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Participatory Budgeting:

The modern form of political engagement

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**ORÇAMENTO PARTICIPATIVO:
A FORMA MODERNA DE
COMPROMISSO POLÍTICO**

A política contemporânea é afetada pelo descontentamento. Os estudos revelam que a satisfação com a democracia na Europa varia significativamente conforme o tempo e as regiões. As Inovações Democráticas são tidas como possível cura para o mal-estar democrático. Uma das formas de Inovação Democrática é o Orçamento Participativo (OP). Os esforços do OP em envolver os cidadãos nos investimentos públicos, não obstante as várias objeções, têm sido um dos canais mais bem sucedidos de contribuição das últimas décadas. O presente artigo explora a forma como o OP em particular torna a participação socialmente menos onerosa, ultrapassando assim os constrangimentos implícitos nas formas tradicionais de participação política na Europa.

Palavras-chave: *Democracia, Governança, Participação política, Inovações Democráticas, Orçamento Participativo.*

**PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING: THE MODERN
FORM OF POLITICAL
ENGAGEMENT**

Contemporary politics is affected by discontentment. Studies show the satisfaction with democracy in Europe varies significantly over time and regions. The Democratic Innovations are claimed to be a possible cure for democratic malaise. One of the forms of Democratic Innovations is Participatory Budgeting (PB). The efforts of the PB to involve citizens in public investments, despite several objections, have been one of the most successful channels of input for the last couple of decades. This paper explores how PB particularly makes participation less socially expensive and, thus, overcomes constraints implicit in traditional forms of political participation in Europe.

Keywords: *Democracy, Governance, Political participation, Democratic Innovations, Participatory Budgeting.*

**BUDGET PARTICIPATIF:
LA FORME MODERNE DE
L'ENGAGEMENT POLITIQUE**

La politique contemporaine est affectée par le mécontentement. Des études montrent que la satisfaction envers la démocratie en Europe varie de façon significative au long du temps et selon les régions. Les Innovations Démocratiques sont désignées comme une cure possible du malaise démocratique. L'une des formes d'Innovations Démocratiques est le Budget Participatif (BP). Les efforts du BP dans le sens d'impliquer les citoyens dans les investissements publics, en dépit de plusieurs objections, ont été l'un des canaux de contributions ayant le plus de succès ces deux dernières décennies. Cet article explore la façon dont le BP en particulier rend la participation moins chère du point de vue social et permet, ainsi, de débloquer des contraintes implicites dans les formes traditionnelles de la participation politique en Europe.

Mots-clés: *Démocratie, Gouvernance, Participation politique, Innovations Démocratiques, Budget Participatif.*

I. DISCONTENTMENT WITH DEMOCRACY

‘By almost any measure, public confidence and trust in, and support for, politicians, political parties, and political institutions has eroded over the past generation’ (Dalton, 2004). Contemporary politics is afflicted by political discontentment. Evidences across many advanced democracies point to development of anti-politics orientation among citizens (Pharr and Putnam 2000; Stoker 2006; Hay 2007; Norris 2011). The common theme across different accounts is the emergence of a gap between citizens, on the one side, and politicians, political processes and political institutions on the other. The quality of governance has become a quantified concept in the social sciences dealing with strength of democratic institutions and trust. Looking at the different indicators of quality of government, we can observe considerable differences within the European Union. Moreover, the Quality of Government report (Charron, Lapuente and Rothstein, 2010) claims ‘European countries have not shown a clear improvement in their levels of quality of government during the last two decades.’ Another study shows although the satisfaction with democracy in Europe remains relatively high, it varies significantly over time and regions (Wagner, Schneider and Halla, 2009).

II. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: THE DEFINITION, COSTS AND BENEFITS

For the last couple of decades we observe the process of evolution of political participation in the modern democratic societies (van Deth, 2012; Benneth, 2012; Cain, Dalton, and Scarrow, 2008). Firstly described in terms of conventional forms, the concept was further extended with protest and social movements. Nowadays, the scope of participation in politics got even broader taking different forms in the era of electronic media. Political participation plays a crucial role in democracy and democratization process. It appears that today’s political participation comprises both actions taken to influence politics as well as activities aimed to express opinions. As van Deth (2014) describes it, participation is ‘the elixir of life for democracy’. However, how would we identify a form of political participation if we observe one? While attempting to elaborate on an appropriate definition, we inevitably face the challenge of infinite expansion. The boost of opportunities for political involvement is followed by growing conceptual uncertainty. Overall, Dalton (2008) claims the trends in political activity represent changes in the style of political action and not solely the shift of the level of participation.

