PEOPLE-POWERED BUDGETS

A CASE FOR DEMOCRATIZING LOCAL BUDGETS TO TRANSFORM OUR CITIES AND CARE FOR OUR COMMUNITIES

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PARTNERSHIP for Working Families

REPORT AUTHOR

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The Partnership for Working Families is a national network of 20 powerful city and regional affiliate groups based in major urban areas across the country. The Partnership advocates for and supports policies and movements that build more just and sustainable communities where we live and work. Taking lessons learned at the local level and applying them to the national conversation, the Partnership builds a framework for addressing climate change, inequality, racial and social injustice. For more information, visit us at www. ForWorkingFamilies.org.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper makes a case for organizers to democratize the way local budgets are set to meet the multiple crises of this moment, build a larger base, and sow seeds that can give rise to a true multiracial, feminist democracy for the first time in our country.

This vision is a contribution to growing movements to win People's Budgets and Moral Budgets in cities around the country and is aligned with calls to defund police. We are drawing on examples of and lessons from participatory democracy and co-governance projects led by Barcelona en Comú and Cooperation Jackson and efforts in our network's own cities. We are also inspired by the ambitious framework set forth by civil rights and labor leaders in 1965 to end poverty in the U.S. in just ten years. In that document, A. Philip Randolph wrote, "we call this a 'Freedom Budget' in recognition that poverty and deprivation, as surely as denial of the right to vote, are erosive of human freedom and of democracy."[1] We seek not just good budget outcomes but self governance. Ultimately, we hope this work will play a role in building a more democratic culture and fundamentally changing norms that keep power in the hands of the very few.

From walking through our cities and talking with our neighbors in 2021, we know that our movement and communities must fight against deep budget cuts, an inequitable COVID response, and over policing. These forces are harming and killing Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and other people of color each day.

The acceleration of violent, Right-wing, anti-democratic politics in recent years also tells us that we must fight for deeper democracy. We need and deserve a democracy that will help us secure freedom and safety for all people. This is a democracy that will be stronger in the face of racist, sexist and authoritarian threats now and in the future.

We believe democratizing local budgets is a way our movement can do both and seek transformation for the long term. Our current system seeks to divide us, and we cannot change that without also building community and our capacity for working together. Our vision for deepened participatory processes can help build the much larger base we need to win fundamental change at work, in government, and in our communities.

Changes to our budget processes will not solve everything—we need more resources available to address shared needs and to build life-supporting, healthy cities. We must aggressively pursue progressive revenue measures at all levels of government. Even here, however, there is a practical benefit to including a more democratic approach: research shows increasing democratic engagement in budgeting expands public support for raising revenue, creating a virtuous cycle.[2]

This document is a contribution to an ongoing conversation between many organizers, movement leaders, and elected officials about creating deeper democracy. It is an invitation to explore local budgets as a site for us to practice building that democracy. Here's what you will find inside:

- An **analysis** of how austerity and anti-democratic politics are intertwined and grounded in white supremacy, and the opportunities presented by anti-racist, anti-austerity movements today
- A **framework** for understanding different participatory processes, based on movement experiences, governing experiments, and academic study
- **Case studies and examples** of democratic practices used by local government and movement organizations
- Some **things to consider in designing** participatory processes
- **Recommendations** for movement organizations, state & local elected officials, and researchers
- Our **guiding principles** for this work

We have a lot to learn if we are to build a deeper democracy. We must try new things and continually adapt based on our successes and failures. We hope this paper is a contribution to our movement's collective, ongoing work, and look forward to experimenting with and learning from you.

Photo by Brooke Anderson, courtesy of East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy

OUR VISION

We call for a democracy that centers care and in which everyone can participate, so we can build a world in which everyone can live full and healthy lives.

We can channel the desires of regular people to enact policies that build a world we want to live in.

Imagine if we could gather regularly with our neighbors to decide how our collective resources can be used to support all of us and to meet shared responsibilities. What might we decide to fund? What collective, public institutions would we build? What priorities would we realize that we all share? Through these discussions, we would know each other as people: we would come to understand each other's concerns and priorities, understand how our circumstances are connected to one another, and see one another within the context of our families and communities. We would disagree at times; we would have to compromise. Over time, however, we would also come to learn that this ongoing process of learning, negotiating, compromising, experimenting, and deeply engaging with one another allows us to work together to build a community that can help all of us live healthier, richer lives.

Prioritizing care means that we use our resources to make our communities healthy. As Black feminists and feminists of color have taught us, the health of our communities goes hand-in-hand with the health of the environments in which we live, and this health encompasses safety from violence, clean air and water, and the resources we need to imagine and pursue possibilities for our lives and the lives of our loved ones.[3]

Centering care also means paying attention to how we treat one another as we govern ourselves. We envision a world where we are working together to include everyone, account for and undo power imbalances, and make space for both self-determination and shared responsibility. These are not (only) lofty philosophical questions but urgently practical and logistical matters, and our work is to learn by doing and trying together.

> ***We envision a world where we are working together to include everyone, account for and undo power imbalances, and make space for both self-determination and shared responsibility.***

OUR FIGHT

This is the time to fight for a radically different democracy.

Crises that fundamentally and immediately threaten the viability of everyday life are powerful opportunities to make change, and the COVID-19 pandemic is a prime example. The pandemic is bringing yet another wave of austerity to our cities. This austerity translates to cuts both in the social services that we need most in our everyday lives and to stable, fairly compensated jobs. Our right to have our material needs met and our right to self-govern are deeply connected, and we believe we have to secure both if we expect to keep either.

This is why we see, in the challenges and opportunities of this moment, an opening for our movement to experiment with budget democracy and move toward a world in which everyone can thrive.

The Challenges

The January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol building made even more obvious two major threats to our current democracy: white nationalist violence that seeks to consolidate the rule of white supremacy in this country, and efforts from inside and outside of government to disenfranchise voters. While both of these threats have long been part of U.S. politics—and in particular the exclusion and suppression of Black people in our politics—this high-profile attack and its supporters in the White House and Congress show that that, in 2021, far Right extremists who support authoritarianism and white supremacy are emboldened and have significant influence in our political system.[4]

Former President Trump's attempts to undermine the outcome of the 2020 election were a blatant attack on democracy, but some thought leaders and politicians on the Right take the position that our government is not and should not be a democracy.[5] Voter suppression, gerrymandering, the electoral college, and corrupt campaign finance law are strategies to undermine democracy and in particular to disenfranchise Black people. And that's just the electoral system.

