

Participatory Budgeting: Ten Actions to Engage Citizens via Social Media Platforms

By Victoria Gordon

Participatory budgeting, an innovation in direct citizen participation in government decision making, began 25 years ago in a town in Brazil. It has since been adopted by 1,000 other cities worldwide and by some U.S. cities as well.

Participatory budgeting offers promise in improving citizen engagement. But critics claim that participation rates are not high enough to be of any value and may actually undermine the broader public interest. However, the use of social media in the participatory budgeting process holds promise for increasing participation in community life for citizens—especially among younger citizens who are comfortable engaging digitally.

A Case Study of the 49th Ward, Chicago, Illinois

Chicago's northernmost ward, the 49th Ward, has a five-year history with participatory budgeting. Under the leadership of Alderman Joe Moore, the 49th Ward is believed to be the first political jurisdiction in the nation to adopt this approach to budgeting. Alderman Moore was introduced to the concept at a 2007 professional conference. He brought the concept home to his community members.

In a 2010 *Chicago Tribune* op-ed, Alderman Moore makes his case for participatory budgeting. He gives three reasons to adopt it. First, it is time to do things differently. Second, citizens don't trust their elected officials or government to do what is right. Third, citizens don't believe they have the power to effect change. Alderman Moore writes, "We need a new governance model, one that empowers people to make real decisions about policy and spending decisions ... In an experiment in democracy, transparent governance, and economic reform, I'm letting residents decide how to spend my entire discretionary capital budget The process is binding. The projects that win the most votes will be funded Hundreds of residents ... many of whom have never before been involved in a civic activity, have become engaged in the participatory budgeting process They

know they have the power to make decisions and that their government is not just hearing them but actually following their mandate. Empowering people to make real decisions openly and transparently is the first step toward restoring public trust in government."

Since adopting participatory budgeting in 2009, the 57,000 residents in Chicago's 49th Ward have voted on how to spend part of the \$1.3 million in discretionary funds made available to each ward annually for capital improvements. Usually about \$300,000 is reserved for contingencies or cost overruns. There are parameters on the types of projects that can be proposed and restrictions on how the funds can be spent. Each proposed project is subject to final approval by the city or other relevant agencies operating in the ward, but generally, all projects have preliminary approval before going on the ballot.

In Chicago's 49th Ward, the general steps taken annually include neighborhood assemblies at which ideas for possible projects are collected. At each neighborhood assembly, those in attendance are asked to volunteer to serve as community representatives. A leadership committee, consisting of individuals who served either on last year's steering committee or as community representatives, oversees the process.

The neighborhood assemblies are open to any 49th Ward resident. Once concrete and viable projects are further developed, community representatives who serve on steering committees begin the process of narrowing down the original list to a final list of the most promising ideas. Eventually, this final list is voted on by a ward-wide assembly of citizens. Depending on their scope, projects may take up to three years to complete.

In the 49th Ward, anyone aged 16 and older can cast a ballot, regardless of citizenship or voter registration status. Proof of age and residency within the ward is required on voting day. Participation rates since 2010 can be seen in Figure 1.

Victoria Gordon, D.P.A., is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science, Master of Public Administration program, and serves as the Director of the MPA Program and as Director of the Center for Local Governments at Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky. She earned her Doctor of Public Administration degree from the University of Illinois–Springfield, and her Master of Public Administration degree from the University of Kansas.

Figure 1: 49th Ward Participation Rates since 2010



As in most communities using participatory budgeting, voting in the 49th Ward is allowed over a period of a week to increase participation. The winning projects go through a final approval stage and are incorporated into the city’s budget. Citizens can monitor and follow the progress of each project from inception to implementation and on through to completion. If, for some unforeseen reason, a winning project cannot be undertaken, a project taken from the runner-up list is substituted. There is an annual evaluation of the previous year’s process and needed procedural adjustments are incorporated into the process for the following year.

Examples of Winning Projects in the 49th Ward of Chicago

- Street resurfacing
- Street lighting
- Sidewalk repairs
- Pedestrian safety engineering study
- Tree planting
- Installation of a water fountain in a park
- Installation of bike lanes
- Commissioning of murals painted on viaducts by local artists

The Importance of Social Media Platforms in Citizen Participation

A recent report noted that three out of four people in the United States make use of some form of social media. These platforms can be cost-effective tools to engage citizens in participatory budgeting if used appropriately. It has also been reported that three-quarters of chief information officers at the local government level report using or planning to use Facebook or Twitter in outreach efforts. Many federal agencies are setting an example for municipalities by “using social media tools to inform the public about their programs, build relationships with customers and constituents, and solicit input about agency programs or activities.” Social media tools can be “used to generate new ideas or approaches to solve problems, provide greater public access to leaders, educate the public, encourage collaboration, and make it easier to provide formal or informal feedback about plans, policies, or programs Most uses of social media ... focus on informing the public about issues, giving people a chance to ask questions, and building a relationship between citizens and governmental officials.” Through experimentation with these social media platforms, municipalities can find what works best for their particular community and citizens.

