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PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING AS A DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION IN POWIATS?

ABSTRACT

Participatory budgeting is a tool of social engagement that for many years has been used by local government authorities in Poland. The aim of this article is to investigate how the tool functions in *powiats* [counties], with particular focus on verifying whether the process of its implementation has been successfully turned into an opportunity for bringing democratic innovation. Drawing on the analysis results, the authors notice that participatory budgeting has proved to be an innovative tool of social engagement adapted into the current system governing powiat administration.

Key words

participatory budgeting, powiats, social engagement, democratic innovations

Introduction

Social engagement is widely presented as one of the elements of efficient public management. The tool used to support this engagement is participatory budgeting (further: PB), understood as a democratized mechanism of distributing public funds, in which decisions are taken recurrently (usually every year) by residents directly (cf. Osmólska, 2014, pp. 262–4). Its international popularity is evidenced by the fact that it is promoted by such organizations as the World Bank and the United Nations (see Shah 2005). PB was first introduced in Porto Alegre, where it served as a tool aimed at increasing social engagement in the local process of public decision-making (cf. Hernández-Medina, 2010, p. 512). The level of public authority at which PB is most frequently used is the *gmina* [borough]. Local government is the level of state administration tasked with delivering public services used by the residents on everyday basis. However, the popularity of PB tool convinced also *powiat* [county] and regional authorities to implement it (for more information on regional PBs, see Gawłowski & Popławski, 2019, pp. 128–139). The authors' choice was to research the principles according to which PB functions at the level of *powiats* [counties].

Implementation of PB is usually justified by such factors as the increase in the level of trust, the process of mutual learning, and recognition of the needs of local community (cf. Irvin & Stansbury, 2004, pp. 58–62; Weyh & Streck, 2003, pp. 25–42). Thus the dominant analytical category is social engagement. Assuming such research perspective seems to be fully justified and self-evident, whereas the aim of the following article is to discuss this tool through a slightly different theoretical perspective – as a democratic innovation. Adopting the aforementioned research category will make it possible to notice slightly different outcomes the functioning of PB may have, i.e. not with regard to the relationship between a local government and a local community but in a broader context – as a characteristics of local administration's functioning.

1. Theoretical background of the research

It is a truism to say that democracy, in its traditional sense, is undergoing a crisis. As Brigitte Geissel and Kenneth Newton (2012) said, globalization, the growing role of transnational political organizations, the acceleration of economic turnover and technological development, numerous changes in centralization

and decentralization of public authority, as well as such phenomena as terrorism, new forms of communication, migration and increasing social diversity contribute to the fact that the current forms of organizing democracy should be adjusted to the new environment (p. 7). One of the manifestations of the indicated crisis is the increasing lack of trust in people who perform public functions as well as in the institutions themselves. Its most prominent symptom can be seen in lack of engagement in democratic activities of institutions, decreasing voter turnout, and lack of participation in social initiatives that are complementary to public administration activities (cf. Panicz, 2011, p. 110). Moreover, strong reluctance to accept changes in the ways democratic institutions function and the decreasing level of understanding current political processes contribute to the growing importance of populist circles (cf. Chwalisz, 2015). The research on the issues of decreasing trust has revealed such problems as people being less inclined to cooperate with others (cf. Dalton, 2014; Johnson, 2015, pp. 765–792), higher spending in public sector on control activities (cf. Hooghe & Zmerli, 2011), difficulties in introducing changes in the functioning of public administration (cf. Cain, Dalton & Scarrow, 2009; Stoker, 2006). Social effects of the decreasing trust among a society were also discussed by Piotr Sztompka (2007), who highlighted the crucial role of social capital as a factor facilitating cooperation within a society. With regard to the above phenomena, it was necessary to find tools that could help to deal with these problems and thereby make residents identify with and become involved in activities of democratic institutions. The term applied to describe numerous new participatory projects is democratic innovation. As Joachim Åström, Magnus E. Jonsson and Martin Karlsson (2017) noted, this is an umbrella concept that involves all the mechanisms implemented in public administration in order to increase social engagement in the decision-making process (pp. 575–587). Thus the term encompasses such actions as public meetings, adopting new technologies in the process of public decision-making (e-democracy, e-petitions), participatory budgeting, and various deliberation tools. According to Sergiu Gherghina, Jakim Ekman and Olen Podolian, democratic innovations mean all the institutions created to increase social engagement (pp. 1–10). On the other hand, Serup Christensen, Maija Karjalainen and Krister Lundell (2019) defined democratic innovations as modifications introduced in public administration by those in charge of them in order to increase social interest in their activities (tasks they fulfil). According to the authors, this process applies to institutions at the local level (pp. 404–416). It is worth noting that in the presented definition it is often a public institution which initiates such changes. Thereby the changes are top-down, and they do

