of the fiscal stress created by the Great Recession. Historically, the budget process has been a target for these efforts, generally through public hearings and requirements for publicly available budget documents. However, there is growing interest in moving past information sharing to more dynamic and interactive engagement. A review of citizen engagement literature reveals the diverse ways in which local governments and citizens engage with each other. It also reveals that most studies are presented primarily from the perspective of the local government. This article responds by presenting a case study on Greensboro, North Carolina, where a citizen-led effort successfully introduced participatory budgeting (PB). In October 2014, Greensboro passed a resolution in which it committed $500,000 annually to PB, allowing citizens to develop and vote on budget proposals. The research presented here is a first step toward understanding efforts to increase transparency and engagement from a citizen perspective, and it highlights some of the unique challenges that citizens face when they take on such an initiative.

INTRODUCTION

Citizen engagement has received increasing attention over the past few decades as government officials, scholars, and citizen groups have begun to value additional citizen input and participation in government. In fact, the Government Finance Officers Association considers citizen involvement in the budget process a best practice. The literature identifies many reasons why local governments may want to engage citizens: for example, to meet legal requirements, to advance democratic ideals of citizen participation, to advance social justice, to educate and inform the public, to encourage innovation and the

creation of new ideas, to improve processes, to create a sense of community, and to generate greater public support (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006; Nabatchi, 2010; Head, 2011; Bryson, et al. 2013; Ho, 2013).

The literature on citizen engagement and participation (CEP) is robust, and the work on case studies, meta-analyses, process studies, and the impact of CEP on outcomes is excellent. However, there is a void in the literature with regard to examining the citizen perspective. Understandably, a great deal of public administration literature looks at the challenge of integrating citizen input and preferences from the perspective of government, noting the difficulties involved in engaging and educating a diverse and representative citizen population. Not all efforts are initiated by the government, though, and when citizens and/or nonprofits are the champions of CEP, the challenges and obstacles are likely to be different. This article examines an example of a citizen-initiated participation effort: participatory budgeting (PB) in Greensboro, North Carolina. This case reveals that while there are obstacles that are unique to citizens' efforts, many of the challenges are the same as those encountered by government.

This article examines PB in Greensboro through a series of conversations and interviews with both practitioners and members of the citizen group that introduced participatory budgeting to Greensboro (Participatory Budgeting Greensboro, or PB GSO) and through analysis of newspaper articles and hearings. It took more than three years for the citizen champions of participatory budgeting to convince the Greensboro city council members to pass a resolution allowing for participatory budgeting. The current plan is for the council to earmark $500,000 for citizen-chosen projects in fiscal year 2017.

The article begins with a discussion of the many definitions of *citizen engagement*, with special attention to citizen engagement in the budget process. It then provides an overview of the ways in which citizen engagement occurs and a brief discussion of the limitations of each. A review of why academics and government officials believe that CEP is valuable follows. The article then discusses a new form of direct citizen participation: participatory budgeting. It concludes with an

examination of unresolved questions and the challenges that participatory budgeting faces after adoption, finding that they are similar to the concerns of other engagement mechanisms.

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

While the literature on CEP is increasingly robust, there is not one universally agreed upon definition of either *engagement* or *participation*. Possible reasons for the different definitions are the substantial differences in goals, expectations, and perceived roles of the actors (both governmental and public). For the purposes of this study, *citizen engagement* is defined as the interaction between a government and its citizens on policy, program, and services. Citizen engagement encompasses a wide variety of interactions between government and the community, "ranging from information sharing to community consultation, and, in some instances, active participation in government decision making processes" (Queensland Department of Communities, 2005, p. 5). As this definition indicates, there is also a related concept, citizen participation.[1]

Citizen participation is a form of citizen engagement. However, it has a specific definition and involves two-way interaction, which is not necessarily the case for citizen engagement. For the purposes of this study, *citizen participation* means "the process by which members of a society (who not holding office or administrative positions in government) share power with public officials in making substantive decisions and in taking actions related to community" (Roberts, 2004, p. 320).[2]

Citizen Engagement and Participation in the Budget Process

Within the CEP literature, a great deal of analysis has been done on public hearings and citizen surveys, often centering on the budget process (for example, Franklin & Ebdon, 2002; Paul, 2007; Rivenbark & Ballard, 2012; Gao, 2012). From an

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[1]. It is important to note that CEP also means different things to different stakeholders. The issue is not simply academics disagreeing on the wordsmithing (Berner et al., 2011).

[2]. For an overview and an in-depth discussion of the many definitions of *citizen participation*, please see Roberts (2004).

applied perspective, there are numerous reasons why elected officials may want to involve citizens in the budget process, including

- informing citizens about the budget and available resources,
- informing citizens about the broader needs of the community,
- providing decision makers with insights about community wishes and preferences,
- educating citizens about government's inability to honor all requests and the need for hard trade-offs,
- generating new ideas and innovation,
- generating support for the budget that is ultimately adopted, and
- improving the budget document overall (Marois et al., 2010).

The academic literature echoes many of the same sentiments and identifies a basic reason why the budget provides a unique access point to government: the budget is a microcosm for all government (Franklin, Ho, & Ebdon, 2009). The budget reveals important information on the scope of government and how it raises revenues and uses those funds. Therefore, it can be an important tool for educating, informing, and involving citizens.[3]

Specifically, the literature has identified three primary rationales for citizen engagement in the budget process: (1) it provides an opportunity to educate citizens about how resources are allocated, (2) it provides an avenue for elected officials to understand their citizens' preferences, and (3) it can aid citizens in holding elected officials accountable (Franklin & Ebdon, 2007). Additionally, public policy decisions are often made during the budgeting process, and involving citizens in the decision-making process presents an important opportunity for them to be meaningfully involved with their government (Ebdon, 2000). Integrating citizens into the budget process may, in fact, lead to allocation of resources that more closely matches citizen

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3. While there is an increasing amount of attention given to the expenditure side, there remains little engagement or transparency on the revenue side (Afonso, 2014b).

preferences and more effectively meets their needs (Guo & Neshkova, 2013).

