

Effects of the iron cage on the social participation effectiveness in participatory budgeting

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Abstract

This paper discusses how citizens' meaning about what "participation is" affects their agency in participatory budgeting (PB). In general, citizens experience frustration, and the PB is not effective, raising questions about why some participatory institutions succeed, some fail, and others produce mediocre results. The research was developed through a qualitative interpretive approach, with data collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were carried out with public servants and citizens from five Brazilian municipalities that have adopted recently participatory budgeting initiatives. The cases analyzes consider (i) different characteristics of PB, (ii) transparency of the process, and (iii) the possibility of citizens monitoring the results of PB. Assuming PB as a social-symbolic object, we argue that the absence of local social-symbolic work favors the maintenance of ceremonial PB, and the status quo is not changed. The widespread social perception is that the participation process "is just like that," institutionalized in a format close to the analogy of Weber's iron cage, leaving citizens without empowerment to action. On the other hand, when citizens have a meaning of participation associated with a more active agency, the results are the opposite, and there are effective room to their action. The organization of citizens in mechanisms like 'associativism' could enable the development of their reflexivity and the emergence of social-symbolic work, enabling citizens to promote changes by providing the necessary resources and skills. So, those interested in the development of socio-symbolic works to strengthen mechanisms of participation must be aware of the need to create meanings of participation that are associated with active action, encouraging the organization of mechanisms of collective action among citizens.

Keywords: participatory budgeting; social-symbolic objects, citizen participation.

1. Introduction

This manuscript discusses whether the agency of citizens who participate in participatory budgeting (PB) initiatives is affected by how they interpret 'participation'. Citizens that have an understanding of participation associated with a passive logic of action are immerse in an iron cage that limits their actions, leading them to accept the rules given by the state about their performance.

In a state-centered model, top-down resource allocation is the premise that builds the public sector budgeting process (Schommer et al., 2014). The Public Financial Management

(PFM) cycle considers the citizen, only but a guest, whose definitions of rules belong to the state (Andrews et al., 2014).

Criticism is increasingly growing about the state's inability to understand the society's needs and materialize them in public policies that respond to social concerns through the traditional process of allocating resources in the public budget, which has been leading to an ever-growing social pressure for participation (Lakin & Elkhedari, 2020; Röcke, 2014). Various literature discuss the exhaustion of the current management model of the PFM cycle, considering social participation as a management tool and of strengthening democracy, whether it is through direct engagement or different formal and informal groups, such as civil society organizations (Bezdrob & Bajramović, 2019)

Although the literature indicates various positive effects of the social participation in the PFM cycle, such as the improvement in the allocation of the budgetary resources with the decrease in the infant mortality rate (Gonçalves, 2014), the effectiveness in the participation of the society in public budget faces barriers and has been widely questioned. Participation spaces end up not operating because governments have been unable to deal with the growing complexity of today's society and pressure for participation (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011).

Research has pointed out that, on the one hand, the adoption of PB mechanisms has been declining (Dias et al., 2019), and low effectiveness may be one of the causes (Uittenbroek et al., 2019). Participants' frustration causes low effectiveness, which occurs when participants perceive that government does not hear them (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2017; Paulin, 2019), losing the meaning in their participation, and skeptical voices against the model begin to prosper (Royo et al., 2011). On the other hand, there are several successful cases. Current literature is questioning the differences between success, failures, and mediocre results (Touchton et al., 2020).

However, there is a lack of systematic empirical studies on how public participation is designed and practiced in the budgetary process and its objectives (Uittenbroek et al., 2019). In other words, we need to go further and understand why, under certain conditions, participation is (or is not) effective in PB spaces.

Citizens' frustrations for their experiences in previous participations and the hostile political environment (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006) are potential explanations for the decay in PB initiatives (de Renzio et al., 2019). However, few studies have focused on the point of view of the citizens involved in the process (Barbera et al., 2016). Literature, in general, focuses on how administrators, professionals, and participants organize and execute the participation. "Before asking what the participation does, academics rarely ask *what participation is* and what it means" (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2017, p.11). One exception is the Barbera et al. (2016) research that gathered what the citizens "think" about the PB through the Q-analysis method with citizens from Rho, Italy.

Effective social participation demands citizens involved in decisions that could otherwise be the exclusive prerogative of the government, with some government authority transfer to the citizens (Zhang & Liao, 2009). In other words, the meaning of participation in PB is associated with actions.

Social actions are shaped by "social-symbolic objects," here defined as a combination of discursive, relational, and material elements that constitute a significant pattern in a social system (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019a). Participatory budgeting is a social construction, so the mechanism functioning is directly associated with what it means for the actors who act on both the state and the citizens' side.

The way citizen participation occurs in participatory instances may be affected by understanding the meaning of participation for the actors of the societies in which they act. It

would happen because "social participation" is about a concept that carries a logic of action (or non-action) associated with its meaning. This research **aims** to analyze how social participation in participatory instances in municipalities is affected by the *meaning* the participants have of what "participation" is, once this is a social-symbolic construction.

We argue that although participatory budgeting has a broad social legitimacy, research has ignored the fact that it has two dimensions, one of the "budgetary cycle" and the other of the "participation." Participation has been accepted as something natural in the budgetary cycle. However, the budgetary process is very resistant to changes, and the proposed reforms have failed (Rubin, 2014) because the public budget reflects the distribution of power throughout the society, according to the theory of non-change from Wildavsky. Thus, even in the country that created PB, it would not be "natural" in the budgetary cycle. With that in mind, we discuss the theoretical perspective adopted which sustains the analyses, considers the participatory budgeting as an object socially built, and, therefore, depends on social-symbolic works (SSW) for its effective institutionalization, and it is subject to strong resistance, natural to the changes in the budgetary process.

