

**DEMOCRATIZING FISCAL GOVERNANCE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF  
PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN ARARAQUARA, BRAZIL AND CENTRAL FALLS,  
UNITED STATES**

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## INTRODUCTION

During the repression of democracy, the creation of new democratic institutions results as a response from the people, after having been ruled by a government without the best interests of the people in mind.<sup>1</sup> Current discourse on democratic backsliding calls two countries into question. Despite the United States long having held itself as a model democracy for others to follow, it is no secret that the United States' democracy does not serve all of its residents, and, in the last five years, has been acutely threatened by the previous presidential administration. A parallel history can be seen in Brazil, where the country's military dictatorship effectively trampled civil and human rights between the years 1965 and 1986, with traces of that repression still visible in the country's antecedent presidential administration. The history of Brazil's military dictatorship does not exist in a silo; Latin America is no stranger to authoritarian governments, especially ones that resulted directly or indirectly from United States involvement. The case of destructed and then re-constructed democracy that occurred in Brazil must be understood within the context of global democratic backsliding, American intervention, the influence of opposing political parties, and the will of the people.

Attempts to create more robust democratic processes within the United States come as a response to the lack of attention placed by local, state, and federal governments on certain vulnerable populations. The democratic process in question is Participatory Budgeting—a policy innovation created in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, as a means of returning to democracy after the military dictatorship so profusely distorted it.<sup>2</sup> This process has since spread

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<sup>1</sup> Lucimar Fátima and Eber Pires Marzulo, "Da democracia participativa à desdemocratização na cidade: a experiência do Orçamento Participativo em Porto Alegre," *Cadernos Metrópole* 23, no. 50 (2020): 399–422, <https://doi.org/10.1590/2236-9996.2021-5016>.

<sup>2</sup> Leonardo Avritzer, "Instituições participativas e desenho institucional: algumas considerações sobre a variação da participação no Brasil democrático," *Opinião Pública* 4 (2008): 43–64, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-62762008000100002>.

around the world, influencing the way cities choose the uses of their public budgets. In the United States, it has spread to cities like New York, Chicago, Cambridge, Nashville, and, the focus of this paper, Central Falls, Rhode Island. Ironically, the same highly democratic process has lost traction in many parts of Brazil, its native country.

Theorists argue that there are fundamental differences in the purposes behind PB in countries like the United States compared to those in Latin America. This paper serves as a comparative analysis of the functionality of Participatory Budgeting in Central Falls, Rhode Island and Araraquara, Brazil, the latter being a rare stronghold in this approach. Grounded in Brazil's democratic struggle and the underrepresentation of marginalized communities in the United States, this analysis examines the contextual nuances that determine the proliferation of Participatory Budgeting, and the circumstances of its dissolution. This paper investigates how budgets are otherwise controlled in both countries, and explores the metrics for evaluating a participatory democracy. Drawing upon ethnographical and empirical insight gained from fieldwork in both countries, this report ultimately seeks to answer the question: Does Participatory Budgeting uplift underrepresented voices in nurturing an engaged citizenry, and what role do both governmental and non-governmental actors play in cultivating a culture of democratic participation?

Commencing with an explanation of the fundamental aspects of Participatory Budgeting, and subsequently a historical overview of democratic repression in Brazil, the foundational narrative unfolds to preface the emergence of PB. The heart of this research lies in the meticulous examination, data collection, and firsthand observations of the PB process in the months of June and July 2023 in Araraquara, Brazil. This is immediately followed by its counterpart study in the summer of 2022 in Central Falls, Rhode Island. It then contains an

overview of the rise of PB in the United States as well as key differences in the way budgets are governed in both countries. The last section provides conclusions, final comparisons, as well as recommendations for global practitioners in PB cities throughout the world—what can be learned from two distinct cities where history and circumstance has shaped their convergence and divergence of participatory ideals?

## **THE FUNDAMENTALS OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING**

Although Participatory Budgeting began in Porto Alegre, the Participatory Budgeting World Atlas estimates that between 11,690 and 11,825 municipalities practice PB worldwide, with the highest concentrations in Europe and South America.<sup>3</sup> Although processes and experiences can vary widely by design, “they have all opened up a portion of public spending (normally from the capital budget) to the citizen mandate.”<sup>4</sup> The skeleton of Participatory Budgeting usually includes the residents identifying local community needs, brainstorming and presenting potential project solutions to these needs, and electing representatives to be part of the negotiation and budgeting process for the execution of those ideas.<sup>5</sup> Basal to the process is its recurring nature. PB is not meant to take the form of a one-time Ad Hoc meeting or town hall, but a continuous and institutionalized process.<sup>6</sup> Another key dimension of PB is the pedagogical learning aspect, where participants, voters, and representatives alike learn about democratic practices and develop their agency.

## **HISTORY OF DEMOCRATIC REPRESSION IN BRAZIL 1968-2023**

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<sup>3</sup> “World.” Participatory Budgeting World Atlas, [www.pbatlas.net/world.html](http://www.pbatlas.net/world.html).

<sup>4</sup> Gianpaolo Baiocchi, and Josh Lerner. “Could Participatory Budgeting Work in the United States?” *The Good Society* 16, no. 1 (2007): 8–13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20711245>.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Cohen, Daniel Schugurensky, and Arnim Wiek. “Citizenship Education through Participatory Budgeting: The Case of Bioscience High School in Phoenix, Arizona.” *Curriculum and Teaching* 30, no. 2 (2015): 5-26, Doi: 10.7459/ct/30.2.02/

<sup>6</sup> Hollie Russon Gilman, “The Participatory Turn: Participatory Budgeting Comes to America” (APSA 2013 Annual Meeting Paper, American Political Science Association 2013 Annual Meeting, 2013), Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2300682>.

The military dictatorship of 1965 to 1986 threatened the country's political rights whilst deceiving the Brazilian public with promises of a false democracy. With the rhetoric that Brazilians wanted and asked for the coup d'état that usurped president João Goulart, the military advanced the propaganda that lasted so many years and continues to be disseminated today. The Goulart presidency was considered a vestige of the final stage of the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas, Brazil's leader during World War II, whose administration adopted communist measures to appeal to the public. Groups sponsored by the United States, large scale capitalists, and powerful landowners positioned themselves against the Goulart government, in opposition of workers and student unions, nationalists, and intellectuals. The United States government was arduously involved in the coup of 1964, playing a crucial role in the legitimization of the military coup and effectively deauthorizing the power of the people.<sup>7</sup> During the 21 years of the military dictatorship, the patrimonialist government weakened the political rights of the Brazilian populace, establishing a dangerous precedent for the entire world.

In a little over two long decades, the dictatorial state passed 17 Institutional Acts, each one tinged with clientelism and patronage, violently guaranteeing more power to the military government and less for the rest of Brazil. Institutional Act I augmented presidential power while diminishing political rights. Similarly, Institutional Act II changed the rules of governance, making presidential elections indirect, removing the right of the country to directly elect their head of state. Institutional Act III constricted even more the parameters of participation, decreeing that the military would select the mayors of important cities as a means of keeping power within the hands of those serving the interests of the military. Institutional Act V, passed in 1968, was arguably the most dangerous of all the institutional acts, serving as the decree that

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<sup>7</sup> James Naylor Green and Thomas E. Skidmore, *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

legalized torture, mass incarceration, and censorship.<sup>8</sup> It closed congress and suspended habeas corpus. Through Institutional Act V, the military institutionalized the repressive apparatus that remained in the country for the next two decades, combining the government, the army, the judiciary, and the prison system to create a violent and repressive structure. This repressive apparatus primarily persecuted students, professors, artists, singers, creatives, and thinkers—people whose thoughts were a threat to the military dictatorship.<sup>9</sup>

## THE RISE OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Participatory budgeting arose as a result of the organizing and demands of marginalized people, along with the rise in power of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party) or PT. More important for the creation of PB than party politics, however, are activists in civil society, governing coalitions, and the people. In Porto Alegre, the parties and the people unified to develop deliberative policymaking institutions such as PB, creating participatory publics.<sup>10</sup> These publics are not only involved in the implementation of policy but actively deliberate and discuss their needs.<sup>11</sup> The transition to democracy in the latter half of the 1980s encouraged social mobilization that fought against the corruption, clientelism, and patronage that seeped through Latin America, and PB accomplishes this by creating venues to overcome political exclusion.

These forums allow for the public to organize and promote their personal and collective agendas, which was actively illegal during the dictatorship. The repressive apparatus of the military dictatorship began to collapse in 1974, when global attention pressured the military to

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<sup>8</sup> Tatyana de Amaral Maia, "Intellectuals, Rights and the Censorship of Public Entertainment During the Dictatorship: Tensions, Accommodations, and Ambivalences (1967-1985)," *Revista De História*, São Paulo, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2316-9141.rh.2021.167428>.

<sup>9</sup> James Green, "From Democracy to Dictatorship," HIST 1310: History of Brazil, Class lesson, Brown University, Providence, RI, April 13, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Wampler and Leonardo Avritzer, "Participatory Publics: Civil Society and New Institutions in Democratic Brazil," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 3 (2004): 29–32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4150132>.