First, conclusions about the changing nature of participation differ broadly depending on the concept used. Those with the most restrictive and conservative conceptions of political participation identify a strong regular pattern of declining in political engagement over time. At the same time, those with a more inclusive conception claim a change in the mode of political participation. Second, there are many newer, creative and personalized, modes of participation. Only the expression of political aims or intentions converts the usual activities into modes of political participation. Yet accepting intentions and aims of people as a necessary criterion to

typify political participation would imply a great subjectivity of our main concepts (Kitschelt and Rehm, 2016).

Thus how can we avoid the situation where the endless growth of the modes of participation results in endless conceptual expansion? In the very basic term van Deth (2014) defines the phenomenon as citizens' activities affecting politics. He claims the available definitions are embedded in a set of main rules to distinguish main variants of political participation. First, political participation is represented as an action. It means that merely claiming to be concerned with politics does not represent participation. Second, political participation is recognized as an action taken by citizens, not politicians or lobbyists in the course of their duties. Third, political participation is always voluntary and not made compulsory by law. A fourth general aspect of the political participation is that it targets government and its policy in a broad sense, political system or policy process. It is neither limited to specific stages (such as policy making) nor to definite levels (such as elections or communication with public representatives and incumbents). 'Frequently used terms for activities meeting the requirements of the definition are 'conventional modes of participation', 'institutional modes of participation' or 'elite-directed action' (van Deth, 2012). Hence we have to focus also on the locus (or place) of participation. Hay (2007) emphasizes forms of political participation that '... take place outside of the governmental arena, yet respond to concerns which are formally recognized politically and on which there may well be active legislative or diplomatic agendas'. Hay (2007) takes this idea to the point: '... actions might be deemed political only in so far as they either arise out of situations of collective choice or are likely to have collective consequences, at whatever point these consequences arise'. Therefore the act of participation is targeted and the targets of the actions can be described without taking into consideration the goals or objectives of the people involved. Hey also defines 'civic engagement' as '... any activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity'. So the activity meant to resolve communal problems also contributes to the general phenomenon of political participation.

As we found it before, the political participation is the link from the masses to the elites. It serves to advertise and communicate demands to anyone, or being used to target policy-makers, or helps to run for an office to implement the demands (Parry, Moyser, and Day, 2011). The cost of participation is one of the key aspects of the theory. According to the definition, it may take place in different contexts as well as varies by intensity and riskiness (Kitschelt and Rehm, 2016). Organizing and participating in protest has always been relatively socially expensive since it tends to consume time, puts under risk and makes to bear other costs. It also requires co-presence to accomplish collective goals. In this sense political participation which is addressed to the central authority is the most costly one (Earl and Kimport, 2011).

What constitutes the concept of price of the political participation? First of all, these are individual traits of participants. By individual traits we mean resources. The common rule here is that people engage if they have resources and characteristic to ease getting into participation. They include availability of time in general as well as income and occupational time autonomy depending on it. People with more discretionary time are more likely to participate (Earl and Kimport, 2011). The

education level is also important as it allows working up more politically oriented information and building stronger self-confidence. The fact of involvement in more civic activities facilitates interpersonal communication and thus allows more inputs to be involved in political process. Second, here we are talking about recruitments. Involvement in associations may enhance for individuals who lack some basic resources. The involvement depends on residency and occupation of an individual. Occupation that does not grant high income and time sovereignty, may still increase participation if work process or residence itself exposes one to others living in the same conditions, creates certain social and group environment. Here we also should not forget the family as an early contact with politics often leads to sustaining political activism. Third, these are orientations towards politics. Political interests and ideology plays an important role in involving people to take part in political process and constitutes the normative image of how politics and social organization work (Kitschelt and Rehm, 2016).

III. LOWERING THE COST OF PARTICIPATION: PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

The Democratic Innovations are conceived as a possible cure for political alienation resulting from the lack of resources (Peruzzotti 2012; Geissel and Newton 2012). ECPR Standing Group on Democratic Innovations define those as ‘innovations that aim at deepening “thin” representative democracy and their impacts on communities, structures, systems, policies and democratic participation.’ It is now widely accepted the new uses of the web may allow participants overcome the constraints implicit in the conventional forms of public engagement; that the Information and communications technologies (ICT) provide important collective experience without co-presence, making the participation ‘cheaper’ (Kitschelt and Rehm, 2008; Earl and Kimport, 2011; van Deth and Maloney, 2012).

