

Participatory Budgeting in Germany: Citizens as Consultants

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Abstract: *This chapter examines the current landscape of participatory budgets in Germany, which currently includes just under 100 local authorities that are actively involved in participatory budgeting (PB). Based on the history of PB in Germany, it shows how German participatory budgets typically pursue the objective of making local government more responsive, which is the reason why most participatory budgets in Germany are based on the consultative model. Under this model, citizens act as advisors to policymakers and administrators. Based on data collected in the autumn of 2012 for the sixth status report of the information portal www.buergerhaushalt.org, the chapter identifies 'typical' features that characterise German participatory budgets. According to this analysis, the majority of participatory budgets in Germany are consultative, allow proposals on the entire budget – including proposals both for investments and for cost-saving measures, and make intensive use of the Internet. There is great room for improvement with regard to accountability, for which a general report has so far been the norm.*

Ninety-six participatory budgets in Germany are currently listed on Germany's information portal for participatory budgeting, www.buergerhaushalt.org.¹ A further 104 local authorities are discussing the possible introduction of PB.² Since the first participatory budget in Germany was launched in 1998, more and more municipalities have come to rely on this instrument of civic participation for all issues concerning the use of public money. Even fifteen years later, this participatory instrument is generally still seen as a 'learning process' for all concerned. In other words, there is no *single* formula for success. Nonetheless, over the years particular features that we can consider 'typical' of German participatory budgets have become increasingly evident. The most striking feature is that right from the outset, the German procedure had little in common with the Brazilian model pioneered by the city of Porto Alegre. At this point a number of questions arise: *What does the 'typically German participatory budget' look like, in what ways is it 'different', and what current trends are evident with regard to PB in Germany?*

This chapter will focus on these questions. The first section will discuss the objectives of participation in the context of the history and development of PB in Germany. On that basis, the second section will explore the basic issue of how participatory budgets in Germany are structured, and how they are defined. This provides the basis for the third section, which takes a more precise look at the current PB landscape in Germany. Using data collected for the sixth status report of the information portal www.buergerhaushalt.org on PB in Germany, the 'typical' distinctive features of German participatory budgets are outlined, and evaluated with respect to objectives and current debates.

¹ The online information portal www.buergerhaushalt.org has been jointly run by Germany's Federal Agency for Civic Education and the Service Agency Communities in One World since 2007. An English version of the website will be online from May 2013 onward.

² To obtain these data, all German municipalities with a population of more than 40,000 were surveyed in October & November 2012. Furthermore, since 2007 a regular press screening has been carried out that has also captured PB in municipalities with populations of less than 40,000. However, we make no claim to completeness. There are a total of around 11,250 municipalities in Germany.

It clearly emerges that the context in which PB was first introduced in Germany, and therefore the objectives and expectations associated with it, were fundamentally different to those in many other countries, and remain so. Given the different aims and the requirements which these impose, the way the procedures are designed varies accordingly.

1. The history and goals of participatory budgeting in Germany

To better understand the objectives and design of participatory budgets in Germany, it is helpful first of all to outline the history of the origins of these budgets, and how they developed.

Whereas the earliest participatory budget in Porto Alegre first saw the light of day in 1989, in Germany it was another ten years before any local authority was ready to 'experiment' with PB (Franzke & Kleger, 2010). In 1998 the small southern German municipality of Mönchweiler became the first local authority to also involve citizens in municipal financial planning (Günther, 2007). Mönchweiler was soon followed by a handful of other municipalities in the 'Local authorities for the future' network (Franzke & Kleger, 2010), a group of municipalities that had got together to test new conceptual approaches to administrative modernisation. In the year 2000 the Ministry of the Interior of the German federal state of North-Rhine Westphalia, in cooperation with the Bertelsmann Foundation, launched the 'Pilot Municipalities in North Rhine Westphalia' project, in which six local authorities tested the instrument of participatory budgeting (Franzke & Kleger, 2010).

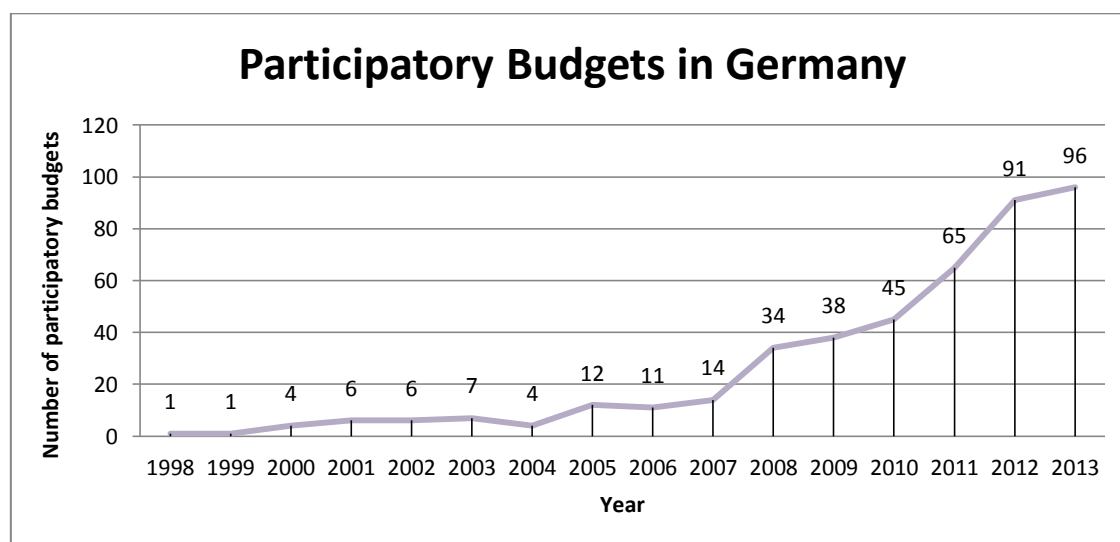


Figure 1: Number of participatory budgets in German from 1998 to 2013³

The year 2004 heralded the beginning of a new phase of PB in Germany. As Figure 1 shows, this phase began with a slump: when the pilot project in North Rhine Westphalia came to an end, several local authorities there broke off their efforts to continue with their participatory budgets. At the same time, though, the project had succeeded in encouraging new municipalities such as the

