



Putting money and power in people's hands

The United Nations calls participatory budgeting a best practice for a democratic government and the New York Times calls it “revolutionary civics in action.” Participatory budgeting, or PB for short, deepens democracy, builds stronger communities, and creates a more equitable distribution of public resources. Around 7,000 cities worldwide do it, including some communities in the U.S. It involves residents actively deciding where their city's money will be spent — everything from new community centers to improvements to neighborhood parks.

Jenna Spinelle: Growing up, the most common thing I heard about politics was that it didn't matter who you voted for, or if you voted at all, because every politician was a crook. They only had their interests in mind and didn't really care about the people they were supposed to represent.

I heard this over and over again. From my grandfather when we'd be watching TV and a campaign ad came on. From my aunts and uncles at family gatherings. And even from my parents when I did my social studies homework.

To this day, my mom has never voted and my dad and brother only vote in presidential elections. No one in my extended family has volunteered for a political campaign, let alone run for office themselves. I don't say that to shame them. I get where they're coming from. And they're certainly not alone.

In the 2020 presidential election, 62 percent of eligible voters went to the polls. But that's the highest it's been in decades. When you compare that to dozens of other countries around the world—like Argentina, for example, where 82 percent of eligible citizens voted in the 2019 general election— it's not very impressive. So my family is the rule, not the exception.

I'm Jenna Spinelle, and this is When The People Decide. A show about how everyday people are shaping democracy.

As I reflect on it, my interest in political reform and civic engagement actually comes directly from the attitudes my family expressed growing up. Because: Yes, there's people who abuse the power voters give them. Yes, there's a lot of dysfunction in government. And I've also seen every day people break through that dysfunction to actually push for change in their community. And when they do, they find a sense of power that can break through those feelings of hopelessness and cynicism.

I see that cynicism come up again and again when it comes to money. I think it's what my family's referring to when they say politicians are crooks, or imply that government is wasting money. But what if residents of a city could sit on a committee with city staff to

actually help them decide how to spend city dollars? Could that increase the public's trust in government, and dispel some of that cynicism?

This is called—participatory budgeting—and it's been done in New York City, Boston and Nashville, to name a few. Participatory budgeting is a mouthful, so you'll hear folks refer to it as PB throughout this episode. PB is a great example of what democracy could look like with more people involved. See, when it comes to governing, money is at the center of everything. There's too much money being invested in this project; there's not enough money to fund that project. Whoever gets to decide where the money goes, gets to decide the priorities of that city. By inviting residents into that decision, city governments using participatory budgeting are actually sharing some real power with everyday people. It's something officials are doing in Durham, North Carolina, today. And we'll get to them in a minute. But first, a little history, with the help of an expert.

Hollie Russon Gilman:

My name is Hollie Russon Gilman. I am a senior fellow at New America's political reform program and an affiliate fellow at Harvard's Ash Center for Democratic Innovation and Governance.

Spinelle: Hollie knew from a young age she wanted to do something in government or social justice. As a kid, she carried around a pocket Constitution, and in high school started a Model Congress at her school. In college she wrote her thesis on the Iowa caucuses. Unsurprisingly, she went into public policy as a career. One of her first lightbulb moments about how we could improve democracy was when she learned about participatory budgeting and political reform.

Russon Gilman: It was actually in dinner in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I met Joe Moore, who was the first alderman in Chicago to implement participatory budgeting in the United States. And it really changed the course of my professional life.

Spinelle: Hollie spent the next few years immersed in the world of PB. She studied the process in New York City and eventually wrote her dissertation on it. Throughout all of this, she learned a bit of where it came from.

Russon Gilman: So participatory budgeting is a democratic innovation that started in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989. And it essentially devolves power to residents to make decisions over budgetary allocations.

Spinelle: The United Nations calls participatory budgeting a best practice for a democratic government. Around 7,000 cities world wide do it, including some communities in the U.S. Even though it's not widespread, to Hollie, it clearly illustrated what a more inclusive democracy could look like.

