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Public deliberation and social justice sensibilities in Greensboro Participatory Budgeting

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ABSTRACT

Participatory budgeting (PB) has emerged as a tool for empowering marginalized communities and advancing social justice through public deliberation and advocacy. However, public deliberation scholars have contested the appropriate roles of social justice, activism, and equity. PB bridges deliberation, advocacy, and equity, as it strives to accomplish social change. We detail how the first cycle of Greensboro PB navigated tensions between residents who sought social change and government officials who wished to maintain the status quo. We argue PB is an example of public deliberation that fosters social justice sensibilities among participants and conclude with applied recommendations for design improvements.

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Communities have struggled economically as state and local governments prescribe austerity as the solution to decreased revenues from income and property taxes. Cutting costs in city governments has occasionally resulted in disastrous outcomes, including in Flint, Michigan where residents learned that their tap water contained toxic levels of lead after the state government prioritized frugality over the public good.¹ The North Carolina legislature also chose frugality over human rights when it cited concerns about cost as its primary reason for not expanding Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, potentially causing 1,145 preventable deaths a year.²

At the same time citizens across the United States struggle to survive externally imposed austerity, they are told that their participation in shaping these decisions is unwelcome. State governments have passed restrictive voter ID laws, decreased early voting periods, eliminated same-day voter registration, and aggressively gerrymandered voters into hyperpartisan, uncompetitive districts, all of which disproportionately impact minorities and low-income people.³ These practices reflect long-standing undemocratic sentiments that have been woven into the tapestry of America's history. Since at least 1981, economic elites have predominantly shaped federal public policy outcomes, leading Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page to conclude that, in the United States, "the majority does *not* rule."⁴ These examples send a clear message to citizens, particularly minority and low-income populations, that government has no interest in hearing their voices.

These factors present challenges in promoting equity, empowering people to reclaim their public voice, and redirecting spending priorities to promote the public good. Participatory budgeting (PB) has emerged as one response to this situation. PB is “a form of participatory democracy in which citizens and civil society organizations have the right to participate directly in determining fiscal policy.”⁵ PB is a directly democratic process that gives everyday people control over a portion of a budget, and it has a long-standing association with social justice because of its intention to redirect capital funds to residents with the greatest needs.⁶

By advocating for the participation of historically marginalized groups, PB depends on communication that represents “engagement with and advocacy for those in our society who are economically, socially, politically, and/or culturally underresourced.”⁷ However, PB processes have struggled to achieve the desired social justice outcomes in developed countries.⁸ In 2014, Greensboro, North Carolina became the first city in the southern United States to implement a PB process, allowing residents to allocate \$500,000 of the city’s budget.⁹ Would residents be inspired to reclaim their power in the public sphere? We wondered further, in what ways would a social justice sensibility be reflected in the voices of participants?

Public deliberation theorists have contested the roles of social justice, activism, and equity in public deliberation. Some argue that public deliberation presupposes equality among deliberators, while others raise concerns that treating everyone equally reproduces and reinforces pre-existing hierarchies of inequality and instead argue that treating deliberators equitably better helps realize social justice.¹⁰ We extend that scholarly conversation by drawing on Iris Marion Young’s theory of communicative democracy to document how social justice principles manifest in PB participants’ everyday talk, thus providing an empirical case of the ways concerns about power, equity, and fairness are negotiated in and through public deliberation.¹¹

We argue that, when people target social justice outcomes in deliberative processes, advocating for equitable outcomes becomes routine in communicative practices. And, with time, says Terry Tempest Williams, “routine opens the door to creativity. We express ourselves. We inform one another and become an educated public that responds.”¹² In the case of Greensboro PB, this form of advocacy manifested in expanded voting opportunities for traditionally excluded populations and reimagined community-improvement projects.

We begin by discussing the scholarship of social justice, public deliberation, and PB before providing a brief contextual overview of how PB began in Greensboro. We next describe our qualitative, community-based research methods and then provide thick descriptions of several deliberative exemplars. Finally, we offer testimonies from participants that demonstrate how power, when vested in the people, leads to greater citizen authority, even when deliberative processes themselves have shortcomings.

Public deliberation, PB, and social justice

As communication scholars, we believe communication practices, including public deliberation, reveal how meaning is created for and understood by participants. We also recognize that, by focusing on social justice, communication may generate fairer results in the public sphere, attuned to the needs of marginalized and excluded communities.