<sup>11</sup> John S. Dryzek et al., "The Crisis of Democracy and the Science of Deliberation," *Science Magazine* 363, no. 6432 (2019).

create a less conservative state. These calls to action generated more activity against the dictatorship, like alternative press, wage increase demands, and movements against the high cost of living. The military dictatorship was losing power, and they knew it. Thus, the transition to democracy was a controlled process, one in which the military ensured they would never be held accountable for their crimes.<sup>12</sup>

Slowly, the military government restarted parliamentary activity and restored the electoral calendar. The first democratic elections for president since 1960 took place during the period of the *Nova República* (New Republic) of 1985-90, signifying the rise of political parties opposed to the dictatorship and the creation of the first Citizens' Constitution. The latter proved monumental in the transition from dictatorship to democracy, being the first time in more than 20 years that the government truly considered the needs of its people. The new Constitution criminalized racism, demarked Indigenous territories, recognized *quilombos* (former resistance communities of enslaved people), and eliminated the literacy requirement for voting.<sup>1314</sup> The military, however, exempted itself from its destruction of human rights, atrocity crimes, and blatant repression of democracy.

Important in this transition was the rise of political parties that did not serve the interests of the dictatorship, particularly in Porto Alegre.<sup>15</sup> The PT built a wide base of support in the country, reaching a level of institutionalization as it evolved from a labor union to one of the strongest political parties in Brazil. They created a party ideologically different from other

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Sabatini and Jon Wallace, "Democracy in Brazil," Chatham House, January 24, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/01/democracy-brazil>.

<sup>13</sup> Rebecca Lemos Igreja, "Combate al racismo y la discriminación racial en Brasil: legislación y acción institucional," *Desacatos*, no. 55 (2016): 32-49, [http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1607-050X2016000200032&lng=es&tlng=es](http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1607-050X2016000200032&lng=es&tlng=es).

<sup>14</sup> *Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil*. 1988.

<sup>15</sup> Gianpaolo Baiocchi, "Participation, Activism, and Politics: The Porto Alegre Experiment," in *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, ed. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright (New York: Verso, 2003).

Brazilian political parties, self-defined as a social democratic party.<sup>16</sup> Half of the 103 municipalities that saw the successful implementation of PB had mayors from the PT, and the process reached its peak nationwide when the party achieved federal jurisdiction in 2002.<sup>17</sup>

The years between 1989 and 2010 were the strongest in terms of the creation of new instruments for popular participation. Apart from Participatory Budgeting, these instruments included the *Plano Diretor* (Master Plan) and the rise of *conselhos* (councils) and *ministérios* (ministries) to govern the city. Plano Diretor, or Municipal Complementary Law n. 5.481/2019, is a political instrument for municipal land use planning and development. Integral to Plano Diretor is the search for citizens' equity, health, security, and well-being in the use of public spaces, defined through a myriad of criteria that promotes and strengthens urban diversity and vitality.<sup>18</sup> In the years following, political disruptions and shifts diminished civic engagement across the country—a wave of neoliberal ideologies assuming power, which meant a significant reduction in municipalities governed by the socially-democratic PT.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, congresspeople and senators at this time, especially after 2014, governed with great resistance to participatory practices. A reduction in governments led by the Workers' Party led to a weakening of PB across the country, even while it spread to other parts of the world.<sup>20</sup>

## THE CASE OF ARARAQUARA, BRAZIL

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<sup>16</sup> Alejandro Lezcano Schwarzkopf, "Sociedade civil, partidos políticos e inter-relações: um estudo comparativo entre Porto Alegre e Montevidéu," *Opinião Pública* 25 (2009): 69–98, <https://doi.org/10.1590/1807-01912019251169>.

<sup>17</sup> Carla de Paiva Bezerra and Murilo de Oliveira Junqueira, "Why Has Participatory Budgeting Declined in Brazil?" *Brazilian Political Science Review* 6, no. 2 (2022): e0002. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1981-3821202200020001>.

<sup>18</sup> Rammyro Leal Almeida, Deisy Nayanny de Brito Silva, and Jairo de Carvalho Guimarães, "Espaços Públicos Urbanos No Novo Plano Diretor De Ordenamento Territorial De Teresina," *Cadernos Metrópole* 25, no. 56 (January 2023): 65–84, <https://doi.org/10.1590/2236-9996.2023-5607>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> João Marcus Pires Días, "30 Anos de Orçamento Participativo (OP) Na Região Metropolitana de São Paulo: A Trajetória Da Governança Participativa," in *Metropolização, governança e direito à cidade: dinâmicas, escalas e estratégias*, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 2020, pp. 267–283.

Despite the political changes that ended and weakened PB where it was previously strong, one city in particular defied these odds. Araraquara, nestled in the interior of the state of São Paulo, Brazil, boasts a population of 250,314 and scorching hot temperatures year round, known as the *moradia do sol* (home of the sun).<sup>21</sup> *Orçamento Participativo* (Participatory Budgeting) was introduced by the *Governo da Frente Democrática e Popular* (Government of the Democratic and Popular Front), a coalition of left-wing political parties and movements, principally the PT. It was their most notable project, a stark difference from Porto Alegre, where civil society mobilized heavily for its implementation. In Araraquara, executive municipal power birthed PB.<sup>22</sup>

The early implementation of PB in Araraquara was guided by representatives from the Porto Alegre and Caxias do Sul city administrations. Araraquara was initially divided into eight regions; seven urban regions and one all-encompassing rural one. Thematic plenaries<sup>23</sup> were then created in 2002 to allow people to propose more targeted project ideas. It is worth noting that at this time there were only five “themes”: women, seniors, people with disabilities, the youth, and Afro-descendants.<sup>24</sup>

Participatory budgeting was codified as a municipal law in the year 2001 under Prefeito Edinho Silva of the PT through *Lei* (law) nº 5592. From 2002 until 2008, the city, like others governed by the Workers’ Party, implemented its own participatory democracy projects. When the opposing party, the *Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira* (Brazilian Social Democracy Party) or PSDB, took power from 2008 until 2017, participatory democracy took a backseat,

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<sup>21</sup> IBGE - Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, "Panorama: Araraquara, São Paulo, Brasil," Cidades, 2022, <https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/brasil/sp/araraquara/panorama>.

<sup>22</sup> Elielson Carneiro da Silva, "Entre o Legal e o Real: A Autoridade da Comunidade e do Governo no Desenvolvimento do Orçamento Participativo de Araraquara," *Temas de Administração Pública*, Araraquara, v. 4, n. 5 (2010).

<sup>23</sup> A meeting or session attended by all participants at a conference or assembly.

<sup>24</sup> "Internal Participatory Budgeting Bylaws," Araraquara Câmara Municipal, 2023.

exemplified in the construction of buildings outside the parameters of the Plano Diretor and the falling infrastructure of PB. The PSDB is a center-right party, the most direct opposing party of the PT. As a result, Araraquara was without PB for a decade, following the political trends of other municipalities in Brazil. Despite the more conservative election results, recent interviews of more liberally-aligned citizens described that Araraquara remained ideologically progressive, and the population felt the profound loss of not only PB, but also other measures of popular participation.<sup>25</sup>

When Prefeito Silva was re-elected as mayor in 2017, this marked the return of the highly deliberative democratic process. PB has since become an important element of local politics, a distinct indicator of the success of Prefeito Silva. Although imperfect, *Orçamento Participativo* (Participatory Budgeting) in Araraquara is structured to ensure the maximum level of public participation; scaffolded to ensure residents have every opportunity to vote.

In the new structure of PB (2017 onwards), Araraquara is divided into 11 regions based on geographic divisions and homogeneity along indicators of socio-economic and cultural commonalities, an evolution from the original eight. Each region is divided into smaller subregions based on similar criteria. The process is sustained and organized by the *Coordenadoria de Participação Popular* (Office of Popular Participation).<sup>26</sup> They begin facilitating the PB process every February with the subregional plenaries—the preparatory phase for the regional plenaries. The public proposes and votes on topics during these assemblies, ranging from health to sport to education. After the subregional plenaries, the PB team begins

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<sup>25</sup> Renato Ribeiro, Interview by Michelle Alas Molina, "Introduction to Araraquara," June 21, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> I use "Office of Popular Participation" interchangeably with "Participatory Budgeting (PB) Team."

organizing the regional plenaries around April, where anybody in the region can propose a project or program within the previously chosen topics.<sup>27</sup>

Beside the 11 regional plenaries, the city hosts additional thematic plenaries based on the same five identities mentioned earlier: women, seniors, the youth, people with disabilities, the Black community, and, as of 2017, the LGBTQ+ community. At the thematic plenaries, only self-identifying members of the respective community may be present and vote. Depending on how citizens self-identify, they may be able to attend more than one plenary. No preliminary (subregional) plenaries are held for thematic sessions; the population comes prepared with projects that benefit their specific population and the city as a whole. In a separate process from the regional and thematic plenaries, the public votes online throughout the year to prioritize three topics for the grand city-wide plenary. In total, 18 projects are chosen at various levels, and all 18 projects are funded and executed by the city each year.<sup>28</sup>

The PB bylaws delineate a series of regulations. Plenaries are only canceled for extraordinary circumstances, such as a natural disaster, and must be rescheduled no later than 15 days after the date of the original plenary. Participants must be at least 16 years of age (15 in the case of the Youth Plenary). In the case of the senior plenary, the winning project must have won at least 30 percent of the vote. To avoid the workday, all plenaries are held at 7 pm on weeknights.

