

Participatory budgeting practices across contexts: understanding how governance structures influence processes in Brazil and Chicago

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In recent years, the “participatory turn” in urban planning has become popular around the world. Some of the most impressive and important examples of participatory democracy have come from Brazil, including participatory budgeting, municipal housing and health councils, and city master plan elaboration processes (Arvitzer, 2009). As these examples have become recognized “best practices,” they have been adopted and adapted in numerous other cities beyond South America (Peck and Theodore, 2015). Nonetheless, as these practices of policy mobility occur, so too occur processes of “translation” into the new social, political, governmental context of their deployment (McCann and Ward, 2011). Over the past four years a growing number of aldermen/alderwomen (councilmembers) have provided a portion of discretionary funding spending to be determined by localized participatory budgeting proceedings in their respective districts.

Building upon research previously conducted on forms of participatory democracy in Brazil, this research examines four years of participatory budgeting experiences in the North American city of Chicago, Illinois and compares how governance structures influence the participatory budgeting process and differ from those in the policy “origin” location of Brazil. At a macro level, Brazil’s federal structure differs greatly from that of the United States in terms of urban planning enabling legislation. At a specific level, municipal governance in Chicago is greatly influenced by its unique district-alderman system, with high levels of political power held at this sub-municipal level; whereas Brazilian municipalities’ systems of citywide councilmembers (vereadores) concentrate more power at the municipal level.

Research on these experiences is important in that: (1) although much is known about the networks and processes that promote policy—and specifically participatory budgeting—transfer between localities, not much is known about the specific differences between its use across contexts; and, (2) this research expands understandings on how governance structures and the scales in which participatory budgeting occur influence both its process and outcomes.

Tatagiba (2011) notes that in Brazilian participatory bodies, the political orientation of the party in power dictates the type of participation that occurs: in left leaning governments, civil society actors tend to participate directly while in right leaning governments they tend to be more confrontational. Additionally, seats on participatory councils often favor actors that are politically connected to elected officials and governmental departments (Lavalle et al, 2005; Coelho, 2006) where the poor are often not self-representing (Hernandez-Medina, 2010). Thus, the inclusion of civil society actors—rather than the extent of their participation—serves as the legitimizer of the process (Pupo and Bueno, 2012). Given the above findings on participatory governance in the Brazilian context, this research paper asks: (1) How does a municipal government's representative structure for councilmembers (district-based or city-wide) influence participatory budgeting practices? (2) And, how does the scale of participatory budgeting processes (city-wide or independent districts) impact participatory budgeting outcomes?

This paper relies on semi-structured interviews with city officials, planners, participatory budgeting coordinators, participatory budgeting participants, and community/civil society groups, along with participant observation through attending participatory budgeting meetings, community group meetings, and other public meetings. To supplement these methods—and in cases where meeting attendance was not possible—I analyzed meeting minutes, planning documents, and internal government and community group documents. Finally, I developed a thematic coding system to analyze these materials across all sources.

This paper offers a number of conclusions that deepen both understandings of policy transfer processes and the dynamics of participatory budgeting practices. Specifically, despite the localized scope of practices in Chicago, neighborhoods still

must collaborate in order to achieve shared project goals and outcomes—a common practice in the Brazilian case. Nonetheless, since participatory budgeting projects occur in just a few alderman (councilmember) districts in Chicago rather than at the citywide scale in Brazil, a second stage of project framing and negotiation must occur with relevant city departments in order for projects to be actually realized. This decentralization, however, does provide for an added level of flexibility, whereby participatory budgeting coordinators are able to tailor proceedings to the specific cultural, socio-economic, ethnic, and planning needs of the community. Finally, unlike in Brazil where political orientations of citywide leadership often dictate the types and levels of participation of civil society groups, Chicago’s case has been borne out of the mobilized efforts of civil society and the willingness of specific aldermen (councilmembers) to open discretionary funding to the process in their districts. Together, these examples point to the varied ways in which higher levels of public participation can be achieved in urban areas and cities can create more democratic decision-making processes for a more just future.

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