

Integrating Multiple Channels of Engagement: opportunities and challenges

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Introduction¹

More than 2800 cities around the world adopt participatory budgeting (PB), a governance innovation that allows non-elected ordinary citizens to shape a portion of the city budget (Sintomer *et al.* 2013).

As noted by many authors PB is unique because it combines multiple phases that ideally allow a variety of different agents, with different interests and different skills, to work together at overlapping pieces of the same problem and/or solution exerting different levels of effort (Stortone and De Cindio 2015).

Generally, participatory budgeting has three participatory phases: an initial brainstorming phase, in which participants propose potential public projects; a project selection phase, in which participants select projects that will enter the budget; and a monitoring phase, during which participants can follow the implementation of projects. Thus, in typical participatory budgeting, participants can engage the process in multiple ways, from simply attending a meeting to voting, from proposing a project to mobilizing other participants or being elected as representatives of their district (Wampler, 2015; Baiocchi, 2005; Allegretti, 2005; Avritzer & Navarro, 2002; Abers, 2000; Fedozzi, 2000).

However, PB in large cities also combines multiple channels of engagement. A channel of engagement is subsystem of a democratic innovation that designed specifically to engage a segment of the population.

Participatory budgeting in large cities integrates separate district level engagement processes, and multiple city level engagement processes. Each of these devices characterizes as a subsystem of the PB system. For example in Porto Alegre, Brazil, each of the 17 districts of the city organize a slightly different participatory process. Additionally Porto Alegre organizes 6 city wide participatory processes dedicated to the allocation of resources to citywide projects on a specific policy domain (e.g.; traffic). Each of these 23 subsystems has two participatory spaces. One open to the public (plenary), one restricted to citizens that are elected during the plenaries (delegate forum). The

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overall participatory architecture is completed by a citywide steering committee composed by two representative of each subsystems – the participatory budgeting council. New York City PB, instead, ‘only’ integrates 26 district level channels with a citywide steering channel open to representatives of CSOS.

Additionally many modern PB processes include an online space that, depending on the implementation, varies from an ancillary system of support to visualize data and information, to a complete separate PB (e.g.; Belo Horizonte).

Each of these subsystems is a separate channel of engagement specifically designed to target a segment of the population identified by geographical, media or policy preferences.

Most of the current research highlights the positive role of integrating multiple channels of engagement to engage a large and diverse set of participants. However, the conflictive relationship that PB had with e-democracy tells a more complex story in which different channels interact positively or negatively depending on the architecture of the PB system. In this chapter, the authors aim to provide a more nuanced view of the role of multiple channels of engagement in participatory budgeting processes.

The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first, the authors review the history of the conflictive relationship between PB and e-democracy highlighting the role of local conditions, path-dependency and historical trends. In the subsequent section, the authors focus on five critical challenges that multi-channel PBs have faced. Then the authors provide examples of PBs that have successfully managed some of such challenges. Finally, the authors conclude by drawing some preliminary lessons.

Participatory budgeting and e-democracy practices

The field of study of participatory budgeting is fast growing and still lacks universally accepted definitions. Following Sintomer *et al.* (2008, 2012) the authors define participatory budgeting as a device allowing “the participation of non-elected citizens in the conception and/or allocation of public finances”, that satisfies five further criteria:

- (1) The existence of an explicit discussion of financial/budgetary resources;
- (2) The existence of a dialogue with an elected body that has specific responsibilities and some concrete power over administration and resources in the interested area;
- (3) The existence of a cycle: cycles of events over years;
- (4) The inclusion of some forms of public deliberation within the framework of specific meetings/forums configuring a new public sphere;
- (5) The existence of a certain level of accountability.

The majority of more long-lasting experiments, today, is co-decisional; which means that participants have “voice and vote”, so the privilege to propose, but also vote, a list of actions and projects to be included in the budgetary documents.

As mentioned in the introduction, most PB combine three phases. An initial brainstorming phase, where participants propose potential public projects; a project selection phase, where participants select projects that will enter the budget; a monitoring phase, where participants gather information on the implementation of projects. In general the majority of people participate in the voting phase, a smaller set participates in the ideation phase, and just a few in the monitoring phase. Large cities further decentralize the process in a number of parallel district-level PBs that are integrated.

The field of e-democracy offers an even larger variety of definitions (Medaglia, 2007; Yildiz, 2007). Following Trechsel (Trechsel *et al.*, 2003) the authors define e-Democracy practices as "all electronic means of communication that enable/empower citizens in their efforts to hold rulers/politicians accountable for their actions in the public realm. Depending on the aspect of democracy being promoted, e-democracy can employ different techniques: (1) for increasing the transparency of the political process; (2) for enhancing the direct involvement and participation of citizens; (3) improving the quality of opinion formation by opening new spaces of information and deliberation."

Participatory budgeting and e-democracy practices in public institutions have several similarities. At the most basic level both approaches aim to increase the number of actors involved in policy-making enriching and complementing existing representative institutions. Both innovations promote a creative multiplication of participatory spaces and arenas where different actors can achieve different goals. In most cases, both innovations are open to the public and prioritize the number of participants instead of representativeness. Rarely e-democracy practices employ random sample of participants, electronic deliberative polls being probably the only exception. Both families of innovations share a number of more specific goals: increasing transparency of public choices, increasing accountability of elected and non-elected public officials, promoting horizontal discussion among citizens, promoting engagement of minorities, and promoting empowerment of civil society through expanding knowledge and intensifying the debate about possible alternatives to mainstream policies and projects.