³ The data for the years 1998 to 2007 were taken from Herzberg and Cuny (2007). The data for the years 2008 to 2013 were taken from the status reports 1 to 6 published by buergerhaushalt.org (Märker & Rieck, 2008 / 2009 / 2010; Märker, 2011 / 2012; Schröter, 2013). The figures contained there for 'Launched' and 'Continued' were added together for the purposes of this graph. When interpreting the data it is important to remember that the figures for the status reports were not always recorded at intervals of a whole year.

city of Cologne to explore the possibility of introducing PB. Furthermore, the Federal Agency for Civic Education had approached a number of districts of Berlin, including Berlin-Lichtenberg, with its concept for PB in cities (Herzberg, 2005); these districts then tried out various forms of participatory budgeting that had been further developed. Following a reorientation phase in 2004, the proliferation of PB rapidly regained momentum, boosted among other things by the establishment of a participatory budgeting network in Germany, and the provision of the online platform www.buergerhaushalt.org by the Service Agency Communities in One World and the Federal Agency for Civic Education.

The Porto Alegre model, however, played barely any role at all in the introduction of the first participatory budgets, and to this day few German participatory budgets are based on it. What has served as a model is Christchurch in New Zealand. In the early 1990s, this city with a population of 300,000 was awarded the Carl Bertelsmann Prize for democracy and efficiency in local government, because its reforms 'substantially improved the quality of its municipal services and satisfaction levels among its citizens' (Bertelsmann Foundation, n.d.). Thus unlike in Brazil, in Germany the participatory budget has been seen not primarily as a means to achieve greater distributive justice or to fight clientelism and corruption. The first German municipalities to practice PB – and this applies to most such municipalities to date – introduced this form of budgeting in the hope of achieving two mutually reinforcing effects. First of all, local government structures that had become bogged down were to be modernised through citizen participation. Secondly, citizens were to be granted a larger say, in support of a trend toward more responsive local government (see Rüttgers, 2008) that would enable citizens to become 'customers/consumers, recipients of high-quality services delivered for their convenience' (Herzberg, Sintomer, Allegretti & Röcke, 2010, p. 37) in response to their concerns and needs. In all their diversity, one thing that most participatory budgets in Germany have in common to this day is the fact that they are 'less about investment, and more about the participatory rating of services and the economical management of public funds' (Herzberg, Sintomer, Allegretti & Röcke, 2010). Modernisation by participation is one of the core objectives that many local authorities wish to achieve by introducing PB.

This desire to modernise local government and make it more responsive must be seen primarily in the context of a municipal financial crisis. Parties of whatever political colour were forced to deal with the problem of empty coffers, and fear of dissatisfaction among their citizens (Schruoffeneger & Herzberg, 2008). In Germany, PB thus arose not as a party political programme, but came rather from local governments themselves. It was explicitly not their aim to introduce greater direct democracy. On the contrary, great importance was attached to ensuring that this participatory instrument did not curtail representative democracy in Germany, and that all decision-making competences remained with the elected political representatives of the people (Ahlke, 2008). Moreover, in the context of growing electoral abstention and political dissatisfaction it was becoming increasingly clear that 'budget issues and local government reform could no longer be left solely to the relevant expert policymakers and administrators.' (Herzberg & Cuny, 2007, p. 8). The publication of budgets, which is legally prescribed in several of Germany's federal states in order to provide citizens with an opportunity to raise any objections, proved inadequate. To this day only few citizens make use of this opportunity, because the documents published tend to be 'a closed book comprising hundreds of pages of columns of figures and incomprehensible expert commentary' (Märker & Nitschke, 2008, p. 17). At the same time, 'civil society pressure for greater participation and co-determination' (Märker & Nitschke, 2008, p. 17) remains palpable in Germany, among other things as a result of large-scale projects such as 'Stuttgart 21'. Since 2007 the planned construction of a large railway station in Stuttgart has led to major public protests that today symbolise what happens when citizens are not involved in major political decision-making processes. For several years an intensive debate has therefore been under way as to whether and to what extent PB in Germany might be able to make a contribution not only to modernising local government, but also to strengthening participatory democracy (Schruoffeneger & Herzberg, 2008).

The design of most participatory budgets to date, though, has still tended toward the objective of 'participatory modernisation' (Sintomer, Herzberg & Röcke, 2012, p.50).