2. Theoretical perspectives

Through a sociological lens, the reality we live in is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). When seen simultaneously by two people, the same action in the social world will not have the same meaning for both, as each has a lens to observe the social world that is embedded, their worldview. Activities in society and organizations are constructed and shaped by rules and routines and people's identities and social norms and premises that provide the context for organizational action (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019a). Social actions are shaped by "social-symbolic objects," defined here as a combination of discursive, relational, and material elements that constitute a significant pattern in a social system (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019a).

Both the creation and maintenance of social-symbolic objects require the development of social-symbolic works, especially when they are highly contested by opposing movements. "These arrangements, like all social-symbolic objects, are ultimately fragile — dependent not just on being left alone but on being actively supported and maintained" (Phillips, 2019b, p. 16). Thus, its creation and maintenance depend on the development of social-symbolic work, which is a consequence of reflective activities of people who develop them purposefully (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019b).

Hence, PB is a social-symbolic object, like the appearance of other social movements. Lawrence and Phillips (2019a) present two examples of social-symbolic objects. First, the concept of endangered species, which today is a widely accepted concept, stemmed from the development of intense social-symbolic work in the 1970s by environmentalists, academics, politicians, and many others. The object currently carries a concept of its 'meaning' and a moral imperative for action to protect animals at risk. Thus, it indicates a logic of action. Its concept refers to a harmful and unwanted social value (extinction), which is not reversible and requires necessary actions to protect these animals. Second, the creation of the "Obamacare" movement in the United States around 2010; based on a change in health logic, with less hierarchical and more collaborative relationships and a greater focus on maintaining health than curing diseases. Its creation faced several challenges related to the identities, relationships, and skills of health professionals, so that the change made sense to them, which required intense development of social-symbolic work.

As brought by Lawrence and Phillips (2019a), understanding social-symbolic objects encompass two aspects, already discussed by Berger and Luckmann (1967). The first is the

institutionalization process, the meaning attributed to sets of habits and routines. The second is legitimation, which involves constructing explanations that justify the institutions for the new generations of participants in the social arenas. The institutionalization of social-symbolic objects often involves institutionalizing new practices, which includes the symbolic meaning that the actors have of embedded institutions.

Institutionalization can be analyzed as a process, as discussed by Tolbert and Zucker (1996). In this process, two stages play a central role. First, theorization, given that it passes through the construction of meaning patterns with cognitive and normative legitimacy, which allow for prompt adoption and social replication. Second, typification (previously discussed by Berger and Luckmann, 1967), in which there is the development of shared definitions or meanings that structure the actors' habitual behavior. In other words, the meaning that the actors have matters directly for the institutionalization of new practices.

Research on meanings has focused mainly on empirical aspects rather than on the relationship with institutions (Zilber, 2017) or its symbolic aspects. Among the explanations for this lack of focus, Zilber mentions that the literature (especially the neo-institutional one) started to study the institutionalization of a structure or practice from the perspective of obtaining legitimacy, assuming - instead of studying directly - its symbolic character and meaningful.

Institutional changes, such as legal changes, are top-down events that affect actors who must comply with them (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). The process of adopting the content present in an external law (or rule) has several factors, such as (i) the degree to which the values of the actors coincide with the values present in the new regulation and (ii) the external validation perceived by the actors before stakeholders who have the social power to validate them (Franck, 1990). From this perspective, if the actors do not perceive that the stakeholders with a social mandate do not unequivocally validate the new content of the law, they tend not to accept the change, generating ceremonial adoption if there is any kind of monitoring, or simply not fulfilling it.

Participatory budgeting as social-symbolic objects

The literature has considered PB with an ideal type of view about what it "should be." In general, the research analyzes PB adoption by governments, forces, barriers, drivers, or effects (positive or negative) as if they were referring to the same object. However, here we discuss that, like other social-symbolic objects, PB is subject to a translation process that occurs during its diffusion, and what the governments adopt, despite having the same label, may not have the same meaning.

The participatory budget is a multidimensional construct that has meanings and assumptions. As a social-symbolic object, it will be affected by the participants' meaning of what should be the participatory budget. It goes through the logic of action associated with the very meaning of participation that the participants (members of society) have. Thus, PB participants tend to have their agency (here understood as the capacity for action) constrained by their understanding of the limits associated with their view of the process.

The flow of new ideas depends on a process of theorization, which occurs by developing abstract categories in a general model, composed of the formulation of patterns of cause-and-effect chains. Without general models, innovative cultural categories are less likely to arise and gain force (Strang & Meyer, 1993). However, diffusion is not a neutral process in which the recipients of information receive it passively. The diffusion of new ideas is dynamic and does not occur in a vacuum. As Zilber (2006) discussed in the high-technology industry in Israeli, the meanings do not travel intact. During the diffusion process, a translation or editing process

occurs, which can affect the original meaning, generating other ideas. Even in imitation, translation can occur, influenced by factors such as the actors' identity or ambiguities (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017).

The outcomes of a process in which actors act collaboratively are affected by the meaning of self-efficacy, which refers to the sense acquired by an individual to perform actions that bring about expected results (Bovaird et al., 2015). In other words, the actor's perception that her activity impacts the process she acts on will affect her propensity for action, her efforts, and persistence in the task.

