

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

Dollars and Democracy: Participatory Budgeting

- What we're talking about is doing business differently and making decisions together even with finite resources, it's about opening a door so that we can reimagine what's possible.
- Community has this expertise, they know what they need. Let's make sure that we are honoring that expertise and turning that into action.
- Participatory budgeting can be just one piece of a range of tools and practices that we start to use to mend and heal and connect and allow us to expand what equity, what decision making looks like.
- It's all coming up, my Laura Flanders Show, the place where the people who say it can't be done. Take a backseat to the people who are doing it, welcome. When the news broke of the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, it was chilling to many of us to learn that 40% of that small city's budget was allocated to public safety, a budget allocation that entirely failed to keep the children and teachers at Robb Elementary Schools safe. What might have been a better way to spend that city's precious funds, especially since the police murder of George Floyd, residents of many US cities and towns have been asking that same question. And there's a tool to which some have been turning in order to give regular people like themselves, more power and voice in the budget process. Participatory budgeting as it's called started in Brazil in the late 1980s. Since then, it's spread to more than 7,000 cities around the world, including 29 in the US. So far ordinary citizens in this country have had a direct role in deciding how to allocate some \$386 million. Could a bottom up approach to something as dry as budgets result in new and different responses to everything from climate change to public safety? Our guests today say yes. And happening at a moment when US democracy itself is under threat, they say that the experience of participating in budget making is not just producing some new priorities, it's validating people's beliefs about voting. Our guests are the Co-Directors of the New York and Oakland based Participatory Budgeting Project. I'll also speak with Shaun glaze from Seattle, where some 30 million are about to be directed toward a new vision of public safety after a two year participatory process. First though, it is my pleasure to introduce Shari Davis and Kristania De Leon both come to the Participatory Budgeting Project from years of community engagement. As Director of Youth Engagement and Employment for the City of Boston, Shari launched Youth Lead the Change, the first youth participatory budgeting process in the US. Thank you so much for joining us both. We've got various cities engaged in this process right now. Are there any that you would like to lift up in particular, Kris?

- Yeah, there are a lot of spaces doing participatory budgeting right now. And I'll say that for folks who are interested in learning more about particular cities or instances, it's important, I think just to name up the front that participatory budgeting happens in spaces, communities, areas of all kinds. So we see participatory budgeting happening in schools like in Arizona and as well in Central Falls Rhode Island. We're seeing it happen in counties like in King County, Washington, as well as previous processes in Merced, California, and the county there as well. And in city spaces, we're seeing a huge growth in using participatory budgeting. One of the exciting places that's piloting participatory budgeting right now is in Sacramento, California. They're piloting a \$1 million process and it's their very first time ever doing participatory budgeting. And this has come after increased tax revenues have come in and community members said, we wanna have a say in where those revenues go.

- Ostensibly government is supposed to be our form of participation. In cities, we elect people, they engage in a process. Why isn't that sufficient, Shari?

- First of all, let's just back up a little bit and talk about how budgets are typically decided on. It's often a guy or a small group of folks that look at expenses for the next calendar year and make some guesses or estimations on what will be required in the next calendar year. And then they present that to another small group of people, maybe a city council, and then that ends up more or less being the budget. And there are people, community advocates that can stand on the side and try to direct or participate but it's actually quite difficult in that system. Participatory budgeting is about doing business differently. It's about really transforming the relationship that people can have with government and with community led decision making so that we make really good fiscally responsible decisions that reflect community spending priorities. This is a process of deep participation and engagement that works over a series of a couple of what we call phases of participatory budgeting.

- So a lot of places around the country are going through or just finishing up going through their budgeting process as we're speaking. If we were watching participatory budgeting and perhaps it's second and third phases, Kris, what would we see around the country right now? Could you describe it for us?

- Absolutely and one thing I'll acknowledge is that the actual mechanisms, the tactics can look very different in every community, 'cause every process is a little bit different and every space will organize differently. But what you'll see is instead of maybe some predetermined ideas about what community wants to do, really active outreach, you'll see people canvassing neighborhoods and putting door hangers to say, if you have ideas, share them with us, do it digitally, send in this ballot, let this form and let us know how that could look. You'll see people hosting events and assemblies in their local libraries or at their local schools. You'll see people coming together to

really think about where should these funds be going? What are our priorities? What are our needs? How can we meet them together and learning from each other and how to do that.

- And so you wanna start with just jotting down some community issues that you care about. It can be things that you have a personal connection to, maybe you've experienced it, maybe your family member has been affected by it.

- And you'll also see folks undertaking a lot of collaborative research, a lot of ways to say, we have an idea, how do we actually make it deeply feasible? How do we connect it to our community needs and how do we make sure it has equitable impact? And so you'll see a lot of collaboration in folks saying, I think there's a nonprofit that does this, let's connect with them and see what they know or folks saying, you know, I don't see a lot of youth voices and really informing what the impacts of this will be. Let's make sure we actually reach out and get that. And then working with agencies or departments to say, all right, are our cost estimates correct? Can we sustain this? Where will this go? What would it look like? And then really working together to then mobilize. The other thing you'll also see is typically when we do design with equity in mind, you'll see a robust diversity of community voices working collaboratively that we don't necessarily see in more traditional or more formal decision making that involves our residents, our community members like regular elections.

