The Effectiveness of Participatory Budgeting in Brazil:
Accomplishments and Potential Improvements

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Abstract

In the 1990s, the Workers’ Party (PT) of Brazil introduced an idea that changed democracy in the country and eventually in the world. The idea of Participatory Budgeting (PB) was first put into practice in Porto Alegre, a city in the state of Rio Grande do Sul (RS). After its successes in Porto Alegre, the system spread throughout Brazil, and eventually to the rest of the world. Its spread started with the recognition of its success by the United Nations. The idea, then, spread to Latin America, Africa, and eventually Europe and the other continents of the world (Gomez, Insua, & Alfaro, 2016). In 2012, Latin America and Europe were the regions of the world with the largest numbers of PB systems with at least 511 and 174 municipalities with PB in Latin America and Europe, respectively (Helena & Lüchmann, 2014). The spread and development of different PB systems was also accompanied by criticisms about its theory and practice. Critics have evaluated the democratic nature of PB and the institutions that might be working as obstacles. Thus, the goal of this article is to evaluate the effectiveness of the PB system in Brazil since it was implemented in the 1990s; this will be made by discussing the successes, obstacles, and potential reforms of PB in Brazilian municipalities.

Keywords: participatory budgeting, democracy, welfare, inequality, Brazil, Workers’ Party (PT).
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In the 1990s, the Workers’ Party (PT) of Brazil introduced an idea that changed democracy in the country and eventually in the world. The idea of Participatory Budgeting (PB) was first put into practice in Porto Alegre, a city in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The definition of participatory budgeting, according to Helena and Lüchmann (2014) is generally unclear since there are many variations of the process. However, it can be very basically defined as the process of budgetary decisions that are made by the population at a local level (Helena and Lüchmann, 2014). The five criteria for classifying something as a PB are the presence of discussion, the promotion of decentralization, the consistency of meetings throughout the process, some form of monitoring and enforcement of the decisions (Helena and Lüchmann, 2014). After its successes in Porto Alegre, the system spread throughout Brazil, and eventually to the rest of the world. Its spread started with the recognition of its success by the United Nations (UN); the UN Habitat and the World Bank were two important organizations that recommended the practice to regions of the world (Gomez, Insua, & Alfaro, 2016; Bland, 2011). The idea, then, spread to Latin America, Africa, and eventually Europe and the other continents of the world (Gomez, Insua, & Alfaro, 2016). In 2012, Latin America and Europe were the regions of the world with the largest numbers of PB systems with at least 511 and 174 municipalities with PB in Latin America and Europe, respectively (Helena & Lüchmann, 2014). The spread and development of different PB systems was also accompanied by criticisms about its theory and practice. Critics have evaluated the results of applying PB and the institutions that might be working as obstacles. Thus, the goal of this article is to evaluate the effectiveness of the PB system in Brazil since it was implemented...
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The first part of the article consists of a literature review of five studies that contributed to a greater understanding of the system of participatory budgeting. Then, a list of accomplishments of the PB system is presented, which includes data that shows how successful the system was. In its third part, the article introduces the main problems related to the PB system and potential solutions to these problems. Finally, the conclusion presents a brief discussion on what the future of the PB system might look like.

**Literature Review**

In order to discuss the effectiveness of the participatory budgeting system, one needs to understand its purpose, structures, and processes. It is important to understand that PB has been defended mainly as a promoter of greater democracy through participation (Piper, 2014). Thus, the distinction between representation and participation becomes essential. Representation is not necessarily as democratic as we imagine it to be in theory. Representatives may or may not end up representing the interests of their constituents (Pipe, 2014). On the other hand, participatory measures allow citizens to have a more de facto experience of democracy by directly influencing decisions (Pipe, 2014). Yet what makes PB successful in its goal to establish democratic decisions? Piper (2014) argues that the main aspect that will determine a successful implementation and endurance of the project is the existence of a simultaneous willingness of both the government and the people to put PB into effect. Even though a bottom-up application of PB is better than when the initiative comes from the government alone, PB will be more successful when both parties cooperate to support the PB system (Piper, 2014; Helena &
Lüchamann, 2014). Bland (2011) specifically recommends that the mayor needs to be aware and in agreement with the PB system in order for it to work appropriately.