The dominant economic policy agenda across the mainstream political spectrum is also deeply anti-democratic. Trump's tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations have exacerbated major inequalities,[6] but these tax cuts are reflective of a policy agenda that is widely accepted and considered centrist. This agenda is neoliberal, which we define as one that advances the interests of private entities such as corporations and seeks to minimize government regulation. Proponents of this agenda sometimes suggest that their policies favoring corporations and the rich will eventually lead to benefits that trickle down to the rest of us. In our cities, this neoliberal "common sense" says our local government's top priorities should be facilitating the private development of land for profit and cutting costs through privatization of public goods.

In recent decades, corporate interests have successfully targeted government spending to enact budget cuts and reductions in government services—known as austerity—and preserve the growth of financial markets. While there are different assessments of when austerity became a popular idea,[7] the structure and logic of austerity are rooted in transforming government into an entity that is shaped by and serves the market. The government and international agencies restructured debt into bonds issued by central banks to commercial banks, with values determined by the market and credit-rating agencies. The change of government spending and debt to take the same form as commercial debt was meant to boost the profits of the market and therefore financial institutions.[8] Lawmakers began prioritizing government cost and deficit reduction through budget cuts, privatization, and outsourcing.[9]

Economic inequality and anti-democratic governance go hand-in-hand. The mega-rich and corporations can use their hoarded money and power to control politics, media, philanthropy, and education. We are told that other people are our competition for the crumbs that are left, which can undermine our potential for collaboration and community building—two essential aspects of authentic democracy. When resources are scarce for the rest of us, the majority are left in survival mode, without much free time or energy for engaging in government to change these conditions. Meanwhile, corporations and politicians gather at the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) to create bills that use the power of state legislatures to overturn measures at the local level, such as laws passed in cities to raise the minimum wage, a practice known as state interference or state preemption.[10] These tactics concentrate power and continually take away the ability of democratic government to protect ordinary people. They make us understandably cynical about the impact that voting every few years and other formal governmental channels will really make. In the U.S., this is a vicious cycle of preserving white wealth and power.

The austerity policies that are coming to our cities—yet again—reinforce structural racism and are anti-democratic.

In 2020 we saw major budget cuts in U.S. localities in response to lost tax revenue and the federal government's failure to provide adequate aid to cities and states in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.[11] Researchers expect local governments to impose austerity budgets for several years in the face of ongoing shortfalls.[12]

While it might seem inevitable that a public health crisis that keeps people home and puts many out of work would require cuts, the truth is that today's austerity in our cities is

> ***"Today's austerity in our cities is just another example of the neoliberal strategy to use economic and political crises to advance an agenda of social inequality and white supremacy.***

just another example of the neoliberal strategy to use economic and political crises to advance an agenda of social inequality and white supremacy.[13] Often, alternatives to austerity are not discussed even though they would benefit a majority of people and are supported by experts and stakeholders. For example, there is a growing consensus among economists that deficit spending is not only okay but sometimes preferable,[14] but state laws require almost all cities to pass balanced budgets.[15] Additionally, while taxing the rich and corporations is very popular,[16] the tax code continues to benefit them.[17]

When it comes to financial crises, corporations and their political allies have enacted a concerted effort over the long term to displace the fallout of financial risks and failures onto our communities.[18]

Banks and financial institutions have become central to governmental functioning, hence the bailouts that prioritize their survival.[19] Additionally, they have successfully created a narrative that government incompetence and overspending are to blame for financial hardship and that cuts to spending are the only way to restore economic stability.[20] Reductions to the federal budget are deliberately displaced onto states and then cities.[21] Services in cities have been expanding since the 1960s and 1970s as lawmakers have gradually dismantled the protections of the federal welfare state; cities are therefore the places where these cuts are felt most acutely in people's everyday lives.[22]

Because cities are targets for austerity, Black people and other people of color urban communities bear the brunt of cuts, even as they already face disproportionate harms to their well-being, like dangerous and low-paying work, insecure housing, and environmental threats.[23] As such, austerity builds on and deepens the structural inequalities that are foundational to our political and economic systems. In the cities where we live our lives, austerity shapes how our neighborhoods look and the lives and futures that are possible for us: it means fewer jobs, vital services, and teachers and school resources.

Our current crisis demonstrates that enacting austerity is a choice—and one that exacerbates the longstanding exploitation of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities and women.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made starkly visible the structures that determine who profits and who is expendable. Corporations such as Walmart, Target, and Amazon and private equity firms have continued to profit in a moment of widespread suffering.[24] Police budgets also often remain robust even in times of austerity,[25] and corporations hold a vested interest in maintaining strong police departments to suppress protests and protect their businesses.[26]

Meanwhile, BIPOC individuals remain at disproportionately higher risk of dying from COVID and face some of the worst economic effects of the pandemic.[27] Employment patterns, long-standing health disparities in these communities, and geography all contribute to this reality across BIPOC communities.[28] COVID also underlines how gender and race together shape the fallout from crises. Women disproportionately work in contingent and hourly labor and have lost jobs at higher rates.[29] They also carry greater unpaid caretaking responsibilities that affect their ability to work and maintain job prospects, particularly for Black women and Latinas.[30] These realities dramatically exacerbate the growing inequalities that BIPOC

communities were already experiencing in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis,[31] as well as the longstanding structural inequalities that have shaped their lives.

Austerity is a neoliberal strategy that limits our collective sense of what is possible. This agenda has dictated what is imagined and presented as politically feasible among policymakers of all political stripes.[32] But it doesn't have to be this way.

The Opportunity

Right now, we are seeing more clearly than ever the lack of policies that care for us and our communities, which means a greater personal burden for us all, particularly for communities that have faced structural barriers to inclusion and prosperity. Although we are constantly sold a narrative of scarcity and competition, the reality is that our world already has ample resources to care for us all. Rather than a life-depleting system that extracts endlessly from our communities, we can build a world that values life.

