

in gross noncompliance,<sup>5</sup> will be required to offer New Yorkers the opportunity to register to vote as part of their agency transaction. City agencies must also comply with requirements for language access and training for agency staff.<sup>6</sup> Twenty-six NYC agencies are currently required to offer voter registration, provide voters assistance in completing registration applications, and increase language assistance for limited-English-proficient citizens. Instead of shying away from a diverse voting populace, NYC has embraced access, as a model for cities across the country. Specifically, all cities should ensure that voters are given the opportunity to register at public libraries, community centers, police stations, housing departments, and the other places where citizens interact with municipal government.

**Renter Registration:** Cities and counties can make voter registration easier. **Madison, WI** and **East Lansing, MI** adopted ordinances requiring landlords to provide their tenants with voter registration forms.<sup>7</sup> These laws will help the cities' large number of college students register and stay registered to vote. Such requirements are also valuable because renters are disproportionately lower income and/or people of color.

**High School Registration:** Local governments can also play a key role in ensuring that high school students register to vote when they become eligible. For example, in **Broward County, FL**, the Supervisor of Elections conducts an annual high school registration drive, which in 2016 registered approximately 12,000 students.<sup>8</sup> School boards can support voter registration efforts by requiring opportunities be available for high-school students on school grounds.

## EXPAND THE FRANCHISE TO NEW VOTERS

**Pre-Registration of High School Students:** In some states, municipalities have the legal authority to set voter eligibility requirements for local elections. Youth Voting: Fifteen states and Washington, D.C. permit 16- and/or 17-year olds to pre-register to vote, so that they will be eligible to vote at the first election after they turn 18.<sup>9</sup> Where legally possible, cities should move further and fully enfranchise youth, as **Takoma Park, MD** recently did.<sup>10</sup> Research shows that voting is habitual and that norms related to political participation in high school have lasting impacts, so that promoting participation among 16- and 17-year-olds will increase turnout for years to come.

**Restoring Voting Rights for Formerly Incarcerated Citizens:** Approximately 5.3 million Americans in 48 states are denied the right to vote because of a past felony conviction.<sup>11</sup> Many of these policies were adopted after the Civil War with the explicit purpose of disenfranchising ex-slaves. These laws continue to have a tremendously harmful impact: 13% of black men are disenfranchised— 7 times the national average.<sup>12</sup>

**Takoma Park** granted all previously incarcerated felons

the right to vote in municipal elections once they complete the prison sentence, before the State of **Maryland** recently restored voting rights to all people with felony convictions upon release from incarceration.<sup>13</sup> In **Minnesota**, law restores the right to vote to ex-felons after completing probation or parole but the state does not provide individuals with notice when their rights have been restored. **Minneapolis** adopted a “Restore Your Voice” initiative to “inform disenfranchised ex-felons of their voting rights.”<sup>14</sup>

## PUBLIC FINANCING OF LOCAL ELECTIONS

The overwhelming evidence is that our system of campaigns funded by private dollars skews public policy in favor of the wealthy and forces elected officials to spend time raising money instead of focusing on governing. This system also distorts political representation, limiting who can run, who can win and who governs.

Cities and states cannot ban political spending, but they can reduce the outsized influence of wealthy contributors and democratize campaign funding through public financing. In **New York City**, candidates for mayor and city council receive \$6 in matching funds for every \$1 that they raise from a city resident (up to a limit of \$175 per resident). Candidates who participate in the program commit to limit their total spending. The program reduces the influence of moneyed interests, permits middle-class candidates to run competitive races and win, and engages a broader segment of the population in the electoral process.

## LANDSCAPE AND RESOURCES

The **Center for Popular Democracy** works with national partners, base-building organizations and state and local allies around the country to defend and expand voting rights at the local and state levels. **The Brennan Center, The Pew Charitable Trusts Elections Initiative**, and **Demos** have excellent resources on voter registration modernization and campaign finance reform. The Brennan Center also has examples of cities and municipalities that have implemented early voting and on cities trying to support voting capacity, such as Los Angeles, as they work to design their own system. For cities looking for ballot design ideas, The Brennan Center offers examples from Florida counties that are working to increase ballot usability. **CIRCLE** has valuable information on youth participation.

## INTERACTIVE CITATIONS AVAILABLE ONLINE AT [WWW.LOCALPROGRESS.ORG/NOTES](http://WWW.LOCALPROGRESS.ORG/NOTES)

*Local Progress gratefully acknowledges the guidance and input from experts at the Brennan Center for Justice on this piece.*

# PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

*“Participatory budgeting can create more equitable public spending... and increased levels of public participation, especially by low-income and politically marginalized residents.”*

—Participatory Budgeting Project

## **THE PROBLEM**

Trust in government is approaching an all-time low. Too often, democratic practices in the United States are inaccessible and unresponsive to the public. This leads to inequitable distributions of government funding and disillusionment with the political process. Many people also feel like government isn’t listening, and they face obstacles to political engagement related to age, race, financial resources, criminal histories, and immigration status.<sup>1</sup>

## **THE SOLUTION**

Create new structures for participation. Participatory budgeting (PB) is a grassroots democratic process in which community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget. Residents and taxpayers work with government to make budget decisions that improve their lives. Participatory budgeting has been used to distribute city, county, state, school, university, housing authority, and other agency budgets.

Participatory budgeting builds real community power over real money by letting people make real decisions over spending. Engaging the community in budgeting builds trust and understanding between elected officials and their constituents.

Participatory budgeting can create more equitable public spending, greater government transparency and accountability, democratic learning, and increased public participation, especially by low-income and politically marginalized residents.<sup>2</sup>

Participatory budgeting addresses inequity in polit-

ical power and spending by giving everyone, including marginalized individuals, an equal voice while increasing civic engagement in local politics by training new leaders. The process is typically designed to allow all to participate, regardless of age, immigration status, experiences with the criminal justice system, and financial resources. In addition, underrepresented groups are often targeted in the engagement process through partnerships with local organizations that are already organizing in underrepresented communities.

Participatory processes also allow fewer opportunities for corruption, waste, or costly public backlash. The inclusivity of the process leads to fairer and more redistributive spending that is responsive to community needs.

## **POLICY ISSUES**

### **VARIATIONS IN PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING:**

There are significant variations in the institutional design of the different models of participatory budgeting that have spread across the country and the world.

The most inclusive and transformative models give residents decision-making power over general budget funds and enable all residents to participate and vote on priorities. Providing a budget for outreach broadens participation.<sup>3</sup> These models produce the best poverty reduction, declines in corruption, and extensive and representative participation from local residents.<sup>4</sup>

Other processes give citizens decision-making power over a smaller portion of the budget or an individual Councilor’s “discretionary funds.”<sup>5</sup> For example, in **New York City**, participatory budgeting is used to allocate \$35 million of City council discretionary funds.<sup>6</sup>

Local councilmembers may unilaterally decide to use participatory budgeting to spend their discretionary budgets, as officials have done in **Chicago, New York City, St. Louis, San Francisco, San Jose, and Long Beach, CA**. Since officials are allocating individual discretionary funds, no new legislation is required.

Alternatively, **Vallejo, CA**, City Council enacted a