

New Research on Participatory Budgeting Highlights Community Priorities in Public Spending

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New York, NY (July 22, 2020) – [Public Agenda](https://www.publicagenda.org), a non-partisan research and public engagement organization, releases findings from new research on [participatory budgeting](#) (PB), a process used in more than 3,000 communities around the world that allows residents to decide directly how to spend a portion of a public budget. The research focuses on New York City, where since 2011, an increasing number of city council members have used PB to let their constituents decide how to spend millions of dollars every year. By comparing council members' spending before and after they started using PB, the research shows that spending priorities do in fact shift when residents play a direct role in budgeting. The new research points to public spending interests at a moment when city budgets are under scrutiny.

“Advocates and elected officials have long seen PB as a way to get people more involved in their communities. But this study is among the first to establish that giving people a voice in budgeting actually changes how public money gets spent in the United States,” said David Schleifer, Vice President and Director of Research at Public Agenda. “Opening these powers of decision making elevates the public’s views and values and helps communities and public institutions redesign and revitalize democratic problem solving.”

The research finds that when New York City council districts adopted PB, greater proportions of their discretionary capital budgets were allocated to schools, streets and traffic improvements, and public housing and smaller proportions were allocated to parks and recreation projects and to housing preservation and development. The peer-reviewed findings are published in an article, “Shifting Priorities: Participatory Budgeting in New York City is Associated with Increased Investments in Schools, Street and Traffic Improvements, and Public Housing,” that appears in issue 42.2 of *New Political Science* and will be open access.

“This kind of rigorous research helps public officials and PB implementers around the world better understand how PB works. It shows where implementers' goals are met. It also illuminates any unexpected results through the use of PB in communities,” said Carolin Hagelskamp, Professor of social sciences at Berlin School of Economics and Law. “PB has the power to bring communities closer together. Residents learn more about each other and start supporting projects that meet needs elsewhere in the district.”

Supported by a grant from the [Democracy Fund](#), the team of researchers from the Berlin School of Economics and Law, Public Agenda and New York University’s Steinhardt School are among the first to examine whether and how PB shifts spending priorities in the United States. Specifically, they found that when a New York City council district adopted PB, it spent on average about \$300,000 more per year on schools, about \$250,000 more per year on public housing, and about \$100,000 more per year on street and traffic improvements.

“What is exciting about this research is that it tells us for the first time that PB can shift spending priorities in NYC to better reflect the immediate needs and concerns of community members,” said Erin Godfrey, Associate Professor of Applied Psychology at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development. “The next step, now, is to better understand if and how these shifts in spending priorities represent more equitable spending, as is the ultimate goal of PB.”

While PB shifts spending towards schools, public housing and streets and traffic improvements, it remains to be seen whether those shifts actually make spending more equitable. Future research will be needed to investigate the specific types of projects

that are funded in each of these policy areas and which community members – and in particular, which schools – are benefitting from those projects.

For more detail on these findings and the methodology, access the article [“Shifting Priorities: Participatory Budgeting in New York City is Associated with Increased Investments in Schools, Street and Traffic Improvements, and Public Housing” by Carolin Hagelskamp, Rebecca Silliman, Erin Godfrey and David Schleifer in issue 42.2 of *New Political Science*.](#)

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