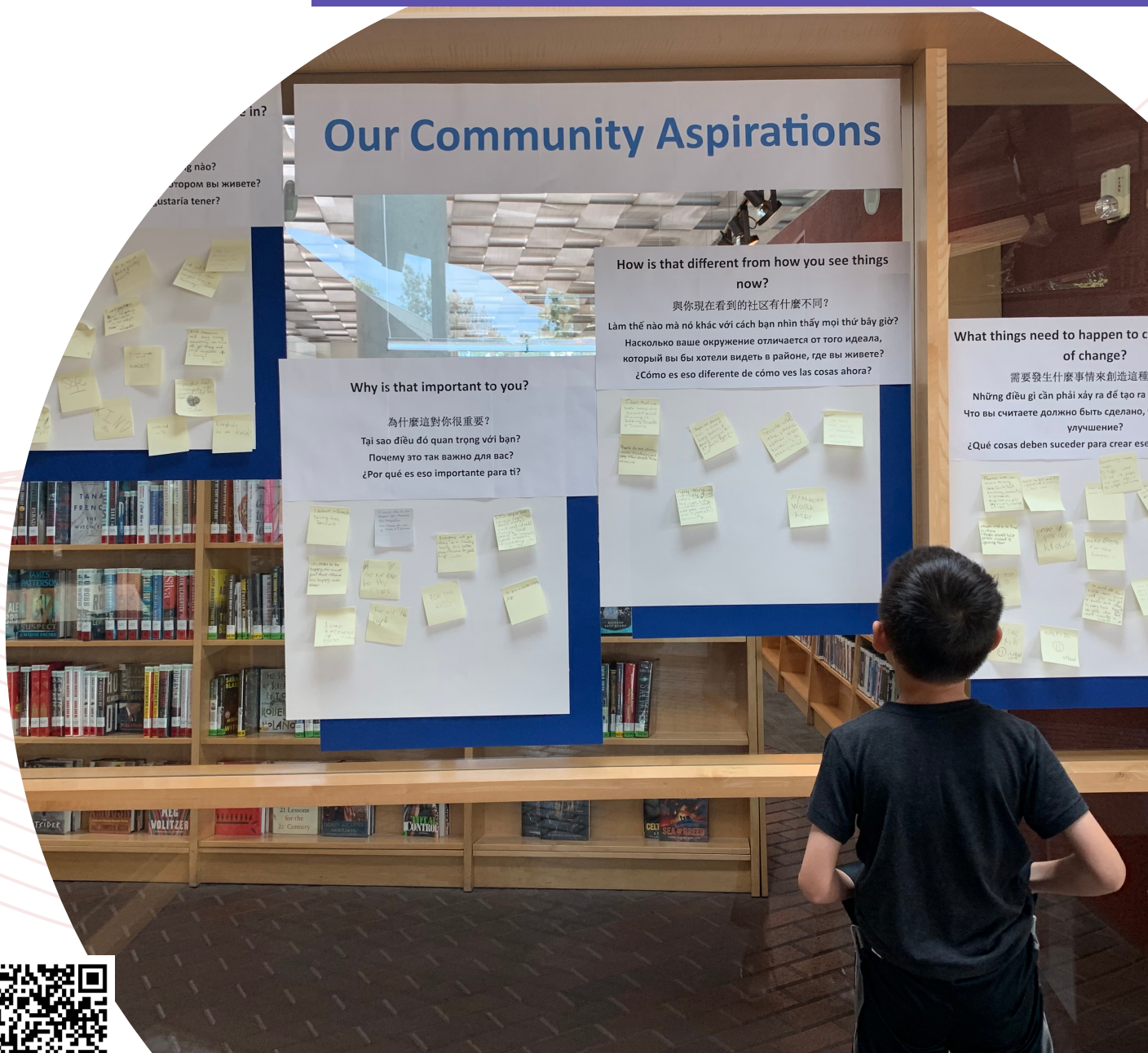


# PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN EUROPE

## BUILDING TRUST AND WIDENING PARTICIPATION

Tiarnán McDonough



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# **ACRONYMS/ GLOSSARY**

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|              |                                                        |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>EU</b>    | European Union                                         |
| <b>OECD</b>  | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| <b>TASC</b>  | Think-tank for Action on Social Change                 |
| <b>FEPS</b>  | Foundation for European Progressive Studies            |
| <b>SDCC</b>  | South Dublin County Council                            |
| <b>PPN</b>   | Public Participation Network                           |
| <b>TD</b>    | Teachta Dála (Irish Member of Parliament)              |
| <b>IPAS</b>  | International Protection Accommodation Services        |
| <b>SICAP</b> | Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme    |
| <b>ESF+</b>  | European Social Fund Plus                              |
| <b>EIST</b>  | Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training             |
| <b>PiS</b>   | Prawo i Sprawiedliwość                                 |
| <b>NGO</b>   | Non-governmental organisation                          |
| <b>PB</b>    | Participatory budgeting                                |
| <b>PT</b>    | Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party)             |
| <b>NPM</b>   | New Public Management                                  |
| <b>CSO</b>   | Civil society organisation                             |
| <b>MFF</b>   | Multiannual Financial Framework                        |

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# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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In an era of rising populism and declining trust in democracy, policymakers at the local and EU levels have increasingly turned to ‘democratic innovations’, such as participatory budgeting, as a way of fostering civic engagement among those traditionally marginalised from local advocacy and politics. Participatory budgeting was first conceived of as a radical programme for rebuilding democracy and addressing historic inequalities in post-dictatorship Brazil. The participatory budgets that have proliferated in Europe in recent decades are generally exercises in selecting projects for discretionary spending. In most cases, this involves members of the public submitting project ideas, which are then voted on by city residents. This policy study presents findings from five case studies. Two of these (Dublin and Warsaw) involved fieldwork with local politicians, city officials and residents who had participated in local participatory budgets. These are supplemented by three smaller illustrative cases (Gent, Helsinki and Marseille) based on desk research.

The aim of these case studies is to understand how those implementing participatory budgets have sought to enable a more diverse cohort of people to take part, particularly among those from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and marginalised groups. These findings are used to consider how policymakers can learn from local participatory budgets to encourage greater active citizenship among those at greater risk of marginalisation in the current climate of polarisation and pessimism. The study also reflects on the inspiration that its findings may have on EU-level debates of budgeting and actively involving citizens in policymaking.

Our findings identify a wide range of tactics and approaches trialled and adopted by those designing participatory budgets across Europe to reduce the risk that they are dominated by wealthier neighbourhoods and residents. These include:

- **Consciously targeting marginalised neighbourhoods and groups** through geographically focused outreach and an “open door” mindset among officials, embedding participatory budgets in longer-cycle, trust-building work.
- **Widening the net** by including residents often ineligible for recognised elections due to age or immigration status, engaging people ahead of voting age or citizenship.
- **Ensuring transparency** by using online platforms to share updates on project delivery, especially when projects are delayed, and providing guidance in multiple languages and accessible formats.
- **Providing multiple ways of engaging**, adding paper ballots and in-person voting to avoid excluding those affected by the digital divide, such as older and migrant participants.
- **Encouraging deliberation** through workshops and other features – like Helsinki’s OmaStadi card game – that get participants talking to one another, not just voting.
- **Using sortition** so that participants more closely mirror the city’s demographics, drawing in residents who would otherwise stay away and strengthening the budget’s legitimacy.
- **Building future activists and leaders** by treating participatory budgeting as a potential first step in wider civic engagement, advocacy, and – as in Warsaw – elected office.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Participation matters. It matters for democracy because it strengthens political legitimacy, enhances public trust, and ensures that policymaking reflects the needs and preferences of the people it is intended to serve. In recent years, various models of citizens' participation emerged and were tested across Europe. Among those, participatory budgeting (PB) – a process through which citizens directly participate in deciding how public funds should be allocated and spent – is one of the most advanced models with particularly strong societal and political impact.

With the so-called Porto Alegre model, participatory democracy was introduced for the first time in the late 1980s to rebuild democracy and address inequalities in the Brazilian post-dictatorship. Enabling broad and deep participation in budgetary questions, this example served as the founding case for an ensuing deliberative wave to advance collective decision-making.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, democratic innovation has proliferated new ways of policy- and decision-making to engage citizens and encourage deeper deliberation on questions of policy and resource allocation. Moreover, tending to engagement with local challenges and local policy issues, PB initiatives are specifically suited to targeting marginalised neighbourhoods and groups. To put it differently, in the process of striving for better policy outcomes through the meaningful participation of those concerned, what is also at stake is strengthening trust in democracy through public interest engagement beyond elections.

