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Reinventing Democracy through Participatory Budgeting.

For all the hype surrounding democracy as a concept, in practice it has fallen short of expectations. Americans are proud of the strength and resilience of their democratic institutions, and yet they are deeply distrustful of their elected officials and turning out to vote at ever lower rates. But the lofty goal of reinventing democracy appears infinitely more achievable when we have a mechanism for doing so. Participatory budgeting is coming to the fore as one of the most promising ways to change the relationship between citizens and government, as part of a wave of new democratic innovations.

Participatory budgeting offers a fundamentally different interpretation of democracy than what we have become accustomed to. What if instead of voting to give officials the right to make decisions on our behalf, there were forums that put decision-making authority directly into the hands of citizens? Participatory budgeting, or PB, is a process that allows ordinary people to decide how part of a public budget should be spent.

A PB process begins with community meetings where residents are invited to come together and share their ideas. Next, volunteers take on the task of refining those ideas to develop project proposals. Finally, residents vote for the projects that they most wish to see funded. The results of the vote are binding, making PB a significant departure from forums that involve consultation but not action.

[The Participatory Budgeting Project](#) (PBP) has supported processes that have allocated over \$45 million from public purses across the U.S. Those funds have brought to life more than 250 individual projects, designed by residents and chosen by over 50,000 voters.

Born in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in 1989, PB is now practiced in over 1500 cities around the world, and in over 40 communities across the US. In Chicago, where the US experience of PB began in 2009, more than 250,000 residents now have the opportunity to decide the allocation of \$5 million.

In New York City, PB started in 2011 with the discretionary capital works budgets of four inspired city council members. It has since grown to include nearly half of the city's council districts. A city-wide youth PB process has been launched in Boston, giving young Bostonians aged 12-25 the opportunity to decide how to spend \$1 million.

But PB is more than raw numbers: it matters who participates. Partnerships with local community organizations and targeted outreach have been crucial to ensuring that PB does not merely attract the "usual suspects" – residents who are white, middle to upper class, and highly educated. Instead, PB aims to give real decision-making power to all members of the community.

Furthermore, the process itself is as meaningful as the outcomes it generates. PB provides neighbours with the opportunity to learn from one another. It ignites discussions around whose interests are being served, and whose aren't. It provides a platform for residents to develop leadership skills that can be taken and applied in new contexts. Research in the U.S. to date suggests that these experience have powerful impacts on many PB participants, including those who

don't typically get involved in political processes.

PB processes are growing across the U.S. Since we first worked with Chicago Alderman Joe Moore in Chicago in 2009, we have partnered with dozens of other elected officials to launch PB in their community. Last fall, the White House began promoting PB as a best practice of civic engagement, and we have worked with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to [share PB resource on their website](#).

At the Participatory Budgeting Project, we are proud to continue to partner with national and local organizations to develop new tools, launch new PB processes, and improve existing PB processes, because we believe that transparent and engaged democracy makes our communities stronger. Join us in Austin to learn how to bring this exciting innovation in democracy to your communities, to engage constituents in making real decisions about real money.

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By Josh Lerner and Madeleine Pape

Josh Lerner will serve as a presenter and facilitator for the interactive NLC University Seminar, "Participatory Budgeting - How to Build Deep Community Engagement in Real Budget Decisions (201)" at the Congress of Cities and Exposition on November 19th in Austin, Texas.

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