How sharp is participatory budgeting as a policymaking tool?

By inviting citizens to help make decisions, could participatory budgeting inspire more political engagement? The EU-funded DEMOTEC project investigated a potential response to the issue of widespread political polarisation and alienation.

Participatory budgeting describes a system where citizens directly decide how public funds are spent, and it is typically exercised locally or regionally. It has attracted attention as a policymaking tool to encourage more civic engagement at larger scales.

Led by project coordinator Paschalia Spyridou from the Cyprus University of Technology (CUT), DEMOTEC has been exploring whether participatory budgeting, as part of regional and urban policies, has led to increased citizen participation, and a better informed electorate.

According to Vasilis Manavopoulos, project manager from the CUT, it first emerged...
in the late 1980s in Porto Alegre, Brazil, from a politically left-leaning programme of social justice and governance reform. It has since been adopted by over 1 500 municipalities worldwide, including more than 200 in Europe.

“Promising numerous benefits, participatory budgeting is attractive, but studies have often focused only on successful implementation, possibly overstating its effects,” says Manavopoulos. “We wanted a more in-depth investigation of its different forms.”

**Comparative case studies**

To explore the impact of participatory budgeting across Europe, DEMOTEC set up a study in urban regions of Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania and the United Kingdom, representing a sociopolitical continuum of countries with varying engagement with the practice.

The team used a mixed methodology to assess if, and how, this process impacts political engagement. “We set up three different research programmes, using a survey to investigate citizens’ attitudes towards participatory budgeting, text analysis to explore how civil society organisations and the media shape these attitudes, then simulated scenarios to test hypotheses,” explains Manavopoulos.

Online surveys polled 3 000 representative citizens, across the case study countries as well as Germany, France and Spain. Almost 43 000 online news articles and over 300 000 tweets in nine languages were examined, and coded for tone/valence (positive or negative).

In addition, interviews were conducted with journalists from the study areas, and simulations were run exploring how participatory budgeting design affects participants, processes and outcomes.

**Regional differences emerge**

Analysis of the surveys to date has indicated low awareness of participatory budgeting across all countries except Poland, where it has been legally mandated. Participation rates in the seven countries had been low, yet there remained high willingness to take part in future activities.

“The key predictors of participatory budgeting support were institutional and social trust, pre-existing civic engagement, such as volunteering, education and a prior interest in politics,” notes Spyridou. Media analysis revealed that interest in participatory budgeting has consistently risen since 2014.
“In just over half the articles, it was only mentioned tangentially, otherwise coverage was overwhelmingly positive. While its practicality and ability to engage and empower citizens were often highlighted, its transformative potential, for example to promote social justice, was very rarely mentioned,” says Spyridou.

Analysis of the tweets showed that participatory budgeting was mentioned mainly by organisations, and when by individuals, mostly by people formally involved in the process.

The journalists revealed that while many thought participatory budgeting useful for mobilising and empowering citizens, it was difficult to implement. There was also consensus that ‘democratic malaise’ is a real phenomenon and that while participatory budgeting was a newsworthy topic, audiences would likely be uninterested.

After taking part in the simulations, regardless of group, all participants indicated high degrees of satisfaction with the process, declaring they intend to participate if implemented locally.

“While the experiments resulted in all groups rating participatory budgeting higher than before, the jump was more pronounced for face-to-face groups than online. This could suggest the value of social interaction for community-based decision-making,” adds Manavopoulos.

DEMOTEC’s partners are currently working in a consultatory role with local municipalities to help promote and implement participatory budgeting in their regions.

Keywords

DEMOTEC, participatory, budgeting, governance, democratic, civil society, policies

Project Information

**DEMOTEC**
Grant agreement ID: 962553

DOI
[10.3030/962553](10.3030/962553)

Closed project

**Funded under**
SOCIETAL CHALLENGES - Europe In A Changing World - Inclusive, Innovative And Reflective Societies
The mechanisms to promote smart, sustainable and inclusive growth
Trusted organisations, practices, services and policies that are necessary to build resilient, inclusive, participatory, open and creative societies in Europe, in particular taking into account migration, integration and demographic change
EC signature date
13 November 2020

Total cost
€ 2 827 546,25

EU contribution
€ 2 827 546,25

Start date
1 March 2021

End date
29 February 2024

Coordinated by
TECHNOLOGIKO PANEPISTIMIO KYPROU
Cyprus

This project is featured in...

RESULTS PACK
1 February 2024

New tools and insights to better connect citizens with democracy

Discover other articles in the same domain of application

LIFE AFTER...
Catching up with SMARTeES: Getting closer to sustainably producing, managing and consuming energy

31 May 2022
NEWS

LIFE AFTER...

Catching up with PROSEU: Sustainable and inclusive energy for the people, with the people

29 June 2022

PROJECT OF THE MONTH

EU citizens at the centre of energy poverty alleviation

27 December 2022

Last update: 26 January 2024


European Union, 2024