

Chapter 54

Participatory Budgeting: Findings From Germany

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ABSTRACT

Consultative participation of citizens in political decision-making processes has been increasing in order to facilitate democratic legitimacy and responsiveness. Consequently, participatory budgets have been established as a ‘best practice’ for consultative participation of citizens in political decision-making processes. The authors compare participatory budgets of 31 German municipalities. An analysis of differences between successfully and unsuccessfully rated participatory budgeting processes provides informative insights and allows for in-depth comparison on a municipal level. The authors show that external service providers and electronic participation channels significantly increase the number of participatory citizens and are positively connected with pursued objectives of dialog processes and public responsiveness as well as efficient and effective decisions. Furthermore, the acceptance of all participants proved to be a key factor for a successful public participation process. The authors’ analysis opens up new starting points for further research.

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INTRODUCTION

Political public participation processes (e.g. participatory budgeting or planning groups) are suitable strategies to counter the challenges of representative democracy regarding legitimacy and responsibility (Schwicker & Collet, 2011; Sintomer, Herzberg, & Röcke, 2010; Yang & Pandey, 2011). In particular, the perceived alienation between citizens and government is a trigger for civic discontentment and the loss of trust in political action (Klages, 2007; Märker, 2009; Tofote et al., 2011). Perceived consequences are: decreasing voter participation, declining party memberships, public demonstrations and resource-intensive renegotiations (Kopp, 2010; Roth, 2011; Schwicker & Collet, 2011).

Consultative public participation gains more and more attention at all political levels to counter voter apathy and alienation from democracy (Roth, 2011; Sintomer et al., 2010); especially at the municipal level, towards which this paper is focused. Citizens are directly affected and intensely perceive the thematic relevance at the municipal level. Hence, consultative public participation is a predominantly adopted method at this level compared to other political level (Klages & Daramus, 2007; Roth, 2011).

The instrument of participatory budgeting has, especially, developed worldwide as a 'best practice' of supporting democracy in decision-making (Lerner, 2011; Peixoto, 2009; Sintomer et al., 2010). An increasing number of municipalities include the civil population to enhance the efficiency of public spending processes (Cabannes, 2004). Governments offer services (Anthopoulos, Gerogiannis, & Fitsilis, 2010) and use specialized web2.0 technologies to include citizens in the spending process (Vogt, Förster, & Kabst, in press). These elements of electronic government (e-government) are broadly accepted modes to modernize public administration and to generate participation (Anthopoulos, Siozos, Nanopoulos, & Tsoukalas, 2006). In this context, participatory budgeting is becoming an increasingly used method in Germany. This development is also propped by scarce municipal financial resources (Klages & Daramus, 2006; Sintomer et al., 2010).

However, there is still a gap in the comparative assessment of targeted objectives and the achieved objectives of public participation (Kubicek, Lipka, & Koop, 2011; Macintosh & Whyte, 2008). Non-specific definitions of effects and outcomes, multiple causes of the aims and the predominantly used case-by-case analysis due to a low utilization of the method cause these circumstances (Geißel, 2008; Vetter, 2008; Wollmann, 2006). Thus, the justification of resources for political public participation remains questionable. Moreover, the deduction of recommendation for action and optimization remain often in the framework of case-by-case studies of individual cases, which are generally limited (Kuhlmann, 2005; Vetter, 2008). More importantly, there is still an untapped potential for optimization of recommendations for action. Therefore we focused on the research question: Are there empirically supported factors which influence the success of public participation processes?

Accordingly, our article aims to contribute to the closing of this gap and to answer the research question with analysis of participatory budgeting processes, which become a central instrument for consultative public participation measures and participatory democracy (Cabannes, 2004; Sintomer, Herzberg, & Röcke, 2008; Vogt et al., in press). According to Sintomer et al. (2008) participatory budgeting highly contributes to the field of democratic innovation research and participation devices. Referring to Herzberg (2002) participatory budgeting processes are a particularly appropriate instrument to illustrate the performance of public consultation because citizen and governments make their decisions together and are characterized by a high quality of active citizenship. Inter-periodic and inter-municipal comparison of participatory budgets enables the identification of requirements and mechanisms to measure the

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