

Does 'participatory budgeting' lead to political patronage?

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Participatory Budgeting began in Brazil in 1988 and then, in 2011, New York City adopted the practice, giving citizens an opportunity to determine priorities for public spending in their communities.

A study of the impact of this ongoing experiment in [direct democracy](#) was conducted by Professor Thad Calabrese of NYU Wagner. The analysis, just published in *Administration & Society*, suggests that the process for determining the use of city legislators' discrete pools of discretionary capital funds has the potential to be directed for political patronage instead.

Calabrese and co-authors Dan Williams of the City University of New York and Anubhav Gupta of the National University of Singapore (and NYU Wagner graduate) found that the capital funds allocated after the input of community members in New York City have been spread among a larger number of community-based organization in smaller amounts than was true before Participating Budgeting began.

At the same time, according to the article, there's been no increase in the aggregate amount of funds allocated within each council district, nor changes, as a result of the consultative process, in allocation categories.

The article, just published in *Administration & Society*, considers the possibility that Participatory Budgeting may be falling short of its promise of increasing input from residents marginalized from official budget decision making, by increasing their roles in determining how public money is spent. It suggests that legislative determination for the use the funds, or earmarking, and the increased number of smaller projects across legislators' districts, seem to suggest that Participating Budgeting can be co-opted by [city](#) legislators to dispense political patronage.

"The analyses here are mostly suggestive of the patronage role in the New York City participatory [budgeting](#) process," the researchers state. "That is, the results presented here are consistent with those predicted by patronage."

However, the findings do not argue that patronage is definitely going on, nor does it rule out the benefit that other researchers have highlighted—that Participatory Budgeting can aid in empowering citizens and increasing democracy.

"Next steps in this analysis might involve determining whether smaller but more numerous capital projects meaningfully improve public service delivery or citizens' satisfaction with these services," they write.

To speak with Calabrese or obtain a copy of the article, titled "Does Participatory Budgeting Alter Public Spending? Evidence From New York City," contact the NYU press officer listed with this release.

More information: Thad Calabrese et al. Does Participatory Budgeting Alter Public Spending? Evidence From New York City. *Administration & Society* 2020. doi.org/10.1177/0095399720912548

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