As for the structures of the PB system, they can vary; however, the case of Porto Alegre provides a good model to be analyzed. Piper (2014) provides a thorough explanation by dividing the process into deliberation, decision, and implementation. The deliberation phase happens in two levels; there are regional assemblies that discuss the problems of the region and determine the most important areas of investment (Piper, 2014). These assemblies only allow the presence of individuals rather than organizations of civil society (Piper, 2014). There is also a city assembly where specific issues related to the whole city are discussed and proposals are made; organizations are allowed in city-wide meetings (Piper, 2014). Then, regional assemblies elect representatives to present its budget priorities to the Council of Participatory Budgeting (COP) (Piper, 2014). In this meeting, the priorities of the regions are matched with the funding availability (Piper, 2014). Then, the decision phase is made by elected politicians who rarely reject the proposals sent by the COP (Piper, 2014). Finally, implementation is monitored by two organs of representation (the COP and the Forum of Delegates) and two organs of participation (the regional assemblies and the booklets that inform people of the status of the projects) (Piper, 2014). In sum, the system has elements of direct (regional assemblies) and indirect (assemblies that involve representatives rather than the people) democracy (Helena & Lüchmann, 2014). Franco and Assis (2019) also explains the PB system with the example of Belo Horizonte (Minas Gerais). The phases are basically the same as the ones listed for Porto Alegre; yet the author introduces the idea of right to the city, which is the right of citizens to have the city serving their
needs, such as the need for infrastructure (Franco & Assis, 2019). Thus, the idea of PB in Belo Horizonte is founded on this principle and it aims it following it.

Once in place, it is necessary to whether the PB system is actually working. Both Piper (2014) and Gonçalves (2014) contribute to this debate. Piper (2014) argues that PB allowed marginalized groups to have a greater voice in government decisions. Gonçalves (2014) expands this idea by arguing that this greater participation of the masses pushes spending towards social programs that improve the welfare of the municipalities. Piper (2014) defends the claim about welfare improvements by saying that redistribution of income has happened in cities such as Porto Alegre. Next, PB is also important as a tool to hold governments accountable since people become more involved with political decisions and are more aware of government actions and decisions (Gonçalves, 2014; Helena & Lüchmann, 2014). This reduces the chances of corruption, for example, since it forces the government to be more transparent regarding spending (Helena & Lüchmann, 2014). Also, it is important to note the impact of the system in gender equality since most of the participants in assemblies of discussion are women (Gonçalves, 2014). Yet the system does not seem evenly distributed to the different regions of Brazil. The wealthier regions of the country are those that have the privilege of having PB (Gonçalves, 2014).

It is important to understand that because of the successfulness of the system in Brazil, other countries decided to apply the PB system. Helena and Lüchmann (2014) talk about how the PB system was spread throughout the globe. The actual number of PB in Brazil depends on the definition used for the term, but the number is greater than 500, according to Helena and Lüchmann (2014). The authors also present two ways in which the system has spread (Helena & Lucüman, 2014). In the first phase of expansion, the Workers Party brings the idea to the
domestic level; in the second phase, the ideology spreads to other countries on the planet. Olivera (2016) elaborates more and talks about three strategies for spreading the PB system. First, the process of *institutional induction* refers to the voluntary or coercive way of passing the message about PB (Olivera, 2016). Second, the *social construction* of the idea has put into people’s mind the perceived and implied need for a PB (Olivera, 2016). Third, the *movement* of these socially constructed ideas as well as the people that carry them (ambassadors) would bring the definition and importance of PB to other countries (Olivera, 2016). Oliveira (2016) talks about two steps to the spread of the system. The first one is the *tipping point*, which is the moment when the system begins its process of spreading. Then, the second step, the *spill over*, happens when the system is already spreading throughout the world. Oliveira (2016) also talks about some key actors who contributed to the spread of the PB system. The author recognizes the United Nations as the main organization that viewed the benefits of PB and recommended it to other countries. UN Habitat contributed to the practical part of the spread through the application of PB with its Urban Management Programme (Oliveira, 2016). Yves Cabannes was an essential leader of the *Programa de Gestão Urbana* for Latin America and the Caribbean (PGU-ALC) (Oliveira, 2016). Cabannes participated in many of the UN missions that implemented PB systems in many different continents (Oliveira, 2016). Finally, the World Bank has been mainly responsible in applying these PB tactics in Africa (Oliveira, 2016).