However, for almost 15 years (1989-2004), PB and e-democracy innovations have rarely being combined (Peixoto, 2009; Sampaio *et al.*, 2010), and not until 2005 did practitioners of PB and e-democracy begin to move from “skepticism to mutual support” (Allegretti, 2012) — recognizing that they could cooperate to reach some of their shared goals.

The initial mismatching was partially path-dependent, being that PB practitioners regarded PB mainly as a pedagogic tool designed to foster community building via face-to-face public spaces promoting horizontal interactions among citizens. This tool used the desire to gain concrete public resources to motivate citizens to participate, to acquire the habit and skills to listen to each other, to learn to discuss alternatives, to understand the difficulties of policy-making, and to abandon destructive protest in favor of more cooperative attitudes. In Brazil the first designers of PB, influenced by socialism, liberation theology and years of organizing under the dictatorship, view face to face participation as a unique tool to liberate people from false-consciousness, apathy, ignorance,

miss-conception of the way the government operates and most importantly as a tool to promote other-regarding preferences and interest in politics.

All these objectives are inherently social and require the promotion of horizontal interactions among participants and a social network. Thus before the Web 2.0 paradigm shift for practitioners it was very difficult to imagine that PB and non-social ICT tools could complement each other. Beside this primary factor, the collaboration between PB and e-democracy was delayed for five key reasons:

(a) ICT participation tools had a low degree of interactivity, requiring high investments in terms of moderation and filtering of citizens' contributions;

(b) Internet access was limited and increased slowly especially in Latin America where PB was first developed;

(c) The average age of municipal employees involved in PB was high and technical culture low. They were rarely digital natives and most often were only used to a traditional paper-culture;

(d) The dominant political culture among the agents involved in the construction of PB projects was centered on traditional face-to-face organizing (Fedozzi, 2000);

(e) Most internet tools generated a one-to-one relationship between the city and the users, similar to an instant poll. Practitioners were unfamiliar with using the web to expand the horizontal relationship among citizens.

The last item in the list was possibly the strongest factor in the failed meeting between PB and the use of e-democracy tools. In fact, PBs were imagined mainly as collective arenas, while the first attempts to collect citizens' contributions through the internet (or by free phone numbers) were mainly tailored to aggregate individual preferences and did not facilitate deliberation and network building among participants.

For such reasons, only a few cities in the late 90s dared to invest in ICT technologies for presenting proposals or voting within participatory budgeting processes. Porto Alegre, the world pioneer of PB, did experiment with tele-voting in 1998-2000. Tele-centers were opened in some deprived neighborhoods, to allow people without internet home access to use ICTs to take part in the PB process (Allegretti, 2005). These costly tele-centers were underutilized, discouraging further experimentation by other municipalities.

With Web 2.0, costs of reaching people through social networks became much lower and internet access more widespread. Furthermore, the integration of the internet with mobile-phone systems, together with an explosion in geo-based technologies, allowed the creation of an easier collaborative environment with citizens. Ipatinga, Belo Horizonte and Recife (all in Brazil) acted as pioneer municipalities in this direction. They all tried to face the digital divide by providing buses equipped with online computers in the most underprivileged zones (later done in Lisbon and Cascais in Portugal).

Another important explanation of the difficulties in integrating PB and ICTs is that web 1.0 e-tools could not help practitioners to defend themselves from the main arguments of those that criticized the process. The introduction of ICT could not mitigate the fears of those that saw in PB a way for

city governments to bypass existing checks and balances, nor the fears of those who viewed common citizens as lacking the technical expertise to manage complex policy decisions. Similarly, the e-democracy tools of the time were not able to alleviate the concerns of those that criticized PB for lacking deliberative qualities, nor the concerns of those who thought the process was not truly representative and that it could easily be hijacked by elites or serve as an amplifier for well-organized groups. At the time, the most common view was that introducing e-democracy in a PB process could only concentrate decisional power in the hands of a minority of like-minded and well-connected citizens, raising new doubts about the minimal contribution that the internet could offer to increase the quality of deliberation and civic dialogue during a participatory budgeting process. There was also a widespread fear that internet was not sufficiently secure, and that trolls and hackers might jeopardize the legitimacy of online discussions and referendums.

A third important factor that helps explaining the delayed collaboration between PB and e-democracy is linked with the evolution of participatory budgeting. A new narrative of participatory budgeting that was less radical and more governance-driven emerged at the end of the 90s. This shift implied a stronger focus on the epistemic values of participatory budgeting, and a weaker focus on its educational value and its capacity to redistribute public resources toward the poor. The Brazilian Workers Party promoted this change as an element of a larger strategy to reposition itself toward the center in order to win the presidential elections (Hunter, 2009). This new governance-driven PB narrative was extremely successful also because it was complementary with the new participatory driven development focus of international organizations (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

This new framework was also supported by the renewed interest in the epistemic and instrumental qualities of deliberative democracy² that provided a new overarching framework disjointed by the radicalism of the early conception of PB rooted in socialism and liberation theology. This new narrative contributed to the diffusion of PB around the world (Goldfrank, 2012).

