

PEOPLE-POWERED BUDGETS:

AN ORGANIZER'S TOOLKIT TO DEMOCRATIZE CITY BUDGETS



PARTNERSHIP
for
Working Families

We have an abundance of resources, expertise, and brilliance to create city budgets. Democratizing local budgets gives us the opportunity to build collective power and our people's capacity for self-governance. By centering the process of collectively setting budget priorities, we can begin to liberate and transform our cities and communities.

In the spirit of solidarity, we share insights and pose questions based on experience supporting local budget campaigns across the country and our in-depth report, *People-Powered Budgets: A Case for Democratizing Local Budgets to Transform Our Cities and Care for Our Communities*.

Our work aims to complement other efforts to transform budgets, like People's Budgets, Moral Budgets, Participatory Budgets, and Human Rights Budgets, by asking organizers to reimagine the budget process and practice deeper democracy. We invite you to use the questions and ideas here as you develop and plan your campaign. Finally, help us continue to refine this tool by sharing feedback and questions.

Start where you are today

- **You don't have to democratize the whole city at once.** At what scale does it make sense to try something now, so you can develop your practices and learn? You could start with your organization, a coalition, a neighborhood, or an apartment building, to name a few examples.
- **Identify your base.** Whose input on the budget are you most interested in cultivating first? If it will take many budget cycles to transform your local budget, where and with whom do you want to build for the longer-haul?
- **Use existing channels.** How can you use current city processes to start organizing today? Can you leverage the city's current "public input" process? Does your city use public surveys to "identify" priorities?

Design experiments to democratize local budgets

- **Visualize your long-term goals.** Do you want to create a process that is inside of government, outside of government, or co-run? Would you like to get to a city-wide process? What would that take? Remember, your priorities can change over time, you can adjust as you go.
- **Push for bold changes to city budget priorities and decision-making power.** How can you organize to meet immediate needs while also putting forward demands that critique the current process and stretch the public's imagination around democratic decision-making? Are there any smaller-scale initiatives that can serve as stepping stones? If so, what is the best sequencing? Consider including demands for democratic practices into other policy proposals, such as those that raise new local revenue or shape how federal and state funds are used.
- **Consider how you can create new channels or arenas without legislative or policy change.** Can you create new spaces for people to connect and engage in collective decision-making? How can you work with your base and allies to force attention to your efforts? Since the parameters of the annual budget debate are usually already baked when it is first proposed, consider how you can work with others outside city-created spaces early or year-round. The local budget process actually plays out every day so the opportunities to be creative online and in-person are plentiful.

Timeout to rest, reflect and readjust

- **Budget campaigns are time-sensitive and time-consuming.** How can you build in periods for rest during and after experiments? What practices can you use to reground yourself and the group and reset when needed?
- **Be open-minded and adjust as you learn.** How can you try things on and apply lessons as you go? How can you evaluate your experiment after it ends?
- **Lean into others.** There is an abundance of knowledge and experience in our communities, cities, and ecosystems; how can you share ownership of the work so that the heavy lifting does not fall onto the same individuals or organizations?

Embody and practice democracy

- **Intentionally decide on who you are trying to engage.** Do you want it to be universally open to everyone, or would you like to engage a specific community, and why? Is there a community that you are really trying to reach, and why is it important to include them? Maybe you want to highlight particular perspectives, and this will shape your outreach and other methods.
- **Determine how you can move beyond including people in discussion to a more transformational goal of ensuring that participants have control over decisions.** Be clear about the decision-making process as you'll need to be transparent about how decisions are made to build trust.
- **Plan for mindful facilitation, particularly through facilitators who are trusted by the community and familiar with its culture and history.** How can you create

models and carefully consider processes that promote equity and make room for disagreement and conflict, even in consensus models, in which everyone must

come to an agreement before moving forward? How can you build capacity for facilitation, sharing, and active listening?