Using a combination of traditional citizen engagement approaches with multiple social media platforms works

Creating the Participatory Budgeting Infrastructure

Action One: Communities that use participatory budgeting need institutional social media platform policies. For example, policies should empower a sufficient number of community leaders with the administrative authority to update social media platforms.

Action Two: Communities engaged in participatory budgeting should understand that actively managing social media platforms is real, important work, not an afterthought. Participatory budgeting will require investment in training both citizens and staff on the use of social media platforms.

Action Three: Communities should plan for, develop, and use social media platforms to complement other forms of communication that are available for citizen engagement and mobilization. Communities should explore and expand ways that people can opt in to participate and to submit initial project ideas online.

Increasing Citizen Participation

Action Four: Communities should build on existing and active social media platforms that citizens in the community are currently using. If citizens respond to e-mail blasts, use them. If youth are using Instagram, use it. Communities should be encouraged to try new approaches.

Action Five: Communities should identify ways to turn passive observers on social media platforms into active participants. Communities should understand that social media platforms are not top-down processes, but collaborative, two-way forms of communication. Citizens should be able to connect across neighborhoods and districts and see the impact of the whole process.

Action Six: Communities should identify who is being left out and work to include excluded populations in the participatory process.

Action Seven: Communities should understand that message content counts. Communities should remember that not all citizens might respond in the same way to a particular alert, message, etc. Participatory budgeting leaders should have a variety of “scripts” prepared and use as appropriate. They should remember to ask, “Why does this matter?”

Assessing and Increasing the Impact of Participatory Budgeting

Action Eight: Communities should identify best practices, share and exchange information with other communities, and support further research efforts.

Action Nine: Both communities and the academic realm should research and develop “technology that might help spread participatory budgeting more broadly, such as voting apps or databases through which communities could share information.” Communities should explore the potential for electronic or digital vote tallying.

Action Ten: Communities should solicit feedback from all stakeholders and incorporate changes into social media platform use policies, procedures, and practices as necessary.

best. Advocates from Chicago and other cities who were interviewed used a combination of traditional citizen engagement approaches (phone calls, flyers, and door knocking) and multiple social media platforms to garner the highest participation. For example, Zach Chasnoff of St. Louis's 6th Ward reports traditional ways of contacting people, like phone calls, but notes that:

With regard to social media, what worked the best was getting on the neighborhood forums. There are a lot of people who care about what is going on in the neighborhood. They will jump in if there is something that really concerns them, but mostly they just ... monitor Facebook and look for updates on things that are going on. We used the people that we had already engaged—the really active people—and they would “like” and “share” and “post” our messages around and they boosted our profile online. Through that approach we would get newer people who were paying attention to those forums. The neighborhood group forums were the best for us. Then Twitter is a funny thing. Twitter was probably the worst use of social media for us. For example, if we were posting from Participatory Budgeting-St. Louis and we were trying to get the word out on an event, I think we had very little response from that. But when we had news articles or we had pictures to post, and we could put them on Twitter, and then send them around using @president of board of aldermen, or @participatory budgetingNewYork, or @ and the name of a reporter I had established a relationship with, then I think we got more responses. And we got shares and retweets.

Aaron Tanaka of Boston's Youth Initiative says:

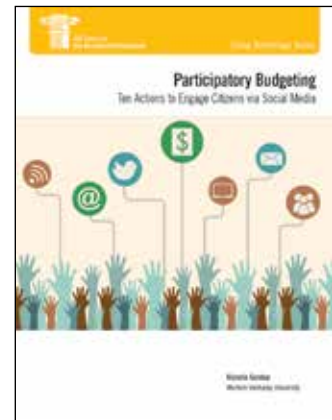
There are four channels that we use in terms of social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and a mobile comments texting application, which is a mass texting service where people can opt in and sign up for updates ... we have been most successful just importing people into it. It is harder to get people to sign up on their own. It has not been as successful in getting people to opt in as they would like. Facebook is the main platform that we use for telling people about upcoming public events and opportunities and the rest is done on Instagram and Twitter.

Conversations with participatory budgeting leaders illustrate the potential value of citizen participation and explore social media platforms' current role in the participatory budgeting process and these platforms' potential for expansion. Findings and recommended actions show how to:

- Create the infrastructure necessary for the participatory budgeting process
- Increase citizen participation
- Assess and increase participatory budgeting's impact ■

TO LEARN MORE

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The report can be obtained:

- In .pdf (Acrobat) format at the Center website, www.businessofgovernment.org
- By e-mailing the Center at businessofgovernment@us.ibm.com
- By calling the Center at (202) 551-9342