In contrast to the above-mentioned deliberative wave, democracy in Europe and worldwide has been deeply challenged by democratic erosion in recent years. The backsliding of democracy is evident from the fact that only 6% of the world's population lives in a full democracy today.<sup>2</sup> Democratic decline results from a complex interplay of underlying structural factors, such as economic inequalities

and governance shortcomings. Across OECD countries, this has led to a situation where trust in democracy and democratic institutions has been slowly eroding for decades. Concern about declining trust and voter disengagement in Europe is increasingly linked to the growing popularity of politicians and parties espousing extremist, right-wing positions. These actors exploit real problems, such as economic insecurity, and manufacture new ones that serve their cause – stigmatising migrants and minorities, for instance – to erode public trust in democratic institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Existing research conducted by TASC and FEPS has explored key factors that are fuelling growing distrust and disaffection among voters and potential voters.<sup>4</sup> Particularly relevant for this study is that research has highlighted how people living in economically marginalised neighbourhoods perceive an extreme disconnect between themselves and the actions of policymakers. A failure to deliver tangible improvements at a local level manifests in a lack of engagement with local democratic processes, consolidating a view held by some that politicians are more interested in personal benefit and remaining in office than in listening to the concerns of people in these areas.<sup>5</sup> As lower-income neighbourhoods tend to be the most diverse, this also has a greater impact on ethnic minorities and other socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

Against this background, this policy study explores PB initiatives in Europe, with the aim of highlighting elements that can help to address tangible problems on the local level and strengthen trust in democracy. Drawing on two selected local case studies – the PB initiatives in Dublin and Warsaw – the study will analyse in a comparative way the design choices and implementation strategies used to broaden participation. It will specifically seek to answer the following three research questions:

1. Why and how do citizens engage with local democracy projects in areas affected by high levels of deprivation and low voter turnout?
2. What are the key barriers to engagement among a wider cohort of potential participants and how could these be addressed?
3. How do those involved in delivering local democracy projects address local and contextual factors that hinder participation in local democracy projects, and what can we learn from success in this regard?

To answer the main questions it set for itself, the policy study is structured in four sections. Section 1 provides some background on PB, its origins and its implementation in Europe. Section 2 reconstructs the case of Dublin and its *€300 Million Have Your Say* initiative, a community-focused PB approach allowing local residents to submit ideas for projects to improve their local area. Section 3 looks at Warsaw's citizens' budget project – *Budżet Obywatelski* – which allocates €30 million each year across three pools (a citywide pool, one for each of Warsaw's 18 districts and one for local subdistricts). Section 4 compares both cases. It supplements them with further illustrative examples of PB initiatives in Ghent, Helsinki and Marseille, seeking to answer the three research questions with specific attention to the elements that contributed to building trust in local governance and democracy. It closes by summarising the study's key ideas. Finally, the epilogue reflects on the implications of these takeaways for EU democracy and policymaking.

The study is built on a combination of desk research and interviews. Several cities that have implemented PB were identified as case study sites, selected to ensure a geographical spread across the EU. Interviews were conducted between June and November 2025 with local politicians, city administrators and PB participants in three EU cities (Dublin,<sup>6</sup> Marseille<sup>7</sup> and Warsaw<sup>8</sup>). These interviews focused on how local participatory democracy initiatives can successfully address both broader and locally specific barriers to participation. Interviews were carried out online, via Microsoft Teams. We faced significant challenges in recruiting participants, and particularly in recruiting PB participants from marginalised groups. These recruitment challenges shaped the final design of the project, as we were unable to reach the target of eight suitable participants in Marseille. The Marseille case study was therefore reimagined as an illustrative example as part of Section 5, alongside two further supplementary examples (Ghent and Helsinki).

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# **1. BACKGROUND: PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING**

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### Democratic innovations.

In recent years, a wave of democratic innovations have been embraced by civil society organisations and policymakers as a way of enriching the voice of citizens in decision-making. One common definition describes it as the “processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence”.<sup>9</sup> The literature on democratic innovations generally identifies the following forms:

- **Mini publics:** where a small cross-section of citizens deliberates over a period of days to make recommendations informing public policy.
- **Participatory budgeting:** whereby members of the public directly impact how public funds are allocated.
- **eDemocracy:** where citizen input is supported by web platforms.

PB was developed in Porto Alegre in Brazil in the late 1980s, with the aim of restoring trust in government in the period of democratisation that followed the end of the military dictatorship that lasted from 1964-1985. The Porto Alegre PB was implemented by the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores; PT) in Brazil, after coming to power in the local elections there in 1988. The challenge it aimed to address was clientelist local government that disproportionately allocated public funds to wealthy areas, while poor neighbourhoods remained underdeveloped. What PB hoped to achieve was bottom-up accountability that transferred funding to the poorest neighbourhoods where it was most needed. The PB was a multiyear deliberative process that began by involving citizens in local neighbourhoods in a process that set the parameters of the city budget and decided how money would be spent across a wide range of areas, from transport and sewage to health and childcare.<sup>10</sup>

Though the canonical and most developed example of PB emerged in Porto Alegre, it was one of several similar initiatives that were trialled in different parts of Brazil during a spirit of experimentation that prevailed in that period, and which enabled civil society advocates and social movements to advocate for direct citizen participation.<sup>11</sup> The Porto Alegre experiment was successful at transforming the city’s infrastructure, extending primary healthcare, education, and water and waste sewage systems to the large slums that covered one third of this otherwise wealthy city. Most importantly for our purposes, the initiative was successful at involving people from low-income households and with below-average educational attainment. The Porto Alegre PB enabled “broad and deep” participation and is lauded as a milestone in what has subsequently been referred to as a “deliberative wave” of innovations to advance public collective decision-making.<sup>12,13</sup>

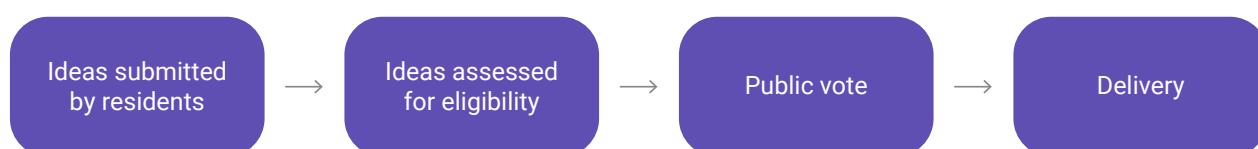
The excitement that has attended deliberative and participatory innovations has to do with the challenges of effective policymaking within complex administrative structures and a context where trust in democratic institutions is declining globally.<sup>14</sup> Some of the optimism that has attended PB arises from a hope that deliberative approaches can bypass some 'political' forms of identification and dispute. Ironically, however, as PB was becoming fashionable across Europe, its implementation was already in decline in Brazil, in part due to its eventual popular identification with the PT, which had been instrumental in its initial adoption in Porto Alegre and other Brazilian cities.<sup>15</sup>

The Porto Alegre model entailed an intensive deliberative process with broad power to shape the budgetary agenda in the city. No doubt European policymakers have been inspired by the radical approach taken by the Porto Alegre experiment. However, the broader literature suggests that the form that PB has taken in Europe is substantially different from the Porto Alegre model that inspired it. As with other participatory initiatives, PB has been advanced by a wide range of governmental and civil society actors. Differing budgetary and

institutional constraints experienced by these initiating parties, including differing capacity to guarantee implementation of outcomes, have meant that the rollout of PB initiatives across Europe is far from programmatic. This has been attributed to the 'plasticity' of the PB concept, which enables the core idea to vary in its implementation to meet these constraints.<sup>16</sup>

The literature describes a form of PB termed 'Porto Alegre in Europe', identifying key features that typify how PB has been implemented in different local European contexts.<sup>17</sup> The model is illustrated in Figure 1. In the first stage, ideas for improvements to their local area are submitted by residents. Typically, each city has a set of criteria for eligibility and submitted ideas are assessed, with those found eligible put forward on a ballot for a public vote. Groups or individuals may campaign for their idea to win. Winning ideas are then delivered by city officials, allocating the appropriate budget and perhaps working with the individuals or groups who submitted the original idea to ensure the final project aligns as well as possible with what was originally proposed.

**Figure 1. An overview of the PB in Europe model.**



PB, as it has been adopted in Europe, tends to place less focus on intensive deliberation; as the model in Figure 1 shows, the focus is instead on staging small local plebiscites. More recently, these have been able to take advantage of advances in potential for eDemocracy made possible by the availability of suitable platforms at a relatively low cost compared to what would have been possible a few years ago. As described, the model of PB delivered

in European contexts tends to provide funds for one-off discretionary projects, and often with a modest budget compared to the total municipal budget.<sup>18</sup> This contrasts with the Porto Alegre experiment, where those who participated were able to directly influence the allocation of funds for major infrastructure and key administrative areas, including education and healthcare.