not stem from a social initiative. Of particular importance is here a possible heightening of social expectations towards participation in a decision-making process.

The cited definitions allow us to notice two important elements which build democratic innovation. The first one is related to the concept of innovation, that is, search for novelties, changes or shortcuts that would correspond with such challenges as the changing social surrounding and decreased level of trust in democratic institutions and that simultaneously would answer the demand for systematic participation in the decision-making process. The second element regards democracy, which means communication between those who perform public functions and represent bodies of public administrations and those residents who are interested in participating in the decision-making process not only through traditional elections and referenda but also within mechanisms related to current issues. Using the concept of innovation with regard to the functioning of public administration is itself a certain novelty as the idea is more associated with the business sector. The style of action followed by public administration is traditionally expected to be stable and focused on minimizing risk. In the suggested approach, innovation equals accepting the possibility of experimenting and testing new solutions, which not always have to bring the intended effect. Certainly, one of the examples of democratic innovation is the PB which in the “Brazilian prototype” was implemented in response to the decreasing level of residents’ trust in the city authorities.

In order to investigate the scope of democratic innovations related to the implementation of PB in the powiats in question, the authors adopted a research tool developed by Graham Smith (2009). Its role is to investigate quality changes in the functioning of democracy in such areas as (1) inclusiveness, which analyzes the extent to which participatory tools guarantee the general access of residents both in terms of form and applied content; (2) popular control, which checks whether residents have influence on the process of managing PB or just on the choice of project which will be implemented; (3) considered judgement, which verifies whether there is any form of evaluation of the tool and whether residents’ opinions about the applied participatory instruments are taken into account; transparency – it verifies how transparently for the residents the applied participatory tools are created and implemented. When comparing various projects aimed at implementing democratic innovation, Smith also focused on efficiency, particularly with regard to financial costs related to implementing the tool as well as on the possibility of implementing innovations in other administrative units.

2. Research methodology

Due to the above considerations, we decided to conduct a quantitative analysis of functioning of PB in Polish powiats – naturally, in those which had implemented the tool. The analysis covered solutions adopted in the last fully completed selection round, which took place in 2018. It should be noted though that the research does not cover the practical part of implementation and evaluation, but comparatively analyzes the existing documents, including acts which extensively stipulate general rules and organizational details for these powiat PB.

At the time of preparing the following analysis it was determined that in 2018 only four powiats introduced PB, i.e. Toruń (Toruń Powiat Council, 2016), Września (Września Powiat Council, 2018), Kłodzko (Kłodzko Powiat Council, 2018), and Sochaczew (Sochaczew Powiat Council, 2018) (further: Tp, Wp, Kp and Sp respectively). Basic information on these areas is included in Table 1.

Table 1. Powiats which introduced PB – basic information

Powiat	Toruń	Września	Kłodzko	Sochaczew
Voivodeship	Kujawy-Pomerania	Greater Poland	Lower Silesia	Mazovia
First round in year	2 016	2 018	2 018	2 018
Area in km ²	1 230	704	1 642	735
Population	103 397	76 956	162 465	85 167

Source: Own work based on: GUS, 2016.