This context, and the objectives that result from it, also explain the design of the first participatory budgets in Germany. Great importance was attached to making the budget comprehensible to people by publishing information on the municipal budget as a whole, publishing budget brochures and organising information events. In their role as 'advisors', citizens were able to submit proposals, whose implementation was deliberated and decided on publicly by the council. Decision-making authority remained (and remains to this day) with the council. The participatory budgets launched after 2004 also follow this pattern. However, participation and discussion clearly play a larger role (Schruoffeneger & Herzberg, 2008). Alongside many creative procedural modifications, two conceptual innovations have had a particularly lasting effect on the design of participatory budgets since 2004: One crucial innovation was the introduction of voting proposed by the Federal Agency for Civic Education and foundations of all political persuasions. This enables citizens to rate the proposals submitted – a function previously performed solely by administrators and policymakers (Herzberg, 2005). Since 2007 online participation, or e-participation, has also played a major role. Cologne's online-based participatory budget has inspired many other participatory budgets (see Rüttgers, 2008). More recent trends include a focus on proposals for cost-saving measures, i.e. involving citizens in budget consolidation, and presenting the budget in a transparent, legible form, particularly using open data.

All participatory budgets in Germany have in common the three phases of operationalisation: 'information – consultation – accountability', albeit with differences in emphasis (see Rüttgers, 2008). These three phases were already evident in the first participatory budget in 1998 (Schruoffeneger & Herzberg, 2008). In the following section we will take a closer look at the structure of the German participatory budget using the three-phase model, and a classifying definition.

2. Defining participatory budgeting in Germany: a three-phase model

We will now attempt to clarify more precisely the basic structure of participatory budgets in Germany, so that we can then consider which definition this model shares with PB in other countries (see Sintomer, Herzberg & Röcke, 2009).

As already indicated, a typical participatory budgeting procedure in Germany encompasses three steps: 'information – consultation – accountability'⁴.

During the first phase – the phase of information – citizens are supplied with information about the budget and the participatory budgeting procedure. Here the aim is first of all to make citizens aware of the public budget, the areas of activity of the local authority, and the scope of income and expenditure, so that they can submit and discuss informed and sophisticated ideas. Secondly, during this phase citizens are informed of their options for participation, and encouraged to get involved.

⁴ In 2005 this three-phase model was further developed into a seven-phase model in the project 'participatory budgeting in cities' (Herzberg, 2005). The seven-phase model also identifies the phases of mobilisation, prioritisation, handover to policymakers, and evaluation. However, the three-phase model has wider validity, and will suffice here to provide an introduction to the basic structure of German participatory budgets.

During the second phase – the phase of participation and consultation – citizens are able to contribute their ideas, make proposals for planning the budget and provide feedback on existing proposals. The proposals are then discussed by the citizens in online forums or at public meetings, and usually also rated. This results in a prioritised list of proposals. Decisions on implementing the proposals are taken by the council. The administration provides the council with written statements either on all the proposals or on a previously agreed number of them. Once the feasibility of the proposals, their costs, and the responsibility of the municipality have been properly looked into, these statements are used by the policymakers as a basis for decision-making.

During the third phase – the phase of accountability – decision-makers and administrators provide information on the outcome of the participation, and explain and justify their decisions as to which proposals will be implemented and which will not. For this purpose an accountability report is usually published.

With regard to the basic model of PB in Germany, in comparison to other countries one fundamental difference is evident to those situations where PB is seen as a procedure in which citizens are presented with a specific budget, and invited to take a decision on it. In Germany, participation means consulting, but does not mean taking the decisions. In other countries, citizens *decide*, whereas in Germany they *advise*. To support this process, major importance is attached to making the municipality's financial situation transparent (see Herzberg, Sintomer, Allegretti & Röcke, 2010).

The definition of Sintomer, Herzberg und Röcke (2009), which is virtually undisputed in Germany, identifies what all these procedures nevertheless have in common – and what it is that makes a participatory budget a participatory budget:

1. Participation revolves around financial matters; the issue at stake is limited resources.
2. Participation takes place at the level of the city as a whole, or at the level of a district that has its own political and administrative competences. A neighbourhood fund alone that does not involve participation at the level of the city as a whole or a district, is not a participatory budget.
3. The procedure is designed as a permanent one that will be repeated. A one-off referendum on budgetary or fiscal policy issues is not a participatory budget.
4. The procedure is based on a dedicated deliberation process conducted either online or at public meetings or gatherings. A written survey alone is therefore not a participatory budget. Nor is mere disclosure by existing administrative bodies or institutions of representative democracy.
5. The organisers must remain accountable for the decisions taken on whether or not to respond to and implement the proposals put forward as part of the procedure.

Clearly, this definition is a very broad one. This is presumably explained by the fact that Sintomer, Herzberg and Röcke wished to produce a single definition covering PB models in various countries – i.e. including for instance both consultative and decision-based procedures. As a result, this definition displays several differences from common definitions in other countries, and therefore also with respect to which procedures will be counted as participatory budgets, and which will not. According to the definition of the North American non-profit organisation 'The Participatory Budgeting Project', the consultative German model for instance would not meet the criteria necessary to qualify as a participatory budget: 'Participatory budgeting (PB) is a different way to manage public money, and to engage people in government. It is a democratic process in which community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget.' (The Participatory Budgeting Project, n.d.). This definition explicitly requires decision-making competences to be transferred to citizens.

Herzberg's, Sintomer's and Röcke's definition nevertheless clearly distinguishes the instrument of PB from other participatory methods. The necessary condition that the organisers possess political and administrative competences means that in Germany, neighbourhood funds that do not involve participation at the level of the city as a whole or the district, are not participatory budgets. At the level of neighbourhoods, in some German cities there are funds available on which the citizens of the neighbourhood can take decisions directly. This interesting instrument for civic participation is also in some cases combined with consultative procedures that relate to the local authority as a whole. In itself, though, participation at neighbourhood level only does not constitute PB. Furthermore, in many German municipalities one-off referenda are held on budget policy issues. According to the above definition, these too do not qualify as PB because they lack permanence. Other elements that do not constitute PB include merely involving citizens in existing political or administrative bodies, merely publishing the budget or merely surveying citizens without offering them opportunities for discussion.