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS

There are three broad types of CEP in the United States, each of which can be achieved through various mechanisms. They are information sharing, consultation, and active participation (Queensland Department of Public Works, 2010). Information sharing and consultation, the two most common forms of CEP in the United States, are engagement mechanisms; only active participation is citizen participation under the definitions previously laid out. An extension of active participation is direct participation, which is the focus of this analysis. Each type is discussed below and examples are provided.[4]

Information Sharing

In the information sharing method, local government leaders create a one-way relationship focused not on receiving input but rather on providing citizens with information. Making budget documents and fact sheets available and creating websites that citizens can access for budget information are examples of information sharing. This is how elected officials, and to a lesser extent practitioners, tend to view citizen engagement (Berner et al., 2011). One benefit of an information sharing relationship is that it is both low cost and low effort for practitioners. Additionally, it can be effective for communicating important budget information. In a time of budget shortfalls and limited resources, this is an attractive method for engaging citizens while ensuring that practitioners are able to focus on the daily operations of the local government. In addition to the examples above, more recent innovations in information sharing include

[4]. The literature on the subject that is geared to practitioners echoes the academic literature but slightly reframes it. An excellent example is “A Local Official’s Guide to Public Engagement in Budgeting” (Marois et al., 2010). This guide identifies six ways in which a local government can engage its citizens: education and outreach, surveys, advisory committees, workshops, deliberative forums, and relationships with neighborhood councils.

taxpayer receipts (Afonso, 2014a; Kendall & Kessler, 2013) and popular financial reports (Yusuf et al., 2013). Both of these are created with an interested lay audience in mind and are designed to increase transparency and accountability.

The information sharing method does have its drawbacks, however. Perhaps the most important drawback is that it creates a one-way avenue of feedback from the local government to its citizens. Citizens are provided with access to the information but have limited (if any) ability to give local leaders feedback that could be helpful in guiding budget decisions. Another shortcoming of the information sharing method is that it often requires citizens to proactively seek out the provided information, and average citizens may remain uninformed about where their taxes go and what their local governments do.

Consultation

A second method of CEP is consultation. Consultation creates a two-way relationship based on citizen feedback and relies on a fundamental assumption by local leaders that citizen feedback is beneficial to the policy setting and administrative process. This method provides an avenue for citizen input while still allowing local leaders to define the agenda. A typical example of consultation is the provision of venues where information is available and citizens are given opportunities to share their opinions and suggestions with local government officials, such as town hall meetings and hearings. An additional benefit of this method is that it requires limited time and money on the part of the local government. Consultations with citizens also meet practitioners' goals of informing citizens and creating community liaisons (Berner et al., 2011). An example of a recent innovation is the budget simulation exercise that Fairfax County, Virginia, created to help educate citizens about the difficult trade-offs that must be made in public budgeting and to provide them with a mechanism for presenting their preferences (Cook, 2013).

While consultation can be very informative for local leaders, they should be aware that they will likely still hear from a segment of the population that may not be representative of the

population as a whole. Therefore, leaders need to balance what they hear with what they believe to be the needs of the greater population. Establishing this balance is no easy task and requires dedication by elected officials and practitioners.

Active Participation

Active participation is the third form of engagement. It is distinct from consultation in that citizens actively shape budget options throughout the process, though the government maintains final decision-making control over the budget. In active participation, elected officials, local practitioners, and citizens are viewed as collaborators working together to create policy. This method can provide leaders and citizens with a truly interactive experience to shape policies, such as those regarding budgeting decisions. Done correctly, active participation allows local governments to make decisions that are aligned with the priorities of their citizens. This is what citizens think of when they think of citizen engagement (Berner et al., 2011). An example of a proposed innovation of active participation is participatory performance budgeting, where citizen input will be used "strategically and systematically to guide budgetary thinking and performance management… as well as the technical analysis at the micro-organizational level of resource allocation" (Ho, 2013, p. 19).

Unfortunately, active participation does come with significant difficulties and drawbacks. It requires a sizeable time commitment by local practitioners and elected officials that may interfere with their daily duties. Additionally, 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. Furthermore, if citizens (and practitioners) are asked to make this large commitment, it should result in the information generated being used and integrated into the budget document in some form. If their input is not used, you risk losing willingness to participate in the future and alienating them.

A more extreme form of active participation is direct participation. Direct participation is different than active participation in that in active participation, the government is still the ultimate decision maker, but in direct participation, the citizens are the decision makers. This form of CEP is largely absent in the United States. Direct participation is based on the notion that an active and engaged citizenry is critical when making substantive decisions that are important to the community (Roberts, 2004). An example of a recent innovation is participatory budgeting, which is the focus of this study.

Selection, Design, and Evaluation of Citizen Engagement Mechanisms

Due to the many types of citizen engagement and participation, the resources required, and the variety of possible outcomes, it is important to understand how mechanisms are selected, designed, and evaluated. Many factors contribute to the levels and types of citizen engagement a local government may decide upon, including manager support, relationship between administrators and elected officials, citizen trust, governance structure, collaboration between government and nonprofits, population of the jurisdiction, and budget resources (Liao & Zhang, 2012; Kasymova, 2014; Dalehite, 2008; Ebdon, 2000; Franklin & Ebdon, 2005; Berman, 1997; Cortner & Moote, 1999). One of the primary constraints is resources. For government, there are real costs in terms of both dollars and staff resources, and for citizens, the cost is their time—a serious concern, since often the best CEP comes with the highest costs (Ho, 2013). It is critical for local governments to carefully assess their goals, perform cost-benefit analysis, and consider what information is most needed to achieve their goals, all within the constraints of what they can actually afford to do. To make these decisions even more complex, the literature advocates using multiple strategies to meet the needs of multiple populations and to maximize impact (Ebdon & Franklin, 2004).