European political forces interested in PB (notably in the UK, Portugal, Germany, Eastern and Northern Europe) were particularly receptive to the new governance-driven approach to PB and began introducing the process at the municipal level around 2002. This new narrative, more favorable to e-democracy, coupled with the multiplication of top-down funding opportunities for the informatization of administrative institutions and the experimentation of new models of institutional communication with citizens was a major factor in the diffusion of new hybrid PBs in Europe. In some cases, ICT tools became the primary media of the process, giving birth to the so-called e-PBs (as in Lisbon, Portugal; Cologne, Germany; and more recently Reykjavík, Iceland) where ICTs facilitated the presentation of proposals and the voting of priorities. Such a transformation took place from 2006 onward, after the quality of the web-based panorama had completely changed, as the wiki ideology and the explosion of social networks had introduced several new types of horizontal relations among internet users, and the level of interactivity had shaped new tools for e-democracy practices and new opportunities to overcome cognitive injustices.

Despite all these changes, and the different sensitivity introduced by a new generation of digital native employees and consultants that began cooperating with public institutions on the

² For an introduction to the vast debate on the various conceptions of Deliberative Democracy see Besson, Marti & Seiler, 2006, chapter 2.

implementation of new examples of participatory budgeting, the collaboration between PBs and ICTs is still very rudimentary (Nitzsche *et al.*, 2012).

The Challenges of Integrating Multiple Channel of Engagement in PB processes

In this section, using the example of both face-to-face and ICT-based PB the authors identify five critical challenges that might emerge from a non-careful integration of multiple channels of engagement.

First, it is important to underline that venues of participation are not separable entities, but that they interact constantly. Introducing a new venue of participation might alter the balance of a democratic innovation and divert users' attention and interests in unexpected ways. For instance, if one venue is particularly successful in attracting participants, others might suffer due to a loss of participants. Similarly, if a venue is particularly unsuccessful, other venues might suffer because they are still part of the same system and problems might spill over across venues. This feature of democratic innovations is particularly important when considering the fact that such innovations are often introduced in the midst of fierce opposition, and that opponents, to delegitimize the entire process, will certainly exploit the activation of new venues of participation.

Here, some examples coming from the world panorama of participatory budgeting can again be useful and instructive, because PBs are often supported by a minority of officials within the city government, and because we now have enough empirical cases in which a new government inherited PB from a previous (and in several cases ideologically different) one.

In Hortolandia, a city in the metropolitan region of São Paulo in Brazil, PB was introduced in 2004 due to the pressures of a minority within the city government. After the first year of implementation the mayor entered in direct conflict with participatory budgeting (Spada, 2012), so he activated a new venue of participation by organizing in each district of the city a consultative meeting with representatives of the city council. These meetings effectively undermined participatory budgeting and led to the abandonment of the process in 2007, although the process maintained a great impact on several ex-PB delegates who are continuing to fight for more transparency and participation (Allegretti, Campos, & Sequeira, 2012). Similarly, some scholars interpret the introduction of the so-called Governança Solidária Local in Porto Alegre in 2005, a process parallel to PB, but that was initiated to generate partnership with local community social organizations, as an attempt by the new government, to disempower a PB that could not be eliminated due to great popular support (Baierle, 2007, Langelier, 2015).

Obviously, the above-mentioned cases are extreme examples, in which new venues of participation were explicitly created to undermine pre-existing ones. However, several other cases demonstrate how adding new spaces within a democratic innovation arena (or introducing substantial modifications in a participatory channel; configuring it as something completely new) can prove risky even in the absence of the intent to undermine the main original process. The introduction of

thematic assemblies in some PBs provides another example of the difficulty of managing parallel channels of engagement. Returning to the case of Porto Alegre, during the early 90s, the city government had decided to introduce a new set of citywide assemblies in an attempt to overcome the fact that projects proposed in district assemblies were limited in scope and mostly concentrated on filling basic infrastructural deficits in informal neighborhoods. These assemblies, called thematic assemblies, attempted to tackle citywide problems, such as transportation, education, employment or environmental pollution. These assemblies created a pure parallel process to the pre-existing one, and the result was that people rarely used the thematic assemblies as intended by the designer. Instead, the assemblies were mostly used to propose projects that had not been selected in the district assemblies, attempting to get the funding through this other channel.

Second, when multiple parallel processes of participation are available, participants might choose the channel that generates the most rewards for the least cost. This form of soft *free-riding* tends to affect significantly the legitimacy of a democratic innovation, and often limits capacity building, concentrating the efforts of individuals and organized stakeholders into an array of behaviors aimed at reaching maximum added-value for themselves, rather than feeding the consolidation of collaborative space. Usually, there is a fundamental trade-off between the amount of redundancy in a democratic innovation and the possibility of free-riding behaviors. The more parallel venues of participation are active, the more a participant can select the one that requires the least effort while retaining the benefits of being a participant.

The latter was a particular problem in some experiments of participatory budgeting that introduced the possibility of voting online. In some cases, the new online voting mechanism was perceived as a mechanism that allowed free-riders to affect the process without actually expending the effort to participate. This loss of legitimacy became particularly problematic when intersected with problems of digital divide as in the case of Recife's experiment with online voting in participatory budgeting. In Recife, both scholars and practitioners noted that e-participants, often coming from the middle class, had the ability to overturn the results of the face-to-face participatory process with minimal effort, without having to deliberate and confront the reasons of more socially vulnerable face-to-face participants (Ferreira, 2010). Another interesting case is Vignola, in Italy, which in 2004 introduced parallel mechanisms of online and offline voting in a new PB process. The online vote was a success in terms of numbers, but it skewed the ranking of projects selected through the face-to-face process. Most elderly people, unfamiliar with e-participation, were discouraged from participating again, which led to the fast suspension of participatory budgeting in 2005.