One of the forms the Democratic Innovations take is Participatory Budgeting (PB). As Talpin (2011) defines it, the “The concept [of Participatory Budgeting] is simple: making citizens participate in a central public decision, namely the definition of the municipal budget.” Provided that the PB project is systematically implemented and has a strong legitimate basis, both citizens and local governments can equally benefit from it. PB opens prospective to promote social inclusion and justice in the allotment of funds within low-level communities. Most generally, PB projects enable groups of citizens to deliberate in order to come up with either a comprehensive budget draft, or a set of consecutive recommendations to be taken into consideration by representatives (Sintomer et al., 2012; Franzke and Kleger, 2010; Herzberg, 2015). In the Porto Alegre model, which is often taken as an example, the procedures are made to put budgeting process in a city under neighborhoods’ authority. Citizen opinion is being aggregated through the neighborhood representatives to determine the allocation of resources citywide (Talpin, 2011).

According to the general definition proposed by The Participatory Budgeting Project (2014), the PB deliberation comprises several stages:

- Community members set up saving or investment priorities and decide on budget delegates
- These budget delegates present detailed funding proposals, revised by experts
- Community members cast their votes for proposals
- The authorities begin with implementation of the top proposals

The idea of Participatory Budget, which originated in the 80s Porto Alegre, was brought about by social movements as opposed to the overwhelming stream that steadily lead to the state's privatization and the shortening of its core functions. The idea became institutionalized in 1989 under the Popular Front government as an instrument for promoting public participation in the creating of the budget, setting priorities for actions to be taken and controlling its execution. It turned to be a valuable instrument in the struggle for public monitoring of the state, authorities and institutions at a local level with hope to expand it onto a federal scale. The deliberative process stood for decentralizing of capital and power, empowering people as individuals outside major political movements (De Oliveira Dutra, 2014).

Olívio De Oliveira Dutra (Ibid), the former Mayor of Porto Alegre, describes the range of questions in the following way:

'Who pays taxes? Why? How? How are the City Council's Revenue and Expenditure constituted? Are the tax indices for the calculation of Urban and Rural property tax (IPTU) fair? And the City Code? The Master Plan? What about Landholding Regulation? How are relations with Federal Agencies State and Union and with the other branches of government, the legislative and the judicial powers?'

There was, he says, a steady demand for detailed information on these issues as well as the greater comprehensibility, which, without doubt, could lead to the transformation of citizenship and its perception within the society. Those people standing behind the first PB schemes in Brazil were primarily concerned with increasing civic involvement in the project all the way from the drafting of the proposal to communicating them to the lawmakers, and controlling the implementation by residents' committees. With the joint efforts of different social and political movements, a general understanding of the State performing better under public control was reached. Far from harming the lawmakers' reputation, the PB invited the municipal councilors to take part in all of the steps empowering them to exercise with independency and responsibility for their indispensable task of converting the proposal into Law (De Oliveira Dutra, Ibid).

Dr. Stefan Wilhelmy (2014), the Director of The Service Agency Communities in One World, claims that "good governance begins at the municipal level, and participation by citizens in municipal processes is an important element in this". For a number of superior reasons the Service Agency Communities in One World is continuously endorsing PB processes ever since 2003. The essential idea of public control over government spending was reflected in the PB schemes. Its implementation steadily disclosed, through meetings in different venues provided by the municipality, both in urban and rural areas. Some of them were organized with the assistance of city councils, though many were demanded by communities themselves.

Nelson Dias (2014) argues that the popularity of the PB comes from the crisis of representative democracy, the fast and broad spreading of participation experiences in policy-making among citizens, the network distribution and public supervision over the resources. First of all, it is about the crisis of liberal democracy. As the regulations and procedures of liberal democracy get to a uniform standard, the crisis of political representation is rising in many democratic regimes over the past couple of decades. "Democratic disenchantment" is experienced in different parts of the world. High numbers of political abstention are found worldwide, which means that the representative democracy is losing ground and appears to be unable of mobilizing people (Geissel and Newton, 2012). It may partly be explained by the fact that for many citizens the power of a vote is false and its casting has no political meaning. Voters are convinced that the actual centers of influence and decision-making cannot be reached or affected within election cycles. The recurrent worries for dishonesty and corruption, abuse of power for personal preference, promoting private good at the expense of collective one, on the side, account for the crisis of political representation (Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Halperin, 2013). That is why the PB is seen (Geißel, and Joas, 2013; Talpin, 2012) as a rather good and successful practice within the participatory democracy.