This transformation starts with the material conditions that shape our lives. We are in a moment in which people are hungry for real change. The summer of 2020 saw an outpouring of uprisings against racial injustice and state violence, while the 2020 election cycle made clear people's demands for progressive change and policies that allow us to take care of one another. The largest social movement in U.S. history's demand to defund the police is fundamentally a demand to restructure the budgets that shape our everyday lives to prioritize care.

Rather than budgets decided by a small minority behind closed doors, we can start to build participatory democratic processes that prioritize our community's needs and desires across the city's entire budget. We demand policies and practices that actually care for us and enable us to care for one another. And further, we demand change to the system itself to build a radically different democracy that truly includes all of us. The time has come for us to act boldly and move beyond modest efforts.

Photo by Taymaz Valley

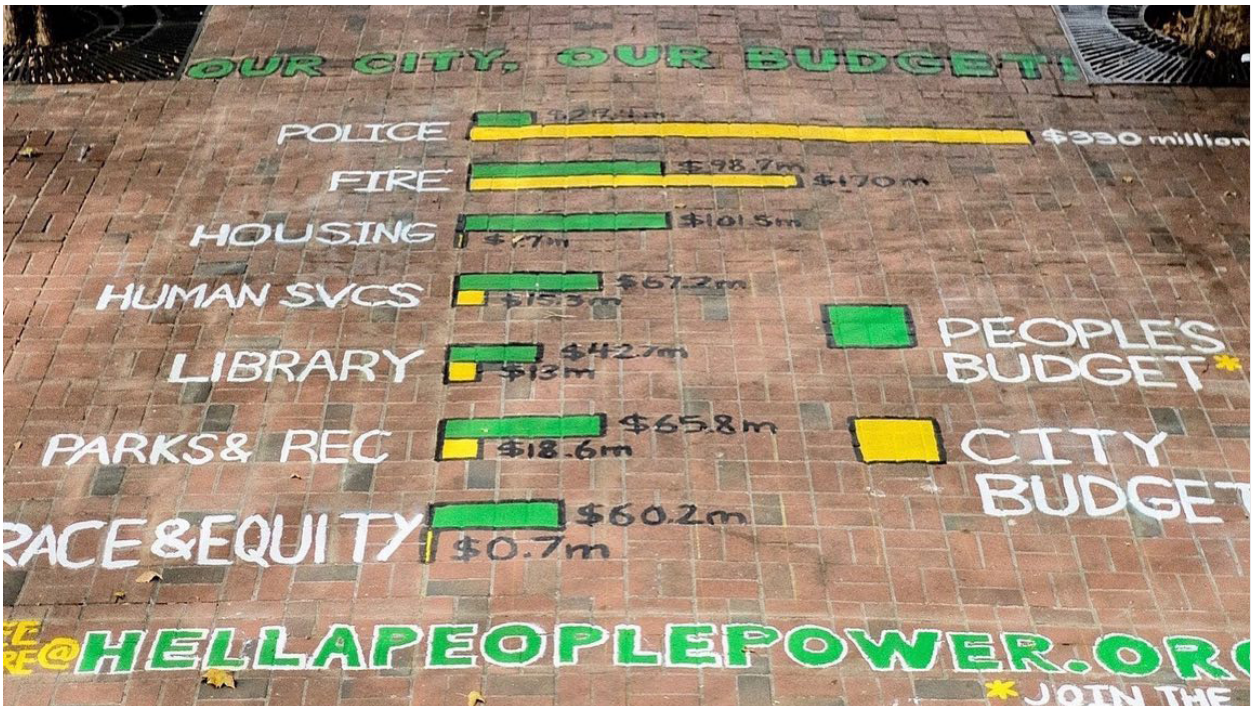


Photo courtesy of Community Democracy Project

Why democratize local budgets, and why now?

- A multiracial, deeply democratic approach to budgets helps us take on the twin evils of austerity and anti-democratic politics, which are interconnected and mutually reinforcing threats. Relatedly, democratic engagement in budgeting can expand public support for raising revenue.
- Combining work to expand democracy and meet our people's material needs allows us to align with powerful movement momentum to build base: the largest social movement in U.S. history, which centers a budget demand—defund police—to achieve greater racial justice, and the pro-democracy organizing of Black women to expand the electorate and win elections in 2020. Plus, budgets touch everyone and every issue—there are many organizing opportunities.
- Local budget engagement is an opportunity to develop leaders and for us all to develop our collective capacity for self-governance. Local budgets have an annual rhythm that we can use to build momentum for continuous organizing, and democratizing budget processes will require us to experiment and learn together.
- Our local budgets are the closest and most accessible to us—they are an ideal place to begin both achieving more equitable budget outcomes and building a more robust and inclusive democracy.

THE HOW: PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Budgets are a key way to expand who gets a say and build democratic processes that we can bring to other areas of our public life.

Calls for People's Budgets, Moral Budgets, Human Rights Budgets in cities across the country are calls to both fund priorities that care for and invest in our communities and to expand who gets a say in budgetary processes that shape the experience of everyday life.

While the policy outcomes of these fights are critical, we also want to transform political and economic structures to build equity and accessibility. Experiments with how we determine budget priorities are a key way to develop processes that directly channel visions people have for their communities, and in turn, build more radically democratic and inclusive structures, institutions, and a broad culture that prioritizes human needs and development.

What is participatory democracy?

Broadly speaking, participatory democracy centers on dismantling hierarchies in how decisions are made and promoting shared decision-making around common interests.[33] And its fundamental aim is a radical reorganization of society at large, not just our government.

Participatory democracy:

- Provides avenues for pursuing social change through civic engagement and cooperation, in addition to or outside of other modes of activism.[34]
- Commonly includes deliberation, but not always.
    - By deliberation we mean meaningful, collaborative discussion between individuals to develop deeper understanding and shared ideas. The inclusion and structure of deliberation should depend on the goals of the project.[35] Deliberation often means designing smaller groups, which can actually sustain exchange and dialogue.[36] While deliberation with an overly large group may not be possible, deliberation in different groups can be built into steps in a participatory process that includes a large number of people overall.