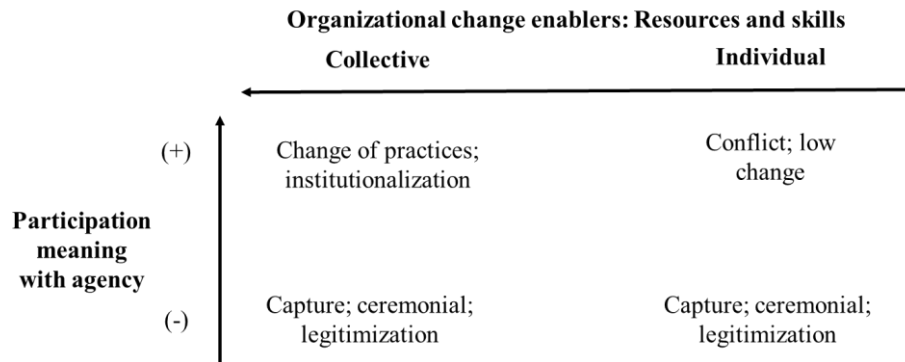
The literature has widely accepted the state as the participation promoter and discusses how to organize participation; deciding how to convey information to citizens affects the likelihood of their engagement (Piotrowski et al., 2017). Hence, citizens are the 'supporting guests' in the process. Some exceptions are Pløger (2001), Baiocchi and Ganuza (2017), Siqueira and Marzulo (2021) and Aceron (2019). This literature questions that the state does not effectively distribute decision-making power to society, generating spaces for conflicts instead of spaces for interaction.

The term "participatory democracy" is often used as a slogan, meaning which, despite being understood, is not clear (Dias, 2014). As the state generally organizes the proposal and frames, the message affects citizens' perception (Piotrowski et al., 2017). Therefore, the translation process that occurs on PB dissemination also affects the meaning of participation (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017), which would explain the existence of different PB models in operation, with different levels of citizens' agency, and divergent practical results, as has been repeatedly reported by research (Wampler, 2003, 2008).

Understanding the meaning of participation may have been an effect of replicating understandings about what it should be. However, formal and informal rules constrain such understanding. Thus, even when participants know the national legislation that gives society autonomy and legal competence for participation if exposed to a process that institutionalized a concept of participation with a passive action logic, this logic will refer to the low reflexivity. In this view, their performance would be seen as 'valid and accepted,' directing non-actions instead of their actions. In other words, the symbolic understanding of "what is" participation affects agency (ability to act). Using the analogy discussed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Weber regarding the effect of bureaucratization on organizations, PB participants would be trapped in an iron cage, accepting the game's rules, which prevents them from acting.

Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework, where human agency means "the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 2017, p. 970). Then, human agency is a capacity for action, which requires reflection on the institutional context in which the actor is embedded. Abdelnour, Hasselbladh, and Kallinikos (2017) discussed the existence of modular individuals, which are clusters of roles enacted in different settings. Through this lens, who owns the agency is not the individual but the individual performing her social role.

Figure 1 - Organizational change enablers: Resources and skills for social-symbolic work



If PB members want purposeful to change the status quo of public resources prioritization, they must have agency capacity, which is essential to execute a social-symbolic work. Agency of the actors will be enabled if they understand that the limit imposed by the Public Administration is not an absolute truth and can be changed.

To perform social-symbolic work, actors must have resources, skills, or the ability to access or use them. Lawrence and Phillips (2019c, p.275) argue that resources and skills can be status, reputation, authority, and economic and material resources. The resources used on social-symbolic work vary considerably. As presented by the authors: "they include discursive resources such as ideas and stories, relational resources such as friendships and reciprocity networks, and material resources such as spaces within which social-symbolic work can be accomplished and physical objects that help translate ideas into practical action."

The institutional sociological literature discusses the role of the institutional entrepreneur, in which a 'heroic actor' can often develop work to bring about institutional change if she can convince people or mobilize resources (DiMaggio, 1988; Lawrence, & Suddaby 2006). However, we argue that associativism provides the citizen who owns the agency with the necessary resources to develop social-symbolic work in the context of the PB. If an isolated citizen has reflexivity and agency to change the status quo, she can generate conflict in the process and achieve change, but her capacity for change will be limited, and the change will be more complex and slower to collective action.

3. Methodology

This qualitative research with an interpretive approach examines how the participation of society in participatory instances in municipalities is affected by the meaning of what "participation" is from the participants' perspective. Little research has attempted to analyze the meanings and understandings of citizens about the process.

Sample

Based on a previous survey carried out by Spada (2017), we analyzed five cases which data we collected through semi-structured interviews (Rapley, 2013) among Brazilian municipalities that have adopted PB. We selected municipalities through a purposeful random sample (Patton, 2015), in which cases are those rich in information to study, which, based on their nature and substance, illuminate the research question. Under a comparison-focused sampling strategy (Patton, 2015), we selected municipalities that started adopting PB in different periods, considering both early and later adopters. It allows capturing any imprinting

existence (Stinchcombe, 2013) of the creation period. As discussed by Scott (2014, p.193), "Organizations tend to exhibit similar structural characteristics, to be of roughly the same size, and to exhibit similar occupational and labor force characteristics" from the time of its founding.

We looked for cases where the PB was in operation at least until the year 2020 because the COVID-19 pandemic would harm the interactions and include a confounding effect since physical distancing impaired PB meetings and assemblies. Some cases quickly reorganized, transferring interactions to the online format. As the objective was to capture the logic of action, there was a need to interview multiple respondents in same case, allowing triangulation (Flick, 2013). Thus, we conducted interviews with three types of respondents: (i) municipal secretaries who work with the PB; (ii) city councilors; and (iii) citizens who work in instances of PB in city halls that carry out this type of initiative.

Initially, we tried to identify a key informant for an interview (Nowell & Albrecht, 2018). It proves to be relevant, as the key informant indicated other interviewees, using a snowball method (Rapley, 2013), which facilitated contact with the others (2016). Respondents from the Public Administration (secretaries, city councilors) were contacted by e-mail, with searches on the city hall's web portal. We selected "citizen" respondents in different ways. First, through a search at the city hall portal, locating the participants in the PB. Among the municipalities that adopt PB, the process transparency is low, and websites, in general, do not present the list of participants. In only one of the cases, the portal presented a list of the participants. Also, only one city hall agreed to provide the citizens contacts.

We made initial contact with all respondents by e-mail or telephone, where we clarified the study's objectives before scheduling the interview.