In other words, the German model differs from PB in other countries particularly due to its consultative nature. Of course, there is no such thing as *the* German participatory budget. Over the years numerous versions of procedures have emerged, some of which differ from each other very considerably. Nevertheless, we can identify a number of 'typical' features of participatory budgets in Germany. We will now analyse these in more detail below.

3. 'Typically German participatory budgets' - Distinctive features of German procedures

As noted in the previous sections, when PB was first introduced in Germany the context and objectives led to a more consultative type of participatory budget. However, this is not the only characteristic feature of the German procedures. In this section we will therefore take a closer look at the landscape of participatory budgets in Germany, and examine their 'typically Germany' features, i.e. those characteristics which are observed in most participatory budgets in Germany. For this purpose we will use data that were collected in October and November 2012 for the Status Report 2013 of the information portal www.buergerhaushalt.org on PB in Germany. This information was collected by a team from Zebralog, an agency specialised in participation, working on behalf of the Service Agency Communities in One World (a unit of Engagement Global), and Germany's Federal Agency for Civic Education. The team began by preparing an analytical framework, which they then applied for close online study of the 96 local authorities in Germany that are actively involved in participatory budgeting.⁵

Based on the results of this data survey, we will now identify and discuss distinctive features or 'typical elements' of participatory budgets in Germany. The data are also summarised in the Status Report 2013 (Schröter, 2013), and published on the www.buergerhaushalt.org/processes website, where they will be continuously updated.

⁵ The team first of all conducted extensive online research on all German municipalities with a population of more than 40,000, as well as smaller municipalities that were already listed on the [buergerhaushalt.org](http://www.buergerhaushalt.org) website when the research was conducted. They thus identified the 96 municipalities actively pursuing PB; these included 70 local authorities that in 2012 were conducting PB for the first or second time, and 26 authorities that had already conducted PB three times or more.

3.1. The ‘typically German’ form of participation: submission of proposals as recommendations

What we have discussed in this chapter so far is also confirmed by the results of the data survey: most participatory budgets in Germany are proposal-based, i.e. consultative. In 81 of the 96 participatory budgets listed (84 %), citizens contribute their own proposals to the budget, and can also discuss and comment on other proposals and usually also rate them. The decision as to whether proposals are implemented rests with the council. Forty of the 81 proposal-based participatory budgets also have a ‘feedback-based’ component. This means that as well as submitting their own proposals, citizens are also invited to provide the administration with their feedback (in the form of statements, comments, ratings). Eight municipalities offer citizens only the option of providing feedback on existing proposals. Five participatory budgets were identified as a ‘hybrid form’, covered neither by the proposal-based nor by the feedback-based format. Significantly, only two participatory budgets in Germany were classified as ‘decision-based’. In these cases the council undertook to adopt a formal resolution on the measures desired by the citizens, and to instruct the administration to implement them.

