



Vitalizing democracy through participation

La Plata; Argentina: Multi-Channel Participatory Budgeting

- Case Study -

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1. Executive Summary

Participatory budgeting (PB) can be broadly defined as the participation of citizens in the decision-making process of budget allocation and in the monitoring of public spending. Internationally praised as a good governance policy, the implementation of PB has been associated with desirable outcomes, such as reduced tax delinquency, increased transparency and the improved and more innovative delivery of public services. Furthermore, this system allows citizens to incorporate their issues on the political agenda and to participate in the selection and implementation of public works.

The multi-channel PB of La Plata, Argentina, uses an innovative combination of offline, online and mobile channels to promote the engagement of citizens in the direct allocation of the city's investment budget. The municipality's unique participatory design, which combines face-to-face deliberation with remote voting (e.g., mobile voting), has produced outstanding results: Over 49,000 out of 400,000 eligible voters have participated in the process.

2. General Background

To get an impression of the circumstances under which the project has to be seen, the next section provides a short description of the history and development of the country and city.

Country Background

Argentina is the second-largest country in South America and the world's eighth-largest country, covering an area of 2.8 million square kilometers. The republic is divided into 23 provinces and one autonomous district (i.e., Buenos Aires, the capital city). It has a population of about 41 million people.

Argentina is a federal representative democratic republic. The president is directly elected for a four-year term and limited to two consecutive terms. Argentina had a long history of political and institutional instability. Between 1930 and 1983, the country lived through a long period of institutional instability characterized by recurrent military interventions in politics and short-lived democratic administrations. In 1976, a more radical type of military regime emerged that suppressed all constitutional rights and engaged in massive violations of human rights. During the dictatorship, an estimated 30,000 citizens were kidnapped and killed by those in power. In 1983, Argentina once again became a democracy, and it has been ever since. While the current democratic period has not been free of serious crises (e.g., the hyperinflationary crisis that forced the resignation of the administration of Raúl Alfonsín—Argentina's first democratically elected president—in 1989 and, more recently, the 2001 crisis that ended President Fernando de la Rúa's administration), democratic institutions have nevertheless remained in place.

According to Latinobarómetro 2008, support for democracy in Argentina's population is high (60% in 2008). Civil rights and liberties exist and are guaranteed.

Argentina benefits from abundant natural resources, a highly educated population (with a literacy rate of 97%), a well-developed agricultural sector and a diversified industrial base. After the

economic crisis of 2001–2002, Argentina has recovered well. For example, between 2003 and 2007, it enjoyed five consecutive years of greater than 8 percent annual growth in GDP, and the poverty rate dropped. However, income distribution is still fairly unequal, and inflation has become a contentious issue.

City Background

La Plata is the capital city of the Province of Buenos Aires. The city was originally meant to serve as the capital of the province after the city of Buenos Aires was declared an autonomous federal district in 1880. The city is home to a large number of students due to the prestige of its public university and the presence of numerous educational establishments. The Universidad Nacional de La Plata, founded in 1905, is considered one of the country's most important educational institutions.

The population of the metropolitan area of La Plata has been steadily growing. Between 1960 and 2001, it doubled its population, from 337,000 to roughly 700,000 inhabitants, with 187,000 living in the city itself and 573,000 in the large metropolitan area surrounding it.

The city's residents elect a mayor every four years. The current mayor is Pablo Bruera. La Plata is also home to the political authorities of the Province of Buenos Aires.

3. Background and Purpose of the Program

In 2008, the municipality of La Plata launched a participatory budgeting (PB) process. La Plata's multi-channel PB was an initiative imposed from above. When Mayor Pablo Bruera was elected, in December 2007, one of his main objectives was to increase citizen participation through the PB and other initiatives. Outreach activities (e.g., door-to-door visits and talking to citizens about their specific needs) were also part of his campaign and continue to be a fundamental aspect of the PB process. Once in office, Mayor Bruera sought a way to institutionalize citizen participation through different mechanisms, including PB.¹ In order to gain some insight in other PB processes, he visited Belo Horizonte and was inspired by the PB process taking place there. However, in designing a PB program for La Plata, Mayor Bruera and his team took the city's specific characteristics and needs into consideration.

In the case of La Plata, the decision to design and implement a PB process was not negotiated with civil society organizations or the opposition. However, this might have something to do with the fact that neither oppositional parties nor civic organizations were actively demanding such an instrument. In an effort to include different voices in the PB process, an electoral board was created that included local lawmakers with various party affiliations. Unfortunately, this board was dissolved owing to a lack of interest, so it did not participate in the 2010 PB process.