The transformation of the PB concept in Europe can be explained by having had to “squeeze the deliberative process into the confines of existing bureaucratic and administrative logics”.<sup>19</sup> While PB was birthed within the ‘open’ set of possibilities that emerged during Brazil’s democratisation, Europe’s political and administrative structures are comparatively more developed. Critics have identified friction between the adoption of citizen-centred, deliberative approaches and the previous wave of New Public Management (NPM) style reforms that have proliferated in public administration across Europe and other advanced economies since the 1990s. NPM sought to import private-sector logics into government, prioritising efficiency, performance targets and competition. In many ways, while these deliberative mechanisms were promoted as an alternative transmission belt between civil society and public administration – with the aim of increasing citizen engagement – the more deeply rooted problems of how the administration functions were left untouched.<sup>20</sup>

The popularity of the PB concept has clearly proved attractive to policymakers at various levels across Europe. Despite the consistent references to the Porto Alegre origins of PB in EU settings, we must recognise that the EU experiment in PB takes place in a very different context. It responds to local and contemporary concerns about the capacity of advanced democracies to engage citizens more comprehensively and in a more inclusive way. This means that many of the key features documented as contributing to the success of the Porto Alegre experiment are absent from the many iterations of PB that have been implemented in EU countries to date. While the examples of PBs documented in the case studies that follow identify novel and innovative approaches for engaging a more diverse cohort of people to take part, it must be recognised that the aspect of the Porto Alegre experiment typically given most credit is the degree to which it redistributed power about key decisions that impacted citizens in poorer areas, to those very citizens.

The question for our study is whether PB in Europe is or can involve a greater number of people in local democracy and encourage greater engagement among people from groups who do not typically take part, such as young people or people from more economically disadvantaged areas. As we have seen, a major attraction of PB to European policymakers is the promise of involving people who do not typically get involved. As voter turnout declines in many Western countries, the question of representation becomes important. Many feel marginalised from voting and consequently feel that elected politicians do not represent them or people like them. PB, it is hoped, is more accessible to these voters and can encourage them to engage and eventually build trust between them and the state. The case studies and mini case studies that follow each illustrate an approach taken by different city administrations to use PB to expand popular participation.

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## **2. DUBLIN**

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The Dublin case study first provides background on local democracy and its challenges at the national level in Ireland, followed by a brief overview of Dublin's socio-economic make-up and the related challenges concerning political participation and trust in local politics. It then presents the €300 Million Have Your Say PB model and analyses it against our main lines of investigation: how people in marginalised neighbourhoods are involved; what challenges arise in PB design in these neighbourhoods; and how authorities have tried to work around them.

## 2.1 The context of local democracy in Ireland and Dublin

While trust in political institutions in Ireland is in line with, or slightly above, OECD averages, trust in local government remains below average and is one of the least trusted institutions among the Irish public.<sup>21</sup> TASC's 'People's Transition' projects, which consult with residents in communities vulnerable to the economic fallout of climate change, have repeatedly identified that a major source of dissatisfaction among people in economically deprived neighbourhoods is a feeling that they have little say in their local area, with consultation largely seen as a tick-box exercise.<sup>22</sup> This frustration manifests in the "distressing prevalence of abuse and harassment experienced by councillors in the course of their duties" highlighted by the Seanad Public Consultation Committee Report on the Future of Local Democracy.<sup>23</sup>

The lack of trust in local government likely arises from frustration. Ireland's local government ranks lowest in terms of legal and financial autonomy when compared with other EU countries.<sup>24</sup> Local government spending accounts for only around 10.5% of general government spending, less than half of the EU 27 average of 22.5%, ranking Ireland among the lowest in these terms.<sup>25</sup> Finally, the

number of elected representatives in proportion to the number of people they represent compares poorly across Ireland's 31 county council areas. There are 949 elected councillors, a ratio of 5,669 people for each local politician; this figure rises in densely populated urban areas.<sup>26</sup>

Ireland's current strategy for improving local government, 'Putting People First – Action Programme for Effective Local Government' asserts that

*"as part of a revitalisation of local government, the approaches used to ensure engagement by citizens in local authority policy formulation and service design may need to go beyond the range of conventional communication, public consultation and citizen participation mechanisms used in the past."<sup>27</sup>*

In recent years, efforts to improve participation in local government have engaged, to some degree, with this spirit of experimentation, achieving differing levels of success and progress. These initiatives have included the establishment of Public Participation Networks (PPNs), initiatives to establish a democratically elected mayor and the introduction of a participatory budget in the South Dublin County Council (SDCC) area, which, we now investigate as the first case study.

Before turning our attention to Dublin's PB approach, it is worth explaining some specificities of the city's socio-structural make-up and the challenges it faces in building trust in the state and politics. As Ireland's capital and home to over a quarter of the population, Dublin is the country's administrative, cultural and economic centre. Sharp social and economic inequality is evident across the city, with areas of severe deprivation, particularly in

the north inner city and suburbs, as well as highly affluent areas, often concentrated in the suburbs in the south of the city that stretch along the coast.<sup>28</sup> Disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Dublin have proved especially vulnerable to far-right organising in recent years, with violent incidents often stoked by misinformation spread online and by populist politicians and activists.<sup>29</sup>

The city is divided into four administrative areas, each with its own local government, including SDCC, which extends from Dublin city into the Dublin mountains and surrounding countryside, and is the site of our PB case study. SDCC has within its borders urban, suburban and rural areas; it encompasses both affluent, established suburbs and areas of relative socioeconomic disadvantage. A current challenge in the area is engaging with what has come to be known as ‘new communities’, large immigrant communities from countries that had not arrived in Ireland in large numbers prior to the wave of non-EU immigration that began in 2016. Ireland’s largest International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) processing centre opened within the SDCC area in 2022. The large numbers of international protection applicants that this has brought to the area have created a new impetus for improving integration and participation, particularly in light of increasing dissent and tension around immigration.

We spoke to local politicians and SDCC staff, who raised concerns about low voter turnout in the SDCC area, which was below average at the last general election, and includes some electoral divisions that saw among the lowest voter turnout in the country. However, they also reported that engagement levels differed across the SDCC area and that trust was lacking in more disadvantaged areas. This was described as helping to perpetuate ‘a vicious circle’ where politicians were less likely to engage with low turnout areas, fuelling a sense of abandonment and distrust among local voters. Specifically, they also reported challenges with engaging meaningfully with local marginalised groups, describing a gatekeeper dynamic whereby individual activists would sometimes claim to act as a voice on behalf of a community.

As a consequence, residents in poorer areas were seen to be less likely to know important information about what services were delivered by the local council and how the roles and powers exerted by TDs (or Teachtaí Dála, representatives elected to the national parliament) and local councillors differ. In short, TDs legislate and hold the government to account at the national level, while councillors set local policy and vote on matters such as housing, planning and environmental protection, roads and traffic, and community services delivered by the council.

*“Citizens of this [County council area] don’t know the services that are delivered by South Dublin County Council. If you don’t know the services, why would you vote for the people who have a say in how those services will be run?”*

**(council staff)**

The distinction between the roles of councillors and TDs was seen to be further blurred by TDs lobbying on local rather than national issues as a way of winning votes.

*“Previously, it’d be very rare that I would get a health query or that somebody would come in and say they had an issue with the hospital or GP or doctor. They would generally go to their TD, or their senator for that, but you’re now finding they ask everybody about it, rather than knowing who actually does what and why.”*

**(local councillor)**

Poor understanding of the role and powers of local councillors is also reportedly reflected in a lack of awareness among local residents of councillors’ limited role in the day-to-day running of the local council. In Ireland, councillors are elected representatives who set local policy, represent their local communities and scrutinise the executive branch of the local authority, as well as collectively exercising so-called reserved functions – such as

adopting budgets and development plans – while executive and operational matters rest with the council's chief executive and its administrative staff. One local councillor described having to explain to residents that they were not themselves employed by the council, but could, as elected representatives, liaise directly with it to relay residents' concerns and issues.

Aware of this overall issue, some individuals interviewed for this study described how some local politicians have managed to build a voter base through engagement with Facebook Groups that attract discontented residents. However, the engagement between residents and politicians that happens on these sites was felt by some to be of poor quality. While some issues reported to local councillors in this way were forwarded to the local council, the fast pace of information churn meant that a significant volume of the information shared by residents in this way was likely to be lost. Politicians expressed concern that there were local residents who only engaged with the local council in this way and were less likely to learn more about how local government works or build skills in more effective ways of voicing concerns or issues. As a consequence, residents of more affluent areas were seen as more likely to know how to lobby local representatives and effectively intervene to improve their local area.