Social justice and ethics

A social justice sensibility for the communication discipline is one that foregrounds ethical concerns, commits to structural analyses of ethical problems, adopts an activist orientation, and seeks identification with others.¹³ Social justice communication is fostered when all people have the maximum freedom to talk about who they are, what they do, and how to envision their future.¹⁴

Given the myriad challenges facing society, grounding communication scholarship in a social justice agenda is imperative to uphold democratic life. As Henry Giroux notes, democracy has been under assault by “wild capitalism and dark pessimism” leading to profound greed and inequality.¹⁵ Against that backdrop, Giroux continues, we need a “vocabulary that refuses to look away, refuses to surrender to the dictates of consumerism, fear, or bigotry.”¹⁶ The commitment about which Giroux speaks reflects the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas who theorizes that communication is centered in ethics as *being for* the other. He says, “it is discourse, and more exactly, response or responsibility which is this authentic relationship.”¹⁷ Ethics so considered is the obligation to respond in accordance to what others need. PB, as a project of direct democracy, offers the opportunity for residents to offer solutions that respond to the needs of their neighbors. With PB, rather than government bureaucrats deciding what is best for communities, residents determine collectively what is needed, first, through discussion and then in deliberation, before voting for community-improvement projects sourced and developed by the people in collaboration with local governance bodies.

Especially in cities across the South, where communication has historically functioned to exclude and demean people of color, the history of slavery and segregation continues to impact the possibility of ethics as the grounding point for conversations,

because what they [people of color] say does not fit into the larger, usually unspoken story that serves as a context for what is heard ... [and, hence,] what they have to say appears foolish and, because of this, is not heard or responded to.¹⁸

A Levinasian ethic challenges interlocutors to acknowledge and respond with compassion to the historical ways some groups have been excluded from public conversations. Dialogue and deliberation, guided by ethics, are important means of communication to facilitate encounters and grant authority to others to speak back, thus allowing for critical issues to be addressed in meaningful, sometimes transformative ways.¹⁹

Omar Swartz concurs, noting that “social justice never is about absolutes but it is about being able to talk about the pressing problems of the day to articulate, critique, and offer solutions.”²⁰ Public deliberation in PB offers a unique site for social justice practice and research because it falls outside of typical associations with activist communication, which include protests, political rhetoric, lobbying, and debate.²¹

Public deliberation and equity

Public deliberation theorists have contested the roles of equity and social justice in the field, for equity reflects social justice considerations.²² Public deliberation scholars initially looked to Jürgen Habermas’s theories of public deliberation, characterized by “the people’s public use of their reason” in “rational-critical debate.”²³ Other principles put forth by

Habermas include consensus, the relative equality of participants in discussion, and an absence of power among deliberating parties.²⁴ For Habermas, deliberative processes ought to presuppose interlocutors are equal and will be treated equally, without any party having power over another.

However, critics found fault with Habermas's ideas. John Dryzek argued that Habermas's emphasis on consensus tends toward homogeneity, group-think, and coercion.²⁵ Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson criticized Habermas's view of power and equality, arguing that to ignore the historical, systemic inequalities outside the deliberative space only further harms oppressed, marginalized, and excluded individuals.²⁶ Furthermore, Habermas's endorsement of rationality at the expense of all other forms of information processing, such as emotion and narrative, has been critiqued as culturally exclusive.²⁷

The project of public deliberation remains vital for democracy as "the best means for changing conditions of injustice and promoting justice."²⁸ We see Young's theory of communicative democracy offering several correctives to Habermas. First, Young theorizes public deliberation as including expressions that may include emotion, anger, and hurt, in addition to calm rationality. Second, communicative democracy appreciates the complexities of pluralism.²⁹ It values heterogeneity in the form of differing values, cultures, ways of life, and history. Finally, Young argues that, in addition to Habermas's conception of reason-giving, deliberation ought to consider the practices of *greeting* (explicit mutual recognition and conciliatory caring), *rhetoric* (forms of speaking that reflexively attend to the audience), and *storytelling* (which allows values to be communicated and increases access for marginalized groups).³⁰ Incorporating these communication practices into public deliberation aids in the advancement of social justice by promoting values of inclusion, care, and equity.

Nevertheless, equality, equity, and justice remain contested features in public deliberation scholarship.³¹ Some scholars argue that public deliberation processes cannot and should not strive to meet all the goals of equity, equality, and justice but, rather, deliberation ought to be judged by each process's specific goals.³² In contrast, David Moscrop and Mark Warren contended that equality and equity are not mutually exclusive.³³ They theorized that equality ought to move a society toward equity and that agenda-setting is a powerful component for promoting equity in public deliberation.³⁴ Carolyn Abdullah, Christopher Karpowitz, and Chad Raphael concluded that too little research has explored the conditions in which equality and equity may reinforce or oppose each other in public deliberation.³⁵

PB is one model of public deliberation that offers a rich context to explore matters of equity, equality, and social justice. PB typically includes four phases.³⁶ First, residents brainstorm and submit ideas for projects that benefit their communities. Second, volunteer residents—called budget delegates—take those ideas and work with government officials to develop detailed project proposals. Third, residents vote on the projects they want funded, and the projects with the most votes receive funding. Finally, city government implements the projects before the PB process repeats itself.