- What are some of the obstacles to something that sounds like such an obviously great idea. I mean maybe who and what are the obstacles and I have to lift up the criticism that I've heard in the New York area where people say, what we really need is expanded budgets, not for more people to be forced to decide what to do with ever shrinking numbers of dollars. How do you respond, Shari?

- Well, I think first there's a different way to think about this. What we're talking about is doing business differently and making decisions together even with finite resources, because that's how we make good decisions together. It's not about forcing people to do a thing, it's about opening a door so that we can reimagine what's possible together. And there are challenges with doing things differently, with changing the ways in which we do business. Participatory budgeting to be successful and equitable in the ways that Kristania is describing requires us to invest time, energy, and dedicated outreach. It requires us to design with and that doesn't happen overnight because we have to build relationships of trust so that folks can participate in government in a different way, in a way that allows them to really take a role in shaping what the outcome is.

- I gather there are some good stories coming outta Cleveland.

- Cleveland is a city that has one of the higher poverty rates for a city of their size United States. They have over 30% of their population living below the poverty line. So when they found out

that they were getting American Rescue Plan Act funds allocated to their municipal government, they said, wait a minute, this is a huge influx of relatively flexible spending, where's it gonna go and who gets to have a say? And so Cleveland community members have been working together through COVID they've hosted home sessions, so allowing community members to come into each other's homes safely and learn in small groups about what this is and what it can mean building hundreds of advocates for this practice, as they learned more about it together. And now I put forward a \$30.8 million ask to be invested through participatory budgeting and reflect the 30% poverty rate within the city and are mobilizing actively to think about what could this yield to reduce poverty in our community and to really build connections through doing a practice like participatory budgeting.

- Now we go to Shaun Glaze of Seattle, the Research Director of the Black Brilliance Research Project and the Founder of Inclusive Data. Tell me how you got involved with the Participatory Budgeting Project and the process right there in Seattle.

- So for me, I came in summer of 2020 during all of the uprisings, during the pandemic, during the economic recession, all of those times coming together. A team of us, community members passionate about creating justice right now came together and wrote a document that ended up being put in front of council, city council to say, hey, we have a way forward here. At the time, the City of Seattle said, hey, we wanna divest in systems that harm black communities and we wanna reinvest that money, but we don't know how. And so we put forth the document, it made the case for what it looks like to divest in police and reinvest in community. And one of the things that we put forth from jump was that there should be community led research that led to participatory budgeting. It took massive mobilization of thousands of people in the street protesting every single day in order to create the momentum needed for city council to say, well, we have no other choice but to do this. And our city council then came together and said, let's actually make this happen. So it isn't something that just kind of happened overnight, it really took community action, mobilizing built off of decades of organizing and thought around a way forward in order to get us to this point.

- How many dollars did the participatory budgeting process actually get to allocate and what did you all, what did the process decide to allocate that money to?

- Seattle's participatory budgeting process will be a little under \$30 million that'll go through this process. It's one of the largest allocations in the United States and we're really proud of that, especially because it's based on black priorities and following black leadership. And in terms of the buckets, those are the things that we've been talking about. Housing and Physical Spaces, especially black led ones, making sure people have their Mental Health needs, youth development, especially as it relates to elders, Economic Development, also looking at Crises & Wellness in a new way, those are the main buckets. And then what will happen is anyone 10 and

older will be able to participate in this participatory budgeting process to suggest ideas related to those five buckets. And then the way PB works, of course, is people suggest ideas and then they vote on them and then those things get funded, so that means that we the people will decide what happens to the public funds and what's different about Seattle is the priorities have to line up with the things that communities who've been most impacted by that systemic structural violence, really setting the priorities and leading the way.

- What is there in the participatory budgeting process that would stop a vocal group of intentioned residents from passing a resolution or getting into one of those buckets, the embrace of a military base or a nuclear plant or a sewage plant or something that, you know, on the outside you might think that's not a good way for the city to go, but it might feel like a way to bring in jobs or whatever to those involved.

- So the way that our process is designed is that those who are closest to the issues are closest to the solution. So the steering committees, the work groups, the group of people who are facilitating and like designing and refining the rules, those folks are gonna be the ones leading. And we as a community like trust those folks to make sure that as we are designing the process of collecting information and what have you, that that's gonna be consistent with the way that things are designed. So, that said, if the communities that we're talking about, those most impacted, so that's black folks, disabled folks, that is people who have lived experience with incarceration, that is trans folks, especially black trans women. If these communities decide, you know, that that is the most important thing and that those are the ideas that need to move forward, then those are the ideas that will move forward. So we'll see what people say. It's one of those things that from our experience, when you ask people who are most impacted, they've spent every single day thinking about like how to really move forward and so creating a mechanism where they get to apply their leadership and be able to bring us into the world that we wanna see is really exciting.