Interviews and Data Collected

We scheduled remote interviews with respondents who agreed to participate. All interviews were recorded after the respondents' authorization and transcribed verbatim before the analysis. We conducted 23 interviews with an average duration of 56 minutes and a total of approximately 17 hours. Table 1 depicts interviewees' characteristics.

Table 1 - Characteristics of All Respondents

Interviewee	Participant' category	Interviews conducted	Role in participatory budgeting	Date	Duration
1	Citizen	1	Counselor - Participatory budgeting	14/07/2020	1h03
2	Citizen	1	Counselor - Participatory budgeting	14/07/2020	1h11
3	Citizen	1	Counselor - Participatory budgeting	21/07/2020	41min
4	Citizen	2	Counselor - Participatory budgeting	11/08/2020	89min
5	Citizen	1	Counselor - Participatory budgeting	17/08/2020	56min
6	City hall	1	Municipal Secretary	20/10/2020	14min
7	City hall	1	Municipal Secretary	15/01/2021	55min
8	Politician	1	City councilor	17/07/2020	42min
9	Politician	1	City councilor	07/08/2020	41min
10	Citizen	1	Counselor - Participatory budgeting	27/01/2021	50min
11	Citizen	1	Counselor - Participatory budgeting	28/01/2021	1h21
12	Citizen	1	Counselor - Participatory budgeting	02/02/2021	58min
13	City hall	1	Municipal Secretary	05/02/2021	39min
14	Politician	2	City councilor	12/02/2021	1h 33min
15	City hall	1	Municipal Secretary	19/02/2021	52min
16	Citizen	1	Coordinator - Participatory budgeting	20/03/2021	57min
17	Citizen	1	City councilor	26/03/2021	49 min
18	Citizen	1	City councilor	29/03/2021	63 min

Data collection through interviews was carried out inductively (Reichert, 2013) through semi-structured interviews (Rapley, 2013). We asked respondents to "tell their story" (like Javor & Jancsics, 2016) and report their experience in PB, focusing on the following general aspects: (i) how the social participation process occurs, (ii) understanding the meaning of 'participation' for participants; (iii) action logics present in the participation. The logic of action would be associated with their understanding of "what is" participation. During the interviews, probing questions were used to capture sensitive and complement details (McKinnon, 1988). The research ethics committee previously approved the protocol used in the interviews of the researcher's university.

Besides, from the municipalities' web portal, we collected data on the organization and operation of the PB process, such as laws, outputs, and internal rules for its operation. We also analyzed the municipalities' budgetary laws from the two previous years to identify possible participation outputs.

Analysis

The narrative was the basis of analysis because it is helpful to capture the understanding of the meanings of participation by the respondents (Esin et al., 2014). The collection and analysis took place in stages. As suggested by Bauer and Gaskell (2000), we developed a phased approach to interviews. First used an initial sample to raise general questions and a broader understanding of the object. Secondly, it focused on particular interest categories. Initially, we conducted six interviews, followed by preliminary analysis. After any adjustments to the protocol, we interviewed other respondents. The coding process was carried out in two stages. We submitted the first emerged categories to a new categorization round, close to the methodology proposed by Gioia et al. (2013).

The first round of coding (open coding) generated 26 classifications that made it possible to understand the actors' process and performance. As stated by Gioia et al. (2013, p.20), "In this 1st-order analysis, which tries to adhere faithfully to informant terms, we make little attempt to distill categories, so the number of categories tends to explode on the front end of a study (and) there could easily be 50 to 100 1st-order categories". As the analyzes continued, we carried out the second round looking for similarities and differences (axial coding), grouped into three main categories.

4. Context of participatory budgeting in Local Governments in Brazil

Brazil is a federation composed of 3 levels: Federal Government (Central Government and its federal entities), 26 states and the Federal District (Brasília), and 5,569 municipalities. Municipalities in Brazil have significant autonomy, both political, administrative, and budgetary, and are highly dependent on resources from other levels of government, especially from the Federal Government.

The public budgeting is on an annual basis, and its elaboration is carried out by the Executive Branch, with the approval made by the Legislative Branch, on a law of each level of government. The budget is a unified document that consolidates all entities at that level of government. Governments can make only expenditures authorized under the budgetary law. However, expenditures are authoritative and act as a ceiling, not obliging governments to execute them.

The Federal Constitution and complementary laws (mainly the Fiscal Responsibility Law, 2000) determine social participation in the budgeting process. The legislation is limited

to 'requiring' social participation, and both the rules and the scope on how participation should occur are not defined and are not clear, neither the meaning of participation. Thus, the adoption of PB depends on each government initiative, which in practice is the one that defines the rules on how participation will occur. Hence, it is a state-centered model. As in Peru's experience, a national law compelling the PB is not a silver bullet when it comes to participation (McNulty, 2014).

Budget transparency in Brazil has been considered high. The country occupies the 6th global position in 2019 measured by the International Budget Partnership (IBP) among 117 countries (IBP, 2019). However, these transparency practices analyzed by IBP refer to the budget execution process, not to the elaboration process. Despite being the birthplace of PB in the 1980s (de Renzio et al., 2019), participation in budgeting has decreased (IBP, 2019; Wampler & Goldfrank, 2019).

There have been several initiatives for PB in Brazilian municipalities. Despite the relevance of the topic, national statistical bodies (such as IBGE and IPEA) have not mapped information about PB adoption, and the country does not have an updated accounting of existing experiences (Dias, Enriquez & Júlio, 2019). A survey carried out by Spada (2017) indicates the occurrence of 474 episodes of PB in 119 municipalities from 1992 to 2012, and the World Atlas presented 436 local initiatives in 2016 (Dias, Enriquez & Júlio, 2019).