Given the importance of selection and evaluation of CEP mechanisms, researchers have developed a scale to gauge the effectiveness of these mechanisms. Robbins and Simonsen (2010) categorize the different forms of participation on a two-

factor scale: information and representation. They contend that engagement efforts that provide little information and that are not representative (that is, low-low methods) will not provide useful data or information to decision makers. Public hearings,[5] voting, and forums are examples of low-low mechanisms. Robbins and Simonsen also identify engagement methods that rate high on both information and representation (that is, high-high mechanisms). Citizen panels, interactive surveys, and budget pies are examples of high-high mechanisms.[6] These strategies provide input on difficult decisions from the citizens who are affected. Participatory budgeting is an example of an engagement method that falls into the high-high category.

THE POTENTIAL VALUE OF CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Because of the various reasons and goals for CEP, the literature is mixed on whether or not it is effective. This is due in part to a lack of agreement on what effectiveness is. Ebdon and Franklin (2004) use the following criteria to define the effectiveness of citizen engagement in the budget process:

- Participants reflect the community as a whole.
- The process is open to a large number of participants.
- Citizen input is collected in the early stage of the budget process.
- There is two-way communication between citizens and government officials.
- Citizen input is not merely symbolic but considered.
- Citizens reveal their true preferences.

Advocates of CEP point to many other possible positive outcomes as well. For example, supporters view CEP as an educational tool that can strengthen notions of civic

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[5]. One reason Robbins and Simonsen believe that public hearings are low-low is that only citizens with both time and motivation attend those meetings.

[6]. Budget pies were developed in the mid-1970s and describe the budget process as if it were a pie in which the slices represent different services. Budget pies force citizens to work within the constraints of the budget—there is a limit to how much money there is overall and how much can be allocated for each service.

responsibility and citizenship. They believe that CEP can introduce people to other perspectives and help them understand the common good. Supporters also contend that citizen engagement can decrease feelings of alienation and legitimize the role of government from citizens' perspective. And finally, they view CEP as giving voice to the have-nots and the politically weak, thereby potentially increasing social equity and justice (Roberts, 2004).

In contrast, there are those who see many problems with CEP and are reluctant to pursue it. Many of them are skeptical of the value citizens add, or they entertain a notion that citizens should not be trusted because they are irrational, self-interested, and lazy. Furthermore, some critics believe that government and its services are technical and require too much expertise to allow citizens to be involved in decision making. There is a concern that if the government is unable (or unwilling) to act on citizen input and preferences, then CEP will lead to greater distrust. Critics also argue that CEP practices are inefficient, slow, and burdensome. Not all of these criticisms are in direct contrast with the views of advocates, but some are. For example, many critics worry that CEP will lead to a larger divide between haves and have-nots, because participation requires resources that the wealthy are more likely to have, such as time and money (Roberts 2004). There are also particular concerns about direct participation:

> [D]irect citizen participation is viewed with skepticism and even wariness. Representative democracy, or indirect citizen participation, has its advantages. It protects citizens from the dangers of direct involvement. It buffers them from uninformed public opinion, it prevents the tyranny of the majority, and it serves as a check on corruption. It also meets the needs of a complex, postindustrial society that requires technical, political, and administrative expertise to function. Unlike public officials, citizens do not have the time or the interest to deliberate for the purpose of developing informed public judgment. Given the size and complexity of the modern nation state, direct citizen participation is not a realistic or feasible expectation (Roberts, 2004, p. 316).

These concerns must be carefully considered and weighed against the potential value of CEP.

The research on outcomes is mixed, though there is evidence that CEP can be effective in meeting some goals. It has been found to benefit both citizens and public officials when taken seriously (Adams, 2004; Hassett & Watson, 2003; Kuo, 2012). A recent study suggests that engaging citizens—using a broad notion of engagement—helps local governments make the hard decisions with which they are often confronted. Examining the effect of engagement on budget outcomes during economic downturns, the study finds that in terms of expenditure cutting, citizen involvement is associated with the adoption of more "high loss and high conflict" choices than "slight loss that lead to low conflict" strategies. This contradicts previous research stating that citizens generally do not favor the high loss budget cutting strategies. Additionally, it suggests that citizens may be willing to pay for services, especially when the revenue-raising mechanisms link payments to service consumption and citizens understand the need and the relationships (Jiminez, 2013).[7]

The success of CEP is not determined solely through the mechanisms and goals, though. Part of what makes CEP efforts successful is how government officials engage with and advocate for CEP. Many factors lead to successful participation, including reaching citizens with steady advertisements of engagement events, taking citizens seriously when engaging them, and following up with citizens after the event has concluded (Baker, Addams, & Davis, 2005). Additionally, there is evidence that the nature of the champion matters—that is, whether or not the person is actually a passionate champion. The political environment and the jurisdiction's manager's attitude are critical: if the manager has a strained relationship with elected officials, he or she is less likely to seek ways to innovate and

7. There is also evidence that involving citizens in the budget process can have an impact aside from budget choices. Agency effectiveness is a common goal of citizen participation, and research has shown that participation makes a great deal of difference in the budget process—especially at the beginning and end of the process. This applies only to the information sharing (setting priorities) and program assessment stages however—there is no evidence of improved agency performance when citizens are involved in the budget discussion or budget decision phases (Guo & Neshkova, 2013).

engage with citizens. A strained relationship will also lead to distrust and to fewer resources being devoted to engagement. Research has shown that to successfully pursue citizen engagement—particularly engagement beyond information sharing—the manager has to be passionate and intentional (Liao & Zhang, 2012).