Even though the system has spread ever since it was implemented in Porto Alegre, it has still received criticism and some signs of decline in the last few years in Brazil. Franco and Assis (2019) analyze how the theory of PB is different than its practice. As optimal as the theory seems, the PB system in practice does not always work in terms of, for example, redistribution.
The authors give the example of Belo Horizonte, where “socio-spatial inequalities” have actually increased since the implementation of the PB system (Fraco & Assis, 2019, p. 91). In addition, Franco and Assis (2019) support that even though the people of Belo Horizonte decide on small projects of the specific regions of the municipality, the state government still decides on big projects. This is exemplified by the BR-163 and the Belo Monte Dam projects which have not received the approval or recommendation of the local populations to happen (Abers, Oliveira, & Pereira, 2017). Cameron (2009) makes a parallel to this situation by looking at the fact that insignificant infrastructure projects are approved by the people even though infrastructure investments are already included on the government budget aside from the funds destined to PB. This leads to the conclusion that there is actually no major improvement of quality of life in some regions. For example, the paving of BR-163 and the dam projects mentioned involved some level of destruction of the areas where indigenous people were living. Yet these people were never consulted about the decision. It was only when they protested against government measures that they were minimally heard.

Now that the discussions of other authors in the topic of PB have been clarified, we shall focus on two main topics. First, the successes and failures of the participatory budgeting system. That is, how has it been effective in Brazil? What aspects, however, have not worked? Second, the ways in which Brazil could improve its system to solve the problems that it has been creating or to offer solutions to new problems.

The Effectiveness of the Participatory Budgeting System

The Accomplishments
Even though an analysis of the successes of the PB system is relative since different regions implemented different versions of PB hence had different results, there are certainly some successes that are easily universal for this system (Bland, 2011). First, there have been instances of increase in welfare in different regions. Gonçalves (2014) shows that there is an increase of two to three percentage points in areas of health and sanitation in Brazil where the PB system is applied. This, according to the author, reduces infant mortality by five to ten percentage points (Gonçalves, 2014). This might have contributed to high achievements of Brazil regarding the Millenium Development Goals that had 2015 as their deadline. Between 1990 and 2015, Brazil reduced its child mortality rate by 67.7 percent (França, et al. 2017). Gonçalves (2014) also argues that the main areas in which Brazilians chose to invest were sanitation, paving, and housing. These are areas of infrastructure that contribute to an increase in general welfare and provide support for economic growth, which, in turn, has the potential to increase welfare even more.

Second, politics is usually filled with lobbying by corporations or big civil society groups. Participatory budgeting reduces these and defends marginalized groups by blocking the participation of organizations in some assemblies while encouraging the participation of unorganized citizens. An example of this would be the regional assemblies described by Piper (2015). This favoring of citizens rather than organizations leads to a greater inclusion of different marginalized and diverse groups in the decision making process. For example, Fedozzi (2007) shows that the large majority of the population participating in PB in Porto Alegre had between two and four times the minimum wage at that time (as shown in Table 1). Interestingly, Table 1:

however, was that most of the people who participated were white (82.4 percent of the participants) (Fedozzi, 2007). This would be inconsistent with the argument of diversification if we were considering the total population of Brazil, which is composed of roughly half white and half black people. Yet, in Porto Alegre, the white population is around 79 percent of the population, which is not too different from the proportion of this group in PB assemblies (IBGE - Censo Demográfico, 2010). Meanwhile, the black population is around 0.0001 percent of the population in Porto Alegre (IBGE - Censo Demográfico, 2010). This means that there are proportionally more people who are black in these assemblies than one would expect when looking at the racial distribution of the population. As for gender distributions, there are slightly more women participating in the PB processes than men when it comes to the example of Porto Alegre (Fedozzi, 2007). Saguin (2018) adds that women of low income are becoming the majority. Yet these women are mostly not married (Fedozzi, 2007). Thus, the data show that
there can be great influence from minorities in budget decisions through the PB system (even if drastic changes do not happen) (Piper, 2014).