In Brazil, where PB began, the process has reduced political and economic inequalities, poverty, and corruption, as well as increased access to public services, tax compliance, and the number of civil society organizations.³⁷ In North America, demographic groups most likely to participate in PB include people under 18 years old, African Americans, low-

income people, and women.³⁸ Although Hispanics and individuals with less formal education have been underrepresented in North American PB processes, PB has encouraged the participation of many groups that have historically been marginalized, oppressed, or excluded from civic affairs.³⁹ Still, equitable participation does not necessarily generate equitable outcomes. Matt Leighninger and Chloe Rinehart argue that the social justice successes in Brazil have yet to be realized in the United States.⁴⁰ Madeline Pape and Josh Lerner, thus, proposed an equity-driven model for PB in the United States, focusing attention on: who participates in the process and how funds are distributed; urging budget delegates to do more research through site visits to engage directly with residents who will be impacted by the proposed projects; and expanding and increasing the pot of money for PB projects while encouraging grassroots organizations to claim PB “as a cause worth fighting for.”⁴¹

We add to this scholarly conversation by exploring how social justice and equity manifested in the inaugural PB process in Greensboro, NC, not by measuring which projects were funded and who participated, as are typically reported outcomes, but instead by analyzing the ways participants navigated tensions related to equity, equality, and justice through their talk. Significantly, Greensboro’s PB process was the first implemented in the United States because of the efforts of a grassroots advocacy campaign.

Grassroots beginnings of Greensboro PB

In 2011, inspired by the potential of PB to catalyze social change, a group of volunteers that included local activists, small business owners, nonprofit representatives, current and retired professors, students, and the authors of this article formed in Greensboro “to introduce a radically democratic process into municipal budget decision making,” calling themselves Participatory Budgeting Greensboro (PB GSO).⁴² In some ways, PB GSO was similar to three other citizen-initiated programs in the city that operated with the democratic goals of equity, justice, and wide participation. First, activists organized an effort to build a cooperative grocery store in the part of town where food insecurity was rampant.⁴³ Second, neighbors launched a people-inspired drive to keep a toxic landfill closed that had harmed low-income people of color.⁴⁴ Third, grassroots organizers joined together to hold police accountable for actions that disproportionately harmed black men.⁴⁵

Some argued that, because of these other efforts, PB was unnecessary to promote inclusion, transparency, and equality. However, PB GSO offered an alternative gateway to addressing the inequalities in the city through a program designed to improve diminishing citizen-government communication, mutual respect, and trust through an ongoing deliberative process.⁴⁶ PB GSO’s collaborative essence meant that, from its grassroots beginnings, volunteers promoted brainstorming, listening, and vetting ideas that could bring officials and citizens into the same room to discuss and plan next steps. After initial, active resistance to PB, the mayor, budget director, and city council members joined with ordinary people to introduce PB to the city. This approach contrasted vastly to citizens pushing back against government ideas, as had become habit in Greensboro. With PB, resident volunteers modeled how to have a substantive role in the city’s future as decision makers, a posture far beyond simply offering advice or voicing concerns, as are the limits of interaction at traditional city-hosted public meetings.

PB GSO organizers understood the potential of its program to put citizens at the center of democratic action, rather than on the fringes. Thus, they intentionally visited places, spaces, and events where residents were meeting for distinct reasons, so that *those* reasons could be translated into PB project ideas for collective review. The group wanted to exclude neither the powerful nor the marginalized from its efforts. Volunteer organizers invited elected officials to conferences, organizing meetings, and public events to witness first-hand how PB was received by others around the world. To model the partnership features of PB, organizers raised enough money to match the city's contribution needed to launch PB, displaying the active role of residents to work alongside government in securing desired outcomes.

After three years of advocacy, the PB GSO volunteers still standing—a fraction of the dozens of people who attended earlier meetings—viewed the setbacks and struggles they faced along the way as exhausting, but inevitable. The six principal volunteers at the end of the advocacy effort to secure PB, two women and four men, ages 22–72, were an all-white team, a less-than-ideal organizing feature they were unable to overcome. Activist colleagues of color expressed support for PB, but indicated that their time was better spent elsewhere, absent a commitment from city officials after years of effort to implement PB.