Third, the more parallel venues of participation exist, the more duplication is generated within the democratic innovation and the more pressing the need for shaping filtering mechanisms becomes. Such complex filtering processes often generate tension in the city's relationship with participants, undermining the trust in PB and the legitimacy of the entire participatory architecture. This is particularly relevant when it concerns the duplications of brainstorming venues aimed to collect participants' proposals and when it is coupled with internet tools that simplify the proposal process.

What has happened in Lisbon's PB since 2009 is an example of this risk: to face the almost 1,000 proposals of investments uploaded by citizens every year, the municipality had to organize an Interdisciplinary Working Group of Civil Servants to merge and pre-select the proposals. The pared

down list of 200 projects sparked numerous complaints by citizens who saw their ideas disappearing or being distorted (Sintomer & Allegretti, 2016).

Fourth, the increased simplicity of presenting proposals and entering the debate on policy making generated by multiple venues of participation can also broaden the expectations of participants, and thus generate frustration when such expectations are not met. This problem is rooted in an intrinsic fragility of participatory decision-making processes that pair an idea-generating phase with an idea-selection phase. These two steps have divergent and intrinsically conflictive goals. In fact, the first one aims to reach out to the largest possible number of people to convince them to share ideas to fulfill their needs and dreams³, almost inevitably generating expectations that might not be fulfilled. While the second step filters the projects to be implemented, aiming at producing some good outcomes out of scarce resources and other feasibility barriers.

The more successful the first step is, the more projects have to be discarded⁴, thus the conclusion of the decisional process is one of the most critical moment for participatory budgeting. The risk that expectations might not match reality, creating frustration in participants is further exacerbated by the fact that many public projects require multiple years to be implemented and that projects might be halted for reasons not foreseen when they were approved by participants (Allegretti, 2013). For example, an increase in the cost of a project (materials and/or workforce, but also building permits or construction obligations and compensations) might affect its feasibility, as the implementation of a different project from a supra-local unit of government or a change in regulations. The case of the E-PB of Belo Horizonte in 2008 is highly representative of these risks (Sampaio *et al.*, 2010). The first of the winning projects was not immediately funded, because a possibility of securing state-transfers funding emerged. When the latter were not concretized, rumors that the local government had preferred to implement the second priority, ignoring the hierarchy provided by citizens, began to circulate. That concatenation of events delegitimized the process generating widespread skepticism toward the subsequent cycle of e-PB.

Unfortunately, carefully explaining the limits of a participatory budgeting process to participants is contrary to the intent of the organizers to portray the process as a *panacea* for all local problems to achieve higher level of participation. A diversification in the venues of participation implies a multiplication of different advertising messages to reach out to different types of participants and carries a higher risk of creating unmanageable expectations.

Twenty-five years of experiences of participatory budgeting suggests that careful management of the participants' expectation is a key aspect to guaranteeing the success and survival of these processes (Allegretti, 2013).

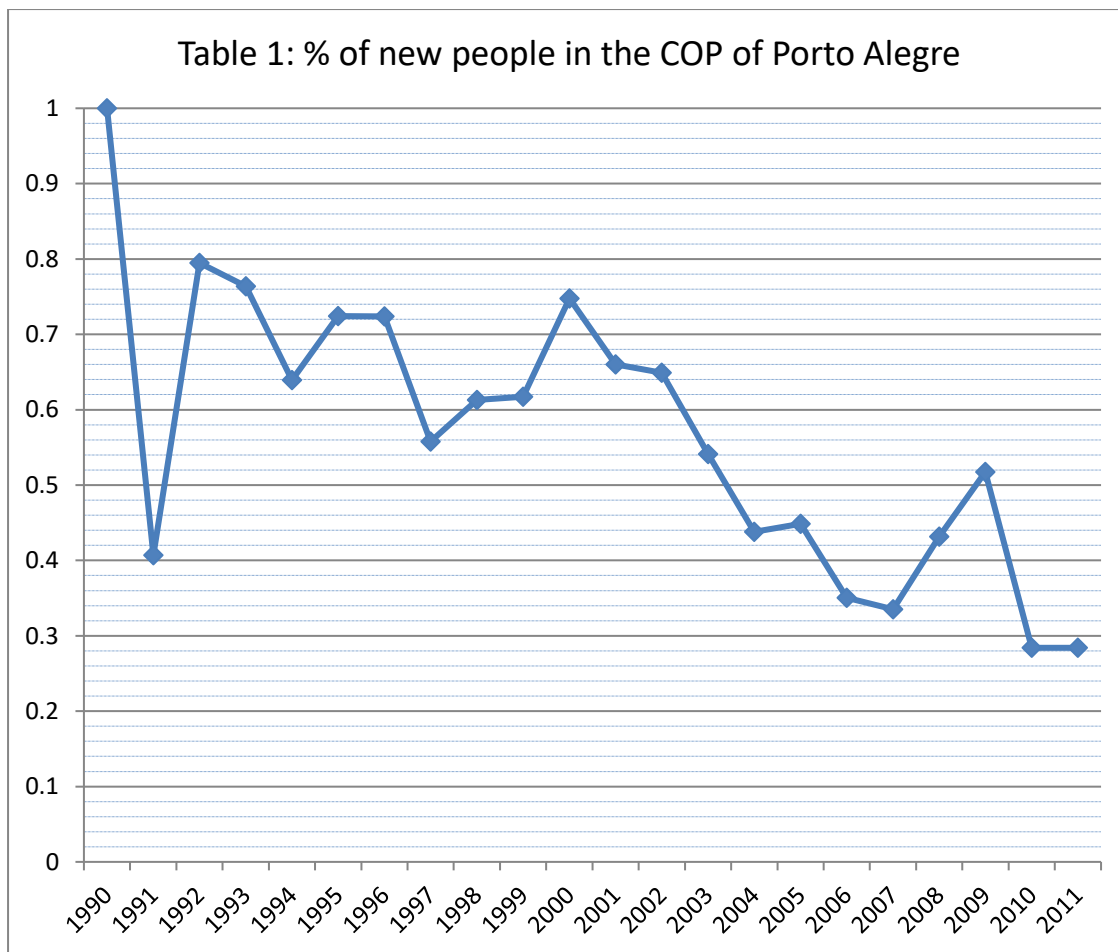
Finally, a fifth problem emerges from the interaction between the multiplication of venues of participation and the risk of the emergence of an oligarchy of participants over time. In fact, the more a democratic innovation is complex, the more difficult it is to manage its evolution. But incremental evolution is one indispensable component of democratic innovations (Allegretti, 2013) because it represents a sort of guarantee of its capacity to progressively solve problems and respond

