

Participatory Budgeting

What it is

Participatory budgeting refers to a number of methods that give citizens direct or indirect influence over how their local government budgets are spent. It may be done in person, through extensive dialogue or through “piggybank” activities, where participants allocate beads to jars that represent their funding priorities. For a broader reach, many sophisticated online tools allow users to imagine they are the mayor and play with allocating different amounts to a set of predetermined funding priorities. With each decision, users see the budget balance change in real time, and obtain information on the consequences of reducing or increasing funding for a given item.

Why it Works

The residents of a community have an important perspective on its social and economic needs. If an agency wants to initiate a program or project that will involve reallocating funding, participatory budgeting is an effective way to gather input. Giving a community control over a portion of the local budget ensures that it is reflective of their needs and increases community support for government actions. Additionally, by being required to choose between several worthy projects when allocating limited funds, participants come to understand firsthand the difficult decisions that planners and policymakers must face – and why citizens’ favorite projects may not always receive the level funding they desire.

When to Use It

Participatory budgeting can be used for a variety of purposes: For understanding general priorities of a community related to funding for recreation, arts, and programming; for deciding between various proposed projects around a particular theme, such as transportation; and for improving relations and trust with the community following a period of distrust or anger about budget cuts.

Audience

Participatory budgeting tools are adaptable for a wide



Piggy Banks are an easy and inexpensive way to gauge funding priorities.

Examples

Participatory Budgeting Project

The Participatory Budgeting Project is a nonprofit organization that equips communities to lead participatory budgeting processes, allowing their citizens to choose how to allocate real discretionary funds. The process involves digital tools, in-person meetings and deliberation, and community organizing to ensure that as many voices are heard as possible. It has been used extensively in New York City, where City Council members may elect to participate by devoting some of their budgets to PB.

[Project Link](#)

“Piggybank” Exercise

McHenry County, IL brought a simple “piggybank” exercise to their pop-up public outreach for their transportation plan, where passerby were invited to allocate pretend coins to the piggybanks that best represented how they wished to spend transportation dollars. Options included public transportation, roads, bicycle facilities, and pedestrian facilities.

[Project Link](#)

Resources

www.abalancingact.com

<http://www.budgetsimulator.com/info>

<http://www.citizenbudget.com/>

range of audiences. The piggybank activity can be used at pop-up events in public spaces and can even appeal to children. It is also easily adaptable to speakers of other languages if a staff member speaking that language is available to explain the activity. Online tools are effective and very versatile because they allow for high levels of specificity, and may be translatable, but they may limit participation to those with high-speed internet access and advanced understanding of how to use web-based programs.

Estimated Level of Effort

The piggybank activity can easily be added to an existing outreach event, and requires only simple preparation of materials as well as counting of the votes afterwards. Online tools require more set-up time, but often have built-in tools for analyzing results as well as user demographics, so the amount of effort depends on the end goal.

Cost Considerations

Costs depend on the type of activity used: Placing piggybanks, or empty jars, on a table representing different funding priorities and asking participants to allocate beads to the jars they care about is very inexpensive, versatile, and requires little set-up time. More sophisticated online platforms offer either subscription pricing, often around \$100-\$200 month, or project-based pricing, often around \$500 per project for three months.



From 2015-2016, New York City allocated \$32 million to Participatory Budgeting, and participants engaged through a series of meetings and votes.