Government can improve the CEP process, but can also undermine it. Leighninger (2014) argues that the laws that currently govern citizen participation are outdated and obsolete, leading to greater levels of distrust in government. Kasymova's (2014) examination of multiple efforts in New York suggests similar outcomes: when citizen engagement is used ineffectively, it may "result in more suspicious and skeptical citizenry" (p. 59). Citizens become frustrated when they believe that the engagement efforts are merely symbolic. A common example of such a symbolic act is when a local government hosts a budget hearing right before adopting the budget (Berner, 2003; Ebdon & Franklin, 2004; Kasymova, 2014).

EXTERNAL FORCES WORKING TOWARD INCREASED CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The bulk of the CEP literature is focused on ways in which the government can involve citizens. These discussions often include ways to overcome the hurdles of getting citizens to participate. For example, citizen academies are devoted to providing citizens with opportunities to learn about and engage with many facets of local government. Typically, citizens are interested for a while but then participation dwindles. Local governments have a difficult path in attempting to get citizens to engage with them, and government officials must be the champions of that engagement.[8]

8. There are, however, many champions of increased transparency and CEP outside of government. Many nonprofits promote increased transparency and citizen engagement. For example, the All-America City Award given by the National Civic League recognizes cities that work with their citizens to tackle challenges facing the community (www.allamericacityaward.com). Another example is the IAP2 Core Values Award, which is given to local governments that are committed to public participation (www.iap2.org/). There are also

The public administration literature, understandably, tackles issues of CEP from a government perspective, since government is the presumed audience for its work. This is less true in other fields. For example, in the communication literature, researchers often consider these issues from a citizen and social movement perspective and highlight cultural challenges and obstacles from citizens' perspective. The literature often describes the process in terms of grassroots organizations seeking to work in a collaborative fashion with government and government being dismissive and treating these groups' efforts as unreasonable. Communication between the two groups frequently devolves into disparaging negative interactions (Bateson, 1935; Watzlawich, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967; Jovanovic & Russell 2014). This stream of literature is sympathetic toward grassroots organizations: it views them as taking responsibility for organizing movements, garnering support, and educating others while being attuned to the needs and personalities of the government leaders who are critical to the success of the programs (Harnett, Wood, & McCann, 2011; Peeples, 2011; Pezzullo, 2011; Jovanovic & Russell, 2014).

Public administration scholars are beginning to recognize this citizen perspective. A recent case study attempts to include the citizen perspective by describing the means of communication and outreach that citizens prefer (Ho, 2013). The analysis presented here takes it further by examining efforts that began with citizens.

Not only is the citizen or nongovernmental perspective important to understanding these issues; there is also literature that suggests that CEP efforts that are advanced by nongovernmental actors are more successful. Kasymova (2014) finds that citizen engagement efforts are more effective when they are advanced by nonprofits, while efforts initiated by governments are often greeted with skepticism and distrust. Even in this study, however, the work is framed from the perspective

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numerous tools designed to empower local governments and citizens, such as Citizen Budget (www.citizenbudget.com), which is an online platform for participatory budgeting; the Open Civic Data Project (www.opencivicdata.org), which provides guidelines for making data open; and Participedia (www.participedia.net), which is a hub for information on civic participation.

of a government working in tandem with nonprofits but still being the driver. Not all innovations and efforts emerge from within the government, though—some are championed and introduced to government by citizens. Participatory budgeting is an example of CEP that was introduced by a combination of citizens and nonprofit organizations.

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

> "This is what it's about: It's about giving people the power. It's the community's needs. It's what people are saying they want. You can't say no to that, right?"[9]

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a process where all citizens have access to an open and democratic process in which they collectively make decisions on public policy as realized through the budget process (Schugurensky, 2004). PB is intended to combat the perception that citizens have "little control over their local economies and environments" (Holland et al., 2007, p. 242); to create more equitable communities (Hawken, 2007); and to promote true democracy, which is perceived by advocates as being possible only when the collective will of the public is integrated into governance (Jovanovic, 2012; Jovanovic & Russell, 2014).[10] There are generally five steps in PB:

1. Develop ideas for community projects.
2. Determine which projects have support from the community.
3. Develop proposals for popular programs in tandem with city staff.
4. Vote on those proposals.
5. Monitor the funding and implementation of the projects that are chosen (Jovanovic & Russell, 2014).

PB is more popular abroad than in the United States. While 1,500 cities around the world have some form of PB, only 8 U.S. cities presently have it in place However, in adopting localities such as New York City and Chicago, PB has gained

[9]. New York Council Member Melissa Mark-Viverito as quoted in Feeney (2013).
[10]. This is in contrast to representative democracy.

traction and is politically popular. Josh Lerner, the executive director of the Participatory Budgeting Project, outlined six reasons for PB's popularity:

1. It is believed to promote democracy through "ordinary" citizens getting to make real decisions.
2. It makes the system more transparent and less susceptible to corruption.
3. It educates participants about the community and the budget process.
4. It leads to more efficient budget allocations.
5. It increases social justice by encouraging underrepresented groups to participate.
6. It fosters a sense of community (Lerner 2011).

The consistent theme among PB advocates is that it gives a voice to those who are often considered marginalized; for example, young people, low-income citizens, and non-English speakers (Barkan, 2014). Advocates claim that rather than allowing important public policy decisions to be made by the few who may have efficiency gains as the primary goal, PB opens the process to many others who may have different goals (Jovanovic & Russell, 2014). While this may be a potential outcome of PB there has not been a great deal of work done analyzing outcomes in the United States.

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

This case study of Participatory Budgeting Greensboro (PB GSO) and the City of Greensboro, North Carolina, was constructed through a series of firsthand accounts[11] (from both government officials and citizens) and through thorough analysis of news articles about efforts to bring PB to Greensboro. It took more than three years for this citizen-initiated innovation to be adopted by its jurisdiction. Despite the fact that both citizen and government actors were reasonable and respectful, there were tensions and frustrations. This highlights the need for public administration to understand the challenges that are created by administrators and elected officials.