According to the bylaws, plenaries are publicized through various means of communication, such as the internet, radio, official pages, television, pamphlets, announcement cars, joint mobilization efforts, etc.. Before each plenary, the PB team is constantly canvassing in the community to encourage participation, reaching out to community leaders, going to public

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<sup>27</sup> Caio Bellintani and Chumbinho, Interview by Michelle Alas Molina, "Participatory Budgeting in Araraquara," July 13, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

spaces with significant foot traffic like parks and schools and conversing with individuals, knocking on doors, and setting up posters and flyers in public places. The popular participation does not end with the voting. Each region and theme will have elected representatives to be part of the *Conselho do Orçamento Participativo* (Council of Participatory Budgeting) where they engage in discussion along with the city staff and two secretaries and two substitutes of the public sector, for each region and theme. At most, one representative is elected for every ten people present at that particular plenary. For the region, those representatives are chosen in the subregional plenaries, while for each theme and city they are chosen at their respective plenaries.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to the 3,314 votes in the digital, preparatory phase for the city-wide PB plenary, the 2023 PB process in Araraquara boasted 5,419 voters in the city-wide, regional, sunregional, and thematic plenaries, summing up to a total of 8,733 votes.<sup>30</sup> The highest amount of participation resulted from the regional plenaries, followed by the subregional plenaries, and then the thematic plenaries.<sup>31</sup> In each of the thematic plenaries, at the women's plenary, there were 78 attendees, at the Black Community plenary there were 137 attendees, the people with disabilities plenary had 166 attendees, the LGBTQIA+ plenary had 122 participants, and the senior plenary had 232 attendees.<sup>32</sup>

As a researcher, I made the nine-hour round bus trip to Araraquara from São Paulo three times, observing a thematic plenary, a regional plenary, and the city-wide plenary. I interviewed current and former employees of the Office on Popular Participation (including the Executive

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> "Orçamento Participativo: coordenador ressalta engajamento popular," July 25, 2023, Araraquara Câmara Municipal, <https://www.araraquara.sp.gov.br/noticias/direitos-humanos-e-participacao-popular/orcamento-participativo-coordenador-ressalta-engajamento-popular>.

<sup>31</sup> Some, however, may be repeat voters who attended multiple plenaries.

<sup>32</sup> "Balanço Orçamento Participativo Temáticas 2023," August 8, 2023, Araraquara Office of Popular Participation.

Coordinator), and spoke with various council people and secretaries as well as the mayor himself. I interviewed participants in each of the plenary sessions to ask their opinions on PB and their motivations behind attending, and observed the process, from sign-in to the announcement of the winning projects.

## YOUTH THEMATIC PLENARY—ARARAQUARA, BRAZIL

The *Plenária da Juventude* (Youth Plenary) was held on 21 June 2023, with 191 participants in attendance.<sup>33</sup> For the thematic plenaries, quorum is 50 people, and a plenary with less than quorum gets canceled. Each participant was directed to a member of the PB team, where they have to answer a questionnaire with their name, phone number, sex, date of birth, ethnicity, whether or not they participated in a PB plenary in the past, whether or not they are part of a government welfare program like *Bolsa Família*, and their neighborhood. Then they are handed their voting placard, a small tagboard rectangle with the PB logo.



OP Placard, Araraquara, 2023.  
Source: Author

This plenary began with a student band welcoming participants into the auditorium of *ETEC Profª Anna de Oliveira Ferraz*, a *Escola Industrial*, a public school in the city. Rows of green chairs lead up to a large stage and projection screen at the front of the room. Every plenary session always begins with an explanation of the PB process given by the Municipal Secretary of Human Rights and Popular Participation, Marcelo Mazeta Lucas, both with an overview of the citywide process and the outcome of the preceding regional plenaries, if

<sup>33</sup> "Orçamento Participativo: Centro da Juventude será reformado e ampliado," June 22, 2023, Araraquara Câmara Municipal, <https://www.araraquara.sp.gov.br/noticias/direitos-humanos-e-participacao-popular/orcamento-participativo-centro-da-juventude-sera-reformado-e-ampliado>.

applicable. During this, the Municipal Secretary also announces the presence of the city secretaries, council people, and managers that are present at the plenary, listening to the wants and needs of the people. I conducted surveys among 15 students before the plenary began, which revealed some of their opinions on the effectiveness of PB. When asked how students felt about the PB process, one answered, “I feel represented, as it allows me to express my ideas about what my neighborhood needs.”<sup>34</sup> Another respondent wrote they felt as if they were “part of something bigger.” Another respondent expressed that “it is important to have a voice in public decisions.”

The Executive Coordinator of Popular Participation, Renato Ribeiro, opened the floor for any participant to present any idea. The three projects proposed during this Youth Plenary were the construction of a new city sports gym, reform and amplification of the *Centro da Juventude* (youth center), and the construction of a *Centro Profissionalizante e Entretenimento* (Professional and Entertainment Center). Three young people arose to present each of their proposals in turn.

One student wearing a basketball jersey, with a slew of boys dressed in the same attire roaring their support, walked timidly to the front of the plenary. He cleared his throat before reciting the pitch he had clearly written with care—the creation of a new city

sports gym, with courts and fields to practice basketball, soccer, volleyball, and futsal (a



Youth Plenary, Araraquara, 2023.  
Source: Author

<sup>34</sup> Michelle Alas Molina, "Araraquara Youth Plenary" Questionnaire, June 21, 2023, [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSecLBBWWt-hRKJNuUabN1-o6HNZ\\_FOPNy6offJUnnhKCSQYDA/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSecLBBWWt-hRKJNuUabN1-o6HNZ_FOPNy6offJUnnhKCSQYDA/viewform).

soccer-like game played on a hard surface). His reasoning was that, despite the city having two sports centers, it is difficult to find vacant spots solely reserved for the youth. Thunderous applause and chanting, particularly from the group of boys in basketball jerseys, followed his speech. The second proposal also had a similar group of supporters, with another young person explaining their reasoning behind the amplification of the city youth center for students who are socially at-risk, which she described as youth who are no longer in school, have fallen into drug use, and been forced into child labor. This proposal advocated to renovate and amplify a space that currently rehabilitates a limited amount of socially at-risk youth. That proposal was also met with exclamation and applause. The third and final proposal was presented by a young person who advocated for the construction of a Professional and Entertainment Center, which he described as a mix of the first two ideas and a center for youth professional development.

It is clear just from observing the young people that factions had formed around certain issues, even before the proposed projects had been presented. This informal organization surprised me and led to several conclusions. The first being the presence of *community coherence*. The young people united to defend their needs and wants and found a way to organize before the plenary so that they came prepared with the numbers necessary to win the vote, despite no formal mechanism existing to do so. The second conclusion matches the first, and that is the constituents' significant level of *community trust* in the government and in the Participatory Budgeting process to come prepared with a cause, design a plan, prepare a speech, and elect a spokesperson. If the populace did not believe in the efficacy and the power of Participatory Budgeting, they would not go through the trouble of participating. The third conclusion is that Participatory Budgeting is *common knowledge*, it is a simple and accepted fact in the Araraquara community. It is expected that the community had *deliberated* beforehand.

That is what is so unique about PB in Araraquara—it opens formal and informal spaces for deliberation.

The Coordinator returned to the front of the room and one by one began listing projects. He asked everyone to raise their hands after each project, and members of the PB team walked around and collected the placards to put in an envelope marked with the number of the corresponding project. After all the placards were collected, Renato asked for those who would like to be representatives in the ensuing negotiations with the city government in the following weeks. Another wave of hands went up and those volunteers were then called to the front, as the PB team manually counted the placards in each of the envelopes.

The recently appointed youth PB representatives stood in the front, as State Senator Thainara Faria announced the winning project with 80 votes: the reform and amplification of the youth center. The auditorium erupted, noticeably from the group of supporters sitting in the back right. They stood up to yell and whistle and clap, with a smattering of other people throughout the auditorium doing so as well. In front of this group of celebrators are a group that is significantly less celebratory, the students in basketball jerseys with open jaws and reluctant applause. They whisper to each other, eyes wide with surprise and indignation. They were cognizant, however, how the voting worked, and the possibility that their project might not win, and that that was the reality of PB.

## **REGION 8 PLENARY—ARARAQUARA, BRAZIL**

The Region 8 Plenary was held on Thursday, 13 July 2023 at *Emef Rafael de Medina* (public school) in Jardim Eliana with a total of 162 participants (quorum is 100 for regional

plenaries).<sup>35</sup> As people are taking their seats, I had the chance to gather insights into their perspectives on the effectiveness of PB and their motivations for attending.