Analyzing the introduction of PB apart from its historical context is not suitable. Two main factors favored its emergence in the country. First, it is part of a historical period marked by profound socio-economic, political, and cultural changes in the country between 1960 and 1980 (Fedozzi & Lima, 2014). Brazil was under re-democratization (1964-1988) when the pressures for participation were increasing. The 1988 Constitution marked the formal beginning of a participatory regime in the country, whose transition generated a democratic euphoria (Wampler, 2015).

Second, the country had an intense community movement (associativism) in the 1980s through neighborhood associations and social movements. This democratic space favored discussions about improvements in local well-being and favored discussions of public policies (Avritzer & Navarro, 2003). Thus, social movements and neighborhood associations were already discussing and seeking local improvements, which prepared them to interact with the state when the PB emerged. Although common sense points to Porto Alegre (state of São Paulo, in the Southeast), Ipiaú (the state of Bahia, at the Northeast), and Pelotas (state of Rio Grande do Sul) were cases of PB initiatives before the most famous case.

After its emergence, PB rapidly disseminated in the country, with an increase since 2000, but declined from 2008 (Spada, 2017). The data indicate that a recurrent discontinuity better depicts the PB adoption trend. The municipalities use PB alternately between the years analyzed, as is the case of Salvador (Bahia capital), that used it in 2008, discontinued, and used later again in 2012; or the case of Ribeirão Preto (São Paulo), which used in 1996, 2004, and 2012, but has not used it in other years.

The recurrent discontinuity may be associated with the vital link between the PB and the Executive Branch (mayor) party. The turnover of the chief executive branch usually leads to PB discontinuity, indicating that it is not effectively institutionalized. This result is according to the literature: government is the participation promoter, which is responsible for defining the 'rules of the game,' that is, on what basis citizens will be able to act (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2017), contrary to the ideal model of self-organization in which the participants themselves would create the rules (Siqueira & Marzulo, 2021) or at least participate.

5. Participatory budgeting: different concepts, different outputs

Cases analyzed

The research analyzed five cases of Brazilian municipalities with different models of participatory budgeting. The analyzes of the cases consider (i) different characteristics of PB, (ii) transparency of the process, and (iii) the possibility of citizens monitoring the results of PB. To an external observer, all cases appear to have a functioning PB. The analysis of the interviews with citizens and complementary data allowed to deepen and interpret how participation occurs in each case. Cases received labels according to the relationship between the citizen and the Public Administration, using the criterias: (1) agency present in the shared meaning of participation; (2) centrality of government decisions; (3) effectiveness of participation. So, the cases received the following labels: (A) Associativism without agency; (B) Associativism with the agency; (C) Government-centered, engaged citizen and frustration; (D) Online and ceremonial participation, and (E) Use for legitimization. Table 2 present the PB characteristics of analyzed cases.

Table 2 - Cases analyzed

Municipalities	A	B	C	D	E
The main feature of PB	Associativism without agency	Associativism with agency	Government-centered, engaged citizen and frustration	Online and ceremonial participation	Use for legitimization
Population (Thousand inhabitants)	401	508	234	122	1,213
Online participation (IBGE, 2019)	0.75	0.75	0.5	0.5	0.25
Electronic transparency	0.25	0.5	0.75	0.5	0.75
Year of PB adoption	2002	1998	2004	2017	2016
Type of Legislation	Municipal law	Municipal law	Municipal decree	Without regulation	Municipal law
Model	Regional plenary sessions; annual congress; council	Annual assembly; elected delegates with an annual mandate	Council	Online voting on topics; electronic form for comments	Annual assembly; elected delegates with an annual mandate
Historical	Continuity	Continuity	Discontinued with a political turnover	Continuity	Continuity
Budgetary Guideline Law (2020)	No mention	New investments indicated by the PB will have priority	Participation expressed as a principle and as a right	No mention	No mention
Budgetary Law (2020)	No details in the budget; without appropriations for the PB	Some expenses intended for the implementation of the PB	The expenses suggested by the PB appear highlighted in the LOA;	No details in the budget; without appropriations for the PB	No details in the budget; without appropriations for the PB
PB transparency					
Meeting report	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
List of members	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
PB monitoring type	Only in meetings	No	Only in meetings	No	Only in meetings
PB website	Yes	Only description of the process	Yes	Yes	Only description of the process

First, the organization of the PB between the cases presents different characteristics in the relationship between city hall and citizens. Although obvious, this result may be relevant, as it indicates the existence of a translation process, more than just a process of disseminating practices, and the absence of social-symbolic work in its implementation in the country, as discussed later.

Second, there was low transparency of the budget participation process. In only one of the cases, complete information about participation is available at the city hall website, such as the presentation of reports and meeting calendars, PB participants identification, and information that would allow the citizens to follow up the discussions externally. In all cases, the communication flow between the city hall and participants is carried out mainly through e-mails, which restricts the monitoring of other citizens outside the PB process. Interestingly, the two cases with the oldest PB adoption (case A in 2002, case B in 1998) allow for greater online participation than those that started more recently with the PB adoption. This result surprises, as the process can receive 'imprinting' from the time they mature (Stinchcombe, 2013), and thus, we expected that the newer structures would be more associated with online participation.

Third, in neither case is it possible to monitor the projects prioritized under the PB directly through the city hall website. Interviewees from two cases (A, C) reported that the feedback occurs only in meetings, but that not all follow-up is shared, and the information presented is selected by the city halls' representatives.

From the analyzes carried out, three outcomes emerged that would explain how the participation of society in participatory instances in municipalities is affected by the meaning that participants have about what "participation" is: (i) absence of local social-symbolic work; (ii) constraints generated by the flow of budgetary information, like budgetary earmarking; (iii) replication of a passive logic in the meaning of participation.