## 2.2 PB in Dublin

It is against this backdrop – of fairly weak local democracy and a lack of knowledge relevant for engaged citizenship in lower-income neighbourhoods – that SDCC introduced the PB initiative €300k Have Your Say in 2017. *€300k Have Your Say* allows local residents to submit ideas for projects to improve their local area. Proposals are assessed by a project team at SDCC, and those that meet the eligibility criteria are put to a public vote. Anyone who lives in the local area is eligible to vote, regardless of age and citizenship; the winning projects are announced at an annual gala. The council has committed to delivering the projects that receive the most votes within any given year. Advancing PB has been

included as a commitment in several recent national strategies and programmes for government, but SDCC was the first to attempt it.

The initiative is implemented in a different local electoral area each year – there are seven in the SDCC area, and the initiative has so far cycled through all of them, with each year's implementation area chosen in a public draw. Project proposals and voting are restricted to residents of that year's area. The €300,000 budget represents 1% of the annual budget for the local area and is ringfenced from the rest of the council's budget. Selected projects must be deliverable within one calendar year and within the overall budget, must be new, and must not be eligible for existing funding overseen by the council. Over the course of the initiative, 1,125 project ideas have been submitted, of which 126 were selected and 62 won the public vote to receive funding. In total, 22,000 people have voted.

*€300k Have Your Say* was consistently described by interviewees – involved in implementing the project – as a way of “giving local people a voice”. They explained that, by working with local communities, they aimed to identify local needs and expand opportunities for residents to work collectively toward realising shared goals. Enthusiasm at the outset of their involvement came from the hope that it could tangibly demonstrate the benefits of taking part in local democracy.

Local politicians and city officials interviewed for this study recognised the value of PB as a way of engaging people living in disadvantaged areas and from marginalised groups but reported that challenges remained when it came to pursuing that ambition. More affluent areas tended to have more established communities living there and stronger active community networks. Council staff suggested that the existence of stronger community networks tended to boost participation among members of marginalised groups living in more affluent areas, compared with those living in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods that lacked the same level of voluntary activity. In this regard, interviewees also linked the capacity of PB to build

a sense of ownership with a long-standing tradition of community development in the local area. In the 1970s and 1980s, local residents crowdfunded to build local community centres.

### **A community development approach to PB**

To address this, the strategy drew on community development principles to deliver the participatory budget. This approach may also have been informed by the evaluation of the pilot round, which found that more could have been done to involve marginalised and disadvantaged groups in the area.<sup>30</sup> Local representatives and city officials reported that a progressive outlook among SDCC executive staff was responsible for a more engaged, community-centred approach. They described a desire to make local government more participative, shared among council staff and local councillors who had first championed a local participatory budget.

*"It's a council building where people can come in; a place [where people can] do business and engage with us. And you see that there are people passing by the whole time, a steady stream of people that aren't just staff coming in using the reception and getting pointed in the right direction. I definitely think that '300k Have Your Say' has assisted that."*

**(local councillor)**

In practice, to support the rollout of the PB initiatives, the council deployed community development workers to promote civic participation and strengthen local groups – for this work, council staff and local councillors we spoke to praised the involvement of community development workers as a positive force, crediting them with empowering residents to tackle challenges such as anti-social behaviour. Local workshops were used to promote the initiative and reach people within their communities, helping them develop project ideas. This was seen as an important step in reaching individuals who were otherwise unlikely to take part. A professional facilitator was supported by community development workers.

The workshops were open to all residents, but community development workers also promoted them among local groups.

The clear communication style employed by facilitators and the accompanying literature explaining the PB were seen as factors encouraging a wider range of people to take part. Implicit within this was a view that

*"The information that's out there on our website wasn't very detailed. It's just plain English, and it gives you the information and explains it for you. Even the voting process was very easy to do. That was helpful for people because if it's too long-winded, people don't want to get involved."*

**(council staff)**

As part of these workshops, community workers were able to encourage participants to develop and improve their submissions. They were able to contribute their knowledge of projects that had worked well in the past to inspire those taking part. They were also able to draw on their knowledge of other local groups to encourage those with similar ideas to work together on shared projects, potentially building new networks between individual and local groups.

*"We would have had follow-on meetings where he would have brought all the groups together, so they get to know each other. Since then, they've worked on other projects together."*

**(council staff)**

However, some city officials felt that the involvement of community workers in the process, and what their role within it was, could have been more clearly defined. They felt that this role could have been expanded to enable them to contribute to other stages of the participatory budget. For instance, community development workers could have played a role in selecting which ideas should be put to a

public vote. Here, it was felt that their intimate knowledge of local contexts would enable them to anticipate delivery challenges caused by unsuitable projects being selected and potentially winning.

*"I think people that are on the ground, that really know the community, really know the area, are most likely to know if a project is workable and achievable. Because there's no point putting in a fabulous structure or something that's going to be burnt out the next week, or vandalised."*

**(council staff)**

Participants reported that limiting the role of community development workers to these workshops could cause issues later in the delivery of the selected projects. For instance, when some projects experienced delivery delays, this was felt to be damaging to the improved trust the €300k Have Your Say initiative sought to nurture. It was reported that, though projects were supposed to be delivered within a year, sometimes this in fact took several years. When this happened, it was felt to be potentially very damaging to relationships between community development workers and local communities.

It was recognised that an integrated approach for engaging communities throughout the life cycle of the project was vital to sustaining trust.

*"So we can say to people 'Remember way back when we sat down and went through a workshop? Well, here it is, and that's because you engaged with us. And if you continue to work with us and trust us, that you can continue to do those things'."*

**(council staff)**

The case study from South County Dublin illustrates how community development work can complement and support how PB attempts to engage with marginalised communities. A key principle of community development work is that it takes

time to build trust and involves slow relationship building. Engaging participants in deliberative and participatory democracy is cited as a key aim of community development work principles in Ireland.<sup>31</sup>

PB initiatives in Europe tend to run on annual cycles, from proposal to delivery. Our research with council staff highlighted the many challenges of fitting this process into a single financial year, which can squeeze the lead-in time needed to establish and nurture it. The South Dublin case study points to one way of extending that timeline: linking into community development work already underway.

Fundamental to community development is that it actively empowers beneficiaries rather than creating dependence. Supporting beneficiaries to engage with PB creates opportunities that can realise that aspiration, building literacy in engaging with local government bureaucracy and self-advocacy. However, the case study also illustrated that there may be some risks attached, because, when the participatory budget process fails, due to poor communication or failure by the council to deliver projects, it can be actively harmful to trust between residents and local community development workers.<sup>32</sup>

Community worker support helps engage areas and residents that might otherwise stay outside the process, and some council staff suggested that community development workers should have a bigger role in selecting projects. Community development work and PB share the key aim of amplifying the community's voice in local decision-making. However, unless a careful approach is taken to integrating the two approaches, it can risk undermining trust. The slow process of building trust and engagement does not fit easily into the annual delivery timetable for participatory budgets; failed projects can put further strain on the trust that community development workers are trying to build in the local area. These stakes may be in tension with the inherently contestatory nature of local democracy, and encourage staff to promote projects that are more likely to 'succeed'.

The key may lie in sequencing, giving community development workers clear lead-in times to encourage bottom-up initiatives. This would enable them to support more genuine participation among local residents. While feedback and input from council staff and community workers are valuable, this should be limited to the pre-selection stage so that democracy can run its course once projects go to a public vote.

## **PB and the EU**

As part of the expert interviews, we explored whether interviewees saw links between EU policy or funding and PB, and where these might point to better support for PB across the EU. As our introduction noted, participatory democracy holds real promise for rebuilding trust amid rising populism and Euroscepticism, aligning naturally with local politics and subsidiarity. However, in South Dublin, participants found it hard to link local government, including the €300k Have Your Say, to the EU. They saw value in the EU helping councils share best practice, but noted that administrative capacity varies widely between member states.

EU funding provides key financial support to community development in Ireland. Earlier programmes established between the 1970s and the 1990s – the European Poverty Programmes and initiatives such as HORIZON and NOW – are credited with growing and professionalising the community and voluntary sector and recognising its role with marginalised groups.<sup>33</sup> Today, the main vehicle is the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), co-funded by the Irish Government and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) under the Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training (EIST) Programme 2021-2027. Its Social Innovation+ strand aims to scale innovative solutions to societal challenges in employment, education, skills and inclusion, and cites PB as a case study with potential for mainstreaming. Flowing from the European pillar of social rights, these are explicitly democratic aims. Our case study suggests that EU funds are vital: they create the conditions, values and frameworks that make participatory approaches like PB possible and legitimate.