Although the PB was a top-down process, it nevertheless reflected a social need for the local political system to have greater openness. All governmental departments are directly or indirectly involved in the PB process. Once the voting takes place, the executive branch distributes and

¹ In addition to launching its PB program, La Plata also collaborated with a group of Stanford University students in 2009 on a deliberative democracy project related to public transportation.

decentralizes all the public-works and infrastructure projects among other governmental agencies, such as the Health Department and the Public Infrastructure Department.

The overarching objective of the project is to produce the desirable outcomes usually associated with successful PB processes, such as increased transparency over budgetary decisions, improved and more innovative delivery of public services, the promotion of citizen participation in public decision-making, improved access to public goods for the poorest population segments and the establishment of more effective ways to monitor governmental policies. Of these general objectives, Mayor Bruera was particularly interested in promoting citizen participation in public decision-making.

However, traditional PB initiatives—that is, ones requiring residents to attend public assemblies to deliberate on the allocation of public resources—present problems in terms of the associated material (e.g., paying for transportation) and immaterial (e.g., time consumption) costs. These costs have often resulted in low turnout levels, which means that only a very small percentage of the city's population actually gets involved in the initiative.

For this reason, another one of the city's objectives was to solve the problem of low participation rates without jeopardizing the benefits resulting from the face-to-face deliberative assemblies. It did so by designing a program that combines face-to-face and remote participation. The idea of "PB Digital," which allows citizens to cast their votes online for specific public works projects from a list of pre-selected projects, was based on the Belo Horizonte model.

4. Structure, Process and Activities

The citizens of La Plata are able to determine how a portion of the city's public infrastructure budget will be allocated. This takes place as part of the annual procedure for defining the budget of the coming year. All citizens have the right and opportunity to participate in the deliberative budgeting process.

The city is divided in 18 administrative delegations, which are in turn divided into 43 neighborhoods or areas for the purposes of the PB process. Although there is no specific mechanism for determining how each delegation is divided, each area's socioeconomic status as well as population size is taken into account in the division process. The municipality allocates a portion of the total PB budget to each of the neighborhoods based on its general knowledge of their socioeconomic status and needs. While the process might seem somewhat arbitrary, this is partly due to the fact that the municipality lacks official demographic information about La Plata's population. Furthermore, when it does have such information, it is outdated. Indeed, although a new national census was carried out in recent months, its data is not yet available, and data from the previous national census is already 10 years old.

The budget allocated for the PB process is increasing each year. In 2008, it was €1.14 million; in 2009, €2.66 million; in 2010, €3.8 million; and, for the 2011 voting, it will be €7.6 million.

Year of vote	Budget in euros	1 st Phase: No. of citizens who participated in local forums	Total no. of projects	2 nd Phase: Total no. of voters	Total no. of projects selected
2008*	1.14 million	3,300	419	17,686	39
2008*	2.66 million	3,400	380	29,000	126
2009	3.8 million	5,230	370	44,938	45
2010	7.6 million	-	-	49,457	-

*In 2008, two rounds of voting took place: one in June, to choose projects for the current year, and a second one in November, to select projects to be carried out in 2009. Beginning in 2009, the votes were held to select projects for the subsequent year.

The municipality has hired four employees to work full-time on organizing the PB process, and volunteers support the official staff members during the face-to-face deliberative meetings. Although the exact costs of implementing the annual PB processes are unknown, PB Director Diego Santana estimates that the city's government spends less than €94,000 for the process each year (excluding the salaries of the PB staff members).

La Plata's PB process has three phases:

First Phase:

During the first phase, face-to-face deliberative meetings are held across the city. The local forums take place in different parts of the city so that careful consideration can be given to the needs of the various segments of the population.

The administrators of the PB process host three to five public forums in each of the 45 neighborhoods. The location, date and time for each forum are published on the PB program's website as well as in pamphlets and local newspapers. According to the program's website, for the 2010 PB, each neighborhood held one public forum in August, two in September and two in October (although, in our interview with the program's director, we were told that the number of public forums ranges between three and four per neighborhood). Forums are usually held in schools but also sometimes in local libraries, and they usually start at 6 p.m. or 7:30 p.m.