(i) Agency x effects of local social-symbolic work

The analysis of the participatory budget as a social-symbolic object suggests that its structure demands some social-symbolic work, primarily due to the possibility of groups opposing the process (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019b). Although the process is in use in several municipalities in the country, and federal legislation determines its adoption, the concept does not yet have a social construction that brings a shared meaning. In its place, what exists is a vague perception that citizen participation must occur to be characterized as participatory budgeting, generating several different processes with the same 'label.' The Sintomer et al. (2013) five criteria to consider the participation initiative as PB seems to be based on the general premise that the state must 'give' some decision-making power to the citizen. However, we question whether it would not be the citizen to establish the rules for their participation.

We argue that the agency of civil society actors will depend on the meanings that actors have of the participation process that would enable agency. It goes through institutionalizing the practices she perceives, which can structure models in her local reality that can be taken for granted and replicated. Thus, if for the actor the meaning of participation in participatory instances (PB) is reduced to just participating in periodic meetings organized by the state, in which she can "have the right" to select projects to be included in the budget (as in case A), for this actor participation is taking place.

The origin of the participatory budgeting in Brazil occurred through a bottom-up movement, proposed by social movements and initially coordinated by political parties aligned to the left-wing (Avritzer & Navarro, 2003). After the initial experimentation with local initiatives, its diffusion was rapid in the country. The creation of the PB did not follow a

structured formulation process, with the generation of a 'template' (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017), which would increase the likelihood of spreading the same idea originally created. It followed a bottom-up process, which spread spontaneously through an imitation process.

Although budget elaboration and execution dominate public finances and are well-understood processes in Brazil, we argue that PB dissemination was subject to a comprehensive editing process (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). It is not a 'template,' but a 'prototype.' On the one hand, the prototype brings a general idea that it is imitated but has no associated details or theorizing. It occurs through an imitation process, usually follows a successful story from another organization. On the other hand, the template provides greater detail of the content and meanings of the circulating idea.

Some participants assume a passive role with low reflexivity, in general, with a perception of participation taken for granted. Of course, cases have been reported in which PB delegates are actively engaged with the broader political system trying to change the reality, like Belo Horizonte (Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022), but most were just focused on local issues. In other words, according to their expectations, citizens understand that there is participation, even if they contradictorily report the existence of several projects prioritized by the participatory budget that has been waited for years or have not been implemented. There is practically no social-symbolic work being developed, which could build a concept associated with an active logic of the process.

Social-symbolic objects need not only be created, but must also be actively supported and maintained (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). The Brazilian PB is actually a case in which the object was created a long time ago and actually has no social-symbolic work being developed to either consolidate it or maintain it nationwide. Research respondents were unable to indicate which group would be the reference for them today in this subject. For example, the Brazilian Participatory Budgeting Network, an organization that could develop this work is currently inactive (Dias, Enríquez & Julio, 2019). This scenario should be explained due to the migration of the focus of the main work to the expansion of participation to other participatory instances, such as social councils, as discussed by Lopez and Pires (2010).

Social-symbolic work is an purposeful activity of people and groups, who have reflexivity, and develop actions to shape the social world (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). For example, the introduction of PB in the cities of Salford and Manchester (United Kingdom) in the 2000s was clearly due to a social-symbolic work developed by a member of society who went personally to Porto Alegre (Brazil) to 'learn' from such experience (Röcke, 2014).

Although respondents do not perceive the existence of national groups acting to maintain PB as a socio-symbolic object, the initial seed planted still remains. However, it ends up associated with local initiatives, which makes room for the emergence of different instances of participation with the same 'PB label', often accepting a passive view of participation. We identified the acceptance of a passive logic in 4 of the 5 cases analyzed, as shown by the following excerpt from an interviewee:

... there is no percentage that the executive may be released for the participatory budget, unfortunately. The participatory budget is one, shall we say ... it is a necessity, which exists because of the legislation (...) then do we collect data of priorities and together with the city budget "right"? Now, the fulfillment of these demands is a huge question, you know? (**Interviewee 5 - citizen**)

Only in one of the analyzed cases (case B) we identified a local social-symbolic work about PB being developing with a active view of participation. That is, there is a *purposeful* work by citizens under development intended to emerge and expand participation. In this case, the PB's citizen members have indicated concerns about the conceptual and symbolic

development of the PB in their locality. The interviewee cited several actions that refer to a social-symbolic work: (i) the creation of t-shirts for the participants that identify the PB's members when visiting a public entity, and that “would allow citizens to identify themselves with the participatory budget” (*Interviewee 16 - citizen*); (ii) creation of a public event for the investiture of members of society, in which they send invitations to the authorities of the Executive, Legislative and other social entities of the municipality, which indicates a search for legitimizing the group; (iii) publication and wide dissemination of a PB booklet, telling the story of the PB in the city; (iv) creation of an annual PB accountability event, where they invite the mayor to present the current stage publicly and what has been done in the budget.

The respondent (citizen) from case B demonstrates reflexivity about the process and ability to mobilize others and symbolically create mechanisms of legitimation. For example, at the beginning of 2021, he is presenting a proposal with three features: (i) greater democratization, with the adoption of a model of direct participation, without representation by delegates; (ii) use of technology to allow asynchronous participation of the population, and (iii) change in local legislation, making the proposals prioritized in the PB mandatory, with a clear allusion to the tax amendments that the legislature has, after all, as stated by the interviewed “*why can't society have the same prerogative as a politician, who is our representative?*” (*Interviewee 16*).

