


Participatory budgeting: Europe's bet to increase trust in government

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By [Esther Snippe](#) and [Silvia Ellena](#) | [EURACTIV.com](#)

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Participatory budgeting: Europe's bet to increase trust in government



Participatory budgeting (PB) – the shared decision between city leaders and inhabitants on spending a part of the municipal budget – is becoming an increasingly popular democratic tool in Europe.

According to the Participatory Budgeting World Atlas, with over 4,500 PBs, equal to 39% of worldwide cases, Europe is the region hosting the highest number of these participatory exercises.

Despite some regional differences, the fundamental step-by-step process adopted in European cities is similar. Residents develop and vote on the project proposals they want for their town, district or neighbourhood.

These initiatives are then funded through the municipal budget and implemented by the city council.

Participatory Budgeting process



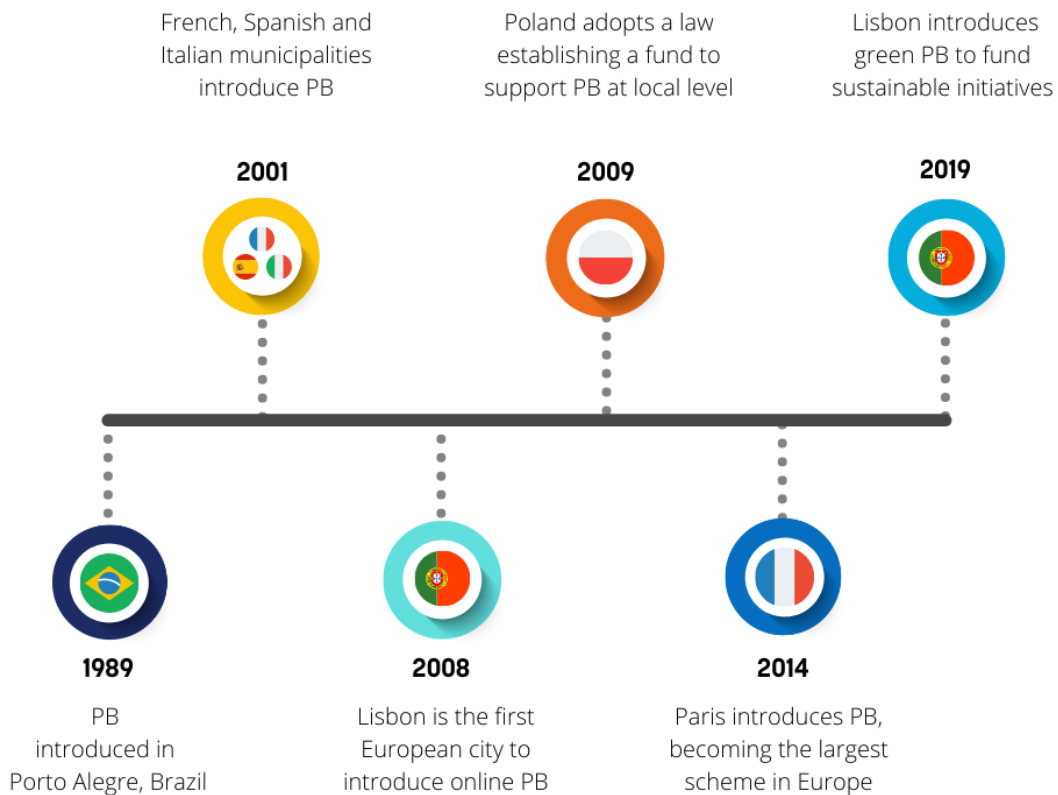
Source: Participatorybudgeting.org, PB Process Cycle

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Originally from Porto Alegre in Brazil, the concept has been adopted in Europe since the early 2000s.

While the Brazilian experiment in 1989 focused on social injustice and aimed at helping the community address economic inequalities, the European experiments vary in scope and format.

Evolution of PB in Europe



Source: europarl.europa.eu, Participatory budgeting An innovative approach, January 2016



For instance, Lisbon, one of the most active EU capitals in participatory processes, was the first city to introduce online PB's in 2008. More recently, the Portuguese capital has also introduced a green PB that funds citizen initiatives to mitigate climate change.

However, demands for green projects to increase sustainability and improve the quality of life at the local level are growing even in cities without a specific green PB. This suggests the scheme could be a way to tackle environmental issues from the ground up.

South Dublin falls under this trend, with most of the winning projects for the 2019 round concerning gardens, outdoor activity spaces, nature trails, and playgrounds.

The South Dublin PB was first introduced in 2017 with a €300,000 budget and targeted the residents of a different electoral area every year.

Example: €300k have your say

'€300k Have Your Say' is the participatory budgeting process run by South Dublin County Council since 2017.

In 2021, the initiative allowed residents of the Tallaght Central electoral area to decide how to spend €300,000 of the municipal budget.



Source: South Dublin County Council, "€300k Have Your Say" Initiative

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Varying demands

While residents' demands in European cities are often similar, the percentage of budget can vary widely from one place to another. Paris dedicates 25% of the investment budget to PB, while other smaller cities usually invest 2 to 5% of their resources.

The geographical distribution of these processes also differs across the continent. Around 92% of PB's are distributed in Eastern and Southern Europe, while Western and Northern countries account for only 2 to 5%.

This unequal distribution is partly due to national legislation promoting participatory budgeting in certain countries, like Poland, where PB has become mandatory in large cities since 2019.









However, the high concentration of participatory exercises in these regions is also linked to the deep-rooted lack of trust between citizens and government, according to Giovanni Allegretti, a researcher at the University of Coimbra.

“When PB was born, it was about creating mutual trust between institutions and citizens and mutual trust is needed, especially in the countries where electoral turnouts are low, and corruption is high,” he said.

On the contrary, countries like Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark lack “a driver for having PB, because they believe too much in the correctness of politics.”

Besides strengthening trust in local governments, scholars agree that PBs can increase voter turnout and better inform city leaders on the issues that require attention and investment.

Pros and cons of PB

Pros	Cons
 Increased transparency and trust	 Lack of diverse representation
 Empowering citizens	 Time consuming
 Better allocation of resources	 Resource intensive
 Increased voter turnout	 Lack of interest or political will

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However, critics say that these exercises might suffer from a lack of interest in having a say in local matters and political will to share power in decision-making processes.

Moreover, PB's often fail to equally represent the population, with marginalised communities, such as immigrants being excluded from participation.

Despite these limitations, PB's are not only growing at the city level, but they are also gaining traction among European institutions as a way to increase citizens' trust and engagement in EU decision-making processes.

In a resolution approved in July 2021, the European Parliament proposed introducing PB and other participation tools for pilot projects to allow citizens to have a say on spending a share of the EU budget.

[Edited by Alice Taylor]