Participants A and B explained they were concerned about their neighborhoods' rainwater flooding issue, pointing out the residents around them present for the same call to action. They said they were



confident that the government would listen to their needs because of the sheer number of projects they had seen successfully realized in the past.

PB Team, Region 8 Plenary, Araraquara, 2023.  
Source: Author

Participant C said that they feel PB is very effective because “the movement of the populace always comes out winning...there are always several projects proposed, and the one that wins is the one that the people want the most.” He explains how he sees PB plenaries as some of the few times that residents can be together with city staff. When I asked him if PB leads him to participate more in other democratic processes, like going to a city committee meeting or conference, he responded “No, because they are not as accessible as PB, which is brought practically to your doorstep, in a common gathering center within your neighborhood.” This statement supported the notion that, for a successful democracy, governments need to meet people where they are at.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> "Orçamento Participativo: CRAS do Yolanda Ópice passará por reforma e ampliação," July 14, 2023, Araraquara Câmara Municipal, <https://www.araraquara.sp.gov.br/noticias/direitos-humanos-e-participacao-popular/orcamento-participativo-cras-do-yolanda-opice-passara-por-reforma-e-ampliacao>.

<sup>36</sup> Michelle Alas, Interview at the Region 8 Plenary, Araraquara, Brazil, July 13, 2023.

Region 8 had held three sub-regional plenaries to identify the needs of the community. As with all of the plenaries, various municipal secretaries, city staff, and managers are sitting at the front of the room, among them the president of the municipal chamber and a city councilor.

The five proposed projects were 1.) a rainwater sewage system, 2.) reform and amplification of a *Centro de Referência de Assistência Social* (Reference Center for Social Assistance), commonly referred to as a CRAS, 3.) installation of surveillance cameras on Av. Santos Dumont, 4.) reform and amplification of the *CER Amelia Favero Manini* (early learning school), 5.) reform and amplification of a *Centro Municipal de Saúde da Comunidade* (Municipal Community Health Center), commonly referred to as a CMSC, on Vila Melhado. Five community members arose to present each of the proposals for their region, each with supporting images and a small group of champions. During the voting phase, the Executive Coordinator, Renato Ribeiro, announced each of the projects one by one, while members of the PB team collected the placards as they were raised and put them in a corresponding envelope, to be counted manually.

I interviewed one last voter, who explained to me that while she is originally from Araraquara, she only recently returned after having lived out of the city for 25 years. She had observed that while every city has city council meetings and conferences to involve the populace, the level of participation is very low, whereas PB is considerably more effective in reaching people due to its intentional involvement of the community.<sup>37</sup>

### **CITY-WIDE PLENARY—ARARAQUARA, BRAZIL**

The preparatory phase of the city-wide plenary is conducted online, where three topics are chosen by anyone who logs into the city website to vote before July 14. The list of topics the city can choose from consist of recurring themes in past plenaries, as determined by the Office of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Popular Participation. The city-wide plenary was held on 19 July 2023. In the five days in between the digital voting deadline and the debut of the city-wide plenary, the Office of Participatory Democracy discloses the three winning topics to the public, giving the community the opportunity to organize project ideas within these topics. This process of prioritization is distinct from the regional and thematic plenaries.

In the former, topics are chosen during subregional plenaries, and the specific project ideas within those topics are then proposed at the regional plenaries. At the thematic plenary, the respective “theme” is considered the topic, limiting proposals to those that serve that community identity. For 2023’s city-wide plenary, the three winning topics (with their vote distribution) were 1.) animal well-being (33.3%), 2.) drug policy program (17.9%), 3.) sport and leisure (16.7%).



Results of Digital PB, Araraquara, 2023.  
Source: Author

After attending and observing three plenaries, the informal community preparation that occurs before each plenary continues to amaze me. Community leaders and activists rally around a cause that attracts much support, and through social media, they are able to draw large numbers for their cause. I observed that, despite there being clear factions of support, the groups were disjointed, meaning that not everyone who was there supporting one issue was necessarily sitting in the same space in the auditorium.

Before the voting started, I interviewed around 10 participants, making sure to purposefully seek out voters in various parts of the auditorium. When I asked one participant

whether she felt that through PB, the city government heard her needs and concerns, she answered “my direct needs no, but indirectly, I feel like my needs are met through PB.” When asked why she was present today, she answered that she finds she is “completing her duty as a citizen.” Another participant said that PB gives the city’s residents the opportunity to design the city they want based on their needs, rather than having projects and reforms imposed on them without their input. This interviewee was there to defend the project related to drug politics and rehabilitation, citing the housing crisis and the need for the city government to take more vigorous action. My third interviewee expressed worry that the Workers’ Party would lose municipal power in Araraquara during the next election cycle, a change that would mark the end of PB, which she said has made her feel closer to her local government and increased her civic participation. She said she now takes part in Black justice, drug policy, and immigrant rights movements because PB inspires her to do so.

My next interviewee’s thoughts deviated from those of most of my respondents. They said that the success of PB depends largely on the people that show up; there is room for a non-essential project to be approved simply because that cause managed to mobilize more people to attend the plenary. She was there for the animal well-being cause, saying she thinks the city needs a reformed veterinary hospital. This voter had brought her mother and her partner, a testament to the importance of interpersonal organizing.

Another interviewee said, “We are the ones who enter the veterinarian's office and health centers, and we determine what those spaces need and what they lack. We are the ones who truly see and decide what needs reforms.” She said this was her second plenary of the week, and she was there that night for the animal cause.

My last interviewee commented on how she had seen extraordinary unity in past plenaries by unlikely allies—people who came originally supporting one project ended up switching teams and uniting for another, more pressing project. She considers the PB process in Araraquara as the best in the region. During her interview, a group of participants began clapping and chanting loudly as the plenary began. She pointed this out with a smile, “It’s exciting, isn’t it?...At the beginning, I didn’t really believe in PB, until I started to participate, and it won me over.”<sup>38</sup>

While people’s opinions varied on how and why they thought PB to be an effective process in hearing the needs of the people, every person I interviewed in all three plenaries agreed on one question: they felt closer to the city government because of PB, testament to Araraquara’s culture of democratic participation.

460 people in total voted in the city-wide plenary. Every seat was filled, and there was a considerable crowd standing in the back and spilling out into the hallway. The plenary began again with an explanation of PB, and introduction of the secretaires, city staff, and managers present, as well as Mayor Edinho Silva himself. Mayor Silva addressed the entire plenary in a 0-minute speech, in which he notably said,

I did not receive your vote to substitute your will...When the people decide what to do with public money, we are deciding the trajectory of the city. Participatory budgeting is a way of governing the city where *the people* are those who choose where the city goes. It is not city hall, nor the city councilors, nor the secretaries. The people decide the city we are going to construct because you decide where we are going to invest our *public resources*. Being here is more than defending a proposal with which we are affiliated, it is about showing up year after year and building the Araraquara of your

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<sup>38</sup> Interview at the City-wide Plenary, Michelle Alas Molina, Araraquara, Brazil, July 19, 2023.

dreams...Democracy is about exercising our power and will. So I ask of you all, come govern Araraquara. Tonight, one proposal is going to win. But that does not mean that the others are not as equally important. It means that if Participatory Budgeting continues, all of your proposals will become reality.<sup>39</sup>

Mayor Silva was not simply inspiring people to continue participating in PB, but also making a political call to action in the advent of the 2024 mayoral elections. The continuation of



City-wide Plenary, Araraquara, 2023.

Source: Author

PB in Araraquara is contingent on the PT keeping power, and their loss would decisively mean the end of participatory politics. Interestingly, it is not wholly the PT that must maintain power, but rather Mayor Silva. From my interviews with

employees in the Office of Popular Participation,

Mayor Silva is larger than the PT, so established in Brazilian politics and popular in Araraquara that he could even switch parties and his supporters would move with him.

After his speech, the Coordinator began inviting people to present their project ideas. The first project proposal was the construction of a reference center on drug politics, where the spokesperson was a former addict turned advocate. The second featured a team of three advocates for animal well-being, proposing the expansion of the city's veterinary hospital. The third and last proposal was a repeat of the Youth Plenary, with the construction of a new sports center. Renato then repeated the same placard collecting process as with the first two plenaries and called for volunteer representatives. With the representatives that would accompany the rest

<sup>39</sup> Mayor's Speech at the City-wide Plenary, Edinho Silva, Araraquara, Brazil, July 19, 2023.

of the PB negotiation process present at the front of the room, Renato announced the winning project: the center for animal well-being won with 242 votes, with the latter two each receiving 109 votes.<sup>40</sup>

## **POST-VOTING PARTICIPATORY PROCESS—ARARAQUARA, BRAZIL**

The *Conselho do Orçamento Participativo* (Council of Participatory Budgeting) has the responsibilities of positioning themselves for or against the proposed *Plano de Investimentos do Orçamento Participativo* (Participatory Budgeting Investment Plan), to be submitted to the Municipal Legislature by 30 September, and are obligated to meet at least once every month, with a fixed date established in the first meeting. The Council gives their opinions and decides the best course of action for the Plan, effectively having a vote in the matter. They do not, however, have the purview to change the original proposal. All meetings are open to the public, allowing any person to attend and share their thoughts on any project. Representatives do not receive any sort of compensation for their contributions in the negotiations.