- Includes an educational aspect as a built-in outcome of participation.
    - A central aspect of participatory democracy is that participants do not necessarily need prior knowledge to participate but become educated in how things are done and, more broadly, how to participate. However, it can be valuable to take time during the process to establish foundational knowledge that everyone needs to participate. For example, to hold an open community meeting about a proposed new development with participants with a wide range of backgrounds, it would be helpful to begin with a presentation of background information and include first-person testimonials and time to speak with affected individuals to help the group make an informed decision.
- Can take advantage of technology and the internet to enhance participation.
    - These technological developments can build dialogue and exchange between government and everyday people and reach people who were previously hard to engage.[37] Technology, however, also presents new challenges, particularly around access. The internet is a privatized resource and not available to everyone, which significantly diminishes its potential for promoting inclusion and equity. Technology also includes challenges of facilitation and is not a substitute for in-person meetings. Further, we must also remain critical about technology's security, surveillance, and privacy practices and work to decommodify technologies so that they are publicly accessible.

Participation and deliberation, however, do not necessarily result in decisions that move towards redistributing wealth and power in society.[38] It is crucial for processes to be designed to mitigate and respond to structural inequalities in society at large.[39] Participatory democracy is a vision for society as a whole, and by developing new practices, we can imagine and test the changes we want to see in broader society.

We draw inspiration from historical and ongoing experiments around the world that are working to broaden the capacities of everyday people to shape policy decisions and change existing structures of power. In these cases, financial crises were also opportunities for these experiments to push their visions forward, and we take inspiration from their responses to crises to build visionary pursuits of a different world.

Barcelona en Comú: Toward Co-Governance

Photo by Barcelona En Comú

Barcelona en Comú (BComu; "Barcelona in common" in Catalan) is a citizen platform and political formation in Spain that has been particularly influential for our thinking. BComu won the largest number of city council seats in the 2015 municipal elections and currently governs Barcelona in a minority government. Their platform first emerged in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the wave of austerity in Europe, particularly as it affected housing and evictions. Since winning governance of the city, Barcelona en Comú has become noted around the world for its progressive policy agenda on social issues such as housing, environment, immigration, gender equality, and democracy,[40] alongside experiments with new and different modes of governing that center participatory democracy and feminism. Their platform is fundamentally shaped by a belief that cities are potent sites of transformation because they are the places where people live their everyday lives and experience community and government most closely.[41] As such, cities can become places of radical experimentation with democracy and co-governance and launching pads for transformation to other places,[42] but the model of new municipalism—beginning with local issues and contexts to build the decision-making power of everyday people—can begin in small towns, neighborhoods, and rural areas.[43]

BComu has become a notable example of an emerging "new municipalism," which involves shifting from "occupying squares" to "occupying institutions" in recognition that these halls of power have remained closed to the structural change activists demand.[44] Their platform ran on a call to "take back the institutions and put them at the service of the common good."[45] New municipalism centers democracy and the "radical redistribution of decision-making" while challenging "capitalist crises from the grassroots—rather than reactively responding, however creatively, within limits imposed by the state."[46] Rather than traditional parties, they instead imagine platforms that coalesce around the shared interests of everyday people.[47] And beyond particular progressive policies, they seek to build deepened democracy that gives ordinary people decision-making power.[48]

As part of this project, BComu has called for a "feminization of politics," by which they mean a fundamental transformation of political agency that goes beyond simply including more non-cis-gendered straight men in positions of authority. While gender parity is important, this change in political agency involves a shift away from traditionally masculine and hierarchical modes of behavior, authority, and decision-making to an emphasis on horizontalism, different modes of expression and communication, dismantling barriers between public and private, and confronting patriarchal structures in society at large.[49] Related to this feminization is their imagination of a "politics of proximity," which goes beyond geographic closeness to emphasize the connections and relationships of everyday life. This "politics of proximity" is an ongoing project to develop these connections and to change local government to reflect and serve the values and interests that bring people together, rather than what drives them apart.[50]

To this end, Barcelona en Comú has experimented with a number of democratic innovations. Their electoral campaign followed a code of ethics and financing that was developed through participatory democratic meetings.[51] Issues are discussed and decided on in meetings of neighborhood and district assemblies, in which anyone can participate, and through voting and deliberation on their open source digital platform, Decidim.[52]

Background

The work of movement organizations has long laid the groundwork for deepened participatory democracy, which has gained currency since the 1960s and 1970s.[53] Proponents of participatory democracy critique the limits of representative government, which enables those in power to become distanced and alienated from the interests of everyday people.[54] In fact, this distance has been deliberate in the history of U.S. democracy. The Founders believed that modes of representation would filter and dilute the unruly impulses of the masses, which translated to a political system that protected the interests of white male elites and a system of racial hierarchy that has "persisted from the time of the U.S. Constitution to the present day."[55] Additionally, democracy, before the establishment of the United States, was rooted locally and at the small scale, and representation was a way to expand democracy to larger geographies and populations, such as the scale of the U.S. nation-state today.[56]

The development of the government towards a representational system as the nation grew, however, suggests that we can reclaim and deepen democracy at the local level. As municipalities have increasingly borne the responsibility for social services in the past few decades, rather than the federal government,[57] there are also more opportunities for government and social leaders to enact progressive experiments.[58]

While skeptics from the U.S. founding to the present have touted the idea that people do not have the knowledge or interest to participate, participatory projects that have proliferated widely since the 1960s and 1970s show otherwise.[59] From participatory budgeting projects in cities across the U.S. such as Chicago, New York, and Atlanta, to projects on ecosystem and conservation planning, to participatory transportation planning, participatory practices are no longer the sole purview of left social movements but have moved into the mainstream. Both government and non-government entities now commission participation, and they can often involve practices like citizens' assemblies, neighborhood councils, and public consultation.[60]

Governments and other entities may initiate practices that include some level of participation for a variety of reasons—including seeking legitimacy and buy-in from constituents—without necessarily providing genuine authority over decision-making and real impacts in shifting power imbalances.[61] Scholar Francesca Polletta, for example, discusses the public forums that were part of the process to determine what should be built on the site of the World Trade Towers after 9/11 as an example of a participatory process that did not carry obligations to heed participant recommendations or mechanisms for asserting them.[62] Participatory budgeting processes in the U.S. also, for example, often grant participants limited say over a small, predetermined piece of the city's budget without allowing for influence over many budget priorities.