For example, you can establish ground rules together about:

- how to engage, when to resolve conflicts or respectfully move on, how to note these conflicts and decide to return to them later, and how to make decisions that will move your process forward while making room for different viewpoints
- the values that everyone agrees will anchor and shape how you engage with one another and the structures that you establish (e.g. extending compassion and openness to one another, valuing one another's knowledge and expertise that come from all areas of everyday life, working together, making space for different styles of expression, etc.).
- the behaviors that you agree reflect these values (e.g. hearing others out, listening carefully and respectfully, not interrupting one another, intentionally asking for others to contribute, etc.)

These agreements may seem basic, but they give you an opportunity to explicitly discuss your values and collectively decide on how you want the participatory space to look and feel. For instance, Barcelona en Comú's value of feminizing politics means that, alongside gender representation and policy goals, they promote "collective models of leadership that listen and aren't afraid of expressing contradictions or doubt" and stress values like horizontality, working together, and sharing power.¹

1. Laura Roth and Kate Shea Baird, "Left-wing populism and the feminization of politics." January 13, 2017. ROAR Magazine. <https://roarmag.org/essays/left-populism-feminization-politics/>.

Create participatory spaces

- **Establish a shared understanding of purpose, outcomes, and process.** How can organizers, facilitators, and participants get on the same page on the why, what, and how? Be sure to create space for questions and feedback loops throughout.
- **Set rules for participation that foster trust and relationships.** How can you

allow participants to create a safe and welcoming space for exchange? One good way to help prepare groups to resolve inevitable disagreements is to clarify roles and desired outcomes.

- **Center access to create a space that welcomes everyone and encourages exchange.** How can you disrupt inequities and power imbalances? Engage people using different modes, and create a space that meets participants' needs.

For example, consider how different forms of engagement can reach different audiences and give different people the room and ability to participate.

You can think about:

- online and/or in-person
- digital tools to use during facilitation, such as polls, for a variety of engagement
- combining writing, speech, and visuals to make presentations and participation accessible for people of all abilities and skill sets
- physical access, digital access, translation and interpretation, food, and child care
- alongside the kind of ground rules listed above, explicitly stating that the space welcomes all kinds of people and all different needs. You might invite people to share needs with you, either publicly or privately, that you have not already identified, and encourage people to move their bodies or attend to other needs during the course of meetings (while also balancing the focus and goals of the group).



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

Prioritize education and narratives

- **Conduct regular political education.** How can you educate your base and supporters about democratic budgets? How can you explain the existing process, while also creating space for new approaches? Remember to break down and translate technical concepts and information?
- **Conduct regular public education.** What are the best ways to educate the broader community on your work? Can you use different tools or tactics to educate, engage, or co-create with the public? Don't forget to educate and organize elected officials, reporters, editorial boards, and donors.
- **Develop and tell stories to change hearts and minds.** How can you use stories to

energize your base, captivate new audiences, and move your efforts to new levels? How can you elevate the voices of marginalized and excluded people and communities?

Analyze power and public budgets

- **Be clear and honest about the power dynamics.** Who are your allies? Any unorganized folks that should join your efforts? Any partners in government interested in exploring co-governance? Who is your opposition? Any corporate or private actors in the finance, insurance, and real estate industry with outsized influence? Which public actors have influence? Assess the landscape, but also brainstorm how you can engage with