³ One of the organizers of PB in Cruz-Alta, Brazil, defined this phase of the process the "a machine to create dreams".

⁴ Discarding a project could have multiple reasons: many projects are redundant, many are not feasible, others are too expensive, and many other do not get enough votes. For example in the first year of the e-PB process in Reykjavík 300 projects out of 600 were discarded.

to inhabitants' anxieties, thus being a pivotal element of the legitimization of the participatory process as a flexible, citizens-friendly institution of territorial governance.

The most advanced democratic innovations, like participatory budgeting, often contain provisions that allow participants to be a central actor in the change of the process' design in order to adapt it to changing conditions and increase the feeling of ownership and belonging of inhabitants in relation to the participatory device and the ruling coalition itself. Allowing participants to modify the rules of the process (as happens in most Brazilian, Spanish and North American PBs) is an important tenet of maintaining the flexibility and adaptability of the process, and is a central feature in activating a virtuous circle that benefits progressively the ruling administration as well as the citizens (Ganuza and Frances 2012). However, this design feature when combined with different venues of participation, requiring different levels of knowledge and effort, might generate the creation of an oligarchy of participants that slowly disempowers one or more participatory channels in favor of the one that is most congenial to them. The case of Porto Alegre (Fedozzi, 2007, Langelier, 2011 & 2015) is exemplary in this regard and it shows this ambiguity related to the self-ruling opportunity. Over a period, through changes to the rules and practices of PB, participants have contributed to diminishing the role of public district assemblies (Fórum Regional de Orçamento Participativo, or FROP) while empowering the smaller citywide assembly of district representatives (Conselho do Orçamento Participativo, or COP). These procedures have *de-facto* gradually encouraged the creation of an oligarchy of highly skilled participants that control most of PB decisions. The following table shows how the renewal rate of members of the COP decreased over time.



Source: Data collected by the ONG Cidade in Porto Alegre for the years 1990-2008; for the years 2008-2012 authors' calculations based on the public list of members of COP.

As we can see from the graph, the percentage of new participants in this key assembly decreases over time. During the 90s around 70% of this assembly got renovated in each cycle. After 2000 the number of new members declines sharply. By 2011, only 30% of the assembly was composed by new members.

More professional district representatives are able to obtain more resources for their districts, but they are also more easily co-opted by the city government. Most importantly, participatory budgeting, by requiring a specialized skill set more tailored to compromise than protest, overtime reduces the ability of community leaders to challenge effectively the city government.

The presence of partially redundant venues of participation is an important byproduct of any democratic innovation, but — as we have seen from some of the quoted examples of this section — the multiplication of participatory and engagement venues can generate significant risks. This is because different venues of participation within a same participatory device or model are not separable objects, and are not nodes of a program that adhere to strict programming rules, they are public spaces composed of people that will often surprise the designer by using the space in unexpected ways. The idea that the more venues of participation the better a democratic innovation will perform is an assumption that does not hold true. Every wound inflicted on the legitimacy of a participatory device can become the start of a vicious circle, as politicians could become less

confident of their experimentation and gradually invest less in it, further delegitimizing it in the view of their citizens.

Lessons from Emerging Success Stories

One of the characteristics of the field of democratic innovations, and PB in particular, is that these devices are constantly adapted and reinvented to overcome challenges and problem. A number of innovations are now starting to tackle directly the challenges we have described in the previous section.

Most of these experiments tackles a combination of challenges that are specific to local conditions, thus the authors do not present them as a specific solutions to one of the five challenges identified in the previous section, but, instead, introduce them as proto examples of a new approach to institutional design.