Table 2

*Gender distribution of PB participants in Porto Alegre (1993-2005) (%)*

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<td>Feminino</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>53.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masculino</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>46.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>NR</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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Piper (2014) also argues that PB increases both participation and representation in the democratic system of Brazil. The decentralization of the decision-making process gives power to the people and increases their participation in economic, social, and political matters. This increases their awareness of government decisions, which can contribute to greater accountability of governments to the people (Piper, 2014). After all, now people are watching closely to see if their proposals are approved and implemented. Also, PB can be associated a “broadening out representation to reflect more equitably the interests of the poor majority” (Piper, 2014, p. 64). This greater representation of the people’s interests within the government happened because of the election of delegates who discuss the proposals of these marginalized groups with elected politicians (Piper, 2014). Unfortunately, there is also evidence of cases of clientelism and co-optation involving the representatives of the communities in some municipalities in Brazil, such as Caxias do Sul (Costa, 2009).
The Problems and Their Solutions

Even though the PB system has been successful in many respects, it still needs to be reformed in order to eliminate its main problems. There are five main flaws to the participatory budgeting system. First, people usually do not make decisions that allocate money from the entire budget. Instead, people decide how to allocate only part of the total budget (Franco & Assis, 2019). Sometimes, this part is so small that it becomes insignificant in terms of real impact of the decisions. From the municipalities surveyed by Costa (2009), the average percentage of the total revenues utilized was 8.33 percent. The remaining value was mostly used in projects already outlined in the Constitution (Costa, 2009). Yet there are some governments that do vote for not using the entirety of the budget or that fail to use all of the money because of irresponsibility or lack of efficient administration (Bezerra, 2016). For example, between 1998 and 2004, Icapuí had a budget proposal that corresponded to 15 percent of the total revenue; this is greater than the average (Costa, 2009). However, the government ended up using only 30 percent of these 15 percent when executing the plans (Costa, 2009). This means that most of the demands were not accomplished by the government. Thus, there is a gap between the theory and the practice of participatory budgeting in Brazil. One solution for this problem, which was briefly mentioned by Costa (2009) is transforming PB into a law and establishing legal standards for revenue availability and required spending of the budget proposed by the people. That is, there has to be at least some regulation regarding the amount of the budget that people will be using (Bezerra, 2016; Gomez, Insua, & Alfaró, 2016). This amount should be clear since the first round of regional assemblies or their equivalent. This allows people to have a clearer planning process and well-informed and reasonable spending proposals. This may sound simple but, as
mentioned before, the federal government has established a spending in certain areas that cannot be changed, which makes the amount delivered to PB decisions too low (Costa, 2009). There are two solutions for that: 1) make a constitutional amendment that gives more power to the local levels of government (decentralization) and eliminates some mandatory federal spending; or 2) allowing the PB law to be flexible so adjustments can be made to consider the constitutionally mandated spending (i.e. maintain the status quo and include minor legal adjustments). These solutions go in opposite directions regarding how much power is given to the people and to the central government.