Background of Greensboro, North Carolina

Greensboro is the third largest city in North Carolina, with a population of approximately 270,000. It is demographically diverse: 48 percent of its population is white, 41 percent is African American, and 8 percent is Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Approximately 16 percent of the population is housing cost burdened,[12] and between 2000 and 2007 the number of very low income households[13] doubled (ACS, 2007). Figure 1 presents a map of the City of Greensboro and its five council districts, shaded by level of economic strength. This economic inequality is one of the reasons that PB

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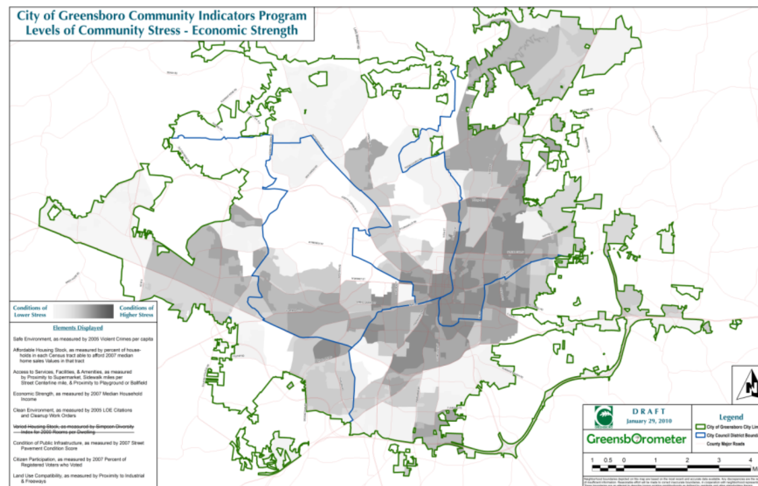
[11]. This includes both interviews conducted by the author and an article by two of the leaders of PB GSO, Spoma Jovanovic and Vincent Russell (2014). The interviews were conducted in person, over the phone, and via email with practitioners from multiple offices within Greensboro, including the budget office, and citizens that were (or are) involved with PB GSO. These citizen perspectives span those who were in leadership to those who were merely low-level sometime volunteers.

[12]. *Housing cost burdened* is defined as more than 30 percent of a household's income going to housing costs.

[13]. *Very low income households* are defined as those households with an income that is 30 percent less than the median income of the area. In the case of Greensboro, NC, this would be households with incomes of $16,080 or less. The number of very low income households in Greensboro went from 10,000 in 2000 to 20,000 in 2007.

GSO was formed— organizers believed that it would give voice to some of the low income council districts.

Figure 1
Economic Strength Indicators



Note: The areas that are shaded gray are those with lower levels of economic strength. The green lines represent the city limits, and the blue lines are the city council district boundaries. Economic strength is measured by the 2007 median household income. This figure was created by the City of Greensboro and is reprinted with their permission.

Greensboro had (and continues to have) many forms of CEP in place. During the years of effort to bring PB to Greensboro, the city had information sharing mechanisms, such as *City Connections*, a biweekly newsletter on council meetings and community news; easily accessible websites with mapping of departments, FAQs, and phone numbers; and high-quality educational videos with interviews of decision makers. Greensboro also had consultation mechanisms, such as public hearings (including IT support for residents who want to attend remotely) and Fix-It apps to allow for service requests. As well, the city had active participation mechanisms, such as the Neighborhood Small Projects Program, where proposals for small capital projects (up to $20,000) can be submitted. Other citizen-led organizations in Greensboro have also worked with the city to give citizens a greater voice, most notably the

Greensboro Neighborhood Congress (GNC). The GNC is a citywide alliance of neighborhoods whose mission is to empower citizens/neighborhoods to resolve specific concerns and those of citywide importance. This citizen-led and initiated coalition of 116 neighborhood associations has met monthly since 2012 and is highly influential.

Participatory Budgeting Greensboro

The efforts to bring PB to Greensboro began in May of 2011. At that point, some wards and districts in Chicago and New York City had adopted the idea, and the Participatory Budgeting Project in New York was working to promote and expand PB. The initial efforts for PB GSO were made by the Fund for Democratic Communities (F4DC), which was also the initial financier.[14] PB GSO members actively sought out other organizations in the community that they believed would be supportive, especially ones that they perceived to be like-minded social justice groups. However, difficulties came early. Within the first year, PB GSO lost financial support from F4DC, and the group had to distance themselves from Occupy Greensboro (Jovanovic & Russell, 2014). Additionally, PB GSO did not receive the support that members had expected from other organizations. Critically, PB GSO did not receive support from the GNC, which organizers had expected to take PB to the citizens once the city passed a resolution earmarking funds for citizen use. While the members of the GNC were supportive, the executive leadership was not. Other efforts were more successful, though, and PB GSO received a great deal of support from the Interactive Resource Center, which deals with homelessness issues in Greensboro.

Organizers of PB GSO were aware that they would need to collaborate with the City of Greensboro from the start, and they "intentionally sought to avoid the more common us-versus-them struggles with government leaders" (Jovanovic & Russell, 2014, p. 20). Knowing that they had to engage the city, PB GSO

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14. F4DC's mission is to support "community-based initiatives and institutions that foster authentic democracy to make communities better places to live." One of the ways they accomplish this goal is to make grants to programs that promote participatory democracy (http://f4dc.org/about/).

members also focused a great deal of effort on building support and educating city officials about PB. This was based on the assumption that it would be well received and that others would recognize the potential benefits, though this was far from the case. There was a great deal that PB GSO members had to learn as well. They were very ambitious and optimistic at the beginning. Their initial goal was to have Greensboro allocate one percent of its budget (roughly $4.5 million) to PB, and they believed that this goal would be attainable in less than 18 months. What PB GSO organizers had not anticipated, however, was that, unlike in New York City and Chicago, council members in Greensboro did not have discretionary *pork* funds that they could use for PB. This made it more difficult for both the city and PB GSO.