Cooperation Jackson: Building Economic Democracy

Cooperation Jackson is an organization seeking to transform Jackson, Mississippi into a solidarity economy.[63] Their program is another example of a vision of participatory democracy that extends to all facets of life and society to fundamentally transform the economically exploitative, racist, and hierarchical system in which we currently live. Their approach is encapsulated in the Jackson-Kush Plan,[64] which involves developing People's Assemblies, a network of national progressive candidates for elected office, and building a solidarity economy.[65]

Their model of People's Assemblies is a model of participatory and direct democracy as a mass gathering to address community concerns and in which every participant has a vote. They identify the roots of the Assemblies in the Black Liberation Movement and in spiritual or prayer circles that "were organized often clandestinely by enslaved Afrikans to express their humanity, build and sustain community, fortify their spirits and organize resistance."[66] These Assemblies have a benchmark of engaging at least 1/5th of the total population of a particular geographic region (such as a neighborhood, city, or state), and this benchmark is based on their idea of the number of people necessary for adequate social force and capacity to implement ideas. The Assemblies also include committees that compose a People's Task Force, which carries out the Assembly's proposals. These Assemblies meet with guided facilitation and agendas that are developed by these committees, but they have no predetermined hierarchical structure.[67]

In their book *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi*, they lay out the four "fundamental ends" of their project:

"To place the ownership and control over the primary means of production directly in the hands of the Black working class of Jackson;

To build and advance the development of the ecologically regenerative forces of production in Jackson, Mississippi;

To democratically transform the political economy of the city of Jackson, the state of Mississippi, and the southeastern region; and

To advance the aims and objectives of the Jackson-Kush Plan, which are to attain self-determination for people of African descent and the radical, democratic transformation of the state of Mississippi (which we see as a prelude to the radical decolonization and transformation of the United States itself)."

They aim to accomplish these ends by transforming the fundamental structures of society and the economy. This project is to be accomplished through taking community control over their resources and labor, which are currently exploited, to achieve self-determination.

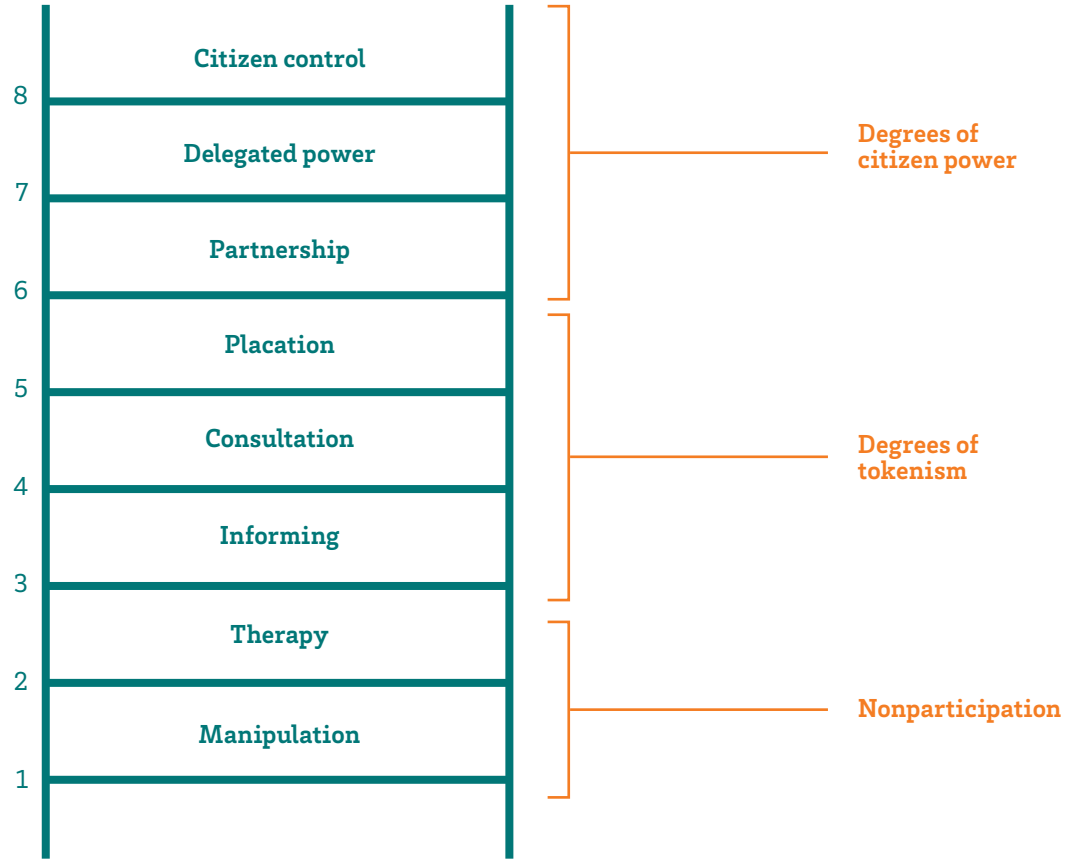
The range of participation

Participatory democracy can look many different ways and exist along a spectrum that includes more or less decision-making power.

To evaluate participant control over decision-making, Sherry R. Arnstein developed a "ladder of participation" (1969) that is still widely cited to evaluate the extent to which the participation of everyday people, who do not traditionally hold power, can influence outcomes.[68] The ladder moves from "manipulation" as the bottom rung, with the least influence, up to "citizen control" as the top. While Arnstein's framework has been critiqued as one-dimensionally focused on participant control over outcomes,[69] which may not necessarily be desirable in every situation,[70] it remains a useful tool for evaluating the depth and degree of participation.

- The lowest two rungs (1–2) are forms of "**nonparticipation**" that are designed merely to look like participation but really seek to enable people in power to "educate" or "cure" participants of conditions. In manipulation, participation is often for the purpose of persuading or "engineering support" for a proposal. In therapy, participants are meant to be cured of conditions that authorities have deemed pathological, such as when parents from

Fig. 1 Sherry R. Arnstein, from "A Ladder of Citizen Participation"



low income communities are invited to participate in child care classes when the real issue is whether their children have access to adequate and skilled medical care.

- Arnstein defines "informing" to "placation" (3–5) as forms of "**tokenism**" that allow participants to have a "voice" without the power to ensure that their views will be heeded.
- There are increasing levels of **decision-making power** starting with "partnership," which enables negotiation and trade-offs with traditional power-holders.
- In "delegated power" and "citizen control," participants have majority of decision-making seats or full managerial power in these top two rungs.

