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How to Spend Your City's Money.

In a system known as participatory budgeting, citizens tell the government what to do.

n August, 2021, five Portuguese firefighters were battling a bushfire in the south of the country when a sudden wind drove the blaze up a steep slope beneath them. They had only a few seconds to climb into the cab of their truck before it was surrounded by flames. Once inside, they activated a safety feature that sprayed a cloud of water to cool the cab. The air was dark and smoky, but they used oxygen masks to breathe from cannisters of purified air. They soon managed to drive to a stretch of road where the fire was less fierce, and escaped without serious injuries.

The firefighters came from the municipality of Cascais, a coastal city of two hundred and fifteen thousand people near Lisbon. Their truck, with its cooling-water system and oxygen masks, cost a hundred and sixty thousand euros; before they purchased it, in 2017, they used a vehicle from 1996 that lacked both features. Though the upgrade was a matter of life and death, they couldn't get funding for it from the national government. Instead, they used a process called participatory budgeting. Each year, the government of Cascais allows citizens to propose, debate, and vote on projects that the public budget will fund. Winning projects receive up to three hundred and fifty thousand euros, and the city guarantees that it will execute them within three years. Since it launched the system, in 2011, Cascais has spent fifty-one million euros implementing hundreds of projects. The city has renovated derelict buildings, constructed high-school science labs and skate parks, improved accessibility at beaches, created green spaces, installed Wi-Fi and charging stations at bus stops, and much more. Collectively, these projects have reshaped the urban landscape: within Cascais, nobody lives farther than five hundred metres from a participatory-budgeting project.

Many cities around the world practice some form of participatory budgeting, but even among those that do, Cascais is an outlier. It spends prodigiously through the system: in Paris, five per cent of the city's annual investment budget has been allocated to participatory projects in recent years, but in Cascais, more than fifteen per cent of the budget flows through the program, and the percentage can float higher if voter turnout rises. Cascais is surprising in another way: its mayor, Carlos Carreiras, is both a champion of participatory budgeting and a member of a center-right political party. Participatory budgeting is often considered a tool of the left, but its role in Cascais suggests that it could have a broader appeal; part of the theory behind it is that citizens can be better than officials at knowing how money should be spent.

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By Nick Romeo

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