Additionally, the group received a "lukewarm reception" from the city manager and from the staff—whose main concern, unsurprisingly, was that they did not know where the money would come from. Even more problematically, PB GSO organizers were unable to find an elected official who was willing to be an internal champion of PB. There are many reasons that this may have been the case. Some of the more likely reasons were that these efforts were coming at the close of the Great Recession and that funds were extremely scarce and that the city was already engaging in many forms of CEP. This lack of enthusiasm on the city's part and the difficulty of engaging with the city led PB GSO members to focus their efforts on awareness within the community, and they met with a variety of groups to spread awareness about PB and garner support for it.

A year and a half later, PB GSO organizers had gained some support from the elected officials in Greensboro and had revised their goal, at that point trying only to get Greensboro to commit one percent of its general fund (roughly $2.5 million) to PB. This shift was a result of PB GSO members' greater awareness of the budget process in Greensboro and of the city's lack of flexibility with its resources given the economic environment and mandated spending. They had to recalibrate expectations while remaining true to their goal. As one member put it:

The city manager has already voiced concerns about taking money from the operating budget, since that budget goes almost exclusively to salaries… I suggest being ready to lower our ask to a percentage of discretionary funds within the (city's) capital budget— this gives the city more breathing room. We just want to stay at or above $1 million in order to have an amount (for PB) that seems significant to the public (PB GSO member as quoted in Jovanovic & Russell, 2014, p. 26). PB GSO members changed their goal once more, reducing it from $2.5 million to $1 million.

After a great deal of turnover in elected officials (some of whom had incorporated PB into their campaigns) and in staff, and with further revisions to their goals, PB GSO supporters eventually succeeded. A resolution was passed on October 7, 2014, in which the city committed a total of $500,000 ($100,000 to each of the city's five districts) to PB. PB GSO representatives presently meet with two staff members from the budget office twice a month to develop a timeline and a strategy for implementing PB for FY 2017's budget. Figure 2 presents a brief timeline of PB in Greensboro to date.

Relationship with City Staff

Before the resolution was passed, PB GSO members found city staff resistant. In an interview, a PB GSO member said that city officials' perception was that PB would cause additional work and deplete scarce resources. Additionally, PB GSO members felt that city staff dismissed the notion of PB too easily, describing it as infeasible and risky. Despite these frustrations, however, PB GSO members and city staff maintained respect for each other, and now that PB has been adopted, they are able to work well together. While PB GSO members previously had found the budget office difficult and unenthusiastic, they now describe it as "extremely helpful and friendly."

This successful transition is attributed largely to two factors. First, PB GSO organizers believed that the original city manager was putting up roadblocks to the group's efforts. With a

new, more supportive city manager, this opposition has lessened.[15]

Figure 2

Participatory Budgeting Timeline

Timeline of Greensboro's Participatory Budgeting Efforts

Year	Event
2009	*Participatory budgeting adopted for the 1st time in U.S.* *- 49th Ward Chicago citizens allocate $1.3 million in capital improvement projects*
2011	*PB is introduced to New York City* *- An initial pilot program is created and approximately $6 million is provided*
	May: Fund for Democratic Communities (F4DC) invites the Participatory Budgeting Project for an informational session - Enough "buzz" that they began organizing meetings on a regular basis
2012	F4DC shifts focus (and resources) elsewhere - PB GSO breaks away and becomes an independent organization - Initial goals: 1% of Greensboro's budget (approximately $4.5 million) - Initial expectations: Get PB off the ground in no more than 18 months
	Fall: Efforts to make PB a campaign issue - Campaign promises to move PB forward
	December: Interest from elected officials - Three council members and then mayor Robbie Perkins - Revised goal: 1% of general fund (approximately $2.5 million)
2013	*Expansion of PB in NYC and Chicago. PB introduced in San Francisco, Boston, St. Louis, Vallejo (CA), and Rochester (NY)*
	October: PB centered community event with elected officials and excited citizens - Council members witness the level of enthusiasm in the community for PB - PB GSO began to draft a resolution
	Late 2013, early 2014: City council subcommittee created by the Mayor - After several meetings they recommend moving forward with PB
2014	Invitation to the White House's roundtable on PB - Two city council members and PB GSO members attend
	Revised goal:$100,000 to each of Greensboro's five districts
	October 7: Resolution creating a PB process - Passed 5-4 - Involves Greensboro providing $100,000 and PB GSO raising $100,000 to bring in experts - Goal is to have PB in Greensboro for FY 2016
2015	**Spring:** - Two members of the budget office (the Director and one other) are meeting twice a month with PB reps to develop a timeline and strategy

[15]. The current city manager, hired in 2014, was not an advocate but did not openly oppose PB either. One member said, "He didn't exactly do much to help our efforts, but he didn't do anything to hurt them, either."

Second, the city council directed the budget office to cooperate with PB GSO, and it has. The budget office "jumped right into it and [has] been a pleasure to work with." Interestingly, the perceptions from the budget office are similar. Staff members were not advocates of PB, nor were they convinced that the city had the resources to undertake a meaningful endeavor. However, once the city passed the resolution and the budget office was directed to cooperate and support PB GSO, of course it did so.

The workload PB will create is still unclear, as is whether or not the city is going to provide additional resources to manage the new duties. There also remains a sentiment among staff members that PB is ultimately PB GSO's project and not the direct responsibility of the city and that PB GSO will manage the process moving forward. These challenges will be addressed in part by the two consultants who are being hired for fiscal year 2016 from the Participatory Budgeting Project in New York.