The spectrum of possible forms of participation can vary in their types of engagement and level of decision-making power. For example, if your city has decided to build more green spaces and asks for community input in their process, this input can look many different ways. The city might:

- hold a vote on how a specific portion of the funds for these green spaces should be raised, but this vote may not be binding **(an example of *direct democracy*, which can be non-binding, i.e. there is no obligation to enact recommendations).**
- convene open public meetings where residents discuss their needs and desires for the planned green spaces and how best to implement them, but this input is not guaranteed to be reflected in the final decisions **(an example of a *consultative* process, which involves discussion and deliberation by non-state actors but is often non-binding).**
- convene a series of neighborhood meetings where residents and city officials work together to develop a plan for developing and building the green spaces together, a process that is binding **(an example of co-governance, also known as "collaborative governance" or "empowered participatory governance," in which non-governmental actors have influence, along a spectrum, over outcomes).**[71]

Beyond simply allowing people to feel included and heard without having any actual say over outcomes,[72] we seek to design processes that build our collective power to shape decisions in how resources are allocated. Participatory processes can be a way to generate demands that reflect community priorities, and they are also means through which we can experiment with methods to build inclusivity and responsiveness to our communities' desires in policy goals and how these processes are designed.

The Graham Street Project: Fighting for a Community Vision

The Graham Street Project in Seattle, WA sought wide community input in visioning the Graham Street neighborhood, which is the most racially diverse neighborhood in Seattle, and used these visions to shape organizing priorities for changing policies and moving towards greater community control of land and development.[73] The project was facilitated by our affiliate Puget Sound Sage and other community groups that make up a Community Action Team (CAT), and was initiated in response to the threat of neighborhood displacement after it was announced that a light rail station will be opened in the neighborhood in 2031.[74] The CAT designed a planning process that would center the structural barriers of low income and BIPOC communities and go beyond physical improvements to space. The CAT convened a series of community meetings, conducted surveys of businesses, tenants, and homeowners, and organized listening sessions with members of multi-ethnic and multi-faith community groups to reach over 2,000 people and deeply engage 500, that were led by neighborhood cultural leaders and organizations in multiple languages. Through these modes, people from different communities articulated their visions and desires for their neighborhood and specific neighborhood spaces. In community meetings, people participated in interactive activities to explore how they want spaces to be used. Based on what they learned, Puget Sound Sage and its partners developed a series of priorities that would shape the next steps of their work in the neighborhood, such as:

Photo courtesy of Puget Sound Sage

- "identify[ing] land acquisition priorities based on our overall plan and vision," including "[d]etermining the number of affordable housing units, square footage of culturally relevant businesses, acres of open space, community activities, and growth required to implement our vision;" and
- "identify[ing] long-term priorities for services and other community ownership opportunities, including: Community-centered mobility; Community-owned renewable energy; Community-owned social and educational services; Village commons, i.e. open space market areas."[75]

The Graham Street Project can be said to be consultative and a form of direct democracy that involves deep relationship-building and accountability to the community to realize their vision of the neighborhood, including the capacity of the community to directly participate, share in decision-making, and monitor the implementation of plans. If these outcomes or further steps in the process shape government decision making, it can also be said to be a form of co-governance.

The Greater London Council: Building Co-Governance in City Services

An example of a process that works towards co-governance is from the Greater London Council, which was responsible for overseeing London-wide services, including "transportation, waste disposal, certain forms of housing, social services and land use planning" and implemented participatory processes from 1981 to 1986. In order to ensure that usually marginalized groups could participate, the GLC provided funding for groups to organize programs that monitored and addressed abuse in government processes and advocate for changes in municipal policies and processes. It also transferred the direct implementation of certain services to local neighborhood offices in order to be closer to the communities in which they worked. One success was that they were able to significantly raise access to public transportation, decrease fares, and increase revenue.[76]

Plenária do Orçamento Participativo" by Prefeitura de Olinda is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Porto Alegre, Brazil: The Origins of Participatory Budgeting to Prioritize Equity

Participatory Budgeting (PB) in Porto Alegre, Brazil has received widespread attention and has inspired PB processes in more than 1,500 cities around the world, including many in the U.S.[77] Participatory budgeting is considered to be the most widespread example of participatory democracy in North America.[78] Although it has been critiqued for its limits, these concrete experiences also offer us important lessons about possibilities to expand participation to people who are excluded from much of our political life, such as young people, people not fluent in English, and those who are undocumented immigrants. PB has provided important opportunities for participants to learn about government processes and interact with elected officials. At the same time, there is widespread agreement among scholars, activists, and participants that it must be expanded to include much larger portions of a city budget in order to substantively work towards its stated goals of equity.[79]

Porto Alegre in particular remains a primary example of PB's potential to extend decision-making capacities to usually marginalized communities and to sustain participation over the long term. PB in Porto Alegre began in 1989 and was first introduced in the previous year's election campaign by the Workers' Party to develop popular participation in economic decision making.[80] Broadly, participatory budgeting is a form of participatory democracy that involves community members and civil society organizations in policy decisions. While its capacity to enact long-lasting, substantive, and structural change remains heavily debated,[81] Porto Alegre illustrates how a large-scale participatory process can be structured to center equity. While it may not have immediately altered the wealth distribution of the city, the process took steps towards significant investments in lower-income neighborhoods and included substantive participation from working class residents. Notably, in Porto Alegre, a large number of poorer residents and women participated every year in the process.[82]

In Porto Alegre, the PB process was used to determine how the investment budget was allocated. As the process was refined, it was structured in three phases:[83]

Phase 1: The city was divided into sixteen regions based on their economic and social conditions. All citizens had the right to participate in two rounds of regional meetings. The agenda was jointly set by City Hall and local regional leadership. These meetings decided on three local investment priorities from the following categories: basic sanitation; water and sewage system; land, human settlement regulation, and housing construction; street paving; education; social assistance; health; transport and circulation; parks; leisure and sports; public lighting; economic development and tax system; culture; and environment. The meetings also chose delegates for a city-wide PB Council and the Forum of Delegates.

Alongside these regional meetings, there were also city-wide thematic assembly meetings to discuss general issues of interest to the city and to improve the planning of PB.