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## **3. WARSAW**

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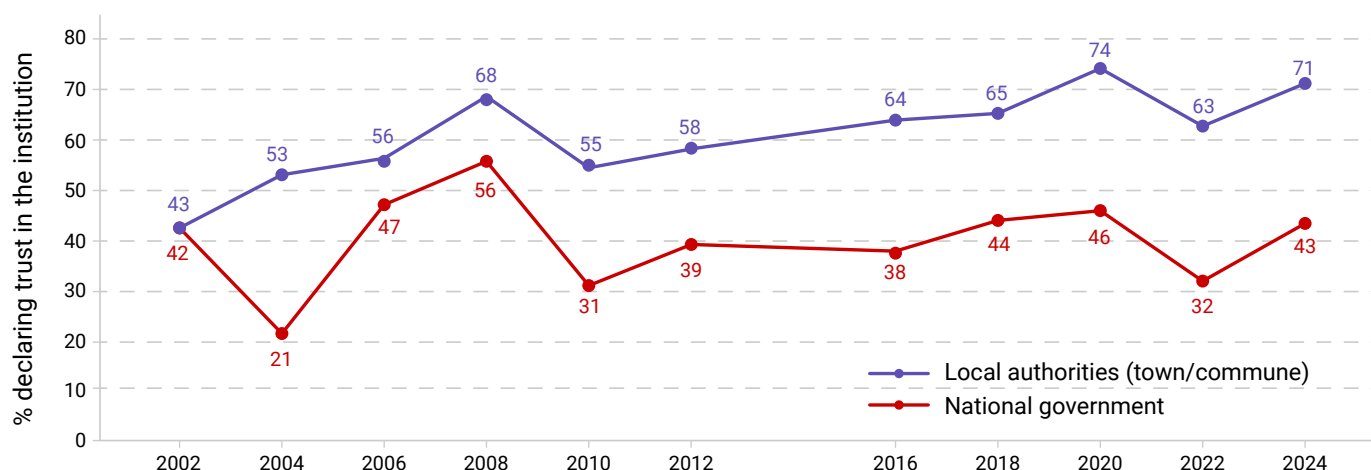
Following the same structure as the Dublin case study, the Warsaw case study first provides background on local democracy and its challenges at the national level, followed by a brief overview of Warsaw's socio-economic make-up and related challenges concerning political participation and trust in local politics. It then presents the PB model, *Budżet Obywatelski*, or Citizen's Budget.

### 3.1 The context of local democracy in Poland and Warsaw

Poland's system of local government was established in 1990 through the Local Government Act, during the early post-communist transition, and extended in 1998-99 into today's three-tier structure: the municipality (*gmina*); the county (*powiat*); and the region, or *voivodeship* (16 in total).<sup>34</sup> It is widely regarded as one of the most successful areas of post-communist political reform, a success attributed

less to bottom-up civic engagement and more to intermediary institutions that professionalised and empowered a new cohort of local elites, backed by an early transfer of substantial spending responsibilities.<sup>35</sup> And while Poland has experienced 'democratic backsliding', in particular between 2015 and 2023, under a PiS government,<sup>36,37</sup> liberal city governments have offered some protection from rising authoritarianism. Buzogány and Spöri describe how Warsaw and the other Visegrád 4 capitals have acted as "laboratories of democracy", fostering experimentation in local governance.<sup>38</sup> The relative success of local governance may explain why it is widely regarded as more trustworthy than national government. While local government has – with some fluctuations – steadily increased its trustworthiness among Poles between 2002 and 2024, trust in national government has remained consistently much lower and, despite some stark swings, shows no clear upward trend over the same period (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Trust in local authorities versus national government in Poland, 2002-2024.



**Note:** This figure was generated with Claude AI. The data was verified carefully by the author against the original source (using DeepL for translation).

**Source:** CBOS (2024), p. 11.

As we did for Ireland, for Poland we also look at the PB model in the capital, Warsaw, a city of around 1.8 million people. Its city council comprises 60 councillors and is elected every five years. The city is divided into ten constituencies, each electing between five and eight councillors. While Warsaw is relatively wealthy, when compared with other parts of Poland, the urban landscape is marked by economic divisions that are shaped, to a large degree, by legacies of World War II, which destroyed large parts of the city, and the subsequent Soviet-era rebuilding of those areas. During a building boom that peaked in the 1970s, housing outpaced other necessary infrastructure, giving rise to 'Warsaw bedroom districts'. Concentrated areas of social housing in Warsaw create a significant degree of economic segregation.<sup>40</sup> Gentrification is on the rise in Warsaw's inner city, and tensions arising from housing shortages are exacerbated by the ongoing process of 'reprivatising' residential blocks that had been nationalised during the Soviet Period.<sup>41,42</sup>

Against the background of Poland's transition to democracy in the early 1990s, as well as emerging socio-economic challenges, civil society organisations (CSOs) have long called for participatory initiatives to rebuild trust in democracy. However, the first such initiative was not launched until 2011. Since 2019, an amendment to the Local Government Act (1990) mandates that "projects selected by means of a PB process shall be included within the local budget".<sup>43</sup> This makes the inclusion of a participatory budget in Polish cities mandatory, although cities have latitude to determine how it will be implemented, resulting in uneven participation.

### 3.2 PB in Warsaw

The *Budżet Obywatelski*, or Citizen's Budget, was first implemented in Warsaw in 2014. The *Budżet Obywatelski* is allocated several million zloty each year; the 2026 iteration awarded 125 million Polish zloty<sup>45</sup> (around €30 million), which is distributed across three pools – a citywide one, one for each of Warsaw's 18 districts and within these smaller 'local' sub-district pools. The size of the budget allocated

to each area is determined by population sizes, with more populous districts getting a proportionally larger share.<sup>46</sup>

Local residents can submit projects for any of the three levels but need to get a certain number of signatures from other residents backing a proposal for it to be considered by city officials.<sup>47</sup> Following this, projects are judged for eligibility by city officials. Eligible projects must have complete applications and be judged to be accomplishable in one calendar year. Projects can be submitted via an online portal, which can also be used to check on projects that have already been submitted, vote on those that have been selected to be eligible, and check on the progress for delivering projects that have won the public vote. All residents are eligible to vote, regardless of age (including children) or citizenship. The online portal contains quite comprehensive information on the budget itself, the area boundaries that apply for the district and local level pools. It also contains a comprehensive indicative price list for delivering different kinds of infrastructure, services, events, and other objects and items that may be required to deliver a proposed project.<sup>48,49</sup>

### Building trust and self-efficacy

Some local representatives and municipal officials in Warsaw interviewed for this study emphasised that contemporary challenges in civic participation are closely linked to long-standing issues of trust between citizens and government. While these dynamics have roots in Poland's experience of authoritarian governance during the communist period, participants focused primarily on how this historical legacy continues to shape present-day attitudes toward political agency and public institutions. In particular, they described a prevailing sense among some residents that individual action has a limited impact on public decision-making.

One local representative explained that this mindset has persisted beyond the political transition of the 1990s:

*"People in Poland, generally after communism, had this feeling that nothing depends on them and their surroundings, and that they cannot influence their surroundings in any way."*

**(city councillor)**

Several of the interviewees we spoke to, from across each of the different categories of study participants, suggested that this lack of perceived agency has also weakened a collective sense of social responsibility, contributing to reduced feelings of ownership over local neighbourhoods. In this context, strengthening local government was viewed as a key mechanism for rebuilding trust within society. Despite significant reforms and an expansion of local government capacity since the 1990s, all groups of interviewees we spoke to noted that public understanding of how local government operates remains limited among many Warsaw residents.

In this context, local representatives emphasised PB's potential to counter feelings of powerlessness by enabling residents to influence even small-scale improvements to their surroundings. As one city councillor described:

*"We thought that giving them any tools to influence even small, tiny things around them would really change this attitude and would show them, 'Yes, you can. You can change what is around you. You can make a bench, put a tree and build a bike shed. You just have to cooperate with your neighbours'."*

**(city councillor)**

As this suggests, the ambitions of some of those involved in conceiving of and implementing the participatory budget extended beyond improving citizen-government relations to include rebuilding social trust, self-efficacy and cooperation among neighbours. The *Budżet Obywatelski* was therefore seen not only as a governance instrument, but also as a means of fostering social cohesion at the local level.

Initially, the participatory budget operated within a legislative framework that limited its formal authority over public spending. Under the Municipal Self-Government Act (1990) and the Public Finance Act (2009), which did not require public participation in budget planning, selected projects were advisory rather than binding. Although this distinction was not always clearly communicated in the early years, the *Budżet Obywatelski* has evolved considerably since its introduction in 2014.<sup>50</sup> Since the amendment of the Local Government Act, the legislative basis is clearer, and the results are now binding.

The transition from paper-based submissions to a centralised online platform was felt by some to have further supported transparency and accessibility. As mentioned above, the online portal provides comprehensive information on the initiative. City officials highlighted the portal's role in promoting transparency, which they regarded as essential for trust-building, particularly in the early stages of the programme. For example, ensuring that residents whose proposals are rejected receive detailed explanations was seen as critical to maintaining confidence in the process.