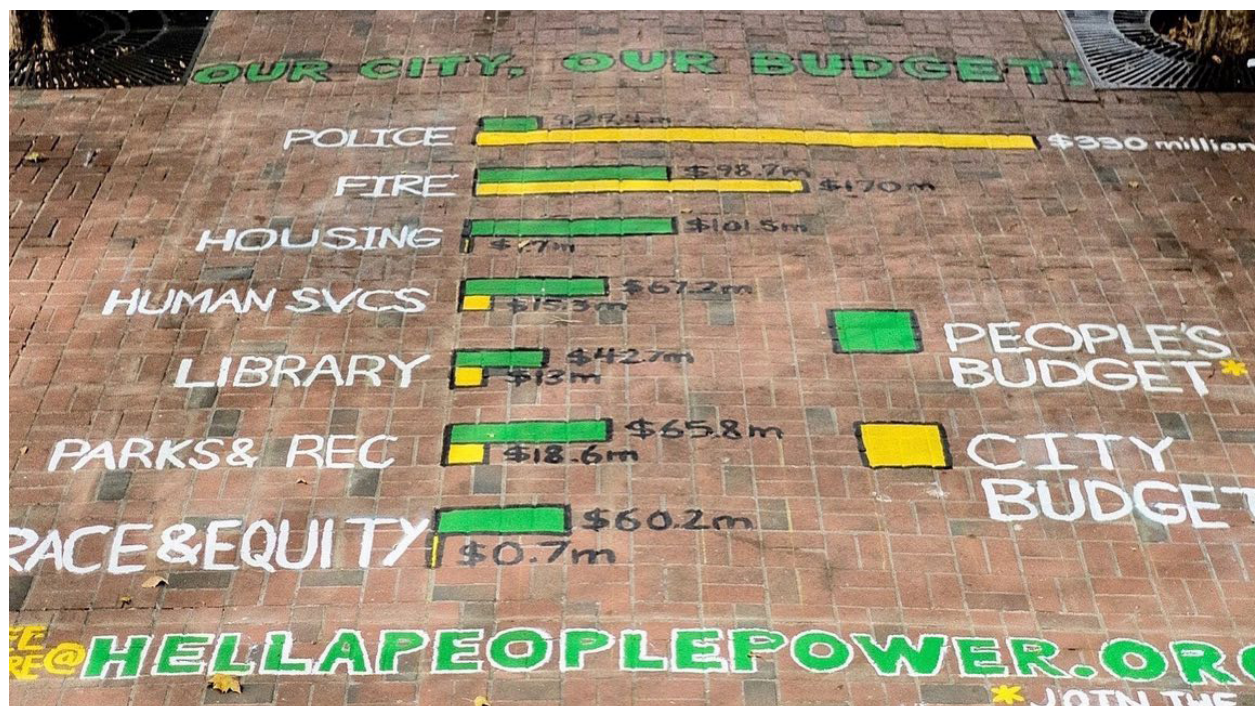


Photo courtesy of Community Democracy Project

people outside formal spaces created by the city.

- **Decipher the city budget process and finances.** Make a plan to dedicate some resources to understanding the current system for setting budgets and how state and local law set rules so that you can move strategically. If you need to request access to public records, do so early. Don't be afraid to try things and learn before you have all the information.
- **Break down and challenge budget proposals.** Identify resources to analyze and understand budget proposals from the city and the position of organized groups. Challenge revenue projections by questioning underlying assumptions of revenue estimates. Again, don't be afraid to try things and learn before you have all the information.

Learn More and Connect

- For more examples and tips on designing participatory democracy check out our report [People-Powered Budgets: A Case for Democratizing Local Budgets to Transform Our Cities and Care for Our Communities](#).
- For more inspiration on models of transformative participation check out [Fearless Cities: A Guide to the Global Municipalist Movement](#) and [Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi](#).
- For more on building a long-term agenda check out [Crafting a Long-Term Agenda for Change: A Case History of National People's Action](#), by the Grassroots Policy Project. Phase 1-4 lays out their approach.
- For more on how to create a power analysis check out [Power Points](#) by Rosten Woo. The guide examines power in Los Angeles using the Power Analysis tool developed by the community organization Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE).
- For more technical aspects of analyzing budgets check out [Follow the Money: Understanding Los Angeles County's Finances and Impacting the Budget](#) by Advancement Project California. Their invaluable set of new tools, [Meeting Crisis with Courage: A Covid-19 Budget Playbook for Advocates and Policymakers](#), also provides excellent tips that could apply to your city.
- For more on campaigns to defund the police check out [Interrupting Criminalization](#) by BCRW Social Justice Institute. Their [#DefundPolice Toolkit](#) and [The Demand is Still #DefundThePolice Toolkit](#) are full of amazing insights and resources.
- For more on police spending and corporate influence check out [Cost of Police, Police Brutality Bonds, and Cancelling Wall Street](#), by the Action Center on Race & the Economy (ACRE).
- For more on budget forecasting and preparation check out [Financial Forecasting in the Budget Preparation Process](#), a helpful primer by the Government Finances Officers Association.