For example, the city of Canoas, in Southern Brazil, has recently introduced a “Municipal Systems of Participation”, which tries to better integrate different channels of social dialogue. The system combines 13 on-line as well as off-line participatory tools. participatory budgeting, Urban Participatory Planning, the Forum of Services (in which citizens oversight the functioning of several city services), and “the Mayor in the Station” (an outreach space of social dialogue which consists – once a week – in the presence of the Mayor in the train station to dialogue with commuters) are some of the most prominent participatory spaces. Some of these devices are conceived to promote horizontal interactions among participants (e.g., PB), while others are designed just to improve the communication between the city officials and citizens as individuals (Martins, 2015). The key innovation introduced by Canoas consists of a complex system of public proceedings of all these different channels that allows the city, interested citizens and civil society organizations to keep track of issues raised by individuals and groups in each of these different channels. This mechanism, obviously, does not solve all the potential conflicts that emerge from mixing such different channels of participation, but is a first concrete step to recognize the need of an integration mechanism and the creation of an overarching dialogue among all the components of the participatory system.

Some participatory innovations, instead, experimented with isolating the channels that generated potential negative interactions. For example, Belo Horizonte, Brazil, created an online channel that has its own budget and is effectively an entire separate space with limited interaction with the face-to-face PB process. Other cases, such as some New York’s districts, have introduced very limited online tools that support only the project proposal phase and thus cannot generate significant conflicts with the face-to-face processes.

The case of the city of Feltre, in Northern Italy, is also interesting for its solution to the potential conflicts existing between collective arenas and spaces of privileged dialogue with individuals and, in particular, powerful socioeconomic players. Feltre introduced the House of Commons⁵ a participatory arena divided in several thematic “Laboratories of Citizenship” that collect and discuss all ideas coming from elected official, citizens and organized stakeholders on specific policies (e.g.,

⁵ See: <http://partecipo.comune.feltre.bl.it/>

sustainability). The interesting innovation of Feltre is that the city formally closed every other channel that could act as a competitor to this open and transparent space of public debate, including private meetings between the mayor and stakeholders from the private sector. Private stakeholders now have to submit any proposal in the public arena of the laboratories. The closure in 1989 of clientelistic and privileged channels of engagement according to many scholars is one of the key mechanisms that empowered the PB process in Porto Alegre (Abers 2000, Baiocchi 2005, Ganuza & Francés 2012, Baiocchi & Ganuza 2014).

Some participatory innovations, instead of trying to eliminate conflict, use it to strengthen check and balances. A common feature is – for example – the creation of a dormant oversight channel that is inactive in normal conditions, but that can be activated, when needed, to review allegations of foul play. For example, the Italian city of Cascina introduced a Control Commission in the participatory budgeting process. The commission included members of the political opposition that were critical of the participatory budgeting process as well as the proposers of all the investment ideas included in the process. In 2012, when a cheating scheme was detected, the commission was activated and provided a transparent decision on what measures were to be taken in such controversial situation. Beyond the obvious legitimacy enhancing feature of this channel of participation, the key innovation introduced by Cascina was to create a dormant channel, in conflict with active ones, that could be activated in case of necessity.

The Portuguese city of Cascais has recently introduced an interesting innovation to reduce a specific conflict that emerged among channels of engagement with different requirements for participation. The conflict exploded in 2014, partially because of the growing success achieved by the three years old process⁶. After the particularly high turnout of 2014 (more than 41,000 votes were casted, an unusually high turnout in a city of around 200,000 inhabitants), several citizens groups started criticizing the process for allowing any citizen around the country to vote for the list of priorities through the mobile phone voting channel.

In Cascais, participants could cast their vote both face to face and via text message (SMS). The critics concentrated on the fact the local taxpayers' will could be overturned by "strangers with a light bond to the city". They also highlighted the paradox of having proposals for PB only be cast during face-to-face meetings (so by someone that was physically present in the meeting), while having the final voting phase that selected the priority list of investments open to everybody.

In previous years, the municipality of Cascais had defended its voting system, underlying the global nature of the city and its objective to attract tourists and international investors. Participation had to be open to anybody interested in the city's destiny. But the new mayor, elected in 2013 with around 28,000 votes, significantly less than those collected by participatory budgeting, was more sensitive to the critics, and accepted to limit the voting rights to formal local residents and workers, forcing participants to pre-register. Civil servants in charge of participatory budgeting opposed the change, viewing it as a decline of the inclusionary nature of the process.

Such a conflict of visions generated an interesting solution implemented this year. From 2015 onward, every proposal of investment that will pass the neighborhood-filtering phase and will be included in the citywide ballot for final approval via referendum, will receive an identical package of

⁶ See <http://www.cm-cascais.pt/area/orcamento-participativo-0>

electronic votes. Supporters of each project will be able to distribute these votes to friends and interested citizens that resides outside of Cascais.

The combination of these two innovations, mandatory pre-registration and cap on extra-municipality votes, has four main benefits:

- (1) it allows to reduce the influence of PB voters located out of the local territory, without frustrating their will to participate in decision-making;
- (2) it gives centrality to the mobilization of local participants because the extra-municipality votes are capped;
- (3) it obliges citizens to campaign outside the community of local residents in order to maximize the use of the whole “package” of votes donated to extra-municipal participants, because – if they are not all used – they can jeopardize the winning potential of any proposal;
- (4) the pre-registration of voters allows the municipal government to better know the typologies of users and, eventually, measure their satisfaction and annually improve the process’ performance.

