Beyond the "Usual Suspects?" Reimagining Democracy with Participatory Budgeting in Chicago

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ABSTRACT
This study examines whether democratic innovations in the United States attract citizens who are typically underrepresented within existing political institutions. We focus on participatory budgeting, an intervention where residents decide how to allocate a particular pot of public money. Taking "PB Chicago" as our case study, we use survey and interview data to examine whether organizers realized their stated goal of involving residents other than the "usual suspects." We find that residents who voted in PB Chicago were more often white, college educated, and from higher income households relative to both the local population and politically active residents in Chicago. While these residents were not necessarily the most active across other stages of the PB Chicago process, we find little evidence that lower SES and minority residents were accessing the civic learning and empowerment gains associated with participatory forms of democracy. Outreach made the process more inclusive but was insufficient to overcome several important structural constraints. Of particular note, the needs and interests of less privileged residents were not met by the narrow capital works focus of PB Chicago. We suggest that when implemented under such conditions, participatory budgeting risks deepening existing political and social inequalities.

Keywords: participatory democracy; participatory budgeting; inclusion; inequality; civic participation; United States.