### Including people from marginalised groups

Our conversations with city officials, local councillors and PB participants alike contained relatively little reflection on the capacity of the participatory budget to offset social and economic inequality. When asked to discuss this, most tended to focus on broader challenges and frustrations they had experienced with the participatory budget, although not ones that specifically pertained to the experience of those from socially or economically disadvantaged groups. It was felt that the participatory budget was equally open to all residents and that there were no obvious barriers to taking part that they considered to be linked to socio-economic position. However, one local politician argued that for those with more pressing challenges, participating in something like a participatory budget would be far down the list of the 'hierarchy of needs' that concerned them. For this participant, relative lack of enthusiasm among less-well-off residents was not related to how the PB

was implemented, but rather arose naturally from the socio-economic position of that group.

A 2019 report by Sudolska-Bytof and Janiak suggests that the participatory budget implemented in Warsaw is distinct from a social justice model.<sup>51</sup> Unlike in the Porto Alegre example discussed earlier, here Sudolska-Bytof and Janiak found no consensus among stakeholders (participants, city officials, civil society) in the PB process that the *Budżet Obywatelski* should be redistributive. This finding may explain the puzzlement that greeted our interview questions on possible barriers to engaging in the participatory budget among people from socially or economically marginalised groups. For example, one local politician replied that they felt the question was somewhat irrelevant since Warsaw is a relatively rich city, and that, in their view, sufficient social welfare measures are available to offset any serious economic inequality that might otherwise be experienced.

Both city officials and local politicians reported some awareness of differing levels of participation, noting that those who did take part tended to fall in the middle of the age bracket, with older and younger residents underrepresented. While the shift to an online portal was seen to have made it more convenient to take part, an exception to this was (typically older) residents who lack sufficient digital skills. Paper submissions remain an option, but these are likely to carry additional barriers of their own – for instance, those arising from mobility issues. While interviewees from each group we interviewed recognised that the participatory budget was not as popular among residents as they would like, they were unsure how to encourage further engagement, since the initiative is already widely publicised in Warsaw. That said, their apparent undervaluing of a more targeted approach to involving marginalised groups might, we can only hypothesise, be part of the reason the initiative has not engaged wider segments of the population.

This assumption was further strengthened by the views of regular participants in the PB initiative and of the smaller-scale CSOs engaged in the PB process,

which underlined some of the bottlenecks that might impede broader participation, including that of more marginalised groups. One PB participant we spoke to was critical of the level of effort required to submit an idea, noting that the process was labour-intensive and likely to discourage wider public participation. The evaluation of the fifth edition of the *Budżet Obywatelski* reports that 88% of projects submitted and 78% of votes were cast by people with higher education,<sup>52</sup> indicating that participation is higher among people more socio-economically advantaged Warsaw residents. However, the evaluation does not consider the implications of this disparity or address barriers that may result in lowered turnout among disadvantaged groups, with the exception of those with mobility issues.

We also spoke to participants involved in local grassroots organisations, who got involved in the participatory budget to lobby for small projects related to men's mental health and LGBTQ+ representation. These participants were critical of limitations on eligible projects, reporting that decisions by city officials sometimes appeared inconsistent. They reported that where projects are placed on the ballot had a major impact on projects that were eventually chosen. When there are many projects, sometimes the ballot will be spread over several pages, and voting members of the public are unlikely to click through, meaning that only those listed at the top of the ballot have a chance of winning. They voiced frustration that much work could go into campaigning for a project that stood no chance for this reason.

Interviewees from each group we spoke to consistently reported that proposed projects were more likely to originate from highly motivated individuals or citizen groups already active than from people without previous experience of taking part. Some local politicians voiced concern that, as a consequence, the participatory budget was increasingly dominated by politicians who used it to advance small local projects to increase their popularity, draining a budget earmarked for projects directly proposed by citizens.

## Creating opportunities for grassroots organisations?

In addition to the question of how marginalised groups should be elevated (or not) within PB in Warsaw, interviews also raised the role of what relationship PB has with grassroots organising and organised civil society, as well as elevating participants into further political engagement. PB participants we spoke to who had been involved in contributing project ideas described how resident groups and small grassroots organisations had made use of the *Budżet Obywatelski* to advance projects.

Those involved in local activism tended to feel strongly that people were most animated by political and policy decisions that directly affect them or apply to their immediate vicinity. Some voiced frustration that local politicians were less concerned with local needs than with national or party politics. The more impersonal nature of cities was felt to be a challenge here, with those we spoke to describing how there was a substantial transient population of people who were living temporarily in the city for work or study and that they were less likely to be invested in issues affecting the city long-term. Nevertheless, some reported that, at the district level, it was possible for a more convivial politics to exist, with people feeling more involved and less of a sense of anonymity. For these participants, the *Budżet Obywatelski* presented an opportunity for individuals to take matters into their own hands and bring about improvements to the city or their local area without having to lobby politicians. They discussed how the participatory budget ensures that there are ringfenced funds guaranteed for community projects, whereas lobbying local representatives, as would have been done conventionally, was more complicated since funds would have to be found for a project within a budget that was mapped out well ahead of delivery.

Here, some local politicians cited an aspiration for civil society to return to its roots through a revival of grassroots, local organising principles they associated with the Solidarity (*Solidarność*) movement that emerged in the early 1980s and advanced a civil society agenda that challenged the Soviet government of the time. City officials and local politicians observed that the need to engage with neighbours and mobilise local support for successful projects meant that the *Budżet Obywatelski* provided an opportunity for local leaders and activists to emerge or to consolidate their position within the community. Those we interviewed included local politicians whose political careers had begun through the successful submission of a proposal to the participatory budget.

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## **4. TRUST AND INCLUSION IN PB: SOME LESSONS**

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Against a backdrop of growing populism and pessimism, in recent decades, PB has been adopted by many European cities seeking new ways of engaging residents with the workings of local government. Proponents of democratic innovations, such as PB, highlight their capacity to engage people in issues close to them. With an emphasis on reducing barriers to engagement, PB initiatives can bring democracy within reach of those typically more at risk of marginalisation.

Against this background, we have identified four areas of contention in which all three elements – the how of engagement, the barriers to it and some ideas for solutions – come together. Acknowledging that we draw on only two small-scale empirical case studies in Dublin and Warsaw, we complement our reflections with insights from three further illustrative cases, each bringing a valuable element: Marseille and the power of in-person engagement in a strongly segregated city; Ghent and its combination of PB and sortition-based tools; and Helsinki, where an innovative gamified approach supports its PB with the aim of engaging more widely.

## **4.1 Four dimensions of inclusive PB**

### **A conscious effort to engage marginalised groups in PB**

Trust and engagement in democracy tend to be particularly lacking among those who feel overlooked by politicians and policymakers. A vicious circle is initiated when politicians then ignore low-turnout areas, further fuelling feelings of abandonment. As seen in Warsaw, those who take part in participatory budgets are often those who already have more social capital, with a disproportionate number of highly educated individuals taking part. Similarly, in Dublin, interviewees mentioned that people from

higher-income segments were more likely to engage and achieve impact in local participation formats. Income and education seem to be strong predictors of a general inclination towards engagement. This finding – anecdotally confirmed through our case studies – has long been one of the most central in political participation research.<sup>53</sup> Conversely, it means that, without direct intervention, PB may exacerbate existing inequalities rather than address them.

During PB's first applications in Porto Alegre, the redressing of social inequalities and the building of trust were fundamental to how the initiative was conceived and designed, through an explicitly social-justice model that sought to promote widespread participation in poorer neighbourhoods. In our two case studies – Dublin and Warsaw – different approaches and levels of awareness were present regarding the need to include an active element of addressing the barriers posed by lower income and education. A reticence to adopt a more targeted approach was evident, particularly in the Warsaw example, where study participants were less inclined to reflect on barriers to participation concerning income and education levels and how they could be addressed. That said, the model allows for participation of citizens of all ages, including children, showing openness to inclusion on this dimension. In Dublin, on the other hand, there seemed to be a clearer awareness among city officials that marginalisation would be a key impediment to engagement in PB. In South Dublin in particular, identifying the central role of close-knit neighbourhood communities as an indicator of how much people would engage and trust one another led to a dedicated approach of integrating community-building principles.

In short, for PB to be inclusive and reach beyond the highly educated and well-off, a conscious, geographically focused effort to raise awareness

and encourage participation among segments of society less prone to engage is needed. The community development approach adopted in Dublin demonstrates the value of embedding participatory budgets in longer-cycle initiatives aimed at building trust. What helped facilitate this was an “open door” mindset among city officials, who had internalised the principle that city services should be open to each and every resident, and that reaching marginalised groups might take some additional effort on their side. Foregrounding such an inclusive culture of service provision may be an important precursor to making inclusive PB exercises a reality.