Phase 2: This phase involved representative democracy in the PB Council, where two delegates from each region, two from each thematic assembly, and two from City Hall (who could participate but had no vote) met. The Council specified the three main priorities for the city as a whole for the year, and then City Hall specified the total investment budget that was available. The investment budget allocations were then submitted to the City Council.

Phase 3: This phase involved monitoring to ensure that decisions were executed through oversight by PB Council, Forum of Delegates, and report-backs at local and thematic meetings that began again the following year.

Some critiques of PB in Porto Alegre remain:[84]

- It focused on resolving specific issues of city life rather than making significant structural changes.
- Participants did not have a say over how the city is financed.
- Finally, the city also closed off other avenues for citizens to make demands, making PB the only mode through which people could express preferences or demands to the city.

Guelph, Ontario, Canada: PB from Outside Government

Participatory budgeting can begin outside of government and eventually become a government-sanctioned and supported process. For example, in Guelph, Ontario, Canada, community organizations who had begun to work together on other community projects wanted to work more closely with the city. A neighborhood group that was receiving funding from the city invited some city officials to observe their work, and as a result, the city proposed working together. The groups formed an umbrella organization that received city funds for neighborhood projects. Eventually, the city's Manager of Community Development suggested that outcomes would be more equitable if the groups deliberated each neighborhood's needs and allocated money based on these deliberations rather than automatically receiving equal allocations. This process has provided the foundation for Guelph's participatory budgeting process, which officially began in 2000. Guelph's participatory budgeting process primarily involves participants from low-income and BIPOC communities. It promotes their participation by providing translation services and sets aside funds to pay for childcare, elder care, and transportation.[85]

While the ways in which existing experiments in participatory democracy reach or fail to reach purported values and goals remains debatable, we can continue to learn from these processes to design the structures we want to see in the world. Ultimately, participatory democracy means not just participation that is restricted to certain areas of our public life but a radical reorganization of our everyday lives at large. Budget demands are opportunities to experiment with these approaches and to design processes that reflect our communities' priorities. We can build from experimentation with budget processes and more democratic participation to create broader structures that center communities in their own governance.

DESIGNING PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

In general, it is critical to intentionally design processes based on desired outcomes and interventions. These goals will shape how the process is designed, for example, to include more or less deliberation and in what forms. As the process proceeds, built-in time for reflection and evaluation are also crucial to continuously learn and modify the process to better align with values and goals.

Perhaps most importantly, embarking on participatory processes requires embracing an open-ended process of trial and error that responds to the particular context in which these processes are taking shape. In designing participatory processes, it is nearly always inevitable that we will have to hold and resolve tensions and trade-offs between values and priorities, necessitating reflection and evaluation of how we seek to resolve these tensions and the observed outcomes of these attempts.

Some factors to consider are to:

- Intentionally recruit participants
  - For example, a choice between random recruitment of a set number of participants, the purposeful selection of certain participants, or processes that are open to everyone.[86] Processes that are open to everyone can still be subject to certain kinds of selection bias, such as self-selection, that might favor those who are more readily equipped to participate in the first place. Openness and universal inclusion therefore do not necessarily translate directly to equity. For some purposes, we might consider restricting participation to certain groups based on criteria that align with the goals of the process, such as focusing on those most impacted.
  - Prioritizing outreach in your planning and securing resources to support it is a crucial step to ensure that the project will be sustainable.
- Center accessibility, including factors such as:
  - language;
  - ability;
  - time of day, duration, and location of in-person meetings;
  - demands of participation and commitment;
  - access to resources such as internet, transportation, and childcare;
  - physical structures of meetings: placement of speakers and attendees, who is given time to speak.

- Reach clear agreements and understanding about the purpose and outcomes of participation and/or deliberation at the beginning of the process
    - Organizers, facilitators, and participants can sometimes have different understandings of their purpose.[87] Establishing a clear understanding of roles and purpose is crucial for resolving dilemmas that will inevitably arise between competing priorities.[88]
- Establish formal procedures for participation
    - Formal procedures or explicitly named norms, rather than completely open-ended informality, can ensure that participants feel safe and are able to participate equally.
    - These procedures should not make assumptions about shared or universal norms.[89] Instead, time can be built into processes to set procedures and reach agreements on methods.
- Plan for skilled facilitation, particularly through facilitators who are trusted by the community and familiar with its culture and history.[90]
- Consider styles of deliberation
    - Consensus models, in which everyone must come to agreement before moving forward, do not necessarily promote equity, and processes must also make room for disagreement and conflict.[91]
- Decide on desired extent of participants' authority over outcomes based on goals
    - Deliberation and inclusion are also not enough to ensure equity and meaningful influence over the outcomes of decision-making processes. Inclusion can be nominal without granting participants actual control over decisions.[92]
- Participatory processes that have the support and cooperation of government entities can become long-lasting and institutionalized, but it is critical that the public perceive these processes as meaningful opportunities to have a say and shape outcomes.
    - In this case, it is important to ensure that project proposals are generated by participants, not government officials or entities.[93]
- Build evaluation into the process
    - Monitoring and evaluating processes and outcomes is often crucial for their success and accountability.[94] Monitoring and evaluation are also necessary in participatory processes to ensure accountability over the decisions that were reached. They can be a distinct phase of participatory processes that are integrated into the overall process.[95]

Grassroots Collaborative: A Collective Platform to Reimagine Chicago

During the 2019 mayoral campaign, Grassroots Collaborative (GC) worked with its member organizations and other partners to design participatory processes and develop a platform called Reimagine Chicago. This platform was designed to articulate policies and investment in all of Chicago's neighborhoods, rather than concentrate it in wealthy and business districts. GC developed and implemented the participatory processes through their relationships with other organizations, which drew on their memberships to bring community members together. They also prioritized the participation of Black members and modeled the platform creation on the work of Movement for Black Lives. In the meetings, facilitators shared information about the policies they would be discussing and conducted gallery walks where participants could consider ideas, discuss with one another, and share their feedback. Meetings were conducted in both English and Spanish, and they included facilitators who could read information out loud and record responses for participants who were unable to do so. Crucially, many of the participants already had pre-existing relationships with one another because of their membership in the same organization. Their feedback was then collected and integrated into the Reimagine Chicago platform, which was presented at a mayoral forum in which candidates and the public participated.

