

# Community Involvement in Participatory Budgeting

ideas

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Engaging budget delegates to help decide how public funds should be spent

**Participatory budgeting is a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend a portion of a public budget. While a popular idea among residents, it doesn't always attract sufficient participation from volunteers needed to serve in an intensive, ongoing way, like budget delegates—community members who dedicate their time to leading participatory budgeting. As New York City prepares to create a citywide participatory budgeting process, ideas42 offered behaviorally informed recommendations for sparking and sustaining budget delegate engagement.**

## Summary

The Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP) is a non-profit organization that has played a central role in launching, supporting, and expanding participatory budgeting (PB)—which enables community members to decide how to spend a portion of a public budget—across the U.S. and Canada. Over the past decade, PBP has provided trainings and technical assistance to help the New York City Council develop and implement participatory budgeting in participating districts, driven largely by volunteer budget delegates. Through this process, residents of participating districts determined the allocation of close to \$240 million in public funds to support 851 projects. In addition, in NYC and other communities, involvement in PB has led to increased engagement in political and community organizations, community boards, school boards, and block associations; increased community mobilization on different issues; and it may also increase voting rates in local elections.<sup>1,2</sup>

In 2018, NYC voters approved a City Charter revision to create a **citywide PB process**, which will allow all City residents to participate, and likely increase total funding allocated, visibility, and impact on local communities.

New York City Council's participatory budgeting process, called **PBNYC**, launched in 2011 in four city council districts and has since become the largest participatory budgeting process in the United States. In each of the now 33 participating city council districts, the council member sets aside a portion of their discretionary funds to be spent on projects selected by community vote. Over the course of an 11-month process (August through June), residents brainstorm community improvement project ideas and volunteer budget delegates

## Highlights

- ▶ Participatory budgeting allows community members to help determine which local projects receive funding.
- ▶ Behavioral barriers may cause volunteers to drop out in the middle of budgetary cycles and/or to refrain from volunteering again.
- ▶ Reducing process ambiguity and feelings of loss among volunteers should increase and extend participation.

<sup>1</sup> The Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP) Report. Participatory Budgeting in the United States: A Growing Movement. Accessed here: [https://www.nlc.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/Participatory%20Budgeting%20Project\\_Engagement%20in%20Real%20Public%20Decisions.pdf](https://www.nlc.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/Participatory%20Budgeting%20Project_Engagement%20in%20Real%20Public%20Decisions.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Learner, Josh. (June 28, 2018). Participatory budgeting increases voter likelihood 7%. Participatory Budgeting Project blog. Accessed here: <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/participatory-budgeting-increases-voter-turnout-7/>

develop and refine project proposals based on these ideas in consultation with city agencies. Once final, residents vote on agency-approved proposals, and then the city implements the winning projects. Examples of past projects have included supplemental funds to aid library revitalization, playground renovations, technology updates in schools, and bus countdown clock installations, to name a few.

There are many ways for people to engage in participatory budgeting, from suggesting project ideas to voting and encouraging others to vote. But one of the most crucial roles is the volunteer budget delegate – community members who dedicate their time to developing neighborhood improvement ideas into concrete project proposals eligible for PB funding for a final ballot. Sustained budget delegate participation is essential for participatory budgeting to work as intended. In the absence of meaningful delegate participation, residents have little voice in shaping project proposals or determining which ones move forward to the ballot. Unfortunately, a number of districts have found it difficult to recruit and sustain budget delegate involvement, and this challenge is likely to become more significant in future budget cycles as New York City expands the process citywide.

To facilitate effective engagement of budget delegates at this pivotal time before the citywide expansion, PBP asked the ideas42 Behavioral Design Center (BDC) to provide insights about behavioral barriers to participation and propose solutions. We applied a behavioral lens to the problem and provided behaviorally informed recommendations and outreach flyer templates.

## Identifying Behavioral Barriers to Participation .....

We worked with PBP to better understand what motivates people to volunteer as budget delegates, and the behavioral barriers that can discourage involvement and lead delegates to drop-out during and between cycles. To gain a firsthand understanding of the PB process and the budget delegate experience, BDC staff observed and participated in several phases of the annual cycle: In the spring of 2019, we cast our PB ballot votes on proposals in our home districts and observed various “get out the vote” week activities. We attended Spring 2019 PB project expositions, events in which budget delegates showcase the various projects on the ballot, where we spoke with budget delegates and other volunteers about their involvement in developing and promoting the project proposals. During the start of the 2019-2020 cycle, we attended district neighborhood assemblies to observe the idea generation and how budget delegates lead this stage of the PBNYC process.

In addition, we reviewed the literature on the history of participatory budgeting and the psychology of civic engagement and volunteerism to learn more about the process and behavioral barriers to sustained participation. This work informed our interviews with 13 current and former budget delegates from five council districts in four boroughs, as well as conversations with council staff from these districts.

Overall, we found that New Yorkers are excited about participatory budgeting, and many are interested in volunteering as budget delegates. However, our research revealed several important behavioral barriers that can lead budget delegates to drop out in the middle of the cycle, or decide not to serve as a budget delegate in the future.