The PB, Dias (2014) argues, is a common trend of localism and working in network in the age of globalization. The practice, originated in Brazil almost 30 years ago, quickly became famous and visible both around the country and beyond. It encouraged various actors such as international organization, NGOs, researchers and think tanks, notwithstanding the other local governments, worldwide. If during the first decade only two projects existed in Porto Alegre and Montovideo, more than 140 municipalities in Brazil adopted this approach by the year of 2000. Later the idea got exported and was broadly diversified. Ten years later a national and international PB networks were established. As a result of its relatively fast distribution, the international network of PB projects embraces all continents, particularly in Europe, Latin America, and Africa with more than three thousand cases worldwide (Dias, 2014).

The concept became a new social movement with political perspective. From experimental practices not surpassing the local level, it acquired the status public policy in many countries (Sintomer et al., 2012). It is highly innovative in the methods of action and organizational forms, as it managed to get away from dissident street movements in the process of defending basic civil rights. Instead the movement is incorporated into the government structures, silently but still revolutionary triggering the change of administrative processes (Sintomer et al., 2012; Franzke and Kleger, 2010; Herzberg, 2015). In fact, the PB, promoted by the cooperation between states, supranational organizations and projects, is meant to reduce the gap between local governments and civil society. In the context of transparent borders and increasing vulnerability to global dynamics, local governments in a need for more public support. (Geissel and Joas, 2013).

Sintomer et al, reasoning about transnational models of citizen participation (2010) claiming that the efforts of the PB to involve citizens in public investments, despite several objections, have been one of the most successful channels of input for the last couple of decades. It induced new studies of participatory democracy in Europe and the world, putting on the agenda different new issues and approaches. However, if in

the western democracies it is seen as a remedy from the crisis of legitimacy and lack of representation, in other parts of the world the higher civic involvement is needed in the context of either internationally supported or bottom-up development programs.

The link between inclusive participation and all-round modernization of public administration is obviously one of the important aspects of the PB sustainability. The consequences following the PB are diverse. As a rule, it contributes to establishing more efficient political communication and cohesion among different institutions of the civil society on the local level (Klages, 2010; Klages, Daramus, and Masser, 2008). Even though it is still uncertain whether it has a potential to substitute parties in their classical role of schools of democracy, the PB has a positive impact on the overall level of political culture as it promotes competences of the people involved and requires less resources to take part (Talpin, 2011).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary politics is afflicted by political discontentment. Evidence across many advanced democracies points to development of anti-politics orientation among citizens. As we found it before, the political participation is the link from the masses to the elites. It serves to advertise and communicate demands to anyone, or being used to target policy-makers. The cost of participation is one of the key aspects making individuals either eager to or not willing to participate in politics and thus affecting the level of satisfaction with democracy. The Democratic Innovations may allow citizens overcome the constraints implicit in the conventional forms of public engagement providing important collective experience without co-presence, making the participation 'cheaper'. One of the forms the Democratic Innovations take is Participatory Budgeting (PB). PB projects enable groups of citizens to deliberate in order to come up with either a comprehensive budget draft, or a set of consecutive recommendations to be taken into consideration by representatives. In general, the PB has a potential to promote less biased public investments, more accountable and transparent administrations, greater numbers of public participation with less exclusion, as well as diverse experience of democratic education.

On the one hand, the concept of PB fits perfectly in the modern definition of political participation. It is represented as an action taken by citizens themselves, without professional lobbyist or political entrepreneurs. Is it voluntary and offers a range of option of targeting politicians, political issues, but also communal problems and needs of a local community. On the other, it aimed at making participation a lot more affordable. The PB is able to effectively mobilize citizens regardless of their educational background, residency and occupation as well as their general orientation towards politics.

Mostly for these reasons, the concept became a new social movement with political perspective. From experimental practices not surpassing the local level, it has quickly acquired the status public policy in many countries and became one of the most successful example innovations in democracy for the last couple of decades with more than three thousand cases worldwide.

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