PB GSO volunteers finally saw success in 2014 when Greensboro's city council approved implementation of PB in a contentious 5–4 vote and allocated \$500,000 for community-improvement projects. Following the city's decision to implement PB, the organizing group known as PB GSO (advocacy effort) officially disbanded. The volunteers, however, took on new roles when the official Greensboro PB (city-run) process unfolded. Two volunteers became members of the new city-established PB steering committee, three became evaluators or research board members for the inaugural process, and one became a champion of a community idea funded in the first cycle.

As the inaugural PB process began in Greensboro, we asked how would public deliberation through PB promote inclusion, equity, and social justice for participants, and how would residents, elected officials, and city staff navigate the inevitable tensions bound to arise? We next discuss our qualitative research methods.

Methods

Our research was a continuation of a long-term ethnographic investigation, fueled by a focus on communication activism.⁴⁷ We recognize the importance of situating our work, as well, within a critical framework that is cognizant of historical debates surrounding public participation.⁴⁸ We begin with an explanation of community-based research methods, followed by a description of our data collection and analysis.

Community-based research

Community-based research (CBR) is defined by the collaborative effort of community members and researchers to ensure that the entirety of the process—from design to data collection to results and recommendations—reflects the interests and needs of the community.⁴⁹ In our case, we coordinated data collection with partners in city government and the community, and relied on the labor of a research team of more than 40 individuals, including undergraduate students, graduate students, and a faculty member, as

well as a seven-member local research board. Undergraduate and graduate students, as well as the authors, served as participant observers at Greensboro PB public meetings. The authors coordinated the research project, conducted interviews, reviewed and analyzed fieldnotes from the entire research team, performed member checking, and conducted data analysis.

Throughout the study, we worked, as did our community partners, to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships, marked by closeness, equity, and integrity—hallmarks of strong community-campus partnerships.⁵⁰ The research was valued, as noted in our fieldnotes from an organizing meeting involving city staff and resident volunteers: “There were quite a few questions, answers, and comments about how great the research effort has been and how quickly we’ve been able to provide information.” The research helped shape communication strategies, develop online content, and provide needed information to local foundations that helped fund the PB launch. Similarly, the research team benefited from community volunteers and city staff who invested considerable time to the process.

The research was a cooperative venture with methods, questions, interpretations, and applications of results discussed in advance with our community partners. In essence, we all entered the project as evaluators. The research team provided monthly updates and preliminary findings to key stakeholders as a form of member-checking. City staff and community leaders often asked questions and requested information that was later incorporated into subsequent stages of the research. Undergraduate students created infographics based on our data that were publicly disseminated, and the evaluation project culminated in a nearly 200-page report that identified best practices and recommendations for improvement. The CBR approach, thus, made explicit what was valuable and worthwhile to the various stakeholders in the community—residents, activists, city staff, and elected officials.

Data and analysis

After receiving approval from our university’s institutional review board, we collected data for 9 months between August 2015 and May 2016. The data include approximately 111 hours of participant observations at 74 public events that generated 521 pages of fieldnotes and 44 participant interviews that lasted 15–60 minutes each. Field observations were collected at 15 city planning meetings, 14 steering committee meetings, 14 idea collection events, 25 budget delegate meetings, five “project expo” presentations, and one voting event.

City planning meetings typically involved key city staff members who oversaw the PB process and a small paid, contracted team responsible for process implementation. A total of 18 volunteer residents constituted the steering committee, which met at least monthly to establish the PB process rules and discuss the progress of each phase. Observed idea-collection events included structured meetings that involved facilitators guiding residents in small group deliberations to identify community needs and propose potential solutions to those needs in the form of capital improvement projects, as well as tabling at community events to solicit project ideas from passersby. Budget delegate committee meetings occurred weekly and consisted of volunteer residents sorting submitted project ideas and then developing selected projects into full-fledged proposals. The project expos were public events similar to science fairs where residents could walk freely among

tables with information about projects on the ballot. Lastly, we observed one in-person voting event where residents cast ballots for community-improvement projects.

We used criterion sampling strategies, useful for quality assurance, in this study.⁵¹ Interviewees comprised a criterion sample because we spoke with people who were involved in the PB process in various ways: by submitting a project idea; by volunteering as a budget delegate, steering committee member, or facilitator; or by being one of the city staff members whose work was impacted by PB. To recruit interviewees, we contacted participants who submitted an email address at a PB event. Interviews were conducted in person when possible, with other interviews conducted by phone. Our questions probed for participants' experiences, such as what involvement meant to them, how they understood their role, the impacts of participation in PB on other forms of civic engagement, ways they thought PB succeeded, and ways it could be improved. Questions were open-ended so interviewees could describe understandings and views in their own terms.⁵² Interviewees were approximately 67 percent white, 30 percent African American, 4 percent Latinx, 53 percent female, 47 percent male, and their ages ranged from 14 to 72. For comparison, overall, PB participants were approximately 50 percent white, 40 percent African American, 4 percent Latinx, 60 percent female, and 40 percent male, similar to the city's demographics.