The role of social-symbolic work, in this case, is relevant, and it seems to locally balance the power of allocation in the budget between the citizen and the government, which comes to understand that the PB has social legitimacy, and an opposite position can generate political risks, as shown in the following:

We hold an accountability event, call the mayor of the city and give transparency to everyone in the process. When May, June arrive, we start the local plenary sessions. Then we do the 126 plenary sessions that I told you about. After that, we hold the regional plenary sessions, which are 11. Then we hold a final plenary session, which is to be able to give a closing and formally deliver a document, and I would like to deliver a document not only to the mayor of the city but also to the public prosecutor's office, the city council, to all control bodies, even the court of auditors, I'd like to officiate in the work that members of the PB do. We must also pressure these “public management people” (*Interviewee 16 - citizen*)

The main characteristic that differentiates this case from the others is the existence of intense local associational life (called associativism), with strong and active neighborhood associations (more than 180 neighborhood associations), which is centrally coordinated by an oversight association, which operates in a network with different social movements. Literature has pointed out Associativism as an essential driver of PB (Avritzer & Navarro, 2003; Marquetti, Silva, & Campbell, 2012; Fedozzi, Ramos, & Gonçalves, 2020). The research results advance, as we identified that associativism could be the primary driver of reflexivity that would open space for the realization of social-symbolic work.

We find that citizens have reciprocity networks in a municipality with local solid associativism to develop a shared meaning of participation. In these networks, citizens are already used to discussing local social problems and looking for ways to improve life. When these citizens enter a PB environment, even if the Public Administration initially imposes the game rules, there is a tendency for resistance to arise. Discursive resources such as ideas and stories emerge and are shared among the group members that make up the network.

In this case, there are 190 neighborhood associations affiliated with the oversight association, which acts on behalf of citizens in the PB environment. The oversight association has its website and social networks, which can mobilize and generate social pressure on the public administration.

In short, associativism helps citizens to organize independently from the public administration. When relating to the PB environment, citizens start to play an additional social role, that of a member of an association, making it possible to access a collective agency that ordinary citizens do not have. Associativism acts as an enabling element that allows the expansion of citizen agency, and helps to create communication channels in which the meanings of participation can be transmitted between members. However, the shared meaning that participation receives depends on the action of social-symbolic work by actors within these groups, otherwise the shared meaning between citizens will have no agency.

(ii) Constraints generated by budgetary information flow

The PFM cycle is resistant to change (Rubin, 2014). In the analyzed cases, the budgetary process was virtually not altered to allow participation. Like Röcke (2014) discussions in the United Kingdom, citizens are called to participate, but the overall institutional framework has not been subject to change. In Brazil, the legislation presents a paradox, it demands social participation but concentrates all stages of preparation, execution, and monitoring substantially within the public administration, and the information flows do not accommodate participation.

Although several national laws determine the comprehensive transparency of public bodies as a rule (Fiscal Responsibility Law/2000; Transparency Law/2009; Freedom of Information Law/2011, among others), the content disclosed is mainly about budgeting execution. Citizens do not have access to the content of the budget preparation process, which is developed exclusively by the government's entities. When the citizen is involved, the general budget structure is ready. Likewise, during execution, citizens are not heard to discuss contingency of expenditures, which directly affects choices prioritized previously in the PB.

As discussed by Azevedo et al., (2022) participation can occur at different stages of the budget cycle. However, the introduction of PB in municipalities took place without the flow of the PFM cycle was adapted to receive participation. We argue that the PFM cycle is complex and has the imprinting of the time of its creation. The federal law from 1964 that regulates governmental budget and public finances does not consider social participation. Budget classifiers are very detailed and complex, making it very difficult for a citizen to understand budget law. Due to classifiers' complexity tracking the results of participation is impractical without undue cost or effort.

The shared view that it would be necessary for a professional citizen to participate, who is familiar with government procedures (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011), is an excluding view maintained by a persistent discourse to alienate the citizen. As Lino et al. (2019) discussed in the case of the Municipal Health Councils of Brazil, citizens can contribute to the process, such as the indication of local needs.

When the citizen has reflexivity and engagement, she goes beyond just participating by pointing priorities in the PB. Citizens participate by seeking financial support from the federal government to help the city hall build schools buildings and health facilities, as shown in the following excerpt from an interviewee:

We got a school here that helps many children in the region. The participatory public budget discussed it, but there was little recourse ... then, I also sought and obtained some funds from city councilors and federal deputies because the city government gives a contribution, and sometimes the budget is low (...) PB members point out the priority, but it is not feasible to build it alone, so we must be searching for partnerships (financial resources) (**Interviewee 4 - citizen**)

However, as the public sector is highly bureaucratic, this is often used to hinder participation. Instead of using citizens' language to communicate with them, the city hall

requires that citizens communicate in the official format and have technical knowledge such as engineering, delaying, and hindering interaction. As commented by one of the interviewees:

A city official asked me to write an "Official letter" (ofício in Portuguese) about it ... then I thought, "what is it?". Then I had to look with other people for an "Official letter" template to do it ... I remember that the 1st Official letter I sent to the city hall, which was what we requested for the drainage paving of streets in the region. I did not know that the two things were different, I should have asked for drainage first and then asked for paving. As I only requested drainage, and then when the "experts" from the city hall read it, they sent it back because the Official letter was wrong (**Interviewee 4 - citizen**).

The budgetary process in Brazil provides that the budget is authoritative, so if a specific action included in the budget is not met, there will be no consequences for the manager. This logic is also used by city halls concerning the outputs of PB, as shown in the passage:

No law obliges to execute 100% of the budget goals. It is [just] an estimate, you know if the public funding was not enough, there is no problem, you did not reach the goal, and everything is OK (**Interviewee 5 - citizen**)

Citizen participation in PB decisions is a process that generates resistance in the city hall. The government perceives a competition for its decision-making power, as shown by the excerpt from another interviewee. It is interesting to note that this report is from a citizen who collaborates with the PB in a municipality that externally indicates having an appropriate participation model.