Within the adopted research field and assumed time perspective, the proposed research question emerges. Due to the fact that in our analysis the research problem is to check whether and to what extent Polish powiats have used the PB as a democratic innovation, we formulated a research hypothesis, according to which authors of PB regulations for powiats adopt solutions that had previously been in force for consulting projects with residents and making final decisions on this basis. For this hypothesis, we formulated the following research questions:

1. To what extent do powiats introduce innovations in voting on PB projects? Innovations are understood here as the extension of the age of eligible voters or the use of electronic voting methods. The answer to this question will allow us to verify the element of social inclusion (inclusiveness).
2. To what extent do residents influence the choice of project types? Democratic innovations are understood here as an opportunity to freely shape

the agenda and spending of public funds. This opportunity can manifest itself in the choice of areas in which projects are implemented, or in their reduction, e.g. by assigning specific amounts to given public tasks. The answer to this question will allow us to verify the element of the residents' influence on the functioning of the powiat local government (popular control).

3. How are the submitted projects verified and processed? Are the residents or NGOs involved in this process? Answers to these questions will allow us to verify the issue of taking into account residents' opinions (considered judgement).
4. What are the rules of functioning of PB and are they known from the very beginning? Answers to these questions will allow us to verify the last element of democratic innovations – transparency of PB.

3. Research results

For research purposes, the individual stages of the mechanism and its components were divided into fields of comparative analysis so as to order the data.

Table 2. Field of analysis of PB

Field	General issues	Submission	Verification	Voting
Element	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – types of tasks accepted for implementation – structure of territorial division – rules for distributing available resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – general legal status of the submitter (natural/legal person) – age of the submitter – residence qualification – form of submitting the application – application structure – limits on the project value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – verification criteria – verifying entity – right to submit corrections – right to appeal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – eligibility to vote – form of voting – method of voting – method of choosing the winner

Source: own work.

The first of these fields – general issues – includes problems that largely determine the nature of a given PB. For example, the catalogue of acceptable tasks determines the substantive space in which residents can decide independently. In this area, all exclusions will require solid justification as they are almost synonymous with perceiving residents as unable to directly decide about a task excluded from the mechanism.

Table 3. Comparison of selected general conditions for implementing PB in powiats

Powiat	Toruń (Tp)	Września (Wp)	Kłodzko (Kp)	Sochaczew (Sp)
types of tasks accepted for implementation	Generally described as tasks of the powiat	Own tasks focused on: – culture – sport – education – tourism – health – social issues – ecology – infrastructure	All issues within the competence of the powiat	Own tasks focused on: – culture – sport – education – tourism – health – social issues – ecology – infrastructure Division into soft and hard projects
structure of territorial division	Two pools – powiat and local (gmina)	One pool – gmina	One pool – powiat	One pool – powiat
rules for distributing available resources	Single amount for the whole powiat. Local pool – proportionally to the population	Equal amounts for each of 5 gminas	Single amount for the whole powiat	Single amount for the whole powiat

Source: Own work.

With regard to the most basic issues, it should be noted that local authors of PB rules use various solutions which may be not identical but are very similar to the existing ones and to each other. This is visible in the case of projects accepted for implementation. In Tp and Kt there is no narrowing down of the project's subject as those who establish the rules refer to the tasks of powiats in a general way, and thus make this rule of decision-making very broad in its content. Wp and Sp present a different approach as there are numerous areas in which the projects can be implemented, and it is indicated that only the projects which comply with the powiat's own tasks can be submitted and introduced. Greater signs of searching are present in the field of territorial divisions. It should be also said that in the case of Kp and Sp, where there is a single pool for the whole powiat, the adopted solution was the simplest one. All the residents of the powiat decide about all resources available in the mechanism.

The next field of analysis – submitting proposals – is the element of the procedure that has great importance in practice as it is the moment when residents have their first direct contact with active participation in PB and diagnose the situation as well as propose their own solutions. Thus if a resident's decision

to get engaged is rewarded by a serious, professional approach, it can be expected that they will be more willing to repeat it in the future.