Events for participant observation also were chosen using criterion sampling because we attended all public events that Greensboro PB staff organized and city planning meetings to which city staff members invited us. The study, therefore, relies on the experiences of those who participated in PB and does not explore why people may have chosen not to participate.

Data analysis activities occurred throughout the data-collection process. After the conclusion of each participant observation event, we reviewed rough, in-the-moment fieldnotes and wrote more coherent, reflective interpretations of what occurred. Additionally, we adjusted the data-collection protocol regularly to ensure the most relevant turning points, highlights, and stories were noted. Thus, the analysis process was ongoing and iterative, allowing us to review what we were documenting, ponder new possibilities for thematic consideration, and reach new understandings while working on the study.

We used both categorical aggregation and direct interpretation to generate codes for analyzing fieldnotes and interviews. Direct interpretation is attaching "meaning to a small collection of impressions within a single episode," while categorical aggregation represents a piecing together of information from multiple episodes.⁵³ We identified "emergent" thematic categories in the data to reflect the views of participants.⁵⁴ The analysis provided herein is meant to convey naturalistic generalizations, which Robert Stake defines as "conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life's affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to themselves."⁵⁵ We then performed member checking by sharing our analysis with our community partners and inviting feedback.⁵⁶ Participants agreed that our findings reflected the challenges and successes they faced during PB.

As Greensboro launched its inaugural PB process, we sought to understand how government officials and local residents would interact with this new tool for social change, and we asked how Greensboro PB could begin to address historic inequities. These questions guided us as we continued our exploration into the process and began to sit down with neighbors to identify and address issues facing our community.

Social justice in Greensboro PB

Greensboro PB navigated tensions between desires for social change and forces that wished to maintain the status quo. Following Young's theory of communicative democracy, we represent these tensions in several stories which document the messiness of deliberation and the challenges the process faced in fostering a social justice sensibility. Young saw narrative, or storytelling, as an egalitarian process especially helpful to marginalized groups whose epistemologies and experiences may not fit dominant narratives.⁵⁷ Storytelling "can foster understanding by presenting human experiences that challenge the hegemonic condition and express the particularity of individual experience."⁵⁸ The stories here from Greensboro PB include controversies around both the processes (why do PB?) and products (what should PB fund?), demonstrating how deliberations were regularly tacking between both matters.

Are you smarter than a sixth-grader?

Upon the approval of Greensboro PB, city council members appointed a volunteer steering committee to oversee the process development and implementation. The committee's first task was to create a PB handbook of rules and guidelines. The diverse volunteer committee, nine males and nine females representing various ethnic groups, included two African immigrants. Committee members quickly decided that anyone could propose a project idea, regardless of residency, citizenship status, or age. However, the group deadlocked on the issue of what should be the minimum voting age, 11, 14, or 16 years old. The ensuing conversation demonstrates their struggle:

- Member 1: I was leaning toward 14, but if there are younger people who want to be involved, let them. I don't want to penalize anyone.
- Member 2: Graciously accepting anyone [to vote] who is interested is a good idea.
- Member 3: My experience is that young people will have good ideas, but by 14 they can sit down and develop a proposal ... when working on budgets you need maturity.
- Member 4: I originally thought 16, then I listened for 11, and then thought 14 ... I think it's a good compromise.
- Member 5: 16! Transportation is an issue. Youth younger than 16 sometimes can't even match their socks.
[Laughter. Everyone checks their socks.]
- Member 2: PB is successful when it is inclusive. I know plenty of 25-year-olds who I would *never* send to the city, but I also know 13-year-olds who could do this. I think the process itself would weed people out.

The steering committee finally decided PB voters would need to be at least 11 years old—the youngest voting age of any PB process in the United States at that time.