These projects planned by the federal government to which most of the revenue goes constitute the second problem of the PB system. It is clear that participation and representation of marginalized populations in the decision-making process have increased since the start of the PB system (Piper, 2014). It is also true that there are cases in which PB is associated with greater levels of welfare (Piper, 2014; Gonçalves, 2014). However, these facts are not true in most of the cases. We will discuss for which cases these facts are not true when we talk about the issues of territoriality. But now the important issue to note is the fact that big government projects use *most of the government budget*, which contributes to inequalities and the marginalization of some groups. This reverts all that is gained from the PB system. Abers, Oliveira, and Pereira (2017) discuss two examples of these projects which started during the Lula administration. Abers, et al. (2017) argue that even though Lula was trying to combine economic and social improvements in Brazil, economic needs were stronger than environmental and social needs. The first example of this is the BR-163 project. The idea was to pave the road to make it economically viable for the transportation of soybean (Abers, et al., 2017). However, this plan would have damaging
environmental consequences. Lula had to decide between the interests of the local populations that were in favor of the environment and the interests of the big farmers (Abers, et al., 2017). The government decided to pave BR-163 but promised to do so sustainably. This promise was eventually broken and the construction was not sustainable (Abers, et al., 2017). The decision was never brought to a PB assembly to be discussed; that is, decision of this huge project that impacted the lives of people and animals was done solely by the federal government. The Belo Monte Dam is another example of the same situation. In this case, the most affected population--the indigenus people of the region-- were never consulted about the project (Abers, et al., 2017).

This leads us to start thinking about the third problem of the PB system in Brazil. Again, even though marginalized groups are better represented and some cities have seen improvements in social indicators because of PB, this does not necessarily translate into greater equality. Instead, PB has been happening under a trend of three basic asymmetries: social, bureaucratic, and territorial (Abers et al., 2017). Social asymmetries refer to the inequalities between social groups, such as the differences in treatment of white people and the indigenous populations (Abers et al., 2017). Bureaucratic asymmetries refer to how social programs have been characterized by lack of funding while economic programs have received the best bureaucratic structures and funding (Abers et al., 2017). Finally, territorial asymmetries refer to the unequal attention that the government pays to different regions of the country (Abers et al., 2017). What usually happens when decisions are made regarding government spending is an overlap of the three categories. But why can there be an increase in inequality in the PB system? First, people tend to vote on measures that are beneficial for marginalized groups on the short-term because of instincts of immediate gratification (Franco & Assis, 2019; Cameron, 2009). This means that
these projects are usually not sustained toward long-term gains; this practice results in little to no significant change in inequality numbers. Second, the PB system has not been implemented in all of the municipalities in Brazil. Many of the rural and isolated regions have never had systems of PB (Franco & Assis, 2019). Franco and Assis (2019) give the example of Belo Horizonte where the Centro-Sul region has much greater participation and better results than the other ones. This also happens on a global scale as exemplified by the Belo Monte dam project which did not consider the opinions of the local population. The solution to this issue of inequality, as proposed by Saguin (2018), is to have better organized and informed citizens so they can take attitudes to advocate for important long-term decisions that will substantially affect inequality. In addition, Bland (2011) argues that, at least in Bolivia and El Salvador, small and rural towns tend to practice PB more consistently than bigger cities who have greater risks of abandoning the system. Yet Bezerra (2016) argues that PB systems tend to spread more to urban centers. These facts show that concentrating resources in the spread of the PB system to rural rather than urban areas would be greatly beneficial to enduring democracy. This could reduce territorial inequality and sustain the existing PB system for longer periods (Bezerra, 2016; Bland, 2011).

Speaking of inequality and exclusion of certain groups, another issue of the PB system has been an underestimation of the power of investing in youth participation (Helena & Lüchman, 2014). The government should keep in mind that the youth are the future of the political decisions of Brazil; educating and engaging this group in politics as early as possible is essential to help them make better decisions for the country in the future (Fedozzi, 2007). Augsberger, Collins, Gecker, Lusk, and Zhao (2017) present a good example of how the city of Boston in the United States has been involving their youth in PB for the approval of more than
seven hundred proposals. Meanwhile, in the city of Porto Alegre in 2005, less than 20 percent of the participants were between 16 and 25 years old (this number is disproportionate to the percentage of the population of youth in the city) (Fedozzi, 2007). Moreover, people below that age group were not even counted. The numbers are even lower when looking at the representation of the youth as counselors and delegates for their community; these positions tend to be filled by people above 40 years old (Fedozzi, 2007). In order to solve this issue, state governments in Brazil should consider adopting measures similar to those adopted by the city of Boston. That is, they should develop small scale programs for middle and high school students that allow them to make budget decisions and monitor government action. These students, as defended by Ausberg et al. (2017), should be guided by politically neutral teachers regarding the necessary procedures and the impacts of different proposals. Students should have “enough time, guidance, (...) and information” in order to make positively impactful decisions for their towns (Ausberg, 2017, p. 246). The results of this investment could even have an impact on inequality since students will be better trained to make decisions that have long-term impact on marginalized groups. This program should be promoted through public schools rather than private ones in order to accomplish the goal of lowering inequality in the future.