- ▶ **False mental models:** Budget delegates can enter the process with a false mental model (or expectation) of what can be achieved through participatory budgeting. For instance, several budget delegates said that initially they thought they were going to be able to receive direct funding for their own project ideas. Others thought they would have more autonomy in developing the project, and were unaware that city agencies would oversee and approve project ideas for the final ballot.
- ▶ **Ambiguity aversion:** We also discovered that the PBNYC process, as well as the roles and expectations of budget delegates, are ambiguous. For instance, many past delegates reported difficulties navigating bureaucratic city systems and politics. They also noted that there was a lack of clarity regarding meeting locations, next steps, and what they could expect at each stage of taking ideas forward through the PB process.
- ▶ **Hassle factors:** Participatory budgeting can be a cumbersome process with many logistical challenges and hassles to navigate when planning and coordinating across multiple neighborhoods, committees, and districts. Scheduling meetings and getting to locations were frequently cited by past budget delegates as major hassles, discouraging participation. In addition, there were times when delegates could not get timely and sufficient information about how to select and develop project proposals – making it difficult for delegates to plan and participate.
- ▶ **Loss aversion:** Loss is a natural part of the participatory budgeting process. Not all project ideas will be developed, approved for the ballot, and win the vote. We found evidence that when proposals – especially ones volunteers suggested or worked on – don’t make it through the process, some budget delegates drop out or scale back their involvement.
- ▶ **Reactance:** At times, feelings of disappointment and lack of authority or control over one’s role may lead to frustration or anger, which in turn can lead to avoidance behavior. Budget delegates may initially believe that they can suggest a wider range of project ideas or have more control over the process than turns out to be the case. Learning that they are more limited in what they can achieve may cause reactance. Hassles and ambiguity in the process can leave budget delegates angry or frustrated.

## Mitigating Barriers—Improving Outreach and Information .....

To address these barriers, the BDC provided a series of actionable, behaviorally informed recommendations to PBP, city council district staff, and the Council Speaker’s office including:

- ▶ **Set accurate mental models.** Provide basic information about the composition of city council districts, PB project criteria and timelines to implementation, and the status of previously funded projects. Make it clear what can and can’t be achieved through PBNYC. Highlight commonly experienced benefits and relevant values. And clearly define budget delegate roles, responsibilities, and expectations throughout the process, using multiple modes of communication.
- ▶ **Adjust PBNYC to align with existing mental models.** Consider how PBNYC could be reformed to meet budget delegates’ and other community members’ expectations. For example, to

facilitate support for a wider range of innovative ideas allow expense projects as well as capital funds; or find alternative sources of funding for popular project ideas that don't win the vote.

- ▶ **Reduce ambiguity and remove hassles to participation.** Identify and assign designated district PB leaders to help guide new budget delegates through the PB process. Maintain a listserv of past and current budget delegates and regularly reach out to them with updates on the new cycle and past projects. Widely disseminate information about PBNYC prior to the idea submission period. Make it as easy as possible to attend all PB-related meetings. Send timely, helpful reminders regarding upcoming meetings and other delegate activities, as well as updates about ongoing committee work, decisions, and next steps.
- ▶ **Make it easier to stay up-to-date on funded projects.** Publicize winning projects and other cycle outcomes through multiple communication channels and continue to invest in a functional project tracking tool. Publicize it widely.
- ▶ **Avoid feelings of loss and reactance** by providing small, guaranteed rewards, like certificates of achievement and an end-of-cycle celebration. Share first-hand accounts about delegates' positive experiences, learnings, and other benefits. Highlight opportunities outside the PB process to address identified needs and suggestions offered by delegates and other community residents (e.g. through the City budget process or other funding streams).

We discussed project findings and recommendations at meetings with PBP, 20 staff from Council member offices, and central Council staff in the Speaker's office who are responsible for coordinating all PBNYC efforts. To further support their work, we designed and created outreach templates for district and citywide use in promoting PB and recruiting community members to volunteer as budget delegates. The template highlights the values and benefits of participation as expressed by experienced budget delegates to help set accurate mental models. It also provides a visual outline of the process with activities and timeframes; along with information on how to sign-up and where to go to participate. Finally, the template includes links to information about city council districts, PBNYC, and past winning projects.

## Takeaways & What's Next .....

In order for participatory budgeting to continue to be a civic success in NYC, it must be directly informed by the voices and active participation of community residents, which is spearheaded by the budget delegates. This work represents another example of the power of behavioral science to support beneficial programs by making them feel rewarding, easier to use, and top-of-mind.

The insights uncovered through this project will be used to support volunteer engagement in the city council's current PBNYC process and inform the new citywide PB process being launched by the Civic Engagement Commission. PBP also plans to use the BDC's recommendations and promotional templates in their work with other cities across the United States and Canada, creating a path to scaling these insights to help more people have a say in their districts' expenditure of public funds.

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