In 2017, the Council of PB approved 18 projects that equaled R\$ 17,954,400 (US\$3,685,302.19) from the 2016 year.<sup>41</sup> In 2018, the total projects equaled R\$ 10,850,000 (US\$2,227,060.15).<sup>42</sup> These investments measured up to be only a fraction of the entire city budget, 2.14% and 1.22% respectively, but a large part of municipal investments. In 2020, R\$ 16,600,000 (US\$ 3,392,671.10) were also invested in PB, this time forming 1.68% of the total budget. Since Covid, Araraquara has only had one complete PB process, with the total equaling R\$ 19,400,000 (US\$ 3,963,187.2), or 1.41% of the total budget for 2023. Between 2017 and 2019, 55 works

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<sup>40</sup> "Construção de nova sede do Bem-estar Animal vence a Plenária da Cidade," Câmara Municipal Araraquara, July 20, 2023, <https://www.araraquara.sp.gov.br/noticias/direitos-humanos-e-participacao-popular/construcao-de-nova-sede-do-bem-estar-animal-vence-a-plenaria-da-cidade>.

<sup>41</sup> Ricardo de João Braga. "Politics plus Management: Participatory Budgeting in Araraquara, Brazil." Siegen, June 2019.

<sup>42</sup> "Orçamento de 2019 é entregue na Câmara Municipal." Câmara Municipal de Araraquara. September 28, 2018. <https://camara-arq.sp.gov.br/noticias/orcamento-de-2019-e-entregue-na-camara-municipal,28-09-2018>.

were elected, and 22 were elected in 2022.<sup>43</sup> The projected cost for 2023's PB is R\$ 9.4 million (US\$ 3,896,892.6).<sup>44</sup> The figure shows Araraquara's projects from the year 2022, all of which are, at the time of writing, in project development.<sup>45</sup>

Region 1	Renovation and expansion of the CAIC Ricardo Caramuru de Castro Monteiro complex
Region 2	Renovation and expansion of the CER Prof. Eunice Bonilha Piza
Region 3	Renovation and expansion of the Altamira Elementary School (EMEF)
Region 4	Renovation and expansion of the CER Concheta
Region 5	Construction of a Day Center for the elderly in the Santa Angelina neighborhood
Region 6	Construction of the Céu das Artes project in the Jd. América neighborhood
Region 7	Renovation and expansion of the CER Antônio Tavares
Region 8	* Renovation and expansion of the CER Maria Barcarolla Filié
Region 9	Renovation and expansion of the Hortências Health Unit (USF)
Region 10	Renovation and expansion of the Bela Vista Settlement Health Center, with an expansion of the team
Region 11	Construction of a dedicated headquarters for the CRAS (Social Assistance Reference

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> "Projeto de lei orçamentária prevê recursos na ordem de R\$ 1,3 bilhão para 2023." *Câmara Municipal Araraquara*, September 30, 2022. <https://www.araraquara.sp.gov.br/noticias/direitos-humanos-e-participacao-popular/construcao-de-nova-sede-do-be-m-estar-animal-vence-a-plenaria-da-cidade>.

<sup>45</sup> The Project for the People with Disabilities plenary is missing from the 2022 table.

	Center)
Youth	Renovation of the Skate parks
LGBTQIA+	Income redistribution program for the LGBTQIAP+ community
Women	Establishment of a Rural Bakery in the Bela Vista Settlement
Black Community	Memorial of the History and Culture of the Black Population
Seniors	Construction of a Day Center in the North Zone of Araraquara
City	Establishment of a House of Hip Hop

The following are the projects that were elected during this past PB process in 2023.

Region 1	Reform and expansion of CER Zilda Martins Pierri - (Jardim Paraíso)
Region 2	Reform and Expansion - USF Marivan "Adolfo Leo" (Jardim Aclimação)
Region 3	Reform and expansion of the complex "EMEF Caic Rubens Cruz Prefeito" (Selmi Dei)
Region 4	Reform and expansion of CER Eduardo Borges Coelho (Morumbi)
Region 5	Creation of the Cultural Center - Former municipal slaughterhouse (St Angelina)
Region 6	Reform and Expansion of CMS "Dr Marcelo Edgard Druet" (Jd America)
Region 7	Reform and expansion of CER Padre Mário Cavaretti Filho (Altos de Pinheiros)
Region 8	Reform and Expansion of Cras Benedito Rufino de Moura (Yolanda Ópice)
Region 9	Reform and Expansion of CER Professora Maria Jose Pahin da Porciúncula (Jardim Iguatemy)

Region 10	Reform and expansion of the health unit "Dirce Regassi Cândido" - Monte Alegre Settlement
Region 11	Construction of a Health Unit in Ibirás
Youth	Reform and expansion of the Youth Center
LGBTQIA+	Creation of a Cultural and Sports Center for the LGBTQIA+ community
Women	Establishment of a Rural Bakery in the Bela Vista Settlement
Black Community	Expansion of Quilombo Rosa
Seniors	Construction of a Day Center for the Elderly in Cruzeiro do Sul
People with Disabilities	Expansion of the Municipal Center of Reference for People with Autism "Aldo Pavão Júnior"
City	Headquarters for Animal Welfare with an outpatient clinic

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## PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN 2022—CENTRAL FALLS, RHODE ISLAND

Many of Central Falls residents do not have the opportunity to vote in traditional elections, and PB offers an alternative of enfranchisement to a highly disempowered population.<sup>47</sup> PB in Central Falls looks very different from PB in Araraquara, not following the traditional model that was coined in Porto Alegre, with regional and thematic plenaries. It does, however, hold most of the fundamentals that make participatory budgeting so democratic.

<sup>46</sup> Araraquara Office of Popular Participation. "Obras Eleitas 207-2023." August 18, 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Celina Su. "Re-Engaging the Disenfranchised: Participatory Budgeting in the United States: Review of Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America," Brookings Institution Press. National Civic Review 105, no. 4 (2016): 23–28. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1002/naticivirevi.105.4.0023>.

Central Falls is situated right next to the smallest state's capital, occupying 1.3 dense square miles, and hosting 20,000 residents to the northeast of Providence.<sup>48</sup> According to the Rhode Island Secretary of State, Central Falls has 7,608 registered voters, which is around 38 percent of the city's population. Around 56 percent of these voters are registered democrats, whereas only 7 percent are republican, and the rest are unaffiliated.<sup>49</sup> The town mainly produces textiles and glass.<sup>50</sup> The United States census estimates that 71.5 percent of Central Falls residents identify as Hispanic or Latino and 38.2 percent as foreign born. The median household income in Central Falls in 2021 was \$40,235. 7.8 percent of the Central Falls population is above 65 years of age. This demographic information is important for understanding the purpose behind PB in Central Falls, which at its essence began for reasons identical or similar to those in Porto Alegre.

The city government played an integral role in the process of PB, allocating \$50,000 for the city's residents to choose the outcome. There were three central goals for this process:

1. Strengthen democracy by increasing civic engagement among participants who face historical barriers to participation.
2. Bring about personal changes in participant's skills, attitudes and behaviors related to civic engagement and empowerment.
3. Address needs identified by the Central Falls community, particularly seniors and people with disabilities.<sup>51</sup>

The city initiated a city-wide process for PB after two iterations of PB had already been instituted: PB at Central Falls High School and PB as a means to decide how to allocate

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<sup>48</sup> "Central Falls." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-Falls>

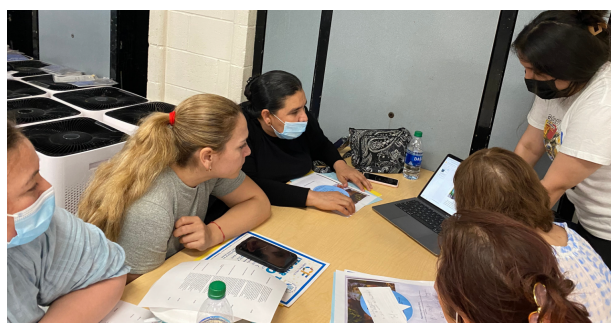
<sup>49</sup> "Registered Voter Information." *Rhode Island Department of State*. August 2023, <https://datahub.sos.ri.gov/RegisteredVoter.aspx>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

\$100,000 in ESSER funds (Covid-19 relief funds).<sup>52</sup> Process-wise, Central Falls PB was very much an effort in community organization and attempting to give a voice, and a vote, to the most vulnerable populations. A Steering Committee composed of members of the City government, researchers, teachers, and community activists met to design an original plan, one that would include as much civic participation as possible in a city where there was not yet an established culture of democratic participation. This Steering Committee then collected 120 ideas from the Central Falls community, from events happening at public housing and at the local food pantry. The largest themes that arose from this idea collection were “road and sidewalk repairs, food access, cleanliness, activities and support services for seniors, and public transportation improvements.”<sup>53</sup>

