

Participatory Budgeting: Participation Barriers and How to Overcome Them

In Conversation with Dr. Robert Gerlit

Why do participatory budgets often fail due to low participation rates despite their potential? Dr Robert Gerlit researches barriers to participation and how to overcome them.



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Image description: The photo shows a barrier in front of an underground car park.

Participatory budgeting has become a globally recognised tool for public engagement, which many cities utilise to increase citizens' influence over the allocation of local public funds. However, despite citizens' overwhelming interest, engagement rates in participatory budgeting processes are often alarmingly low. This prompts concerns about the effectiveness of such initiatives and has even led to some of them being discontinued. Dr. Robert Gerlit explored challenges impeding citizens' participation, strategies to overcome them and methods to mobilise citizens in his research at the Technical University of Munich. He is sharing his insights as part of this conversation.

Despite calls for increased opportunities for public participation, many participatory budgeting processes appear to show (too) low engagement rates. How do you assess this phenomenon?

Participatory budgeting is widely acknowledged as one of the most common practices in open government and has been effectively implemented in numerous cities worldwide. This practice aims to enhance citizens' knowledge of municipal budgets and increase their voice in public fund allocation decisions. Participatory budgeting has been implemented in various German municipalities with divergent results. For instance, interviews conducted with 216 citizens in Unterschleißheim, Stuttgart, and Trier as part of my doctoral thesis at the Technical University of Munich have revealed that 94% of respondents expressed explicit support for the continuation of participatory budgets in their cities.

However, this widespread endorsement is no guarantee for high levels of participation. Only 6% of respondents in the survey reported engaging in the participatory budgeting process. Similarly, in other cases, politicians and administrators anticipated high participation rates, which were not observed. In some instances, participation has decreased upon several rounds, down to participatory budgeting events running with no attendance at all, with only municipal staff being present. This has caused some local councils to suspend their participatory budgeting initiatives or explore alternative ways to encourage citizens' participation.

Low engagement rates in participatory budgeting can be associated with various problems. Problems cited in the literature include inadequate representation of areas of interest, worsening of existing inequalities, neglect of minority interests and potential strengthening of extremist political views. Nonetheless, it would be inappropriate to consider all participatory budgeting initiatives in Germany as failures. Some of these initiatives have achieved comparably high participation rates.

Participatory budgeting is often criticised for attracting only those already politically engaged in other areas. How can this practice be extended to reach members of "silent groups"? Or is the tool unsuitable for this purpose?

The criticism is based on the hypothesis that low engagement rates in participatory budgeting and, in some cases, the observed composition of participants indicate that the process is merely used as a platform for a vocal, well-organised and networked minority, often referred to as the "usual suspects". Through this process, this minority gains a disproportionate advantage in promoting their interests, while the majority's concerns remain unheard, and their voices remain silent.

I firmly believe that participatory budgeting can potentially engage these "silent groups" often overlooked by other participation methods. Participatory budgeting covers multiple facets of community life and is aimed at all residents. Sometimes, it extends even further, including commuters or tourists. The quantity of participants does not necessarily indicate the degree to which citizens are better informed about the budget or whether there is wider acceptance of savings. It could also be that these quiet groups have not been active enough in proposing their recommendations. However, to find out how to encourage silent groups to take a more active role, we must understand why they are not participating. Engaging in dialogue with them instead of only talking about them is vital. It is possible that these groups are not silent; instead, we have not listened properly or at all.

Could you give us an impression of the possible barriers to participation in the participatory budgeting process?

As part of my dissertation, I identified 36 obstacles, categorised into five groups. Alongside citizen interviews, the data has been derived from expert interviews with employees of exemplary municipalities that have been running or have been previously running participatory budgeting initiatives and the agencies that developed and drove these. A systematic literature review and analysis of German press coverage on participatory budgeting was also conducted. By means of example, the following findings can be outlined:

- (1) Citizens' lack of interest is often believed to be the primary cause of low participation rates. However, disinterest can have many faces —it might refer to political participation in general or the participatory budgeting process specifically. At the same time, personal interest in the discussed topics can be a significant barrier, too.
- (2) One might wish to engage in participatory budgeting, but it's only possible if there's an opportunity. This barrier might initially surprise. However, some cities label initiatives as participatory budgeting, which solely inform about the budget without any participatory element. Moreover, participatory budgeting processes usually have deadlines, after which participation isn't possible.
- (3) The target group is often unaware of participatory budgeting or its features. 67% of the interviewed citizens didn't know about participatory budgeting in their municipality.
- (4) Certain factors can deteriorate participation despite general interest being present. For instance, a participatory budget is introduced within a specific political environment: it's unreasonable to expect a sudden improvement through participatory budgeting when relationships between citizens, politics, and administration are strained. The process may be seen as tokenistic, with no actual outcome expected, leading citizens to question the point of their participation.
- (5) The prerequisites for participation are also significant. These include the availability of time, access to digital platforms and the competencies for their practical use. Dealing with complex issues requires technical and language skills and an understanding of procedural rules.

What advice would you provide to local councils looking to implement participatory budgeting?

Given the strengthening of right-wing populist movements and the decline of public confidence in democratic institutions, it is imperative to provide practical solutions to bolster democracy in conjunction with scholarly discourse. For participatory budgeting to positively impact this context, careful planning, a user-oriented approach, and thorough implementation are required.

Firstly, one must consider the rationale for introducing participatory budgeting and its appropriateness as a participation tool. It may demotivate citizens from submitting proposals if they perceive the initiative to have limited financial leeway and believe only savings will be justified.

Engagement with key interest groups, media, and multipliers right from the start - already at the design phase of the participation process - is key. This promotes the initiative and makes participatory budgeting a participatory artefact in itself. Using digital labs can help enhance user-friendliness and appeal to your target groups. Ensuring digital accessibility is essential. If possible, funds should be secured to implement suggestions from citizens. Doing so can strengthen the notion that they also have a say in what matters.

Effective, targeted, and long-term communication is also very crucial. Municipalities that report about participatory budgeting regularly and through multiple media channels tend to see higher engagement rates. The initiative's background and the benefits for the city and citizens should be clearly explained, and all phases of the participation process should be

advertised. Detailed reporting, including what kinds of proposals are expected, maintains transparency. After the cycle ends, the results and next steps need to be shared. Continuous communication ensures the process stays in the public eye.

Lastly, an independent evaluation needs to be included. Look beyond the data – find out if residents know about participatory budgeting, whether they've participated, and why not. Gather suggestions for improvement to refine the process and lower barriers to participation.

And remember: A process with few initial participants can still be successful. Learn from it, share outcomes, engage with the community, and build your success story together.

About the person

Dr. Robert Gerlit served as a research associate at the Chair for Information Systems under Prof. Dr. Helmut Krcmar at the Technical University of Munich from 2014 until 2019, specialising in digital government research. In 2021, he completed his doctorate, focusing on the barriers to political participation in participatory budgeting within Germany and exploring methods to overcome these challenges. He joined the Bavarian State Ministry for Digital Affairs in the Department of Digital Government, IT Strategy, and IT Law in 2019. Since his relocation to Sydney in 2022, Dr. Gerlit has been back to active in academic teaching, contributing as a remote lecturer for New Public Management in the "Digital Management of Administration" Bachelor's program at the University of Applied Sciences Landshut, Germany, thus training future leaders in the field of public sector modernisation and digital transformation.

His doctoral thesis is available online at the following URL: <https://mediatum.ub.tum.de/1575542>