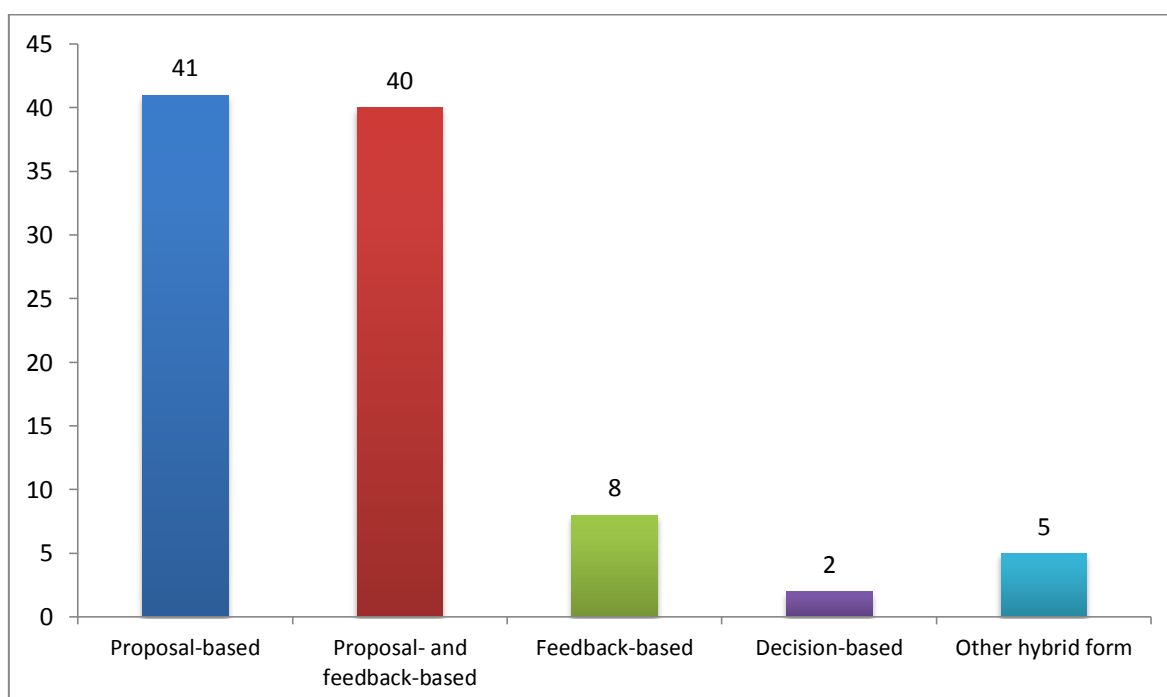


Figure 2: Types of participation in participatory budgets in Germany

This result highlights a clear difference between the German participatory budgets, and the original Porto Alegre model in which citizens are granted direct decision-making authority. The consultative nature of PB in Germany is explained chiefly by the different objectives mentioned above. PB is used not primarily in order to strengthen participatory democracy (see Sintomer, Herzberg & Röcke, 2012), but to sensitise administrators and policymakers to the needs and wants of citizens using participatory elements. ‘This creates opportunities for citizens to bring their own expertise and competencies to bear in the political decisions that affect them. For administrators and policymakers it generates new opportunities to gain important information on the preferences of the population, and gain fresh impetus from the ideas and proposals submitted by citizens’ (Märker & Nitschke, 2008, p. 17).

For a number of years, however, objectives of participatory democracy such as the sustainable mobilisation of citizens, and the step from consultation to cooperation, have increasingly been considered in the design and evaluation of participatory budgets (see Ruesch, 2012). Many local authorities have had to deal with the problem of declining figures for participation, once they have implemented PB on several occasions. One possible explanation for this is the asymmetrical division of competences: 'Citizens advise, policymakers decide'. One of Germany's best-known researchers in the field of PB, Carsten Herzberg, therefore recommends 'releasing citizens from their tutelage' and developing a system that 'transfers decision-making competence in circumscribed areas' (Herzberg 2010, p. 116), without calling representative democracy into question.

3.2. The 'typically German' object of participation: the entire budget

Typically, participatory budgets in Germany enable citizens to participate in the entire budget. The research identified only four participatory budgets that make a fixed sum (and thus a partial budget) available to citizens. Twelve others limit participation to selected thematic areas of the budget, such as education or sport. Six participatory budgets were classified as a 'hybrid form'; these participatory budgets for instance allow proposals on the entire budget, but define thematic focuses or provide the participatory budget with a small supplementary budget. However, the vast majority – 74 participatory budgets – allow proposals on all areas of the budget without defining any sum in advance.

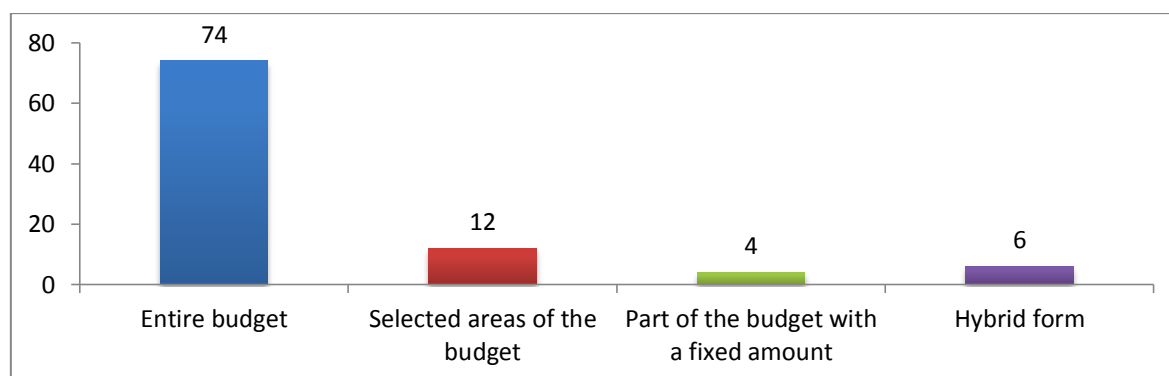


Figure 3: The object of participatory budgets in Germany

Here too we see a major difference compared to participatory budgets in many other countries, where citizens decide, or at least consult, on how to use a specific sum. Like the notion of consultation, the idea of participating in the entire budget can be explained by the objective of modernising local government. With this objective in mind, it makes little sense to make a small amount of money available for citizen proposals outside of the budget planning process proper. This would not satisfy the aim of using PB to integrate citizen participation directly into the politico-administrative process of budget planning. Moreover, unlike the provision of 'play money' (Amrhein, 2012) or limiting participation to selected areas of the budget, the possibility of participating in all areas of the budget is seen as providing a higher degree of openness and citizen influence, as the procedure does not prescribe what citizens may express their opinion on.

Nonetheless, some researchers point out that this understanding is often the case only in theory, and that citizens usually make proposals on more short-term measures, and tend not to use PB to discuss long-term measures (Klages, 2010). This is why some players are now asking whether it actually makes sense to provide a fixed amount for PB (Servicestelle Kommunen in der Einen Welt, 2012). It remains to be seen whether the approach will begin to converge with the original Porto Alegre model in this respect over the next few years.

3.3. The ‘typically German’ input: obtaining citizen proposals on expenditure and cost-saving measures

Typically, German participatory budgets relate not only to expenditure, but also to cost-saving measures. Sixty-four of the 96 participatory budgets analysed allow citizens to make proposals both on investment and on budget consolidation. It is also interesting to note that there are a growing number of explicitly ‘savings-oriented’ participatory budgets that aim to jointly identify options for budget consolidation. Twenty-three municipalities in Germany explicitly call upon their citizens to provide their input on cost-saving measures or measures to improve local government revenues. Only nine municipalities focus explicitly on citizen inputs on investment measures.