Youth, although not typically included in discussions of marginalized groups, constitute a demographic formally excluded from civic participation. People under 18 hold a tenuous position in Greensboro, where they make up a quarter of the people living in poverty; the poverty rate among public school students is higher yet, at 66 percent.⁵⁹ Formally including middle and high schoolers in Greensboro PB offered an early indication that participants would embrace a social justice sensibility by granting formal voting authority to an under-resourced population. The committee members left their meeting proud and energized to launch the process, but would eventually face backlash from institutional powers.⁶⁰

Three months later, Greensboro's City Council expressed heightened anxiety about the previously agreed-upon voting age. The mayor said 11-year-olds should not be allowed to vote in PB. A council member concurred, questioning, in exasperation, "We're turning over half a million dollars, and 11-year-olds are going to decide how to spend it?" However, the volunteer steering committee members defended their original decision. One said, "At first, I was opposed to 11-year-olds voting, but then I thought what better way to teach them how the process works?" These remarks were met with derision, including the comment by an elected official, "You've got to be kidding me." Several council members said they should have decided the minimum voting age, not the steering committee members.

Following this episode, the city's daily newspaper published an op-ed that opened,

Are you smarter than a sixth-grader? We would certainly hope so. That's why the [PB] skeptics are right about at least one thing: No way in the world should 11-year-olds be allowed to vote in the city's first stab at participatory budgeting.⁶¹

The question of the voting age, in turn, raised larger questions of who should have the authority and power in determining the specifics of the Greensboro PB process—the volunteer residents of the steering committee appointed by elected officials for this purpose or the elected officials themselves.

At the next meeting of the steering committee, the voting age controversy continued. Representing the city council was a senior-ranking African American councilwoman. She chastised the steering committee members, arguing that 11-year-olds were too young to make important decisions and that their participation diminished the legitimacy of PB:

They don't understand the process. They may vote like their mama. ... No one is saying youth cannot be part of the process, but I don't think we should have youth do something that could impact the community.

In response, a committee member vigorously disagreed, saying:

Even someone at age 11 has the capacity to say something is a good idea or not. It's not about the dollar amount. You devalue the mind of an 11-, 12-, or 13-year-old because of their age. As a person who values input from all ages and walks of life, that is the age where we can capture people to get involved in the process.

This brief exchange reflects a struggle over equality, equity, and justice in public deliberation. The councilwoman made clear that, while children could be encouraged to observe the process, she did not want them to have the same decision-making power as adults. Steering committee members countered that such youth exclusion, as is common in most other forms of political participation, was precisely why they wanted young people's formal inclusion as legitimate community members in the PB process. Seeing youth as equal to adults in their deliberative capacity offered an example of how equality could contribute to equity, as Moscrop and Warren contended.⁶²

After additional meetings, the steering committee voted with some trepidation to increase the minimum voting age to 14 years old to appease the city council. They worried that to defy the city council would put the future of PB at risk. Despite the concession, this extended example demonstrates that the PB process provided opportunities for residents to persevere in their desire to incorporate young people in the process,

notwithstanding pressure from city council members to raise the voting age. While the issue of voting age was diffused, tensions about equity and how to advance social justice issues continued to arise in the process periodically, particularly between residents and city staff members as they developed project proposals, as evidenced in our next exemplar.

Preposterous as potential

The story of one particular project idea and proposal demonstrates differing values among residents and city officials. An African American male and university student had been frustrated standing at bus stops and not knowing when the next bus would arrive. He proposed a smartphone application—or “app”—to give riders real-time updates on a bus’s estimated time of arrival. His project was initially deemed ineligible by city staff who reasoned it was not a capital project. Capital projects are fixed, material items such as sidewalks, bus benches, and trash cans. Because the bus app would require ongoing maintenance, it exceeded the one-time cost stipulation that defined capital projects.⁶³ Undaunted, the student continued to advocate for the bus app, despite repeated rejections from the city. He rallied the support of budget delegates who used the process’s equity criteria to conclude the app would benefit public transit, which lacks amenities in minority and low-income communities, and benefits racial/ethnic minority groups who constitute a greater share of bus ridership than whites.⁶⁴

City officials eventually deferred, and the project was put on the ballot, but the challenges did not end there. Greensboro PB involved five different ballots, one for each district of the city. The original \$500,000 allocated for PB was divided so that each district was allocated \$100,000 to spend on district-specific items. Because the bus app would benefit the entire city, officials said that the app must be a winning project on all five ballots in order to be funded. Despite the high bar established, voters approved the app on all five ballots, and the community heralded the college student as a PB hero. His persistence was featured in a story published in a national magazine.⁶⁵

Another winning project likewise generated controversy. The community voted to build two stone game tables that city staff estimated would cost \$20,000. An African American woman proposed the idea to serve as a site for people to sit together and create bonds in the community, whether through a friendly game of checkers or informal conversations with one another. Residents approved the game tables to be installed in parks that had experienced years of degradation and were located in a part of the city with elevated crime levels. PB participants saw the game tables as an opportunity to turn attention to these neglected areas of the city and provide new (albeit small) investment in an underserved part of the community.