The ensuing delegate committee, called Next Door Nation (NDN) then took these ideas in phase three of the process. This committee was composed of members from non-profit organizations, community advocates, city leaders, teachers, those familiar with city politics, and those involved in PB in the past. The group was formed through interpersonal organizing, where individuals cast a wide net in public spaces and online to see who would be interested in joining the committee. Although imperfect in forming a representative sample of the city, this committee was diverse in its thought, and underwent an intensive deliberation process to create and narrow down seven proposals based on the needs of the community gathered in the



Delegate Deliberations, Central Falls 2023.  
Source: Pam Jennings

<sup>52</sup> Jill Kimball and Nancy Kirsch. "Education Scholar at Brown Sparks Civic Engagement in Central Falls and Providence." Brown University, June 28, 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

idea-collection phase. The delegates met weekly over eight weeks, facilitated by Pam Jennings, a Participatory Budgeting project manager in Rhode Island. To narrow down the prioritization of projects, the delegates used an equity-based scoring rubric, inspired by the Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP).<sup>54</sup> In addition, delegates did additional budgetary research, considered natural roadblocks in certain projects, and determined whether the city was already allocating money towards the project.

The deliberation was aided by translators and interpreters, as many delegates felt most comfortable in Spanish. By the end of the eight weeks, the delegate had created seven proposals with line-by-line cost analyses: 1.) Renovations to Veterans Park, 2.) Renovations to Governors Park, 3.) an Adopt-a-Grandparent program, 4.) Solar powered/Compacting Trash bins, 5.) a Knowledge is Power program (making community and social resources more widely known), 6.) Speed Calming (speed bumps), and 7.) Bus Stop Renovations. Delegates were surveyed before, during, and after the process, to see how, if at all, they were impacted by the deliberation process. One delegate commented, “What I liked about being a delegate was to have the opportunity to be part of a team and study and analyze the needs of my city.” According to the report made by my team of researchers at Brown University, the delegates were 10 percent more likely to “strongly agree” that they could impact the decisions their local government made. Furthermore, they reported being 15 percent more comfortable analyzing data at the end of the process. These data are in concordance with the theory for Participatory Budgeting that the deliberation process should be pedagogical, allowing its participants the chance to learn about the municipality’s bureaucratic processes.<sup>55</sup> What we see here is a participatory process that is almost the reverse of

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<sup>54</sup> PBP is a New York-based organization that aids in the implementation of PB across cities. <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/>.

<sup>55</sup> Tara Bartlett and Daniel Schugurensky, "Reinventing Freire in the 21st Century: Citizenship Education, Student Voice and School Participatory Budgeting," October 20, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.52214/cice.v23i2.8571>.

the process in Araraquara, where the itemized project development happens after the voting process and is highly democratized so that the voters can choose directly who is going to represent them at the negotiating table.

This incipient Participatory Budgeting system that has developed in Central Falls shows the examples of the limitations that arise when PB has yet to be established as a city-wide practice—less people have the opportunity to make decisions. However, that does not mean that the first PB process in Central Falls was not highly democratic and deliberative. In addition to keeping the ideas of the city at the forefront, the delegates met with city representatives to discuss project feasibility. Delegates were also provided with childcare, dinner, and a small stipend for participating.

After the seven priorities were established, the entire city was invited to vote on one of the proposals to allocate the \$50,000. Anyone who was 15 years of age or older could vote, regardless of their voting status in traditional elections. Voting was advertised through posters and flyers, social media advertisements, announcements from public officials, and interpersonal sharing. In total, 333 Central Falls residents voted on the projects, in various locations around Central Falls. The Next Door Nation team brought a mobile voting station to senior living centers in the city and the Progreso Latino food pantry. At the senior centers, the residents were informed in advance the date and time of the voting, and the team set up in the common or community rooms. There, residents were able to sit down and have a team member guide them through each of the options in a binder that delineated the title of the project, a budget estimate, and a short description, in English or Spanish, before being handed a ballot developed by the Secretary of State's office. They then were able to sit down with their ballot and pick their top three options, with ballots in English, Spanish, or Portuguese, while a team member was there to

answer any questions they may have. Voters were then invited to fill out a post-voting survey and were offered snacks for their time.<sup>56</sup>

At the food pantry, the mobile voting station looked a little different. The food pantry is a central point for the city, and it operates with the fluidity of a conveyor belt. Families must be registered and there is always a line waiting outside the door before the food pantry even opens. The line lengthens in a separate room as the families and individuals move through the different food stations, picking up cans, boxes, and packets of food. The voting tables were set up in the center of the warehouse, and after finishing with their food, people are drawn to the bustle and hustle of the voting station, curious as they see more and more of their fellow community members approaching the booths. There, the voting worked similarly to the food pantry, just with a bit more noise in the background. All voters were given “I voted” stickers at the end.

Finally, the principal voting took place at Jenks Park, right next to city hall, on 25 June 2022. Voting machines provided by the Secretary of State were set up in the gazebo. Signage and people with bright yellow shirts helped draw the attention of passersby, as well as consistent music and movement. Voters could rifle through binders with explanations of the projects, ask questions to members of the NDN team, and take their time voting. Voters afterwards could also fill out an optional voter questionnaire, as well as be interviewed about this voting experience.<sup>57</sup>



Voting in Jenks Park, Central Falls, 2023.  
Source: Author

<sup>56</sup> Michelle Alas Molina, Pam Jennings, and Matthew Lioe, "Central Falls Next Door Nation: Participatory Budgeting," Brown University, 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

The winning project was the Smart Trash Bins/Compacting Trash Bins, announced at City Hall on 30 June 2022 by Mayor Maria Rivera and Central Falls city council members, and the finished trash cans were unveiled in the summer of 2023.

## ORIGINS OF PARTICIPATORY

## BUDGETING IN THE UNITED STATES

In the United States, Participatory Budgeting first arose in 2009 in Chicago, Illinois, spearheaded by Alderman Joe Moore as an experimental process in a single ward. It would take several years for other aldermen to begin signing on to the process, but the initial process serves as an important precedent for PB in the rest of the United States.

Chicago's PB process was funded by a portion of discretionary funds that was awarded per ward per annum for various infrastructure projects. A slew of mayoral and ward-level political scandals and corruption, such as embezzlement, tax evasion, and extortion, left the alderman in search of a new democratic process, one that would self-institute itself under national scrutiny.

Similar to the pilot PB process in Central Falls, a steering committee of 40 community leaders, from schools and civic service organizations, was formed, under the guidance of the PBD. This steering committee outlined four main stages of the process: 1.) Neighborhood Assemblies, 2.) Community Representative Meetings, 3.) Voting Assembly, 4.) Implementation and Monitoring. Another similarity in the pilot processes between Central Falls and the Chicago



Project Announcement in City Hall, Central Falls, 2023.  
Source: Author

ward was how community members could self-select to be part of the delegate committee, and there was no limit in its size. This is at odds with the process in Araraquara, where the number of community delegates must represent the number of participants at the plenary, and, in the case of more candidates, the plenary attendees vote on who represents them. These theoretical deviances between Participatory Budgeting as it existed in Brazil and as it arose in Chicago are integral for understanding the community realities that drove the implementation of PB in the United States, and how other U.S. cities benefited from this experimentation.<sup>58</sup> 1,652 people voted in the first Participatory Budgeting process in the United States, regardless of citizenship status. They did, however, have to meet several requirements, including being at least 16 years of age, providing proof of residency (or sign an affidavit to affirm it), and a photo ID.<sup>59</sup>

The result was the election of 14 projects, from sidewalk repairs to speed bumps to street lighting—what can be categorized as infrastructural improvements. The following iterations of PB, however, saw more community-oriented projects, such as murals, community gardens, and dog parks.<sup>60</sup> The United States learned several lessons from PB in Chicago, principally that PB directs city leaders to not only people's needs, but to where and how to address them. Furthermore, and equally as important: the continuous implementation of PB will ensure that the community's needs transform from primarily structural considerations to a broader range of social, cultural, and recreational aspects.

New York's PB pilot program was significantly grander, beginning with four council members in 2011. PB proved to be a transparent, participatory, and accountable allocation method amidst critiques of New York's previous discretionary funding system. The city's Board

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<sup>58</sup> Josh Lerner, "Participatory Budgeting: Building Community Agreement around Tough Budget Decisions," *National Civic Review* 100, no. 100 (2011): 30-35, DOI: 10.1002/ncr.20059.