### Providing online and offline engagement

As digital capabilities improve across public administration, so too does their rollout and integration into democratic processes, including PB. The Warsaw case exemplifies both the considerable

potential this offers for transparency and some of its pitfalls. Warsaw’s digital PB platform provides an all-encompassing overview of the projects submitted to each annual call, public access to the evaluation of those projects (whether or not they were selected), a searchable database of successful past projects and an indication of what specific items in an application are likely to cost – which in turn encourages more realistic future submissions. Taken together, this is a significant gain for a more transparent system of managing PB: it can alleviate concerns about arbitrariness or favouritism, and may help build trust. That said, Warsaw also showed that the digital transition, here as elsewhere, faces challenges, including the question of how to make such platforms accessible to elderly and less digitally literate residents. Indeed, as the example of Marseille shows, the question of how best to combine online and offline engagement can also be a central one when trying to engage marginalised neighbourhoods.

#### Marseille: Offline engagement to reach marginalised communities

Marseille’s PB was first rolled out in 2023, and our interviews with city council staff suggest an emerging approach of privileging proactive, in-person engagement with the city’s poorer districts, mirroring the idea of the founding case of Porto Alegre to some degree. The first edition (2023-2024) was deliberately launched in the northern arrondissements, a conscious choice as Marseille’s geography has long been marked by sharp segregation between the poor northern neighbourhoods and the wealthy southern coast. One official described these as priority areas defined by social difficulties, high voter abstention and institutional distrust, and, for those reasons, the clear political target for the first iteration.

As PB has spread across Europe, cities have increasingly relied on digital platforms, often built on open-source tools such as Decidim, to let residents submit and vote on ideas. Proponents of eDemocracy point to its potential to streamline communication between citizens and governments, but it can also widen participation gaps for those with limited literacy or digital skills.<sup>54</sup> In Marseille’s northern districts – home to a high concentration of North African immigrant communities – these risks were recognised early. Voting in the first edition was conducted online, which officials came to see as a cause of relatively low turnout. Learning from this, the municipality introduced paper ballots and mobile ballot boxes for the second edition, replicating familiar electoral practices. The shift proved decisive: participation rose to

over 15,000 voters, the substantial majority of them in person. Participants stressed that paper voting not only reduced exclusion but reinforced the symbolic seriousness of the process.

Even so, officials acknowledged that some residents struggle to meet basic needs, and for them participation may seem secondary to urgent concerns such as employment, food security and safety.

### Combining collective and individual participation

Another broader question surrounding PB, and other “unconventional” mechanisms of democratic participation, is how best to combine individual and collective participation so that the combination leads to a ‘sum greater than its parts’ scenario, rather than the two competing with each other or one being advantaged over the other.

Those we spoke to involved in delivering the PB initiative in Dublin reported, as we have noted before, that in marginalised communities the absence of more established community ties can be a hurdle to democratic engagement. In other words: if people do not know their neighbours and have never worked with them to improve their shared surroundings, they might be less inclined to consider that PB is for them. Conversely, if they do know them, and share spaces or a history together, they might be more inclined to work towards the shared goal of improving their neighbourhood. The community-development approach in Dublin recognised this, setting up offline workshops for groups of people in marginalised neighbourhoods to develop project ideas together, in the spirit of not merely engaging people in PB for its own sake, but building community in the process. This approach also helped support capacity-building and civic-engagement education along the way.

In Warsaw, grassroots CSOs play an important role in submitting and implementing projects, advancing their goals at the local level and mobilising their neighbours in the process. CSOs are an important player in any healthy democracy (provided they are

bound to democratic values) and can foster social cohesion and trust simply by organising collectively for a common goal. Several interviewees also pointed to people who came into their own as community organisers through PB, making it their entry point into local politics – an intriguing, if anecdotal, pathway from “unconventional” to conventional participation. That said, tensions can arise: PB may be used by local politicians to advance their own causes for visibility and promotion, as alleged in Warsaw. Similarly, the involvement of organised civil society, while critical to local participatory democracy, can be a double-edged sword; the views of motivated activists and community leaders may come to stand in for the views and interests of ordinary people, even when they do not accurately reflect those views.

For some theorists of participatory democracy, the participation of individuals is paramount. A key text on democratic innovations states that the primary interest is whether institutions can be designed “to directly engage what have been termed ‘lay’ or ‘non-partisan’ citizens, as opposed to experts and partisan campaigners”.<sup>55</sup> The central tension is whether involving civil society groups as participants in democratic innovations inevitably sidelining individuals who lack representation by established organisations. At the same time, sidelining CSOs from the process altogether risks hollowing out a lively civil society. For some real-life context: in Córdoba, Spain – where some of the earliest European experiments with PB were staged – neighbourhood associations pushed back against what they felt was a process that alienated them from their traditional role as the bedrock of collective citizen action.<sup>57</sup>

## Innovating to engage people in PB

In addition to improving trust through community building, combining offline and online approaches, and pairing individual with collective approaches, there is also space to think outside the box and go beyond the “classical European model” of PB laid out above – namely, the submission of projects, a plebiscite and implementation, all within a one-year cycle. By going beyond, or adding to, this model, the

aim is to reach broader segments of the population that would not otherwise engage in PB. The case of Ghent highlights how sortition can be one such pathway, combining different forms of democratic innovation (PB and sortition), while also exemplifying the approach for promoting individual participation just outlined. Helsinki’s PB model, on the other hand, shows how multilingualism and a gamified approach for submitting PB proposals can be parts of a wider toolbox for engaging citizens more widely in PB.

### Ghent: Using sortition to improve PB

One approach that foregrounds individual participation within non-electoral democracy, while still casting a wider net of participants, is sortition. Frequently used to select participants for deliberative processes, such as mini-publics and citizen assemblies, sortition is designed to create randomly selected, representative samples of citizens: eligible people are chosen at random, and those who respond are filtered against a sample frame that incorporates socio-demographic characteristics.<sup>58</sup>

In Ghent, sortition has been combined with PB, departing from the more classical model in which projects are chosen by a city- or district-wide vote. What distinguishes the Ghent platform is its use of ‘Neighbourhood Panels’ (*gelote wijkpanels*), advisory groups selected by sortition. As the city administration’s website explains, panel members “engage in dialogue with the project applicants and advise on the ideas within their neighbourhoods” (own translation) before the final projects are selected. The panels are organised by age, gender, nationality and household type. A key principle is that each resident is an expert on their own

neighbourhood; for this reason, all members are chosen through sortition, with no places reserved for known community figures.<sup>59</sup>

Proponents argue that representative panels allow for a more diverse set of perspectives to be debated than deliberation drawing on elected or self-selecting pools.<sup>60</sup> Sortition is not foolproof, however, and still suffers from non-response bias: an evaluation of the first round found the selected participants were not fully representative, skewing towards highly educated people and the 25-59 age group. Even so, the approach engaged a high proportion of people who had never previously taken part in city activities, and the selection process itself proved pivotal in drawing these newcomers in.<sup>61</sup>

One theory for Porto Alegre’s success in including poorer neighbourhoods is what Abers terms the “demonstrative effect”:<sup>62</sup> residents who did not initially participate were inspired to do so after seeing the positive impact of earlier waves of PB nearby. One might speculate that sortition can produce a similar effect, signalling to others that the process has a genuine interest in hearing diverse voices, beyond “the usual suspects”.

### **Helsinki: Widening participation through multilingualism and a gamified approach**

Finland has a strong tradition of local democracy and is one of the most decentralised countries in the world, with close relations between central and local government.<sup>63,64</sup> This has also fostered an early use of the digital Decidim platform to support participation at the local level (2014) and the introduction of the OmaStadi participatory budget (2018). One of OmaStadi's key aims is to improve equal participation in Helsinki's governance. Barriers to inclusion for marginalised groups were identified along the way, informing Helsinki's non-discrimination plan, which flags challenges around digital accessibility; inadequate multilingual information and services; and low trust among marginalised groups, migrant communities in particular.<sup>65,66</sup>

While the overall sequence of OmaStadi follows the classical path from project idea to implementation, it adds two dimensions relevant to any participatory budget striving to be inclusive. First, having identified diverse migrant communities as harder to engage, the OmaStadi website provides instructions on how to make a proposal in languages spoken by non-native Finnish speakers, including Russian, Somali, Arabic and Estonian.<sup>67</sup>

Second, the process includes an innovative card game designed to guide players through a "structured negotiation strategy" for developing concrete proposals within OmaStadi's parameters. The game aims to encourage more inclusive participation by lowering "the resources and time required by citizens to take part" and making the concept of PB easier to grasp. In 45-90 minutes (depending on the number of players), it walks participants through developing a proposal, weighing different challenges and perspectives, and jointly assessing eligibility. After the conclusion, proposals will be submitted to the online platform to compete with other proposals for funding. An evaluation found that participants felt it created a more equal discussion between people from different backgrounds, encouraging them to listen to one another. Rather than requiring prior familiarity with the PB's aims and eligibility rules, the game builds that understanding in the process, reducing the risk that participants submit ineligible proposals and feel discouraged when these are rejected early on.<sup>68</sup>

OmaStadi illustrates a key principle: any citizen can learn to deliberate on complex policy decisions, regardless of education or experience. Yet, existing inequalities may call for self-conscious strategies to prevent them from being reproduced within the deliberative process itself.