Any citizen can attend a public forum and present a project for the neighborhood they live in. Citizens often gather in non-official meetings (e.g., in private homes) prior to the public forums in order to agree on specific project proposals that they will then jointly present at the forums. A staff member from the municipality of La Plata moderates the discussions and manages conflicts, if necessary; however, they do not directly participate, and their role is to give the floor to a specific speaker and to coordinate the flow of the forums. During the final public forum, residents vote on which projects and how many projects will make it onto the voting list. 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. In previous years, residents could vote for up to three projects per district. However, in 2010, each resident was allowed to vote for only one project. The specific number of projects that make it onto each list is decided upon during the public forums. The projects with the highest number of votes make it onto the list, with a maximum of 20 projects allowed per list.

Before the election takes place, city authorities verify whether the submitted projects are financially and technically feasible. The responsible municipal departments also deliberate over whether different project proposals can be merged into a single proposal.

There are two types of public forums: neighborhood forums and extraordinary forums. The latter are carried out when specific problems come up during discussions. For instance, if residents show an overwhelming amount of concern for the community's health center, the municipality will organize an extraordinary forum in which residents can specifically address this problem with a representative from the city's Health Department. In 2010, approximately 20 extraordinary forums were held in La Plata.

Second Phase:

The second phase consists of a larger process of voting between the options previously selected during the deliberative meetings; a secure system allows votes to be remotely cast through both paper ballots and text messages (SMS). All interested citizens can choose any of the project ideas generated during the first phase. The projects up for selection for each neighborhood are publicized online and via the media. In addition, residents who submitted a project often engage in door-to-door campaigning in order to persuade fellow residents to vote for their proposals. The voting results are publicly announced at a press conference at city hall. In 2010, 49,457 residents (about 10% of eligible voters) took part in the voting, selecting 45 out of 370 projects.

There are 44 voting locations spread across the city, one for each neighborhood (though one neighborhood has two voting locations). Eighty-one percent of these voting points are located in public schools, while the rest are located in community dining halls, libraries and kindergartens. The voting locations are published in newspapers, on the PB program's website and on pamphlets distributed in each neighborhood. Residents can visit the voting locations on two weekends between 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. In 2010, the voting took place on the weekend of November 21–22 and the weekend of November 28–29.

Votes can also be submitted remotely via text-messaging (SMS). Voting by SMS is possible 24 hours a day over a nine-day period. In 2010, SMS voting took place between November 21 and November 29. Voters send an SMS to a specific number (6357). In the SMS, they type the word VOTE followed by their ID number and the number of the project they wish to vote for.

The majority of voters chose to visit the voting locations instead of casting their votes via SMS. This is interesting because SMS voting was available over a nine-day period, whereas the voting locations were only open for four days. While electronic ballots were available in previous years, they were not used for the 2010 voting. The PB program has not yet analyzed the information regarding which societal groups prefer which voting methods, but it can be said that an overwhelming majority of people prefer voting in person.

In 2010, 49,457 voters registered their ID numbers to participate in the PB elections. Of the 700,000 people living in La Plata, 400,000 are eligible to vote. This means that, during 2010's PB process, over 12 percent of the city's eligible voters participated in the voting. Each electoral staff member has a Blackberry phone on which he or she can access the name and ID number of each of the voters registered for the previous provincial or national election. To avoid multiple-voting or

manipulation, members of the electoral staff use their Blackberries to check whether the person has already voted in person. If so, they are not allowed to vote again. At the end of the process, if the same ID number is connected to an SMS and a vote cast in person, the latter is given priority.

Year for execution of projects	Total no. of votes	Paper ballots	Votes via SMS
2008	17,686	N/A	N/A
2009	29,000	N/A	N/A
2010	44,983	25,674	19,309
2011	49,457	31,263	18,194

When the implementation costs of a selected project are lower than the funds allocated to the specific neighborhood, a second project from the list can be implemented. According to PB Director Diego Santana, if the combined costs of the two projects overrun the original budget allocation, the municipality will allocate more money than was originally planned for that specific neighborhood. In fact, he stated that, most years, the total budget needed to execute all the projects exceeded the originally allocated budget. Furthermore, the government analyses the remaining submitted projects in order to better understand the needs of the citizens. At times, these remaining projects have been executed directly by the Public Infrastructure Department.

Third Phase:

In a third phase, the projects selected by residents are distributed among government agencies and outsourced to service providers for execution. The PB team is responsible for overseeing the infrastructure work. In addition, the residents who submitted the projects and other residents verify that service providers are adhering to their contracts, starting their work on time and following rules. Ordinary citizens are in direct contact with PB staff members, and PB Director Diego Santana personally responds to some of the issues that arise.