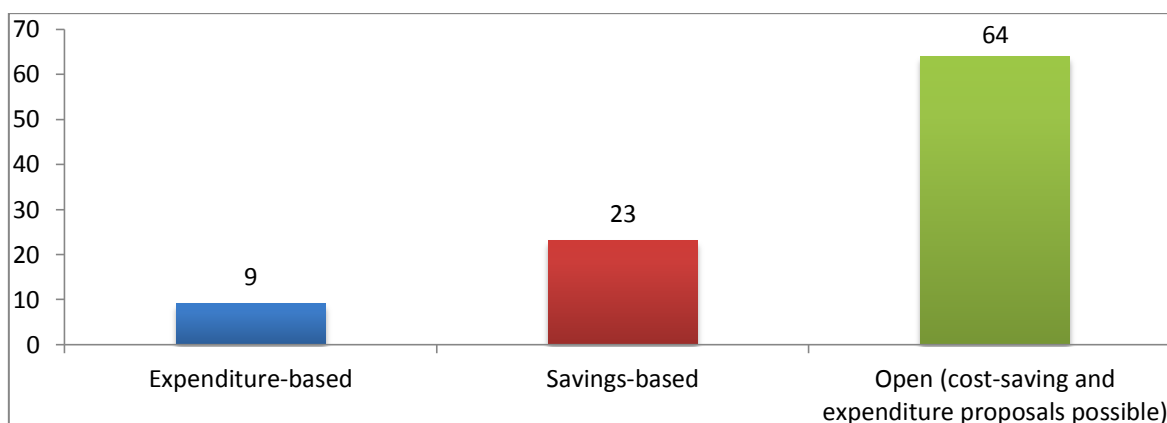


Figure 4: Inputs for participatory budgets in Germany

Compared to the Porto Alegre model, what is most striking here is the fact that the typical participatory budget in Germany is not confined to investment, but also offers space for ideas and proposals on municipal cost-saving measures and revenues. This feature of German participatory budgets is explained chiefly by the fact that many local authorities in Germany face a threat of over-indebtedness, and must therefore consolidate their budgets. In this setting it makes little sense to ask citizens how the money (which is not available) should be spent. To avoid planning financial cuts without consulting the citizens, and to ‘inform citizens comprehensively of the plight of their municipality and of planned measures, and actively involve them [...] as providers of information and feedback’ (Märker & Wehner, 2011, p. 5), more and more local authorities are introducing ‘cost-saving budgets’. Here too it becomes clear that the objective of PB is to integrate participatory elements into the politico-administrative process of budget planning (and consolidation). One of the best-known examples of a ‘cost-saving budget’ is the participatory budget of the city of Solingen (see box).

An example: The cost-saving participatory budget of the city of Solingen

This participatory budget, which was first implemented in 2010 under the slogan ‘Solingen spart’ [‘Solingen is cutting costs’], is an example of citizen participation in budget consolidation. In 2011 it led to the city receiving the European Public Sector Award for good governance, and in 2012 Solingen received the German Sustainability Award in the governance and administration category.

Faced by the threat of bankruptcy, the city decided not to discuss the issue of where savings could be made behind closed doors. Using the platform www.solingen-spart.de, citizens made their own proposals for cutting costs and generating revenues, and commented on and rated proposals made by the local authority and other citizens. This launched a broad public debate on the cost saving measures needed. In 2010 the municipality of Solingen, together with its citizens, drew up a package to save 44 million euros. After the success story of 2010, PB was conducted again in 2012.

However, opponents of the model of budget consolidation involving citizen participation (and PB in general) speak of a ‘capitulation of local policymaking’ (Amrhein, 2012). Those who hold this view argue that the participation of citizens in cost-saving measures is an illegitimate abdication of responsibility to citizens in difficult times. In financially good times, so it is argued, politicians cling to power, while in difficult times they leave things to citizens. Here too, it remains to be seen whether citizens will also embrace this view, or whether they will see the opportunity to participate as a positive one even in times of belt-tightening.

3.4. The ‘typically German’ channel of participation: online participation

A further distinctive feature of participatory budgets in Germany is that almost all of them use the Internet as a channel of participation. Seventeen municipalities involve citizens solely via the Internet, while 43 use the Internet as the main channel, supplemented by traditional channels of communication such as the telephone, letter or public meetings. A further 17 municipalities focus on public meetings as well as telephone communication and letters, and use the Internet only as a secondary channel (for instance for submitting proposals by email). Sixteen participatory budgets were classified as using a ‘complex, multi-channel procedure’. This procedure combines different channels in complex ways, in which no clear distinction can be drawn between the main and secondary channels. Only two local authorities do not use the Internet at all.