## **4.2 Summary: Key ideas and best practices**

For participatory budgets to build trust among participants, they must be able to show that they deliver real outcomes. The basic model that has developed in Europe lacks the more radical ambition of the original Porto Alegre experiment: where the

Brazilian version sought to fundamentally transform how spending on vital infrastructure was allocated, European participatory budgets are typically confined to small amounts of discretionary spending, usually around 1% of the local budget. And when they struggle to deliver the chosen projects within administrative constraints, the damage to public trust can be greater than if they had never been

attempted. A wider question, then, is whether future efforts in European cities should try bolder ideas, with much more robust budgets, a clear upfront focus on fighting inequality, and a deliberate effort to engage marginalised groups. For now, though, we stay with the lessons learned from the more limited models we examined in this study.

Despite the limitations and the tensions set out above, our study found that those designing and implementing participatory budgets across Europe have adopted a wide range of approaches for making them more inclusive, engaging citizens beyond the usual highly educated and well-off suspects. Some of the key ideas and best practices include:

**Consciously targeting marginalised neighbourhoods and groups.** This includes geographically focused efforts to raise awareness and encourage participation. Dublin's community development approach shows the value of embedding participatory budgets in longer-cycle, trust-building initiatives. What helped was an "open door" mindset among city officials, who had internalised that services should be open to every resident – and that reaching marginalised groups might take extra effort on their part.

**Widening the net.** Participatory budgets often include people not eligible to vote in recognised elections, whether due to age or immigration status. As exercises in political participation, they can therefore engage people early – ahead of reaching voting age or attaining citizenship.

**Ensuring transparency.** Online platforms can give participants easy access to up-to-date information on the projects being delivered. This is particularly helpful when projects are delayed: sharing the barriers and how they are being addressed builds understanding of how resources are administered. Providing clear guidance in multiple languages and accessible formats is vital to ensuring everyone has the information they need to take part.

**Providing multiple ways of engaging.** Recognising the barriers created by digital-only implementation,

those running participatory budgets can add paper ballots and in-person voting.

**Encouraging deliberation.** Workshops and neighbour-to-neighbour discussion were used to spark debate around proposed initiatives, whether through community-building workshops in Dublin or, in Helsinki, the OmaStadi card game, an enjoyable, low-barrier way to guide participants through structured deliberation.

**Using sortition.** Self-selecting participation tends to skew towards higher-income groups with more social capital; building in elements of sortition – so that participants more closely mirror the city's socio-economic profile – can draw in residents who would otherwise be unlikely to take part. In doing so, it strengthens the legitimacy of the participatory budget, helping residents feel that the chosen projects reflect the wishes of a wider section of society.

**Building future activists and leaders.** Though often celebrated as a way of engaging individual citizens, participatory budgets can also help grassroots organisations focus their campaigning. In Warsaw, more than one study participant had launched a political career – ultimately winning elected office – through previous involvement in participatory budget projects. Given the typically low representation of minority groups and disadvantaged areas across the EU, participatory budgets can then, ideally, be an entryway to electing more diverse candidates in future.

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## **5. EPILOGUE: LEARNING FOR THE EU**

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Trust in democracy, and the disengagement of marginalised groups from it, are not only local concerns; they run through every level of politics, including the EU. Libraries have been filled with the debate over the EU's "democratic deficit": one we do not propose to add to in these few pages. In keeping with the EU's principle of subsidiarity, that decisions should be taken as close to citizens as possible, on the premise that those decisionmakers closest know best, we were nonetheless curious how the practitioners we interviewed as part of the study understood the relationship between their PB work and the EU. We asked an open question of how practitioners relate their work on PB with the EU, hoping to learn whether they were aware of EU funding flowing into their projects, had drawn inspiration from PB models elsewhere in Europe or could place their local practice within a wider European democratic frame. What struck us was how little the EU figured in their understanding of their own work.

The one connection raised was the potential value of sharing learning between people running PB in different parts of Europe.

Even so, some ideas can usefully travel in both directions: down from the EU to PB on the ground, and up from local practice to the European level. We highlight two.

The first, and most obvious, is budgetary. PB allocations are typically small, often cited as around 1% of a local budget. Yet EU money can matter well beyond that figure. In our Dublin case, the community development infrastructure that made an inclusive, trust-building approach possible is itself substantially EU-funded: SICAP is co-financed by the Irish government and ESF+, and its predecessors are credited with professionalising Ireland's community and voluntary sector, albeit at the cost of

depoliticising the sector and undermining advocacy-oriented work.<sup>69</sup> EU funds, in other words, can help create the conditions, values and frameworks that make participatory approaches legitimate and possible. In more tangible terms, this means the best practices and ideas outlined above become financially viable and methodologically imaginable. Community work approaches to PB, for example, are only possible if a city has community workers with the necessary skills to deploy in support of PB processes. Processes like sortition, or the dual efforts of setting up engaging online platforms and coupling them with paper voting, also become easier when funding is available.

Scaled up, this speaks directly to the ongoing negotiation of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which will shape EU spending from 2028 to 2034. As headline volumes and structures are being fought over between member states at the moment, what matters for local democracy is whether the funds that sustain it survive and grow. Three battlegrounds stand out: whether cohesion funding is preserved and genuine spending discretion left with regions and local actors, rather than folded into nationally managed plans; whether streams like ESF+ continue to underwrite community infrastructure; and whether democracy itself is properly resourced under AgoraEU – the new programme bundling culture, media and civil society – without the current rights-and-values programme (CERV) being diluted as it is absorbed. If those closest to citizens understand local needs best, that logic must extend to how democracy itself is funded.

The second concerns how the EU engages its own citizens, and how that engagement, in turn, builds or erodes trust in the Union. Here, the signals under the current Commission are mixed at best. The EU has embraced what critics call a "citizens turn" without always delivering real participation. The Conference

on the Future of Europe, ambitious in conception as a continent-wide dialogue, also exposed the limits of the model: genuinely participatory processes are hard to orchestrate top-down; the balance between individual citizens and organised civil society beyond Brussels proved elusive; and the deliberation rarely travelled beyond the rooms in which it happened.<sup>70</sup> Some scholars go further, reading such formats as self-legitimising exercises that mostly engage actors already in the Commission's orbit rather than citizens at large.<sup>71</sup> Set against a broader retreat from civil society consultation, amid a deregulatory "simplification" drive and complaints from civil society about its limited role in the MFF negotiations,<sup>72</sup> one question we met at the neighbourhood scale returns, magnified, at the European level. How can a culture of genuine openness to citizens' engagement and proposals be instilled, and those proposals meaningfully followed up? Failing to answer these questions satisfactorily risks further damaging trust in democracy, at both the local and EU levels.

We may close by contending that our study has shown that PB can be an important puzzle piece in trying to address the big questions of how to improve trust in democracy in the EU, no matter the scale. More specifically, it may be one important tool, among others, to find ways to better engage marginalised groups, if done right. Yet, an observation by Karl-Heinz Lambertz, former Socialist President of the European Committee of the Regions, in relation to participatory processes trying to bring citizens closer into EU policymaking and decisions, rings true across lower levels as well:

*"citizens' consultations are not a magic bullet solution that will completely eradicate the disconnect felt in every corner of Europe, [they] will contribute to increasing civic empowerment, [reinforcing] a sense of ownership in the EU, whilst strengthening transparency and democracy."<sup>73</sup>*

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In an era of rising populism and declining trust in democracy, policymakers across Europe have turned to 'democratic innovations', such as participatory budgeting, to foster civic engagement among those traditionally marginalised from local politics.

Drawing on the cases of Dublin and Warsaw, this study asks how those running participatory budgets have sought to involve a more diverse range of residents, particularly from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and marginalised groups.

It identifies a wide range of tactics for reducing the risk that participatory budgets are dominated by wealthier residents: targeting marginalised neighbourhoods through sustained outreach; widening eligibility beyond voting age and citizenship; building in transparency and multilingual guidance; offering paper and online voting; encouraging deliberation; and using sortition to better mirror a city's demographics.

It closes by considering what these local lessons offer EU-level debates on budgeting and citizen participation.

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