While there is no council or board that monitors the process, in previous years, the program has had an electoral board that included representatives from La Plata National University, the *Defensoría del Pueblo* (i.e., the Office of the Ombudsman) and different parties in the city council. However, this mechanism was not implemented in 2010. The program has made an explicit decision not to form a council or board since it does not want to make the process a corporate one.

All phases of the PB process are advertised on local radio and TV stations, in newspapers and online. The PB program has a website² and profiles on social-networking sites that are constantly updated so as to inform residents about when and where local forums will be held, which projects are included on the voting lists and all other voting-related information. Furthermore, its website and Facebook page include pictures and news regarding the public infrastructure projects currently underway.

At the same time, the PB program prints and distributes around 500,000 pamphlets with information tailored to each of the 43 neighborhoods. First, the program advertises the face-to-face

² <http://www.presupuestoparticipativo.laplata.gov.ar/index.html>

deliberative forums. The location, time and dates for each forum are decided in advance. Once the forums meet, discuss and decide upon which projects will make it onto each of the voting lists, the program publishes and distributes pamphlets with the projects for each of the neighborhoods. Finally, the program prints posters with the number and description of projects for each of the neighborhoods, which are then posted at each of the voting locations.

5. Number of Participants, Inclusion and Representativeness

The numbers below clearly show that there has been a constant increase in the number of citizens participating both at the local forums and during the voting phase. The number of voters more than doubled between the 2008–2009 voting and the 2010 one. What's more, there was a dramatic increase in the number of citizens participating in the local forums in the last year.

Year	1 st Phase: Citizens who participated in local forums	2 nd Phase: Total no. of voters
June 2008	3,300	17,686
November 2008	3,400	29,000
2009	5,230	44,983
2010	N/A	49,457

No specific efforts have been made to reach traditionally excluded segments of society, such as women or LGTTB (lesbians, gays, transsexuals, transvestites and bisexuals) citizens. In addition, the times when the public forums are held (6 p.m. or 7:30 p.m.) might decrease women's ability to participate given the unequal distribution of family-care responsibilities between men and women. However, special marketing activities are undertaken to reach certain disadvantaged or marginalized groups. For example, outreach activities (e.g., door-to-door campaigning in poorer and more remote areas) are organized for this purpose

Unfortunately, we know very little about how representative the participants in the program are of the wider population because the administration has yet to collect any related data.

6. Impact/Outcome

Influence on Political Decisions

More than 12 percent of eligible voters in La Plata participated in the 2010 PB process. Since citizens participate directly in the decision-making process, there is no ambiguity regarding their impact. The municipal administration complies with the budgetary priorities selected by the citizens and executes the chosen projects during the following year. The budget that citizens decide on corresponds with a portion of the city's total budget investment for public infrastructure work.

Year	PB budget (in euros)	Percentage of city's total budget
2008	1.14 million	2.1
2009	2.66 million	3.4
2010	3.8 million	3.7
2011	7.6 million	6.1

The city's total budget includes salaries for all public employees, health, education, and other administrative costs. According to the PB Director, Diego Santana, these percentages are much higher than in any other city with a PB process.

Achievements in regard to Project Targets

There is widespread evidence that the initiative has been having a positive impact on the neediest sectors of society. For instance, since the project was launched, as a result of the PB decisions of La Plata residents, health-care services provided by the municipality have significantly improved (as can be seen, e.g., in a 1% decrease in the city's child mortality rate).

Many citizens who have been historically excluded from political life have been incorporated into it through La Plata's PB. This is particularly the case in marginalized and remote areas. However, the PB process is still young, and more resources will have to be allocated to expand advertising efforts aimed at informing citizens about the PB process, its benefits and how they can participate in it.

Unfortunately, we know very little about whether the PB process has helped reduce corruption and clientelism, improve transparency or aid in the fight against poverty and inequality in general. This is partly due to the fact that no outside entity monitors the PB process, the contracts or the implementation of proposed projects. Although some university students and professors compose related evaluations and proposals, having additional monitoring by NGOs and research centers would undoubtedly increase the transparency of the PB process and ensure that resources are allocated in an efficient manner. At the same time, the PB process could be improved by keeping more detailed records and conducting analyses of the different procedures it has used since 2008 (e.g., electronic voting) as well as of the specific groups of citizens (e.g., women, the elderly) that participate in or are excluded from the three different stages. Finally, the PB's main objective—increasing citizen participation—would be greatly assisted if specific efforts were made to include traditionally marginalized groups.