Table 4. Comparison of selected rules for submitting projects

Powiat	Toruń (Tp)	Września (Wp)	Kłodzko (Kp)	Sochaczew (Sp)
general legal status of the submitter	Resident or NGO which runs its activity on this territory	Resident	Resident, NGOs, and organizations stipulated in Art. 3 Paragraph 3 of the Act on public benefit activity and volunteerism, which run their activity on this territory	Resident or NGO which runs its activity on this territory
age of the submitter	18	18	18	18
residence qualification	Yes, both in the powiat and in the gmina	Yes	Yes, but there is only one pool so on the territory of powiat	Yes, but there is only one pool so on the territory of powiat
form of submitting the application	On paper	On paper	On paper	On paper (also by email)
list of support	Yes – 15	Yes – 5	Yes – 20	Yes – 15
limit on the number of projects	Yes – one for the powiat pool and one for the gmina pool	Yes – one	Yes – one	No

Source: Own work.

At the submission stage, the authors of PB regulations are very reluctant to apply solutions other than the existing ones, e.g. in gminas, and they approach even the latter with caution. For instance, only in Sp it was clearly indicated that the application can be submitted in a scanned form by email. The same applies to the requirement to reside in a given powiat: no alternatives are offered, such as the requirement to register residence or declare a life centre.

Interestingly, as many as three out of four powiats decided to allow not only their residents but also NGOs to submit applications. In Kp the group of submitters was expanded to include entities stipulated in Art. 3 Paragraph 3 of the Act of 24 April 2003 on public benefit activity and volunteerism (Ustawa z dnia 24 kwietnia, 2003), but was also limited to those which conduct their activity in the territory of the powiat. Nevertheless, this is a sign of symbolic elevation of NGOs to the rank of important entities shaping local policy.

The next field of analysis – verification of submitted applications – includes several elements such as the adopted criteria, the verifying entity, and the right to appeal or to submit corrections.

Table 5. Comparison of selected rules of verifying submitted proposals

Powiat	Toruń (Tp)	Września (Wp)	Kłodzko (Kp)	Sochaczew (Sp)
verification criteria	1) compliance with the formal requirements for application, including correctly completed form and list of support 2) verification of proposed costs of implementing the project and their kind 3) compliance of the submitted project with spatial development plans binding in gminas 4) compliance with the binding legal regulations, including property law 5) non-generation of maintenance costs disproportionately high in comparison to the value of proposed project	1) compliance with the formal requirements for application, including correctly completed form and list of support 2) verification of proposed costs of implementing the project and their kind 3) technical feasibility 4) compliance of the submitted project with spatial development plans binding in gminas 5) compliance with the binding legal regulations, including property law 6) non-generation of maintenance costs disproportionately high in comparison to the value of proposed project	1) compliance with the formal requirements for application, including correctly completed form and list of support 2) assessment of the presented costs of project implementation with regard to the type of task and its utility for the public interest 3) compliance of the submitted project with spatial development plans binding in gminas 4) compliance with the binding legal regulations, including regulations of local law	1) compliance with the formal requirements for application, including correctly completed form and list of support 2) verification of proposed costs of implementing the project and their kind 3) compliance of the submitted project with spatial development plans binding in gminas 4) compliance with the binding legal regulations, including property law 5) non-generation of maintenance costs disproportionately high in comparison to the value of proposed project 6) feasibility of project implementation in a given calendar year 7) possibility of securing in budget for following years financial resources for possible costs generated by the project in the future

Powiat	Toruń (Tp)	Września (Wp)	Kłodzko (Kp)	Sochaczew (Sp)
verifying entity	Substantively relevant departments of starosty	Committee on PB, which consists of representatives of gmina offices from the powiat territory and representatives of Wp's local government councils	Committee consisting of employees of starosty or organizational units	Verifying committee including: 1) Starost of Sochaczew – chairman of the committee 2) one representative from each councillor's club 3) one representative of Sochaczew Council of Public Benefit Activity; 4) one representative from the powiat chamber of commerce;
right to submit corrections	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
right to appeal	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Own work.