The innovation has not yet been implemented and it will take a few years to understand if it is successful, but for our purposes it remains an important indicator that Cascais is starting to pay attention to the negative interaction among parallel channels of engagement.

Figure 2 summarizes the integration strategies described in the previous examples. This is not an exhaustive list, but it is a first step in mapping the variety of these emerging strategies.

Figure 2: emerging strategies to overcome conflict among parallel channel of engagement

- a) Strengthening integration through information sharing (Canoas, Brazil).
- b) Isolating the channels (Belo Horizonte, Brazil).
- c) Limiting the opening of new channels to non-conflictual spaces (New York City, USA).
- d) Eliminating pre-existing channels that might generate conflict (Feltre, Italy).
- e) Leveraging conflictive channels as dormant oversight mechanisms that can be activated when necessary (Cerignola, Italy).

If the above-mentioned cases tried to find solutions mainly for the risk of conflicts determined by the parallel voting or consultation channels, other strategies have been shaped to reduce conflicts among different channels of participation that require different levels of effort. Some of these solutions to the free-riding problem highlighted in the second challenge can be found in participatory budgeting processes that established incentivizing measures to strengthen the commitment of participants such as:

- (1) linking the amount of funding to greater participation or to better performance of a neighborhood in terms of fighting tax-evasion, as happened in Villa el Salvador, Peru (Cabannes, 2004);
- (2) linking the ability to propose more projects to sustained participation, like in the southern district of Porto Alegre⁷ or in La Plata in Argentina⁸;
- (3) linking the privilege to vote in participatory budgeting to commitment in the voluntary sector. This is – for example – the case of Hichikawa’s PB and other similar experiences in Japan, where initially only taxpayers could take part in the distribution of 1% of public budget for projects of social interest. Gradually non-taxpayers were also admitted to vote, provided they could gain their privilege through a score-card registering their commitment in voluntary social activities that promote capacity building (see Sintomer *et al.*, 2013; Matsubara, 2013).

Returning to face-to-face democratic innovations, some processes have introduced proto-gamification rules to promote environments that are more productive and less conflictual. For example, the previously mentioned House of Commons in Feltre in Italy, a participatory consultative body, allows citizens to submit a formal complaint about municipal services, policies or projects, only if they have previously submitted a solution to another city-level problem. This solution has been particularly effective in overcoming the widely held view that citizens are only able to complain, and cannot propose effective solutions. The Laboratories of Citizenship have been gradually affirming their presence in the political panorama of Feltre as the main spaces for shaping policies and projects for the city, progressively overcoming the skepticism and resistance of many actors coming from the social fabric and the entrepreneurial domain.

However, the above suggested paths which mitigate the effect of free-riding and promote capacity building are not exempt from carrying critical dangers: for example, that the more difficult it is to earn the privilege to participate meaningfully in a participatory process, the higher the probability that an oligarchy of participants will emerge through a sort of Darwinian selection process. Participants might abandon the process because their expectations were not satisfied immediately, or might not even try to achieve their goals if discouraged by the cost of participation. Thus, it is not only fundamental to preserve meaningful participation in all different venues of engagement, but

⁷ One of the southern districts of Porto Alegre (Região Sul) developed over the years a set of rules that complements the ones of participatory budgeting. These rules were originally designed to deal with the backlog of projects proposed by the participatory process that were not yet implemented by the city. The rules established that newly elected representatives in the regional district assembly (Forum Regional do Orçamento Participativo - FROP) who were not familiar with the backlog of projects and the functioning of PB should spend a period of training and capacity building. They could not propose new projects, that have a higher chance of being redundant, but they could still participate to the deliberation of projects proposed by more experienced participants. An additional requirement imposed a minimum amount of participation on all members of the FROP in order to maintain the possibility of proposing projects.

⁸ In la Plata only those residents who have attended half or more of the public forums held in their neighborhood are allowed to vote during the final round (Peruzzotti, Magnelli, & Peixoto, 2011).

also to create mechanisms that reduce the negative impact of unachieved expectations of participants and promote engagement.

Decreasing the negative effect of not obtaining the approval to implement a project desired by a participant is something that successful participatory budgetings manage through the establishment of a dynamic tournament perspective. The unsuccessful participant whose proposal cannot be implemented has 'lost' this time around, but by increasing his/her capacity, and by participating next time, his/her chances of success will increase. This fundamental element, by increasing the probability of achieving the objectives of participants and by reducing the cost of losing in the participatory process, allows many participatory budgeting processes to sustain high levels of participation over time and promotes a friendly agonism that avoid destructive forms of competition.

Some recent practices have also begun to tackle directly the issue of the multiplication of ideas during the brainstorming phase of a democratic innovation. In general, such solutions are based on two typologies of approaches:

a) the creation of a participatory filtering space (as laboratories or specific assemblies) where the redundancy is reduced by collective operations of merging similarities or by ranking;

b) the support of the ideation phase with geo-location tools that highlight similarities among proposals which deals with the same physical space and/or the same issue.