Relationship with Elected Officials

PB GSO organizers realized that they would have to gain support from elected officials as well as staff. However, PB GSO members expected that elected officials would be more supportive than staff, especially after they realized that the first city manager opposed PB. This expectation was based on the experience in New York City and Chicago, where there were extremely outspoken advocates in elected office. PB GSO members believed that they had support from three city council members and the mayor at the time, but nothing came of it. They invited council members to a PB conference, and though two were expected, none came. PB GSO flew in experts from NYC and Chicago to meet with the nine council members and had commitments from eight council members and three staff members to attend the meeting, but only five of the eleven actually came.

One event stands out as having turned the tide, however. When the White House invited PB GSO to come to a round table on PB, PB GSO members were able to get two council members to join them. The White House round table reinvigorated the efforts and helped to legitimize PB with elected officials. After

the White House round table, there was also a shift in actual elected officials. The new mayor pro tem, four council members (two of whom were newly elected), and a new city attorney were open to and supportive of PB. As well, the new city manager was not opposed to PB, as the previous manager had been. It was not simply PB GSO members' persistence that finally won over those in office—many factors had to change and in some respects, go PB GSO's way.

Overall Lessons from Participatory Budgeting Greensboro

Overall, PB GSO members' experience was that while they were treated respectfully, there was no outreach or reciprocation from the city. Some members felt that they were required to provide all the resources and make all the effort. This may, in fact, have been the case. This is an important finding: PB GSO was able to succeed in their efforts because they had a committed and *persistent* membership. Members were willing to modify their expectations and requests to the city, and they were willing to do the work to bring PB to Greensboro. If they had simply presented the idea and educated citizens and city officials, their efforts would have failed.

This case presents many lessons for elected officials. First, goals and priorities for their jurisdictions need to be defined clearly. If it is a priority for citizens to be able to engage and innovate, jurisdictions need to find ways to be more engaged and provide resources. A lack of resource allocation, even in terms of staff time, hindered PB GSO, but it was not that simple. The efforts that PB GSO members made were met with some receptiveness from elected officials, but those officials often did not follow through. Clearer signals and more follow-through from elected officials would have been beneficial. Even signals from officials that PB was not a priority or that it was not going to happen (at least with the initial slate of government officials) would have been valuable to the PB GSO members who were dedicating a lot of their time and resources to the cause. Mixed signals not only waste citizens' resources but also lead to frustration and possibly more distrust.

One of PB GSO members' biggest frustrations in dealing with local government was a perceived lack of urgency. This is

something government can improve on. Officials could have collaborated with PB GSO to explain how local government and more specifically budgeting works and to point out some of the difficulties involved in making radical changes or in simply freeing up money (in this case, one percent of the total budget). Also, officials could have attempted to explain the reason for the perceived lack of urgency. It may have been as simple as insufficient support or the fact that PB was not a priority, or it may have been that change does not happen overnight in government and there is a legal and administrative process that must be followed. More information and feedback from the government would have been valuable, even though, of course, that would have required additional resources.

These are not lessons or issues specific to Greensboro. Slightly more than half of respondents to an International City/County Management Association survey reported that it is important for government officials to partner with citizens when responding to community issues and developing strategies for coping with them. Less than one fifth of respondents reported that it was important to involve citizens in decision making (Vogel, Moulder, & Huggins, 2014). The majority of respondents reported that their responsibility was to inform citizens, not involve them. This is in contrast to advocates of direct participation, who feel that there needs to be a robust relationship between government and citizens.

This case also presents lessons for citizens. Most importantly, it demonstrates that in order to be successful, citizens need to identify and ask the right questions, and they need to persevere. Perseverance was key throughout the PB GSO process. When reflecting on the process, PB GSO organizers recalled the slow communication from officials, low levels of enthusiasm for PB, loss of interest among advocates, and lack of follow-through (within both the government and the community) (Jovanovic & Russell, 2014).

PB GSO organizers also would have benefitted greatly had they based their initial goals on what was feasible in Greensboro rather than on what had been done elsewhere. Identifying the important differences between Greensboro and New York City and Chicago could have prevented some of the

delay and dismissive attitudes PB GSO members encountered from government officials. Formulating goals with better information and understanding likely would have aided their efforts and perhaps diminished the frustration experienced by both sides.

Moving forward, perseverance and situational awareness will still be important. From the government's perspective, there is lingering uncertainly and concern about the long-term commitment and the high levels of community support and participation that a successful PB effort will require. And PB GSO members will have to develop an understanding of the laws that dictate what government can actually do. They will also need to comprehend the actual costs—not just the one-year costs, but the long-term costs—of projects. Otherwise, there will be a great deal more frustration on the horizon in Greensboro.

BEYOND ADOPTION

While the resolution adopting participatory budgeting in Greensboro is quite a victory for PB GSO, the next steps will not necessarily be smooth. Under the current resolution, Greensboro is committing only $100,000 in matching funds to bring in experts from New York. This requires PB GSO to raise another $100,000, which may be a challenge. While this is a hurdle for PB GSO, the interviews suggest that this was not considered a way to thwart the efforts. The council is supportive of bringing PB to Greensboro. After the first year, and with an implementation plan in place, the city will allot $500,000 for PB. Beyond specifics to the arrangement in Greensboro, there is evidence from other cities of some difficulties that may emerge.

Resources

PB requires a large commitment of both government and citizen resources. It takes money from the budget, which may be less problematic in economic booms but is difficult in times of budget shortfalls. When confronted with the idea of PB, one mayor embraced the spirit of the endeavor but argued that this was not the time for funding community gardens when the city was still recovering from the recession and there were public

safety needs. The mayor's jurisdiction was at almost half of its police force size from a decade ago. Therefore, the concern was not just about the budget line item, but about the opportunity costs of that money (Jones, 2013).