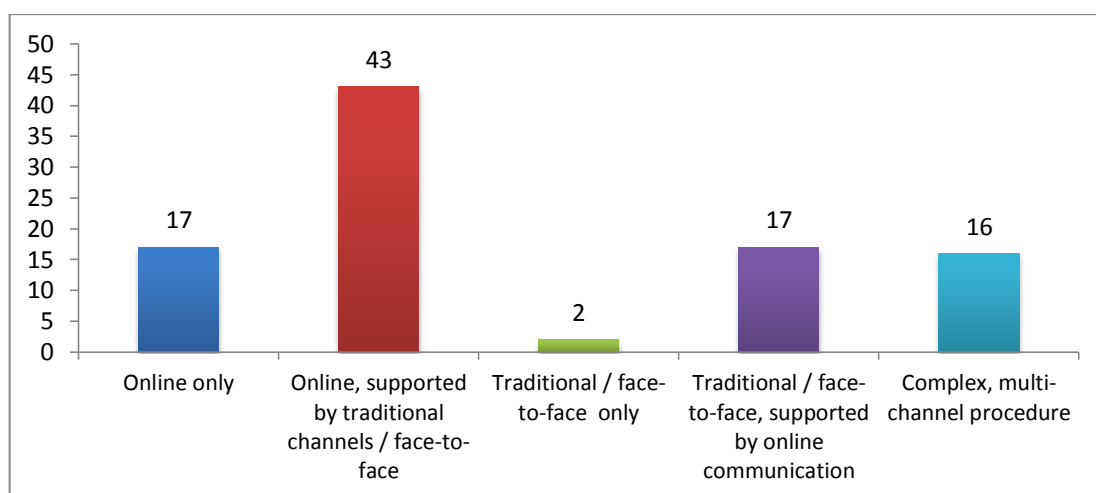


Figure 5: Channels of participation in participatory budgets in Germany

The highly intensive use – particularly as compared with other countries – of online-based participatory procedures is presumably due to the objective of participation here, too. The objective of informing citizens and obtaining information and feedback from them can be achieved effectively online, as the much-copied example of the city of Cologne (see box) demonstrates. Using moderated online platforms, for instance, far more people can be reached than with traditional channels of communication, as the threshold of participation is far lower than is the case with public meetings (Märker & Nitschke, 2008). At the same time, unlike participation by telephone or questionnaire, online participation facilitates deliberation, because proposals submitted online can be commented on and rated. By making information available and ensuring the public visibility of all proposals, comments and statements, online participation also makes a significant contribution to transparency (Wehner & Märker, 2011). One rather new phenomenon is the trend toward the ‘open

budget', which was recently introduced for instance by the city of Bonn, and which is designed to make the structure of the budget more comprehensible to citizens (see <https://bonn-packts-an.de/haushalt>). It involves a transparent, dynamic visualisation of the budget.

Example: Online-based participatory budget of the city of Cologne

Cologne's participatory budget won several awards for its innovative citizen participation concept in 2008 and 2009, including the United Nations Public Sector Award. Cologne has been pioneering PB and online participation since 2007.

Every year, over a four-week period citizens are able to submit their proposals on the city's expenditure, cost-saving measures and revenues using the <http://buergerhaushalt.stadt-koeln.de/> platform, where they can also comment on and rate proposals made by other citizens and the local authority. The ten most highly rated proposals are then reviewed by the administration, and forwarded to the Cologne city council along with a statement. The individual proposals and the decisions taken by the council are explained in the accountability report and on the online platform. The threshold for participating online is low, requiring only a user name and password. Citizens who do not have access to the Internet can submit proposals through a call centre or in writing. Thanks also to its intensive public relations work, Cologne achieved very high participation rates of 11,000 and 14,000 active participants in its first and second participatory budgets.

The critics of online-based PB, however, do not consider the Internet to be an appropriate channel of participation. Besides the risk of manipulation by multiple ratings and the influence of anonymous lobbying groups, they also criticise the fact that active participants are not representative of a cross-section of the population either in terms of the numbers or in terms of their diversity (see for example Holtkamp & Fuhrmann, 2013). Even before the first online based participatory procedures were launched, reservations were expressed as to whether PB is compatible with representative democracy, or whether it might more probably lead to a dominance of a minority of participating citizens. The use of the Internet has intensified this debate on representativeness over the last few years. This is interesting because the figures for participation in online-based procedures – even though still far from representative – are far higher than for public meetings. Hopes that the Web 2.0 will trigger a new wave of participation, and the direct visibility of figures for participation on the online platforms, now appear to be making participation figures more and more important as a criterion for measuring the success of participatory budgets (Wehner & Märker, 2013). Nevertheless, in order to reach as many different target groups as possible, and especially in order to avoid excluding those with no access to the Internet, a trend is evident in Germany toward multi-channel formats (see box on the participatory budget in Berlin-Lichtenberg).

3.5. The 'typically German' form of accountability: no separate accountability

(Only) 57 local authorities in Germany currently practice a form of a separate accountability for participatory budgets. Thirty-seven of them provide only aggregate or overall accountability for all proposals, i.e. no reference is made to the individual proposals. Detailed accountability is provided for only 20 participatory budgets; here, accountability takes the form of statements or council decisions in relation to specific proposals. Of these participatory budgets, seven have also developed a monitoring system that enables the local authority to provide regular information on the implementation status of a proposal.