<sup>59</sup> Hollie Russon Gilman. "Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America." in *The Participatory Turn: Participatory Budgeting Comes to America*, Chapter 3, Brookings Institution Press, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

of Estimate had recently been deemed unconstitutional, and the city council were granted expanded land-use and budgetary decisions. The disparate allocation of discretionary funds that did not correlate with neighborhood needs led to calls for innovative budgetary solutions. New York's PB process was funded by these discretionary funds and capital funds. City council members worked with a steering committee to formulate the process, members from mostly civic organizations and community boards working to empower citizen voice. The process was guided by the Community Development Project at the Urban Justice Center, working with academics to administer surveys during the neighborhood assemblies, budget delegate committee meetings, and the voting process. Apart from these phases, the timeline included stakeholder information sessions, second rounds of the neighborhood assemblies, and an execution and monitoring phase. The city council members were the foremost entities in deciding the parameters for the voting, deciding on an age limit of 16 to delegate, 18 to vote, and instituting a residency requirement for voting. PB in New York City has seen rapid growth and is one of the strongest PB processes in the nation. It is aided also by the fact that the PBP is based in New York. Voter turnout in New York City has historically been low, so it is not a surprise that the percentage of people involved in the original PB process is also a marginal percentage, with a total of roughly 6,000 people.<sup>61</sup> The number of people involved in PB, however, does not necessarily determine the success of the process. Araraquara and Central Falls also saw a fraction of their population represented in the voting, yet that is still thousands and hundreds of people, respectively, who are now involved in a public decision-making budgeting process that they would not have been involved in otherwise.

Results-wise, PBNYC saw a mix of infrastructural to community-oriented projects, such as new technology for public schools, the installation of floodlights in parks, and a gazebo

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

performance space. This combination demonstrated that NYC residents are able to identify community needs as well as propose community wants, and their success is not mutually exclusive.

From Chicago and New York, two considerations stick out for the implementation of PB in the United States. The first is that the structural budgeting differences that exist across U.S. cities determine the shape of PB. The second is that the political ecosystems dictate tandem cooperation with civil society organization, and a strong system of democratic participation requires significant cross-party collaboration.

In both cases, the initiative of elected officials in involving the public for small budgetary allocations led to PB. Sometimes it is city councilors, or alderman, or the mayor. Institutional designs for PB, however, must vary across urban landscapes and demographics. Especially in the United States, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to democracy.

### **BRAZIL VS. UNITED STATES MUNICIPAL BUDGETS**

One crucial but often overlooked aspect of Participatory Budgeting is the depth of government involvement. PB is a process for the populace to make decisions on a public budget, but the ultimate project is developed by the city, with the maximum level of popular input possible. In Brazil, PB legitimized the parties of the left, undeniably coupling participatory democracy and the Workers' and Socialist parties. However, the United States is no stranger to public participation. This existing participation is one of the main differences between the United States and Brazil in terms of implementing PB.

North American cities such as those in the United States have existing forms of participation that are diametric opposites to PB, the most common being isolated public hearings or open city council meetings where members of the public have the opportunity to speak to a

decision-making entity in public comment, however, can leave the chamber having simply received indifferent silence in response. Furthermore, there is a certain level of cultural capital expected when one speaks during a school board meeting, and highly bureaucratic processes are often plagued by inaccessible language and indefinite outcomes. This façade of public participation may deter constituents from engaging in deeper participatory processes.<sup>62</sup> In addition, Brazil's homogeneity in terms of language further facilitates the implementation of large discussion forums, a barrier acutely felt in the United States' more diverse cities. In Brazil and other Latin American countries, the fervor around PB can be chalked down to the lack of forums for civic engagement, and the simple failure of local and federal governments in serving their people. PB is revolutionary, as it is incompatible with the ideals of the authoritarian regimes that left many nations grappling for democracy.

Both the United States and Brazil are federal republics, meaning states and cities are politically autonomous. After the military dictatorship in Brazil, the intense decentralization through the Citizens' Constitution of 1988 transferred much responsibility for creating metropolitan areas and regions to the states, in addition to expanding the autonomy state and local governments had in collecting taxes and investing their federal resources. These changes in fiscal federalism granted a degree of political and administrative sovereignty to municipalities, and in 2008, "Brazil's federal system provide[d] municipalities with nearly fifteen percent of all public spending."<sup>63</sup> This considerable allocation in turn leads to the creation of new regional institutions for how to spend the money, and Brazil's consistent decentralization leaves Brazilian mayors with a substantial amount of power to create new programs and institutions with minimal

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<sup>62</sup> Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Josh Lerner. "Could Participatory Budgeting Work in the United States?" *The Good Society* 16, no. 1 (2007): 8–13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20711245>.

<sup>63</sup> Brian Wampler, "When Does Participatory Democracy Deepen the Quality of Democracy? Lessons from Brazil," *Comparative Politics* 41, no. 1 (2008): 61–81, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20434105>.

interference from other legislative entities.<sup>64</sup> Many Brazilian cities, however, similar to other cities in Latin America, are limited by the Fiscal Responsibility Law (FRL), implemented in 2000 to avoid fiscal sustainability issues. Yet, since Brazilian municipalities assume much of the responsibility for fulfilling public services, the relationship between the FRL and the provision of public services is not so direct.<sup>65</sup>

Municipal Participatory Budgeting programs must be created and overseen by the mayor and city government.<sup>66</sup> This rapport between city officials and civil society is the crux of the process, without which it does not function, in both countries. Brazil's municipal budgeting is determined based on three central laws, all of which must be approved by the legislature after being introduced by the Mayor. These laws are the Budgetary Guidelines Law, which defines the budget's principals, the Annual Budgetary Law, which specifies all government revenues and expenditures for the following fiscal year, and Pluriannual Plan, which sets objectives for the public administrations every four years and is subject to yearly reviews.<sup>67</sup> Central Falls, in turn, has a mayor-council model, where the head administrator is elected by at-large voters. Central Falls has the lowest median property value in the entire state, and, not coincidentally, also relies heavily on state/federal/other education aid, over two-thirds of all local revenue, whereas other cities rely mostly on property taxes, significant being that education is the largest expenditure. More so than in Brazil, Rhode Island municipalities have significant limitations in raising revenues or borrowing money and can only do so to the extent approved by the General

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<sup>64</sup> Andrés Muñoz Miranda and Jorge Martínez-Vázquez, *Metropolitan Financing in Brazil: Current Trends and Lessons from the International Experience* (2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.18235/0001461>.

<sup>65</sup> Lilian Lopes Ribeiro and Debora Gaspar Feitosa, "Fiscal Limits and Local Public Expenditure in Brazil," *Interações* (Campo Grande) 23, no. 4 (October 2022): 769–85, <https://doi.org/10.20435/inter.v23i4.3483>.

<sup>66</sup> Fernando Rezende and Sol Garson, "Financing Metropolitan Areas in Brazil: Political, Institutional, Legal Obstacles and Emergence of New Proposals For Improving Coordination," *Forum of Federations*, March 5, 2004, <https://www.forumfed.org/libdocs/BrazilMUN04/BrazilMUN04-Rezende.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> Ricardo de João Braga, "Politics plus Management: Participatory Budgeting in Araraquara, Brazil." *Siegen*, June 2019.

Assembly.<sup>68</sup> Given these limitations, the \$50,000 allocated by the Central Falls government to the pilot PB process is even more significant, demonstrating the city's commitment to their previously outlined goals. Outcomes for PB weaken when mayoral support drops, a key piece of information to fully understand the success of PB in Araraquara and its inception in Central Falls. Several interviews with organizers and participants alike of Araraquara's PB yielded one common answer: the mayor is the backbone of the PB process in Araraquara.



Mayor Edinho Silva and Michelle Alas,  
Araraquara, 2023.  
Source: Author

Prefeito Edinho Silva is a charismatic politician who is a large figure in Brazilian politics, especially as a member of the Workers' Party. He passed the municipal ordinance that codified PB in 2002 and re-started the process after its pause in 2017.<sup>69</sup> Press outlets have reported on his close relationship with President Lula and his prominence within the PT. During the historic January 8th storming of Brasília by far-right Bolsonaro supporters, two days after the first anniversary of the nearly identical United States Insurrection, Lula was not in Brazil's capital—he was in Araraquara, overseeing the aftermath of the heavy rains that wracked the city with Mayor Silva and several other senators.<sup>70</sup>

Not only is Mayor Silva responsible for the implementation of PB in Araraquara, but its continuance is directly dependent on his actions. A total of 18 projects are voted on and funded

<sup>68</sup> "An Introduction to Municipal Finance in Rhode Island," RIPEC (Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council), April 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Caio Bellintani and Chumbinho, Interview by Michelle Alas Molina, "Participatory Budgeting in Araraquara," July 13, 2023.