However, this winning project was berated by those in power. Many community members responded with exasperation, noting the city council was once again micromanaging a process they had already approved and turned over to a steering committee to oversee. One city council member, who said spending the money for game tables was foolish, indicated in an interview, “One thing I would encourage people to think creatively about is some safeguards. ... When things like [stone game tables] make it to a short list, it undermines confidence in the [PB] program.” The council member believed the public needed to be kept safe from their own decisions. Another council member was even

more aghast, proclaiming, “This is ridiculous. \$20,000 for game tables. I want to remove it and reallocate it to [a local food pantry].⁶⁶ I’ll tell everyone . . . that it’s ridiculous.” The council member constructed an image of game tables in parks as a wasteful menace, one that threatened the very community it purported to serve. The conflict revealed a view by those in authority that regular people were unable to be fiscally responsible. However, the officials failed to grasp the passion behind the democratic process that allowed “people to broaden the range of their commitments to others, to build a more inclusive community.”⁶⁷ PB operates by encouraging people to take responsibility for others rather than relegating that to authorities.

Taken collectively, the bus app and stone game tables were deemed preposterous by critics. The app was not feasible, city staff said; the game tables were a waste of money, cried elected officials. However, PB’s design vested power in the people so that residents acted with confidence to address inequities and resist dismissive discourse. Eventually, city staff secured new, less expensive estimates for installing the stone tables at the insistence of the people.⁶⁸

PB encourages the public to have a say in decisions and, at the same time, recognizes the elected leaders and city staff will be engaged as well. The process, however, was far from perfect in its design, as we describe next.

Participation in the face of shortcomings

Among Greensboro PB’s greatest success was attracting diverse involvement, particularly from people of color and low-income residents who reflected Greensboro’s population in terms of ethnicity, income, and gender.⁶⁹ The process also drew in people who had not been involved previously in civic affairs. We found that 85 percent of the participants were new to the city’s budgeting process, and 70 percent of the roughly 2,000 participants reported that they were not previously involved in city/community affairs.⁷⁰ One budget delegate said,

I was at a voting event at the central library, and there were a lot of homeless people there. They would tell us they didn’t have an address, but when we told them they could use the address of the shelter they’re staying at, they would get really excited.

Allowing people without a fixed address to vote served as a form of Young’s idea of greeting, where those who are typically excluded from formal civic participation are welcomed and provided mutual recognition and care through an invitation to cast a ballot.⁷¹ Volunteer budget delegates reported feeling more knowledgeable and thus more connected to their city after actively working with others, former strangers, to develop details necessary for projects to make it onto ballots. They indicated that they were more likely to attend other community events and work with their neighbors to achieve change in the future.

Greensboro PB also promoted productive, positive communication between residents and city government. One city staff member said, “I think PB opened a lot of opportunities for dialogue with the community.” He explained that most of his previous communication with residents was defensive in that he generally only responded to complaints, whereas, with PB, his interactions with residents were proactive and optimistic. Residents, too, were impressed with communication. One participant responded:

It [PB] served to validate what I think the city truly wants to be about, and what I feel the community truly needs, which is more interaction, feedback, and collaboration with the people of the city to improve the city.

Even still, some process design features impeded Greensboro PB's ability to achieve transformative change.

As the stories about the youth voting age and project development demonstrate, residents and city representatives struggled over community values. Elected officials and city staff members often sought to control and limit PB's influence to projects with which they were comfortable, while residents wanted to introduce novel ways to address lingering problems. Some residents said PB did not go far enough in countering systems of oppression that have neglected certain communities. In the words of one participant, "The most significant conversation that night was how to respond to homelessness. In my district, I don't think people spend a lot of time thinking about those issues." Her comments further exposed the limitations in the process that only funded capital projects. That funding restriction, participants reasoned, prevented them from being able to fully address issues that required money for programs, food, and personnel. They wanted deeper and prolonged critical dialogue to consider how best to address problems in their locality and find common ground with neighbors.

Finally, another barrier to fostering a social justice sensibility in participants was the organization of deliberation events. During the idea-collection phase, the meetings functioned as large brainstorming sessions with too little time for important discussion surrounding collective problems in the community and who would benefit from proposed projects. That talk was instead relegated to the smaller subset of budget delegates who also sidestepped the difficult conversations in favor of prioritizing projects quickly to meet the timeline demands of the process. Further, when budget delegates did prioritize projects according to equity criteria, oftentimes city staff assessed projects instead according to cost-effectiveness and efficiency.