Russon Gilman: Typically there's neighborhood assemblies where people come and aggregate their ideas. So they say, "I would like to fund this, I would like to fund that," and they're sort of hyper-local, based in people's communities. Then from that, people are signing up to become budget delegates, which is my favorite part of the process because you get to really see how this sausage is made. You're signing up, you're working intensively with your counterparts inside government to sort of understand on a given proposal, how you could make it viable, what would it actually take? And then that's a huge learning

opportunity. You're learning what's federal, what's city, what's in, what's out. And the way that a PB is structured is there are certain limitations and structures.

Spinelle: And there are limitations. People who participate in the PB process don't have access to all of the city's funds. Typically, a city government sets aside a certain amount of money for projects that the PB committees choose.

Russon Gilman: And then those proposals get turned back to a wider group of residents for a vote. And one of the things that's really great about participatory budgeting is that it's more inclusive than traditional elections. So non-citizens, young people...we're seeing some places as young as 11 or 12 are eligible to vote.

Spinelle: Seeing kids vote on their city budget inspired Hollie. She's now spent more than a decade advocating for this work, and has seen it work all around the country.

Russon Gilman: I did a lot of research on the first youth-driven participatory budget process in Boston, and that was amazing because you'd see young people come in totally skeptical, totally not believing government works for them. And we would joke they'd come for the pizza, but they would stay because it was really impactful.

Spinelle: One reason it's meaningful, explains Hollie, is that people affected by issues in their local jurisdiction, are the ones proposing solutions to them. And sticking around to see them come to fruition.

Russon Gilman: When the young people in Boston started talking about their concerns, it was overwhelmingly public safety and many of them had lost a friend to gun violence. It was so illuminating to me to just hear these young people and to see it, see this spark where they're like, "Oh, this is real. This is actually dollars that I'm gonna be able to control." And you see them stay and engage and seeing them working on this over several months. 7:00 PM it's a Thursday, you're here, and you see people on the government side volunteering their time.

Spinelle: Inviting community members to be in government discussions about their own neighborhoods, is something Andrew Holland prioritizes in his work in Durham, North Carolina.

Andrew Holland:

I am Andrew Holland, and I currently serve as the assistant Director for strategy and performance for the City of Durham.

Spinelle: Andrew oversees the division that does participatory budgeting.

Holland: This is a program in which it allows residents to decide how to spend a portion of the city's budget.

Spinelle: The Durham city council launched the PB program in 2018. Andrew was hired shortly after that to lead the process.

Holland: And our goal was really to draw up and come up with the vision and the goals of PB in which the goals were really focused on equity, attempting to correct past harm. The whole trust thing with government, that is something that you can understand why there is some distrust there, especially in Durham.

Spinelle: This "past harm" includes decisions that the city of Durham—and much of the South—made that disproportionately impacted its residents of color.

Holland: Durham had a Black Wall Street similar to Tulsa. And even if you go and look at some of the past harm that has occurred, some of it occurred during the urban renewal where you have Durham Freeway was constructed, which was built in the middle of a prominent, African American community, Hayti. In which that freeway basically severed that community from the downtown area where you saw Black Wall Street happening. So that really decimated that community.

[ABC news clip](#): Hayti, this village of Black commercialism stretching from Umstead Street to Pettigrew ... was built out of necessity. Jim Crow segregation was the rule. So Black Durham built itself a place to thrive. But what Hayti was, and what it became, more often than not is traced back to the Durham Freeway.

Spinelle: That clip was from Durham TV news station ABC 11. The highway project in the 1950s demolished most of the original businesses in Hayti, and nowadays the only remnant is a church that also serves as the historical center for old Hayti. Luxury condos replaced some of the old structures, and developers are proposing new mixed use buildings in the neighborhood.

Andrew says that when Durham started its PB program, they wanted to include people who lived in this community, and others that felt wronged by city decisions in the past.