PB may require additional and substantial resources from the government. For example, in 2013 Chicago's Mayor Rahm Emanuel created a new position in the Office of Management and Budget with the sole responsibility of assisting any alderman who wants to use PB (Chicago Mayor's Office, 2013). This is in part to encourage wards (other than the 49th) to engage in the practice. There is also a time requirement on the part of existing staff (and citizens):

> Local government is time-consuming. It takes a lot of work to vet projects, make sure public money is spent properly. To guarantee everything is done fairly and transparently, there is a lot of procedure to follow. There are meetings with votes about how to hold future meetings. Homework from meetings. Meetings that consist mostly of talking about past meetings (Michael Carr quoted in Semuels, 2014).

Getting citizens to commit to the time requirement is also a serious impediment. In one case,[16] the citizens engaged with PB claimed that the time commitment had gone from 3 to 4 hours a week to almost 40 hours as the vote neared (Semuels, 2014). This leads to the question of who will be involved and able to stay involved. The strain on resources is echoed in the literature and applies to a great many citizen engagement strategies. It takes both government and citizen resources to keep citizens up to date in the constantly evolving policy environment (Liao & Zhang, 2012). There is also no evidence that suggests that PB will lead to efficient or even reasonable uses of resources.

Citizen Engagement

Despite supporters' rhetoric that CEP gives voice to those who have not been heard, there remains the hurdle of actually getting those citizens to engage. There are elected officials who feel that a city will not be able to draw new voices

16. See the discussion of Vallejo, California, below.

into the process through PB because the participants will mostly be the same people who engaged previously (Erickson 2012). Beyond that, there is a contingent of citizens who feel that their elected representatives are there to represent their interests and make the decisions that will best serve the community. Those citizens therefore feel that PB is unnecessary and possibly even detrimental if citizens are not able to make intelligent decisions about where to use the funds (San Francisco Examiner 2012).

The example of Vallejo, California, is a powerful one. Vallejo was the first city in the United States to undertake PB for the entire community. While Vallejo was and still is considered a success story in many respects, some of the luster has worn off. The proposals for PB put forward by citizen groups have not been enthusiastically met by the city; in fact, during the vetting process, the city has deemed a great many of them unsuitable. The PB committee has made requests to delay the vote on projects because they are concerned that the limited number of options being presented to citizens will lead to a loss in interest from the community and will harm the movement (Burchyns, 2014). Only four percent of registered voters voted on the PB projects. Not only is this disconcerting; leaders of the movement also feel that there has been a bait and switch. They have used a lot of their own time and resources to develop projects, and they feel that the city is primarily using PB to fund projects that are really the city's projects, not the communities'. One longtime advocate for PB said, "If this is Participatory Budgeting, I for one will not be a part of it next year" (Carr, 2014). Not only are the citizens not engaging, but their perception is that the government is not using PB as intended and that this is resulting in less engagement and trust from citizens.

CONCLUSION

PB GSO began with a strategy: engage the city, being careful not to alienate officials by being pushy or hostile, and garner community support through education and collaboration with like-minded organizations. Organizers saw PB as a way to address lack of faith in the government, to obtain better outcomes, and to give a voice to traditionally marginalized groups. Their support of PB is echoed in other cities. For example, Chicago's 49th Ward's alderman believes that PB changes the role of the citizen for the better:

> Rather than being passive observers of government they've become active participants in governing. More important, they know they have the power to make decisions, and that their government is not just hearing them but actually following their mandate. Empowering people to make real decisions openly and transparently is the first step toward restoring public trust in government (Moore, 2010).

Despite the rhetoric, however, PB has been adopted in only eight U.S. cities. In the case of Greensboro, it was met with little enthusiasm and a great deal of skepticism. Organizers encountered constant challenges and hurdles, and they had to completely revise their goals for the scope of PB GSO on numerous occasions. They also had to devote considerably more time to the effort than they had anticipated. Nevertheless, they maintained a positive working relationship with city officials and were successful in the end. This is true in part because there was a lot of learning and cooperation on both sides. A key lesson from Greensboro's efforts is that while it is paramount for government to consider public preferences and needs, it is also important for citizens to understand the government environment, especially when engaging and participating in it.

The next steps in this research are to track and study the progress of PB GSO and other PB efforts. Many questions need to be addressed with respect to efforts and outcomes—perhaps most importantly, "what are the differences in policy outcomes?" Once PB is in place, it will be critical to examine whether those funds are used in a significantly different manner than they

would have been used otherwise. It is possible that PB projects will reveal a disconnect between citizen needs and preferences and the preferences represented by traditional budgets.

It is also possible that PB will prove to have little effect on policy outcomes. There could be many reasons for such a finding. Perhaps representative democracy and other CEP mechanisms function well already. Or maybe, given the legal and economic constraints facing governments, the PB projects that are approved by a city will not be substantially different from those that the city would have undertaken without PB. However, PB advocates would be quick to note that it is not just about what gets funded—it is about voice, access, inclusiveness, and increased trust in government. Therefore, these outcomes also must be measured. How much participation is there? Is PB successfully engaging a population that had been previously unengaged? Have community relations improved?

These questions will have to be carefully examined, in part because the literature suggests that public meetings on the budget should accomplish similar goals. While they do not allow for direct participation, budget hearings do provide a way for citizens to be heard and to make their priorities and preferences known to government officials. Of course, as with all types of CEP, there are many problems with hearings: they are underutilized (Ebdon, 2000); they are often held when many of the decisions have already been made (Ebdon, 2002; Ebdon & Franklin, 2004); and getting citizens to participate is difficult because there not widespread interest in engaging (Ebdon, 2002). PB may help governments address some of these concerns, but it is not a solution to the most important problem—getting citizens to engage.

According to Lerner, "If citizens have enough time, information, and support, they will make good budget decisions" (2011, p. 35); that is a big *if*. The literature has not yet weighed in on this, and only time and more evidence will reveal whether PB lives up to this promise.

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