Table 3

*Age distribution of PB participants in Porto Alegre (1993-2005) (%)*
The fifth issue is the party bias of the existence of PB systems. Even though this issue is not as alarming and it has been showing signs of improvement, it could be a contributing factor to the reduction of the PB systems in recent years as well as greater bias in decision-making processes. According to Helena and Lüchmann (2014), the PB system was mostly implemented in cities where the government was from the Workers’ Party (PT), which is a leftist party in Brazil. The authors argue that this changed around 1996 when the implementation of the PB system became more neutral regarding the ideology of the governments (Helena & Lüchmann, 2014). However, a study by Costa (2009) shows that 53 percent of the municipalities that implemented PB were still under the PT’s administration in the first years of the 2000s. Other parties involved were either from the left or in the center of the political spectrum, which makes it hard for more right-wing governments (such as the current Bolsonaro administration) to favor and promote the system (Costa, 2009). Paradoxically, a solution for this problem might be in the current scenario of Brazil for two reasons. First, after the 2014 crisis, Brazilians have been gradually more interested in current national political issues. Hence, promoting PB to empower
people and their opinion might not only be accepted but also desired by those who feel like they have something to say and want to make decisions. This should certainly be accompanied by discussions on tolerance and respect for each other’s opinions in order to guarantee healthy discussions. Second, in order for a right-wing government to stay in power, it needs to make its opposition (leftists) relatively content at the local level so there is not much pressure at the national level. PB systems are the perfect way of satisfying the need for participation from the opposition and reduce the pressure and protests against right-wing governments (Helena & Lüchmann, 2014). Therefore, presenting this logic to the Bolsonaro administration could incentivize the government to support PB.

There are three other necessary reforms that will improve the efficiency and democratic nature of the PB system. First, there has to be an increase in transparency and monitoring strategies throughout the whole process of implementation (Piper, 2014). As we have seen, not all projects are fully implemented, and in order for the people to pressure the executive to attend their needs, they need to know what is being done in an efficient way. Moreover, as mentioned before, including the PB system in the political structures of Brazil through its legal officialization would be ideal. This has happened in countries such as Peru and it allows for widespread application of the system that will decrease territorial inequalities and give voice to different groups (Bland, 2017). Third, this universal legal application of the PB will not work if both the people and the governments are not willing to participate. Educational measures need to be taken to spread these ideals throughout Brazil in order to establish a greater connection and consensus of these groups regarding the wish to have participatory measures implemented.
(Piper, 2014). Education could happen in schools, work environments, social media, and television.

**Conclusion**

Considering the length of the discussion on the problems of the PB system, one can conclude that the future of PB in Brazil is unknown (Gomez, Insua, & Alfaro, 2016; Bezerra, 2016). Brazil was the pioneer of this democratic project that was recognized by the United Nations and spread to cities in Latin America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania, and recently the United States. However, the system has become weak in its own country of origin (Gomez, Insua, & Alfaro, 2016). It is only through the proposed reforms and an increased education regarding government decisions that this system is going to be sustained in Brazil. According to the World Factbook (n.d.), Brazil is the sixth largest country in the world; thus, it is of extreme importance that it establishes strong local governments. This would increase democracy and potentially move Brazil from the status of flawed democracy to the ranking as a full democracy, according to The Economist’s Democracy Index (2018). Also, participatory budgeting would improve the situation of different populations, empower people and increase trust in the government, decrease inequality, reduce corruption, and make Brazilians more active citizens.
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