Holland: One of the things that our former city manager had communicated out to us is he wanted the PB program to be a true reflection of Durham. And with our city council, especially during that time and even now, there's a focus on equity. Everything that we do as a city, it needs to be equity focused. So how we went about designing our outreach and communications plan, it was targeted to those underserved neighborhoods in Durham.

Spinelle: This took a lot of work. To find people to participate, they didn't just post a flier at city hall and call it a day. Andrew and a small team of people from the city went out into Durham neighborhoods to find the right volunteers. First, they gathered data on the different neighborhoods in the city. For example, they wanted to know which areas had the highest number of kids using free or reduced lunch at school or where there were food deserts in the city. They made a deliberate effort to reach out to folks in these communities.

Holland: So we wanted to make it as easy as possible. That's why we had iPads available so that folks could use that. We understood that some folks may not be techno-savvy, so that's why we had paper as well. We also ensured that we had folks who could translate the information. We also canvassed various neighborhoods where we knocked on doors. We also went to the Durham bus station because, especially in North Carolina and the South, a lot of those individuals that rely on public transportation tend to be low income individuals. So we were very strategic in how we went about targeting those individuals.

Spinelle: Once they had enough residents involved, they started the process. In the first cycle, participants had around 2 million dollars to allocate to projects. Around a hundred community members in Durham helped create proposals for the projects, and according to the city, over 10,000 community members voted on which projects would be funded.

Holland: So for the first cycle, a lot of projects were around park improvements. Street trees in underserved neighborhoods. We have developed, I believe, 15 projects thus far. And even with those winning projects, there was still another round of community engagement afterwards. Prime example is our Drew/Granby Park in which we incorporated participatory design, where we worked closely with our parks and rec department to invite those individuals from that neighborhood to ask them exactly what type of park equipment would you like? What type of shrubs and plants would you like? And it was a very interactive exercise in which we wanted to make sure that, "Hey, you voted for this project. What do you want this park to look like?" Because we want the project to be a true reflection of that community.

Spinelle: So, regular people in Durham were getting to design the changes in their neighborhood. And Andrew started to see those who got involved in the PB process want to do even more.

Holland: Especially during the first cycle, what we witnessed was an uptick of the applications that were submitted to the city clerk's office. Where these individuals such as budget delegates, they applied for boards and commission seats, which, to me that was very telling.

Spinelle: He assumed when he saw the PB delegates joining city commissions that it meant the program helped more residents feel connected to the city. And he was right. After the first cycle...

Holland: We did conduct an evaluation in which we had North Carolina Central University, their public administration program, they went and held focus groups with budget delegates and also folks who voted in the process. There was an appreciation of the city having a program such as participatory budgeting.

Spinelle: Andrew says it's a step in the right direction.

Holland: Our goal as the city is to continue to improve because we know when it comes to equity it's very difficult. And it takes a lot of time, especially attempting to correct past harm. But I would say we were very successful.

Spinelle: Hollie might say something similar: that this is one tool worth trying. There are arguments made against participatory budgeting. Some political scientists don't consider PB and other bottom-up reforms realistic or important enough solutions to the real big problems with our democracy.

But Hollie says, we have to take an honest look at the economic and political inequalities in the U.S., and revive grassroots approaches to governance and policy making.

Russon Gilman: What's the alternative? Is the status quo going so well? Are there a lot of people who still think America is a beacon on a hill and our democracy is thriving? I mean, none of the data suggests that. 61% of Americans reported feeling lonely. 80% of Americans have not gone together with other people to do something positive for their community in the

past year. And then I think you don't need to be a political scientist to think that we have some problems. And if you ask people, I mean across both sides of the aisle, I think they're very disaffected with their institutions and all the data suggests that, all across the board.

Spinelle: Hollie documents the impact of PB in cities all over the country. She says that when given the opportunity, residents do show up to participate in their institutions. Some places see voter turnout go up after implementing a PB program. She'd like to see more places do this kind of budgeting, because it invites residents to the table to make decisions and have an impact on their community.