Verification criteria were almost identical in all four powiats. In Wp the aspect of technical feasibility of the project was added, and in Sp – the requirements to implement the project in a given calendar year as well as to allocate in the budget for following years financial resources for possible costs generated by the project in the future. Moreover, in each of the powiats a resident has the right either to submit corrections to the incorrectly prepared application or to appeal against the negative result of verification, and sometimes to both these actions. A little more creativity was manifested in the case of the verifying entity. In Tp they are simply officials of the starosty; in Wp – representatives of gmina offices from the powiat territory and representatives of Wp local government councils. In Kp, employees of starosty or organizational units are involved. Yet another path was followed by the authors of PB rules in Sp, where, apart from the representatives of powiat authorities, this body includes also civic representatives.

In the last field of analysis, the form of voting and its method were separated. The first one is related to technical aspects of collecting information about support, including electronic, traditional and postal voting. The voting method is understood as the maximum number of votes and the rules for their distribution. Determining the winner means here all the issues related to counting and possible recounting of votes.

Table 6. Comparison of selected rules of choosing winning projects

Powiat	Toruń (Tp)	Września (Wp)	Kłodzko (Kp)	Sochaczew (Sp)
eligible to vote	18yo, residents, qualification for lower level	18yo, residents, residence qualification	18yo, resident of the powiat	18yo, resident of the powiat
voting form	Paper, ballots put into ballot box or delivered by traditional post	Paper, ballots put into ballot box or delivered by traditional post	Paper or electronic on website, email	Paper or scan – email
voting method	One vote per eligible person	One vote	One vote	Two votes
determining the winner	Totalling all the votes up, support threshold at 3% of total population in a given territorial division unit; in the case of an equal number of votes, a draw decides; if there are insufficient funds for the next project, the subsequent one that does not exceed the pool is chosen	Totalling all the votes up; the winners are those which got the largest number of votes until the funds are exhausted; if there are insufficient funds for the next project, the subsequent one that does not exceed the pool is chosen; no threshold	Totalling all the votes up; the winners are those which got the largest number of votes until the funds are exhausted; in the case of an equal number of votes, a draw decides; no information about choosing subsequent projects that do not exceed the pool	Determining the results of voting is based on totalling up all the valid votes for each project put to the vote. Each vote is converted into points. One vote is calculated proportionally to the population of a given gmina – scale from 1 to 10 points. As of 31 December 2017, selected are those which received the highest number of points; in the case of an equal number of votes, a draw decides; if there are insufficient funds for the next project, the subsequent one that does not exceed the pool is chosen

Source: Own work.

In the powiats that were the subject of this analysis, it can be observed that the assumptions are basically similar to those of other local government units which decided to implement PB. Here, there was no attempt to implement a fundamentally different approach, as was the case with e.g. Dąbrowa Górnicza gmina, where the main emphasis was placed on the element of deliberation, replacing voting with a series of debates focused on consensus (see Popławski, 2018, pp. 407–423).

It should be acknowledged that the adopted solutions are again very conservative. In all the cases in question, only adults are eligible to vote, and their

choice is limited to projects submitted in the territory they reside in. In each of the powiats the voting is done on traditional ballot papers, and only in Kp this process can be done via an online form or an email. The second option is also available in Sp, where additionally an interesting method of determining the winner was adopted – various, inversely proportional weight functions.

4. Discussion

The obtained research results allow us to formulate conclusions regarding the scope of democratic innovation implemented by powiat local governments. Did powiat authorities use an innovative tool of social engagement – PB – in order to introduce a new quality in communication between the residents and the office? The answer to this question is presented in the following table.