<sup>70</sup> "Presidente Lula e ministros avaliam danos causados pela chuva em Araraquara," *g1*, *Central Globo de Jornalismo*, January 8, 2023, <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-carlos-regiao/noticia/2023/01/08/lula-visita-araraquara.ghhtml>.

each year, and sometimes, even second place proposals make their way to the negotiating table. These projects are continuously supported as a result of the *emendas parlamentares* (parliamentary amendments) granted to the city. Emendas parlamentares are sums of money allocated to municipalities within the federal budget, proposed by legislators and senators as a form of distributive politics that promotes social change and combats clientelism.<sup>71</sup> The amendments resulted also from the redemocratization efforts post-dictatorship, and are a means by which to direct funds to regions in need.<sup>72</sup> Despite the purpose of these amendments being to fund areas suffering in health, education, and infrastructure, they have the potential to take an opportunist turn, in that particular interests often prevail. However, they are the pillars that sustain PB in Araraquara. Mayor Silva actively lobbies federal legislators to continue funding PB in Araraquara through these amendments. Furthermore, private companies can also invest in PB, oftentimes offering to fund a certain project that serves the interest of the company.

In Araraquara and Central Falls, the mayors and elected officials must not only relinquish a portion of their decision-making powers in the name of PB, but actively seek out and allocate funds for the process. The state is the first and foremost actor in creating a culture of participation.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participatory Budgeting is a means of democratizing a public budget, of bringing to people's doorsteps the direct power to decide how their city's money should be spent. To institute the project in the first place, the state as an entity plays a crucial role. We learn from both Araraquara and Central Falls that without the will of the city government, and their commitment

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<sup>71</sup> Silvana Aparecida Medina, Marco Aurélio Marques Ferreira, Tainá Rodrigues Gomide Souza Pinto, and Igor Américo dos Santos, "ALOCAÇÃO DAS EMENDAS PARLAMENTARES INDIVIDUAIS: CORREÇÃO DE ASSIMETRIA EM SAÚDE OU GANHO POLÍTICO?," Read. Revista Eletrônica De Administração (porto Alegre) 29 (2023): 98–125, <https://doi.org/10.1590/1413-2311.374.124848>.

<sup>72</sup> Nilson Santiago Junior. "O que são emendas parlamentares." Transferegov.br. <https://siconv.com.br/o-que-sao-emendas-parlamentares/>.

to its success, Participatory Budgeting would not only not be supported with the infrastructure to continue, but would simply not be instituted in the first place.

Several factors point to why PB has historically mostly operated under left-wing parties. In Brazil, from its inception, PB was inextricably linked with the Workers' Party. It was through their opposition to the dictatorship and dictatorship-aligned parties that they mobilized with civil society actors in Porto Alegre, where the latter was also instrumental in its enactment. In Araraquara, it was the efforts of the Frente Democrática e Popular that introduced PB, and the guidance of administrators from cities like Porto Alegre to see its successful execution. The necessary infrastructure Araraquara has invested, to have an entire team of city staff dedicated to popular participation, is unfortunately not sustainable in all cities. Even now, the upcoming elections pose a considerable threat to the future of PB, and have many actors waiting with baited breath to see if Mayor Edinho Silva will remain in power.

A similar implementation story can be seen 20 years later in Central Falls, where the city's left-leaning leadership was directly responsible for the introduction of PB, and voting instruments from the democratic Secretary of State helped institutionalize the process. Mayor Maria Rivera is a popular political figure in Central Falls politics, with the vast consensus from interviewees being that they trust her and her accomplishments.<sup>73</sup> The City Council and herself worked alongside PB consultants to formalize the first steering committee and the ensuing committee of delegates. They advertised the process to their networks, accompanied the delegates through project formation, and were present speakers during the voting process. PB requires elected officials to concede some of their power to the populace. It requires that "politicians, public employees, and citizens adapt to new roles."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Interviews at City-wide Voting, Michelle Alas, Central Falls, United States, June 25, 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Josh Lerner, "Participatory Budgeting: Building Community Agreement around Tough Budget Decisions," *National Civic Review* 100, no. 100 (2011): 30-35, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ncr.20059>.

While the United States' two-party political system is distinct from Brazil's network of ever-evolving parties, they share an eerily identical recent past. The two countries were governed by right-wing presidents who were voted out of office after their first term, both who denounced their respective elections as stolen ones with unfounded claims of voter fraud and unsecure voting processes.<sup>75</sup> Nationalists in support of the losing candidate stormed both Capitols while bearing the nations' flags, with the Brazilian insurrection occurring almost exactly a year after the U.S. insurrection.<sup>76</sup> Trump advocated for stricter voter ID laws while Bolsonaro disrupted transportation to get people to the polls. Participatory budgeting is rooted in the idea that *anyone* can vote (with age restrictions), and everyone *should* vote, even on the most miniscule of decisions. This grand-scale enfranchisement is antithetical to ultra-conservative parties with politics grounded not only in voter suppression but in fiscal conservatism. Participatory Budgeting means allowing the public to build and construct freely based on their needs, a process that expends considerable costs. It is not necessarily a left-wing democratic institution, just one with a distinctly liberal premise. This conclusion explains the historic rise and fall of PB in Brazil, but not in the United States, where public officials have had to transcend party lines to accomplish an incipient PB process.

The socioeconomic context of both countries shapes the distinct purposes of PB. In the United States, PB is used as a mechanism to increase civic participation, used to impulse voter turnout, more than a budgeting tool. In Brazil, it was used to bring about infrastructural projects that the United States, in theory, should already have.<sup>77</sup> In both Chicago and New York, it was a

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<sup>75</sup> Jack Nicas, Flávia Milhorce, and Ana Ionova. "How Bolsonaro Built the Myth of Stolen Elections in Brazil." The New York Times, October 25, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/10/25/world/americas/brazil-bolsonaro-misinformation.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap>.

<sup>76</sup> Marcia L. Godwin, "Studying Participatory Budgeting: Democratic Innovation or Budgeting Tool?," State & Local Government Review 50, no. 2 (2018): 32–44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48596703>.

<sup>77</sup> Hollie Russon Gilman, "Transformative Deliberations: Participatory Budgeting in the United States," (2012), <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.139>.

means of increasing transparency around the use of discretionary or capital funds, and had to overcome significant bureaucratic red tape to see its inception.

For the most part, left-leaning governments have the history of being responsible for PB's implementation, but governments by no means can take sole credit for its success. In Araraquara, I observed an astounding level of civic participation. Plenaries are *exciting*, because the participants make it exciting. The Office of

Popular Participation works to divulge information on upcoming plenaries to the entire community, and it is then the community that mobilizes informally, coming to the plenary prepared with an idea and the numbers to win. It is a culture of trust, one that exists not only because projects that have been proposed in past years have been built in a timely manner, but because



The Office of Popular Participation and Michelle Alas, Araraquara, 2023.  
Source: Author

the city government is constantly affirming the success of the process, and because the community continues to show up. An important ethical caveat of this presence and organizing, however, lies in its fairness. PB cannot truly be representative of the community if a small number of people with significant influence can co-opt the process and lobby their communities for the wants of the few. From what I witnessed, however, this organizing does not stem usually from a powerful interest group with the resources to corral attendees. Instead, it often arises from local neighborhoods and community identities that view PB as an opportunity to address a community issue. Without parameters to require the full participation of the people, no election,

no democratic institution, can be fully representative. Should a *percentage* of Araraquara decide what to do with millions of dollars in public funds? This can be compared to the outcomes of elections in the United States, which are not compulsory, unlike Brazil. Should a *fraction* of Central Falls elect the next mayor, especially when many of its residents cannot vote? Lack of voter turnout, and lack of fair political representation, is not exclusive to PB—it is one inherent to the broader democratic landscape.

A walk through Araraquara’s city center or a drive through its various neighborhoods (which I was privy to on July 20), will show you remarkable new buildings and works—schools, health centers, playgrounds—each with signs outside announcing them as “yet another conquest of PB.” Signs for the plenaries are posted in schools and public spaces. Civil society leaders use the plenaries as a way to mobilize around a cause. Participants come to the plenaries prepared to present, advocate, and vote. They are attached to their cause and want to see its success. The attachment and profuse level of engagement seen during the plenaries is exactly this: an intense culture of participation.

Notwithstanding modest attendance levels in comparison to the population of the city, Araraquara and Central Falls’ numbers are consistent with other cases of PB, and the former is still an extraordinary example of the process. Equally as important as the participation of people in the plenary is the widespread community knowledge that this process *exists* and it *works*. These platforms stand as invitations for participation, bridging gaps in representation and amplifying the voices of marginalized citizens, as seen in Central Falls’ efforts to empower seniors and the underserved. For a truly participatory process, the government must continue expending resources to facilitate attendance, deliberation, and voting.<sup>78</sup> In both cases, governmental impetus sparked the Participatory Budgeting process, but it is the collective

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

agency of non-state actors—the people—that create a culture of participation. Despite the administrative hurdles that meet PB in the United States, several cities have seen its successful integration in the last decade, varying in their functionality and effectiveness at creating a truly participatory public. Originating from a crucible of democratic repression, Brazil's PB arose as a vital budgeting mechanism for infrastructural progress. Brazil and the United States both use Participatory Budgeting as a means of creating a more civically engaged polis, yet their political landscape and socioeconomic indicators dictate how that takes form. Participatory Budgeting is not a monolithic concept with a singular implementation, but rather a dynamic institution shaped by the government it serves, the hands of those it empowers, and the contexts it inhabits.

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