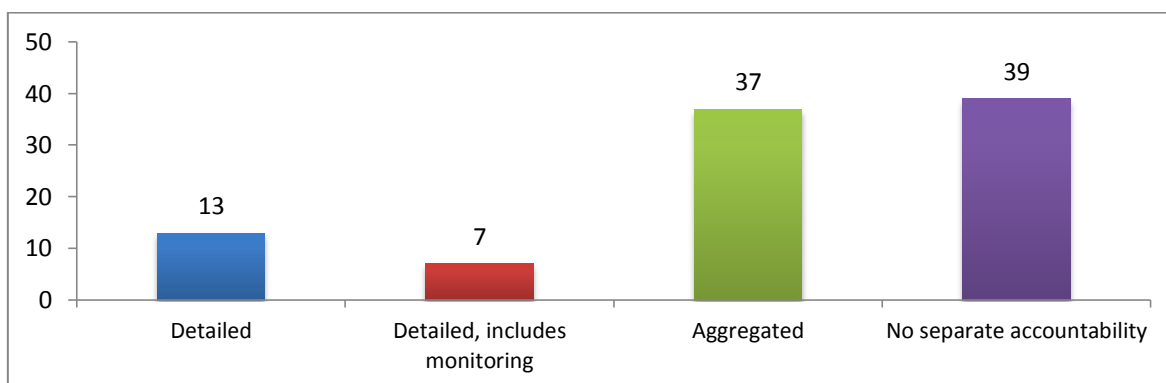


Figure 6: Accountability in participatory budgets in Germany

Here it should also be pointed out that where detailed accountability is provided, often only an individually and previously defined and publicly announced number of top-rated proposals (i.e. those considered most important) are professionally reviewed and consulted on by decision-makers. The figures range from just a few proposals, to the 100 best-rated, to all those submitted. Since most procedures in Germany are consultative and citizens do not take decisions concerning implementation, accountability is a phase that is all the more important for German participatory budgets, because ‘without any feedback as to how the input made by citizens is being used in budget planning, citizens are highly unlikely to feel motivated to invest their time (once again) in participating’ (Märker & Nitschke, 2008, p. 21). The results of our analysis of the German participatory budgeting landscape are thus all the more problematic. It is to be assumed that insufficient accountability will also entail a decline in participation. It is therefore to be hoped that more municipalities will provide a more detailed form of accountability in the next few years. From the citizens’ perspective in particular, this phase is essential and must not be swept under the carpet. The focus on providing information through brochures and open data that we observe in Germany is important, but participation should not end there. Civic education is only the enabling factor that creates the possibility of informed participation in the discourse on the local budget. Consultation – at least from the perspective of citizens – is only valuable if the decision on whether or not to implement proposals is at least communicated and explained. The Lichtenberg district of Berlin is an excellent example of the inclusion of all three phases (see box).

Example: Multi-channel, legally institutionalised participatory budget of Berlin-Lichtenberg

The participatory budget of the Lichtenberg district of Berlin is by German standards rather ‘untypical’, though nevertheless it is one which is highly successful and often cited. In 2007 Berlin-Lichtenberg received the European Public Sector Award, and in 2013 was awarded the Theodor Heuss Medal. Through neighbourhood dialogues, public meetings and an online platform (<http://www.buergerhaushalt-lichtenberg.de/>) the citizens of Lichtenberg are able to submit and discuss their own proposals. Citizens can vote on these proposals either online or face-to-face on the district-wide voting day. The procedure also includes a representative household survey. Although this participatory budget is also consultative, it is very binding: around 90 per cent of the most highly rated proposals have so far been included in the district budget. Other exemplary aspects include the legal institutionalisation of citizen participation in the district administration law, and the detailed accountability practices that include monitoring.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter we identified the distinctive features of the ‘typically German’ participatory budget, and explained them in relation to the history of PB in Germany and the objectives associated with it. We analysed the current landscape of participatory budgets, and categorised this in relation to five key procedural characteristics. Trends and current debates were identified. The results of our analysis can be summarised as follows: The typical participatory budget in Germany is consultative. It calls upon citizens to contribute and discuss their proposals on expenditure and cost saving measures. It usually makes use of an online platform, and provides accountability (which is aggregated in most cases). The trends identified include the proliferation of citizen participation in budget consolidation, and the intensive analysis and visualisation of information on the Internet and in brochures. These distinctive features are to be explained particularly by the fact that participatory budgets in Germany were designed primarily as a means to modernise local government and make it more responsive to citizens. For a number of years, though, other objectives and thus other designs have been entering the discussion and have been tried out. In this context it would certainly be worthwhile to have a look at other countries in order to learn from other models. German municipalities tend to be interested e.g. in models that combine consultation with formats in which the participatory budget has a specific amount set aside for it.

At the same time it should not be ignored that the consultative model also has advantages that might be attractive for municipalities in other countries. This is the case particularly where there is a desire to institutionalise greater openness of decision-making and administration, and establish transparency and dialogue on the budget as a whole. Here the consultative procedure offers a form of participation that is directly linked to the politico-administrative processes, and in which citizens can make proposals on any thematic area and without financial restriction.

Issues that are currently the subject of controversial debate in Germany include how to deal with the decline in the number of citizens participating, and the lack of representativeness of those involved (especially how different target groups can be reached, and how necessary representativeness is in the first place). A further issue is how to integrate the three phases of information, consultation and accountability as efficiently as possible into the politico-administrative procedures. As demonstrated in this chapter, accountability is one area where there is still much room for improvement. One thing which is certainly clear is that the development of participatory budgeting has not yet come to an end in Germany. In fact, more and more local authorities are realising that the customary procedures of PB need to be further developed fundamentally, in order to truly achieve its objectives.

About the Author/s

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Michelle Anna Ruesch is a Project Manager with ZebraLog GmbH & Co. KG, one of Germany’s leading agencies for civic participation, with a focus on e-participation. She has already provided conceptual planning and consultancy support for several participatory budgets in Germany, and moderated and evaluated these procedures. She is also editor of the Internet portal www.buergerhaushalt.org on behalf of the Federal Agency for Civic Education and the Service Agency Communities in One World. This involves writing regular articles and planning network meetings on participatory budgeting. Michelle Ruesch studied in Maastricht, Toulouse and London. She holds an MSc in Politics and Communications from the London School of Economics. Outside of her professional responsibilities she is also actively involved in cross-boundary dialogue, civil society participation and conflict resolution processes.

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