Table 7. The scope of democratic innovation of PB in Polish powiats – Smith’s model

Powiat Scope of innovation	Toruń (Tp)	Września (Wp)	Kłodzko (Kp)	Sochaczew (Sp)
inclusiveness	No	No	No	No
popular control	Leaving residents with free choice about the area the project concerns	Leaving residents with free choice about the area the project concerns	Leaving residents with free choice about the area the project concerns	Leaving residents with free choice about the area the project concerns
considered judgement	No	Consulting the decision with representatives of gmina offices from the powiat territory	No	Involving residents and/or non-governmental organizations into the verification process
transparency	No	No	No	No

Source: Own work.

The research results allow us to say that in the vast majority of areas the powiat authorities did not use PB as a tool for implementing innovation in public management. In the first area – social inclusiveness – the groups entitled to vote are those who have the right to participate in a traditional voting or referendum. The possibility of involving younger residents was not provided for. Voting via e-mail was allowed only in Sp.

The area in which the residents were left with most freedom was the independent choice of project types that could be submitted, which were limited only by legal provisions and powiat tasks specified therein. Such a generally defined scope helped gaining knowledge about real social needs as well as facilitated the emergence of unconventional ideas.

The third area allowed us to assess the extent of the residents' influence on the verification of submitted projects and thus significant social control over the method of implementing PB in the powiat. In two out of four analyzed powiats, a traditional way of managing the project was adopted. In Tp and Kp this responsibility was delegated to powiat officials, so this process remained entirely at the discretion of the local government unit. A more open method of managing PB was employed by Wp, where the PB committee was established. This committee comprised representatives of gmina offices from the powiat territory and representatives of Wp's local government councils. The highest level of openness could be found in Sp, where the verifying entity comprised Starost of Sochaczew as the chairman of the committee; one representative from each councillor's club; one representative of Sochaczew Council of Public Benefit Activity; and one representative from the powiat chamber of commerce. Thus the process was subject to both political and civic assessment.

In the last analyzed aspect of democratic innovation – transparency – it is difficult to identify an area that would differ from traditional forms of administration activities. Applications can be submitted by residents – however, only by those eligible to vote in the traditional process of democratic decision-making. The applications can be submitted mainly in paper version. Moreover, in each of the analyzed cases there is a support threshold requiring the submitters to collect a set minimum of residents' signatures.

Concluding remarks

It is still an uncommon practice to implement participatory budgeting at the powiat level. During their research, the authors found only four powiats that took up the pioneering challenge of implementing this form of making democratic decisions on spending public funds. Definitely, this fact should be assessed positively because PB, due to its international popularity, is slowly becoming a democratic standard of functioning of local government units. However, it should be emphasized that the processes of designing the tool as well as implementation of the said tool do not introduce any democratic innovation.

This means that in each of the analyzed elements that constitute Graham Smith's model for testing democratic innovations, no fundamental changes in the process of political decision-making were noticed. It can therefore be concluded that the process of preparation and implementation of PB was in fact an adaptation of the innovative tool of social engagement into the existing model of functioning followed by powiat administration. In other words, authors of the PB regulations for powiats adopt solutions previously used during consulting projects with residents and making decisions accordingly. The analysis confirmed the formulated hypothesis. It is worth mentioning here that Graham Smith, when comparing various projects that introduced democratic innovations, also emphasized the issue of efficiency and the possibility of implementing innovations in other administrative units. Following these postulates, it can be stated that all of the applied solutions for the functioning of PB neither require high financial introduction costs nor would pose problems with their implementation in other powiats. It is even possible to get an impression that Toruń powiat, which was the forerunner of adopting this solution in Poland, was an important reference point for PB solutions applied in other powiats.

What emerges from the analyzed context is a call for further qualitative studies involving persons who manage PB in powiats. Such research is necessary to discover why this option has not been selected. The results could serve as a recommendation for powiats which consider introducing PB; furthermore, they could also serve as a general recommendation to introduce innovations in state administration.

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