... from what I know, it is mandatory to have PB in the city hall, but it is something that bothers [the government] a lot. I realized that the discourse is about participation, but when you ask for information ... I am saying about the city hall here where I live, but there is always hope (**Interviewee 10 - citizen**)

(iii) Meaning of participation

The interviews indicated that the shared meaning of participation in the PB process is associated with capital expenditure, in a passive logic. Practically there is no local social-symbolic work in development, and PB strategies are built upon a logic of competition rather than a logic of cooperation. The widespread perception is that the participation process "is just like that," institutionalized in a format close to the analogy of Weber's iron cage.

When asked about their understanding of "participation in the budget," almost all the citizens interviewed stated that the citizen's decision is limited to capital expenditures like "investments decisions". This stems from the reflection of the socio-symbolic construction that citizens received, and accepted as given. Although this understanding is not a legal requirement, it may have become institutionalized from the first initiatives and has been found in several publications on PB in Brazil (Gonçalves, 2014; Touchton et al., 2020; Wampler, 2008b). This understanding of the meaning of the PB is beneficial for governments, as the investment capacity of the city halls is very low in Brazil (investments were around 6% in 2019), which already restricts the pressures for participation to a low percentage of decision.

Second, in general citizens do not think they would have the agency (capacity for action) to change their activity in the budget stages, either in (i) the design of the rules with which participation occurs, (ii) public spending decisions; (ii) the monitoring and control of the execution of the projects already prioritized. Even if some participants reflect on the low effectiveness, if they do not understand that they could develop work to change the situation, the process tends to remain unchanged, as shown in the following excerpts:

the law is good, the law is extraordinary, but participation today is significantly compromised because the population still does not understand its strength (*Interviewee 5 - citizen*)

...as it is a law, the PB must exist and be complied with it. It is formally fulfilled ... we (citizens) make the presentation of the demands at the beginning of the year. We hold the PB congress in June, and basically, participation comes down to that. As it is today here [Case B], it is just to comply with the law, just to comply with the law [thoughtfully] (*Interviewee 12 - citizen*)

The process is mainly coordinated by the government, often with little possibility of action by citizens. Interestingly, even city councilors who consider BP as important, understand that the process is not subject to change, as shown in the following excerpt from an interview with a city councilor:

the mayor makes popular participation difficult by scheduling meetings during business hours on weekdays when the population needs to work and only presents the project without any discussion. The project is forwarded to the city council [...] the citizens themselves do not participate because they cannot. They are also frustrated because the PB projects do not become a reality, remaining in the imagination of people, which is something ceremonial holding a public hearing to do political actions, so citizens give up (*Interviewee 8 - city councilor*)

The city councilor does not understand that he/she would be responsible for changing the situation in his municipality, whether proposing legislation change or developing social-symbolic work in his locality.

Third, the perceived effectiveness of participation is associated with its meaning that the citizen has. It often generates different perceptions about the effectiveness of participation, even if the models are similar in municipalities. The interviews revealed that even in municipalities with symbolic PB and government-controlled participation, participants have an upbeat assessment of the model adopted. There was, therefore, no level of reflexivity by the participants that their decision-making power in that participatory instance was being limited and could be broader.

6. Discussion and final remarks

The article explores four main issues. First, it argues that the wide dissemination of PB in local governments has generated different models of PB grouped under the same 'label,' but many do not evolve 'participation' properly said. The diffusion of PB has suffered an editing effect (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017), whose general idea is carried forward without a 'template' or an associated theorization. This occurs due to a lack of social-symbolic work (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019) being developed to either consolidate it or maintain it nationwide.

Second, the research discusses the relationship between the meaning of 'participation' by citizens and their agency, leading them to feel trapped in iron cages if the meaning of participation is associated with a passive logic. The evidence supports the idea that citizens' actions are limited to what they perceive to be their limit of action. If the meaning of participation for citizens is just to participate in a meeting and vote on projects presented by the government, it tends not to go further. However, when exposed to a local socio-symbolic work that presents a more empowered version of participation, the citizen assumes a new, more reflective role.

Third, the evidence in analysed cases indicates that there is practically no social-symbolic work developed for the social construction of the PB with a logic of action, as was the case with the construction of the social-symbolic object of *endangered animals* reported by

Lawrence and Phillips (2019a, p.8). Its creation was the target of intense social-symbolic construction work by "lawmakers, scientists, environmental activists, and others engaged in work that made this concept meaningful".

Four, solid local associations favor the emergence of citizens' reflexivity and provide the necessary resources and skills to social-symbolic work actions. A participatory environment can collaborate with the expansion of the actors' reflexivity that change is possible, as well as providing the resources for collective action to emerge.

Social-symbolic work could be analyzed from two perspectives. From a broader perspective, the question is 'who are the entrepreneurs acting in the construction of the meaning of PB in society?', as they seem absent. "Culturally legitimated theorists" like scientists, intellectuals, policy analysts, and professionals (Strang & Meyer, 1993, p.494; Zilber, 2006, p.282) who would be developing social-symbolic work on PB nowadays in Brazil are limited to academic papers. Second, at the local level, when a social-symbolic work occurs, it contributes to the institutionalization of the logic of active action, and citizens start not to accept the "given" rules.

The absence of social-symbolic work in the municipalities has generated a passive model of PB, which would explain the recurrent capture of the citizen, as a case of window dressing by public decision-makers who hope to legitimate predetermined outcomes (Uittenbroek et al., 2019, p.2533). The only case in which the scenario proved to be different (Case B) showed the existence of social-symbolic work developed intentionally for the institutionalization of the PB as a usual practice within the budget flow, which generates reflexes in the conduct of the PB locally, contributing with its institutionalization.

Finally, the evidence indicates that the participatory budget in the cases analyzed is operating with two main characteristics: (i) a logic of competition rather than cooperation; (ii) rules centered on the state, with the passivity of the citizens. The competition logic favors the low organization of networks by citizens, given that they have to define strategies to "win" other neighborhoods in the vote on their project, and then they end up not organizing themselves with shared projects.

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