For example, a white female budget delegate proposed a stoplight at an intersection identified by the community as one needed to promote pedestrian safety. After working with the city staff, the budget delegate had to settle for changing the proposal into one for a crosswalk instead:

We took a crosswalk because that was the absolute, only thing [city staff] would do. It felt like [PB] was the one time where people's voices are supposed to be heard. It felt like no one was listening. I understood all their reasons, but it felt like this would be one time to override all their rules.

This budget delegate said she was constrained by the city staff's review and emphasis on feasibility and practicality. As Sara Ahmed explains, privilege and status quo are preserved, with little energy, when decisions are made to uphold habits and long-standing practices.⁷² Social justice work, in contrast, requires extra effort, more pushing, disruption, and changes that may require additional creativity or costs.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study demonstrates that PB's deliberative processes moved toward fostering social justice sensibilities. In Greensboro, participants foregrounded ethical

concerns, intentionally responded to the needs of others, and advocated for changes they saw as important for the community. They resisted attempts, as well, from city officials to seize control at times. Participants discovered, they said, that the deliberative processes provided a pathway to forming new alliances with diverse neighbors. The stories they shared demonstrate that participants urged city officials to consider values other than efficiency so as to better prioritize the needs of historically marginalized and oppressed members of the community. Participants advocated for inclusion and equity even in the face of objections and obfuscations from some government officials.

One unexpected and long-lasting result was that residents were successful in reframing how even city officials spoke about community issues. That is, the PB process paved the way for discussions that put social justice concerns at the center of community planning. For example, in order for the city council person to justify his objections to the cost of the stone game tables, he claimed there were other disadvantaged people—those who faced food insecurity—as more deserving of the money. That is, to be seen as legitimate, the council person objected to a PB project by arguing it did not do *enough* for the disadvantaged. This framing reflects a significant departure from austerity policies that question the significance of any public spending. Greensboro PB framed public spending as necessary and instead asked questions about who that spending should benefit. PB provided a shift in rhetoric toward Young's conception of communicative democracy when a city council member had to offer an objection that was reflexively attendant to the audiences' desires for equity and the common good. By reframing public spending issues into questions of ethics and fairness, PB generates transformative outcomes for individuals and communities.

This case demonstrates that an equity-driven PB process is both possible and achievable, despite obstacles. In Greensboro, the challenges included insufficient time to address systemic inequalities, as well as resistance on the part of certain government officials to participants' proposed projects. Other design issues prevented the process from fully realizing Young's theory of communicative democracy for social justice. Many project ideas put forth by residents were eliminated or diminished in scope. The bus app idea almost did not make it to the ballot because city staff deemed it a program; an idea for a stoplight had to be changed to a stop sign, and eventually only a crosswalk. Residents frequently expressed concerns about food insecurity and homelessness in the city, but Greensboro PB's limitations of funding only capital projects with just \$500,000 was unable to address those needs. Another critique of the process concerned the city council's decision to allocate funds equally across the city's five districts. The political district separation was meaningless for everyday residents and only mattered for politicians to be able to say they brought money into "their district." On paper, PB grants everyday people unprecedented control of a public budget. However, the advancement of Young's conception of communicative democracy in which social justice is valued was not simple or easy to enact. Residents had to keep pushing, fighting, insisting, and organizing through communicative acts of greeting, storytelling, and rhetorical appeals to realize the successes they achieved.

This study extends prior research by shedding light on what comes next when activists' calls for direct democracy are heeded. Greensboro PB offered a unique case where activists organized and advocated to achieve their policy goals, and then also performed the arduous tasks of working alongside government officials to implement new policies and

practices through public deliberation.⁷³ Judith Hendry concluded that public participation processes often serve as more effective advocacy tools than decision-making tools.⁷⁴ We disagree. Our findings demonstrate that public participation offers critical routes for both advocacy and decision-making to advance social justice when equity and equality are design measures of success in the process.

Lastly, these findings possess implications for US society. PB provides tools through dialogue and deliberation processes, paired with public money, for residents to reclaim their democracy, build community, sharpen communication skills, and promote social justice. As Greensboro PB concluded its first cycle, residents and participants were hopeful about its potential to correct historic inequities. One participant remarked, “I hope citizens regard this as a small revolution—letting citizens get involved in the budget process. ... I think it’s one of the things that could make Greensboro better and more democratic.” PB offered residents an experience of how to contribute to meaningful change in their communities. PB aided participants in adopting a social justice sensibility, rather than an individualistic orientation, through their communicative acts, and it provided ways residents can continue to steer deliberations toward the equity and fairness they want for their city.

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