One thing she says is crucial to this kind of program being successful, like Andrew's program in Durham—is making sure the citizens who participate, actually get to have real power in the process. Meaning—it's an opportunity to do more than just speak during public comment at a city council meeting.

Public engagement can often be set up to be merely performative, where city leaders ask to hear from residents, but then make the crucial decisions themselves, with their colleagues or staff. And not with the folks who stood up to voice their preference.

Hollie says city leaders wanting to implement a PB program need to be ready not only to listen to their residents, but to also give them decision-making power. Especially when as a city leader, you're trying to engage with communities your city has historically marginalized.

Russon Gilman: And so if you're thinking about, for example, what more equitable policy may look like in a community, it's going to be a tough conversation. You're gonna talk about historic injustices, maybe talking about racism in your community. And I think having those spaces where people can come together helps us build our civic muscles, but they have to be tied to action and they have to be tied to consequences.

Spinelle: Hollie argues, when a powerful governing tool like PB is used, members of the community are bound to each other, even when they disagree.

Russon Gilman: I think this is often where you see some people in government maybe hesitant to do engagement because they say, "Well, we may engage the public, but then we won't actually be able to do the thing that we say that we will." And I think having these honest, trust building conversations between residents, grassroots leaders, and those in public decision-making power is really essential to saying what's in and what's out. Because then you can show tangible benefits. I don't watch sports, but I know people do, and people watched the game last night and maybe their team lost, but they enjoyed the experience of it, because they understand how the rules are set. And so I think that's a similar way to think about some of these participatory engagements. There may be different types of tools used, there may be different kinds of processes used. But if we can create a level playing field where people feel like the rules are transparent, the rules of the road are clear, there's a process for them to engage with, there's clear accountability, clear feedback—then my ultimate hope is that people engage in something and they don't get their proverbial park bench, they will feel like they gain something from that process.

Spinelle: Even if the people who engaged with the PB in their city didn't get what they wanted, Hollie says it still brought something positive to their lives.

Russon Gilman: Deepened relationships, deeper understanding, education, so they won't feel the sense of "the game is rigged." I just want to be really clear. A lot of engagement is rigged and the rules are not clear, but when designed properly, I think there is an opportunity to reknit that fabric and to help people experience this kind of civic engagement and this kind of co-ownership and agency over democracy.

Spinelle: Andrew says he's seen people in Durham get involved in PB, and because it's their first experience asking their local government for something, sometimes they discover so much more of what their city can do for them.

Holland: Especially during the first cycle, there were projects that did not need to go through the PB process. All it required was for someone to get in contact with, let's say the transportation department, public works department. Prime example: getting street lights. That doesn't have to go through a PB process. What that really requires is someone in the community understanding, Hey, all you have to do is get a petition going, get enough signatures. Boom. There's a good chance that you can go and get a streetlight.

Spinelle: And he says this kind of interaction is good for the city staff as well: pushing them to be better civil servants.

Holland: How do we do a better job of communicating that? Because it's all about access. Because if they don't have the information, how do you expect them to go and try to go and make change in their community?

Spinelle: Choosing the shrubs for your neighborhood park, in the grand scheme of things, might not feel like a lot. But if you pick the shrubs, you now feel ownership over that park. Over your community. You might know the person at the city to call when you see something else wrong in your neighborhood.

It's not about the shrubs. It's about power.

When the People Decide is produced by LWC Studios for the McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State. The podcast is reported and hosted by me, Jenna Spinelle. Our producer is Claire McInerney (MACK-in-urn-ee). Paulina Velasco edited this episode. Erica Huang (WONG) mixed this episode. Fact checking by Fendall Fulton. Special thanks to Andrew Holland and Hollie Russon Gilman for participating in this episode. And to Lisbeth Lucero and Shannon Lynch at New America for their help with Hollie's interview.

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