The solutions of the first type normally happen in face-to-face arenas, while the second privilege online environments. Some districts of New York employ both solutions in their PB process. Projects during the ideation phase are displayed in online maps divided by policy. When the ideation phase is over volunteers (budget delegates) take the hundreds of proposals and narrow them down in collaboration with city staff to a ballot of around 20 projects.

The city of Reykjavik in Iceland is another interesting case.⁹ The city in 2011 introduced an innovative e-participatory budgeting that uses an online participatory ranking process to reduce the filtering costs of PB. Participants not only propose ideas, they also immediately rank them in an online platform. This platform is anonymous and open to all, even nonresidents and minors. The objective of this platform is to capture the best ideas no matter where they come from. In this step, a careful online structure has been set up in order to allow the quality of debate, and the readability of arguments that motivate citizens who support and oppose each presented proposal of investment.¹⁰ Then the city staff analyzes only the top ranked projects and selects a set of 30 feasible projects per district. Finally, local residents select one district and play a budget game in which they assign the available city funds to a combination of the 30 projects. This second phase uses one of the most advanced security system currently adopted by e-voting platform and restricts participation to residents.

⁹ For more details and background information see the Participedia case study: <http://participedia.net/en/cases/electronic-participatory-budgeting-iceland>

¹⁰ In the case of Reykjavik, the opposition to a project is declared during the debate, and requires expressing clear motivations. This solution seems superior to other approaches that introduce the possibility of assigning a negative score to projects without providing a justification. For example in Cologne, the introduction of negative voting without justification led to widespread strategic behavior that undermined the cooperative spirit of the e-PB process.

PB processes have tackled the challenge of the emergence of an oligarchy of participants in two ways. On one hand, they have introduced turnover rules, on the other, they have limited the meeting to randomly selected groups of participants. The case of Porto Alegre shows the limits of the first approach. The turnover rules were never enforced. The PB Model of Turin and Milan shows instead applications of the random selection approach (Stortone and De Cindio 2015). Random selection however has significant limits in terms of inclusion and is difficult to explain to citizens.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter begins by noticing that the most successful democratic innovations, like – for example – participatory budgeting, often consist of a coherent system of overlapping channels of engagement and participation. But introducing multiple channels of engagement also introduces risks.

The chapter describes five challenges that many democratic innovations that merge multiple parallel engagement processes face. First, different channels might enter in conflict and undermine each other. Second, the presence of different channels of participation that have different costs of participation, but generate the same return, runs the risk of generating ‘*soft free-riding*’ behavior in the participants, and thus might undermine the legitimacy of the process. Third, the multiplication of engagement processes often leads to the creation of a large number of redundant project ideas and participants’ requests that need to be filtered with costly processes. In many cases these filtering mechanisms are not sufficiently transparent and reduce legitimacy. Fourth, the more ideas are proposed, the more ideas will not be approved due to budget constraints, and thus the more expectations will be frustrated. Failing to manage the participants’ expectations is without a doubt one of the most common problems experienced by democratic innovations. Fifth, the presence of different venues of participation with different privileges facilitates the creation of an oligarchy of participants that monopolize the channel(s) with the most net benefits.

While there are no simple and *plug-and-play* designs that can magically find solutions to respond to these challenges, the examples reviewed in the third section of this chapter show some promising and concrete steps forward. In this perspective, such examples are not meant to offer blueprints or recipes that should be copied, but to reveal an underpinning systemic approach that could be positively emulated. This systemic approach is based on:

- (1) a careful attention to the interaction between different channels of participation and the risks and challenges of their possible conflicts, overlapping, duplication or integrative complementarity of effects;
- (2) a user-centric design approach that collects data on the variety of users’ needs and skills and tailors new channels of participation to specific types of participants;
- (3) a recognition of the multiplicity of reasons behind the choice of participating in different ways to the process (e.g., a single working parent can only participate online late at night) that translates in a valorization of all forms of input, even those that require little or no effort;
- (4) a recognition of the centrality of including difficult-to-engage participants;

(5) a recognition of the centrality of empowerment and capacity building of all different typologies of participants;

(6) a meaningful gamification approach, that abandons superficial and tokenistic incentive schemes (e.g., badges) in favor of providing increasing control privileges within the democratic innovation as reward for sustained participation, completion of capacity building exercises or achievement of certain transparent objectives;

(7) a careful attention to the overall architecture of the participatory process that needs to balance the internal justice of the system (assigning greater privileges to participants that exerts the most effort) with the promotion of inclusion of new participants and minorities;

(8) a careful attention to the management of participants' expectations that is grounded in the ex-ante disclosures of the limits of each democratic innovation, in the increased transparency of idea-filtering procedures, and in the systematic answering of users' feedback;

(9) a renovated emphasis on the oversight of public actions (including the functioning of the participatory arenas themselves), as a measure for increasing the legitimacy of the different spaces and channels of social dialogue;

(10) a careful attention to the changes in the incentive structure that might emerge due to the evolution of the environment (e.g., changes in the political coalition governing the city implementing the democratic innovation) and the evolution of the process itself (e.g., the emergence of an oligarchy of participants).

These ten guidelines offer the initial basis of a systemic design approach that can support the creation of democratic innovations that combine more effectively multiple channels of engagement and can guide the decision to introduce or eliminate a specific channel of engagement. As all design recommendations, these guidelines are not meant to be blindly followed. The authors encourage practitioners to reinterpret them at the light of their specific local conditions and their specific objectives.

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