

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Books

Democracy Reinvented

By Hollie Russon Gilman

Review by Josh Lerner

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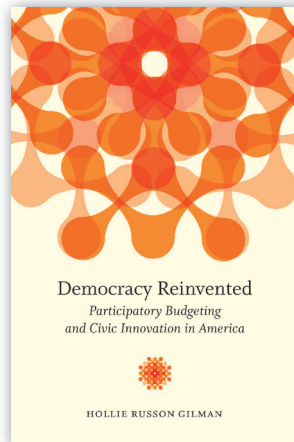
The People's Budget

REVIEW BY JOSH LERNER

In an increasingly divided country, Americans are perhaps most united by our frustration with politics. Trust in Congress and other political institutions has fallen to all-time lows. Most efforts at democratic reform focus on patching holes in the electoral system. But even if patched, can our thin model of representative democracy inspire the civic engagement and trust necessary for government to work?

For Hollie Russon Gilman, the answer is no, and the solution she presents in *Democracy Reinvented* is participatory budgeting. First developed in Brazil nearly 30 years ago, participatory budgeting, or PB, has become a global model for local democracy. Now practiced in more than 3,000 cities around the world, it enables citizens to directly decide how to spend part of a public budget. Residents come together to brainstorm spending ideas, turn them into concrete proposals, and vote to decide which proposals get funded. My organization, the Participatory Budgeting Project, launched the first PB process in the United States in 2009 and has since helped spread PB to 15 cities across the country, engaging more than 150,000 people in deciding how to spend \$145 million. In the past five years, PB in the United States has grown from a small experiment to a best practice promoted by the White House.

Gilman argues that PB's greatest contribution is not better spending decisions, but rather a new model of democracy, one that offers greater civic rewards and opens up more space for civic creativity. According to Gilman, people dedicate their precious evenings to PB because it rewards them with new civic knowledge, relationships with officials, and leadership skills. "People make friends, form new networks, and enjoy being a part of something larger than their personal day-to-day concerns," Gilman



DEMOCRACY REINVENTED: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America

By Hollie Russon Gilman
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writes. PB also encourages more creative thinking about what government could be, modeling new ways for citizens and institutions to communicate, interact, and make decisions. As one community leader told Gilman, "Opening up the imagination of what is possible is the biggest achievement of participatory budgeting."

Expanding the horizons of democracy comes with its own tensions, alas, as Gilman describes. What makes PB so rewarding, the rich civic interaction, also makes it a lot of work—and often frustrating work, navigating municipal bureaucracies (or drowning in them). Deepening democratic engagement also can conflict with the goal of improving spending outcomes. The former requires lengthy deliberation; the latter encourages expedient discussions focused on practical proposals. More talk vs. better results.

Democracy Reinvented raises important issues, validating the findings of two decades of international PB research. More data from Gilman's own research, however, would be helpful for backing up (or challenging) the book's arguments in the US context. Likewise, more engagement with the vibrant debates of PB researchers and practitioners in the United States, beyond the world of good governance, would help refine the book's conclusions.

Tapping into these broader discussions about PB uncovers one big—and innovative—idea that is mostly hidden in Gilman's book: Although civic rewards may keep people involved in PB, it is the promise

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of empowerment and inclusion that mobilizes them to participate in the first place. As I documented in my 2014 book *Everyone Counts*, PB in the United States has engaged good-government groups, but it mainly grew out of grassroots movements for people power—the inclusion-focused World and US Social Forums, social justice networks like Cities for Progress and the Right to the City Alliance, and organizing groups like Community Voices Heard. "Real money, real power" has been the loudest rallying cry driving people to participate in PB.

Critically, this trajectory has been intentional. My organization and others have actively focused PB in the United States on empowerment and inclusion. Grassroots groups have played a lead role largely because organizers in each area established community-led steering committees. Low-income residents have participated heavily because staff decided to encourage engagement from specific low-income neighborhoods. Immigrants have turned out because cities contracted organizations from their communities to engage them where they already convened, in their own languages.

In the end, Gilman rightly suggests that PB can create a new system of citizen-driven government, but only if it takes on bigger budgets. She assumes this growth will be driven by new technologies, which will make PB easier to adopt and scale. Yet she acknowledges the great paradox of this strategy: Moving engagement online strips away the civic rewards that keep people involved. (We generally find more joy in the company of others than in the company of others' emails.)

PB's rapid growth has been driven by people, not technology. Too many Americans feel marginalized by the political system and yearn for a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Governments need to share real power with these disillusioned masses to earn their trust and engagement. PB will continue to grow as long as it—and the technology it uses—is designed by and for the people. If we can keep empowering those with the least power to redesign our rigged political system, maybe we can truly make America great. ■