Art by Danbee Kim and courtesy of Grassroots Collaborative

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to fundamentally transform the system, winning budget goals needs to go hand-in-hand with continuing to change the public culture and conversation about participation and participatory democracy. Now is the time to move beyond an accepted culture in which we only have a say on a very limited and predetermined piece of the budget, or no say at all. To do so, we need to promote more robust public conversations about participatory democracy that center equity and meaningful engagement. These conversations will broaden our understandings of participatory democracy and put pressure on elected officials and candidates to support these practices by demonstrating that we have the will to participate.

Different actors can leverage their particular strengths and areas of expertise to build our collective will and capacity for participatory democracy:

Social movement and base-building organizations can:

- Generate public pressure for transparency in government processes and participation alongside specific policies
- Build public participation into your campaign demands
- Continue to build robust civil society organizations through memberships and other community organizations and spaces, such as cooperatives, fab labs, and mutual aid groups
- Support the development of additional spaces in which local communities can come together to address common challenges
- Within your own work, develop your knowledge and skills for participatory democracy
- Consider how to fund and resource participatory processes so they can be sustained over the long term
- Engage in ongoing dialogue and public education with communities to continue preparing them to engage substantively with issues
- Participate in monitoring and evaluating processes to hold government and other actors accountable

Center on Policy Intiatives: Community Say in the City Budget

The Center on Policy Initiatives anchors two coalitions that work on local budgets to transform the City of San Diego and County of San Diego. The Community Budget Alliance (CBA) is a coalition of local organizations and community members who believe the city budget should be a people's budget. Invest in San Diego Families (ISDF) is a coalition of community residents and groups that believe in a community, economy, and county government that puts power into the hands of the people. Both build local power and put forward intersectional demands for equitable public investments that foster community wealth, health, and justice for all, especially communities of color.

For both, a centerpiece of the work is public education. The coalitions learn from each member's experience and expertise and hold events to demystify the budget process. They also conduct original budget analysis. Findings and recommendations are regularly shared in public events, social media, reports, and city forums. As a broad, cross-sector coalition, CBA works together every year to develop its collective budget priorities and a campaign plan. The collaborative and interactive process asks that each member contribute and lead key areas of work in groups. Decisions are made through a consensus-building or voting process. Major breakthroughs for ISDF include expanding participation and access. ISDF was able to: move county elections to November, when there is higher voter turnout; add an evening budget hearing so people with day jobs can participate; and win Spanish translation services.

Local elected officials can:

- Work to change the culture of expertise and governance:
    - Build support within government bureaus for participation. This may involve work to change definitions of expertise beyond technical policy knowledge to embracing the expertise that also resides in communities who have firsthand experience
    - Build a culture of co-governance with the individuals and communities you serve by advancing participatory processes that grant decision-making authority to the community
- Build and advocate for progressive economic policies, including to raise revenue, and democratic participation with both experts and community members
- Help to make local budget processes transparent
- See local community groups as partners in developing deeper democracy and ensure that community base-building organizations have an equal say over how the participatory process is structured
- Work to ensure that participatory processes have meaningful influence over substantive issues, which is crucial to the legitimacy and longevity of these processes

State elected officials can:

- Advance the right of local governments to determine the allocation of their resources over corporate interests and their ability to raise revenue through local taxes and fees
- Convene state-wide networks of base-building organizations, local leaders, and community members around shared concerns
- Build coalitions with other state officials to defeat state laws that interfere with local democracy
- Build infrastructure and public support for local participatory democratic processes
- Build and advocate for progressive economic policies, including to raise revenue, and democratic participation with both experts and community members

Think tanks and research groups can:

- Generate public pressure for participation alongside specific policies
- Share best practices for organizing participatory projects to prioritize equity
- Help monitor and evaluate participatory projects
- Conduct research on how state-level interventions stymie local innovations
- Conduct research on progressive revenue measures
- Disseminate research to organizers and other movement organizations

APPENDIX I:
THE 7 GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF OUR WORK

For all actors, it is crucial to center racial and other forms of equity in our demands and actions. By doing so, we can build a multiracial feminist democracy that arises out of both the painful histories that have capitalized on, dismissed, and coopted BIPOC labor and experiences, as well as the strength and resilience of these communities who have built their own expertise and strategies.

Rather than static benchmarks to meet once and for all, these guiding principles can serve as a horizon towards which to continually strive. These principles are invitations for conversation, collaboration, experimentation in what is possible, and collective imagining. Beginning in our localities, the places were we live our lives, we can:

1. **Build structures and policies through participatory democracy that care for individuals and communities and recognize their fundamental value and capacity for self-determination.**
2. **We define care as protections for individuals and families such that all people have access to healthy and sustainable lives and possibilities for the future.** This is a vision of a world built around thriving rather than one premised on scarcity, competition, depletion, hierarchy, and heteropatriarchal white supremacy. And this world can only be built from the true participation of local communities, who have the knowledge, expertise, and ability to make the decisions that shape their everyday lives. Center an intersectional politics that is feminist, ecological, and anti-racist as the necessary antidote to an economically exploitative system premised on depleting BIPOC communities.
3. **Reclaim and democratize public goods and services to serve everyone.**
4. **Deliberately expand the participation of historically underrepresented communities and their power over decision-making methods and outcomes, thereby expanding their access to power in society more broadly.**
5. **Embrace experimentation as a generative approach that is necessary to the flourishing of democracy longterm.** In doing so, promote and support non-state, non-governmental community spaces that incubate and enact solidarity communities and alternatives to economic exploitation.
6. **Recognize that local action is tied up in global networks and that true communities of solidarity must address these interconnections.**
7. **Focus on relationships and what brings people together, rather than what drives them apart, while insisting on racial, gender, and class equity.** We strive to develop a "politics of proximity"—a proximity that does not just refer to geography but also, even more fundamentally, to an emphasis on what is shared and connective rather than a politics that is premised on dividing people.[96] This politics is locally driven but does not assume that the local automatically equals more connection or a more emancipatory politics: instead, we must continually work to bring people together around shared interests and goals. And importantly, we must actively reach out to all communities and recognize that failing to engage as many individuals as possible will result in failure to achieve our aims.

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