7. Next Steps/Visions for the Future

In February 2010, Gabriel Bruera, a legislator in the Province of Buenos Aires and brother of La Plata Mayor Pablo Bruera, introduced a bill aimed at extending La Plata's PB model to all municipalities in the Province of Buenos Aires. If passed, the Province of Buenos Aires PB would apply to 135 municipalities and would make up 0.2 percent of the province's total budget. Each municipality would be assigned a specific portion of the PB budget depending on its number of residents:

- Municipalities with less than 100,000 residents: €95,000
- Municipalities with 100,000–300,000 residents: €190,000
- Municipalities with more than 300,000 residents: €570,000

8. Transferability to the German Context

In more general terms, you could say that the idea of having citizens participate in making budget-related decisions is transferable to the German context. However, in doing so, you also have to pay attention to the fact that there is no *single* participatory budget in today's Germany. Instead, you can see two trends: On the one hand, there are the participatory budgets that fall under the general umbrella of austerity proposals related to the ongoing municipal-budget crisis. On the other hand, there are certain practices that try to take citizens' proposals into account when trying to improve service provision and infrastructure. In the latter case, the most important variable is the specific part of the city inviting citizens to play a role in determining its policies. Examples drawn from Latin America are particularly well-suited to this kind of participatory budgeting. However, given the very tight budgets of most German municipalities, it would be particularly challenging to find ways to fund such citizen-suggested programs. With money so tight, it often happens that there is no funding left over in municipal budgets to implement the suggestions, which creates a situation that threatens to diminish the credibility of participatory budgeting over the long term. What's more, it must also be noted that participatory budgeting and social urban development currently have only the most tenuous of ties.

The PB process in La Plata matches up well with the existing PB processes in Germany, which have also put a focus on sustainability projects in recent years. From the German perspective, it is interesting that the administration of the PB program is provided with its own budget, which has grown to the equivalent of €7.6 million. Doing so helps guaranteed that citizens' suggestions can be realized in a country where public resources are already relatively scarce. In La Plata, at least the first priorities of each neighborhood are implemented, and the remaining ones are implemented if there is still money left over in the budget. In general, one of the most difficult challenges when it comes to getting citizens to participate is mobilizing them to do so. In this case, La Plata provides an example of a very sensible way to divide the necessary tasks: During the meetings, the already active citizens get involved in the discussions, while a majority of the participants—many of which are presumably otherwise not active—are drawn in via the public “votes.” To allow for this, at least one polling location is set up in each neighborhood, such as in a school or a neighborhood center. Likewise, it's also possible to vote via text-messaging (SMS). The fact that citizens also encourage their neighbors to participate in the process also contributes to mobilization efforts. In order to gain supporters for the projects that they have proposed themselves, they even undertake door-to-door campaigns. In the German context, having “strangers” knock on doors might not be the most acceptable way of winning supporters. Nevertheless, the idea could still work well in Germany in a number of venues, such as shopping centers, libraries and weekly markets. One could also theoretically set up information kiosks where votes could be cast. Something similar has incidentally already been done with successful results in Germany, in the Berlin district of Lichtenberg.

One disadvantage of the method is that it involves a process that is restricted to projects at the neighborhood level and does not make allowances for larger projects at the citywide level. As has been shown by discussion in Germany in recent months, it is precisely at this latter level that a large amount of interest could arise among citizens in getting involved. Indeed, it is much more likely that you will achieve effective citizen participation if you also encompass the “major” issues of local politics. Another noteworthy aspect is that the inhabitants only have a relatively minor degree of influence on the rules related to the method itself. For example, there is no council of delegates (advisory committee) for the PB process that can serve as a permanent liaison for the municipal administration, debate the method’s rules and, most importantly, monitor the implementation of the projects chosen by the citizenry. In terms of social goals, the door-to-door mobilization could be a very effective way of getting citizens from disadvantaged neighborhoods involved. However, in La Plata, there were no specific criteria taken into account in determining which neighborhoods were disadvantaged when it came to distributing PB funds.

La Plata’s PB model is also transferable to Germany in the sense that it does not violate any federal laws. This is also the case when it comes having the municipal council put aside part of its budget for PB projects in neighborhoods or districts.