- Coming back to you after this, Kris and Shari, talk a little bit about your own journey to participatory budgeting. I mean, you Shari were involved in government young as you are for years before you got involved in this. Why the shift and what was it in your background that drew you to the Participatory Budgeting Project?

- Yeah, Laura, I am a recovering government employee. And I say that with a shout out to the folks that do work in government because it's a hard role to be in. And one of the things that I learned in working in government in the City of Boston was how important it was for community members to directly decide and not just any community members, community members that are most impacted by decisions that affect them. And so in my role in the City of Boston, I was overseeing youth engagement, youth initiatives, the summer and school year workforce development program for young people. And when I was introduced to participatory budgeting,

it was actually by Mayor Menino at the time who said, 'Shari, I heard about this thing. I wanna do this thing, it's called PB.' And I Googled it and had to find out what it was and when I met the Participatory Budgeting Project, it was first as a client. They taught me in the City of Boston how to run this sort of process. And in all of my experience managing civic engagement with youth, I had never seen young people make direct decisions about a million dollars in the city's budget. And it was so powerful to me that I was like, ha, this is something that we can bring, not only to the City of Boston, but across the country in a very, very big way that has direct results. And so that was the big shift for me as a person that worked in government and served as a community organizer.

- And you, Kris.

- I think I come from more of that outside game strategy and actually was coming from a background in public health and community organizing and experiencing a space where we were working to build coalitions to change our legislative policies to center community needs more effectively. What I recognized for me and particularly as a young woman of color, is that the people in the room still designing the legislation, still figuring out how to word it and get buy-in and move it through the process were never as diverse as the communities we were hoping to center. We're always speaking on their behalf or engaging them once something was introduced. So you could probably imagine why there's a natural connection then for me when I had discovered participatory budgeting, I was like, there's something here that's really interesting and I actually became familiar with the Participatory Budgeting Project after seeing Shari like presents at an event and I was so excited to say, I was like, this is something that actually is feeding, like filling this hole that I was feeling.

- Do you have a favorite project that's been funded this way, or a favorite initiative that got support?

- Some of my favorite projects include things that come from young people and young people are not bringing forward ideas like, I don't know, we need taco trucks everywhere, but if they did, I think that would maybe be great. Instead, what we're seeing is that young people are saying things like we need increased wifi access. So I'm thinking back to instances in Boston, where it's because of young people that these access points for broadband internet were kind of installed in areas in the city where there was limited access, in areas of the city where there is a low income population, in areas of the city that are traditionally and historically under resourced. And I just thought that was a beautiful example of how to transform how folks can communicate with each other and get resources and it was a really simple solution.

- The Participatory Budgeting Project also has a fellowship program for young leaders.

- One of the beautiful things that we have is a People's Fellowship that's led by young people that are providing really coaching and consulting to local agencies on how to better run participatory budgeting processes, and deeply engage community members in making direct decisions.

- Shari, we're gonna see one of the fellows explaining why the project was important for them.

- We've seen young people as young as 11 years old non-citizens and people from all walks of life votes in PB. What you might not know is that I've been shaping the city's budget with other young people across New York City for about three years now. I've seen young people begin to shape what COVID recovery should look like in New York City. And this is what's been possible by listening to our young people and local groups. In East Flatbush, we got our leadership development program for young musicians seeking career opportunities. Now, young people in East Flatbush will gain hands on musical experience. And this year as well, 19 barber shops and 17 hair salons in Coney Island will get educational materials about mental health to reduce stigma about mental health and let New Yorkers know that we're here for them if they need it. It is clear that PB is a reflection of what we want and quite frankly, what we need at this time to rise together and shape New York City into the city we want it to be.

- Well, that was one of the people's fellows with the Participatory Budgeting Project. Shari are the things that you've learned in all of this that are surprising, shocking, worth sharing with the millions.

- Well, one of the things that's coming up for me is actually some of the work that's happening in Sacramento right now. And what I would say, it's less about being surprised and shocked, but it's more about understanding that practice requires a discipline, a discipline of hope, a discipline of commitment, a discipline to practice, a discipline to have conversation that allows us to make policy change and deeply engage with folks.

- In Sacramento, what's been really exciting to see is that we initially would talk about participatory budgeting, community members really wanted it, but we did get pushback. We got folks kind of wondering, you know, what does this really mean? And if we give you 1 million, \$5 million, what's it gonna really yield? And is it gonna be any different than what we typically see? And what's been really beautiful is folks saying, even if it isn't the most radically different thing, but is sincerely what community wants, we wanna invest there. And also bringing a really strong commitment to center the communities that exist within Sacramento which is our state capital. And to really say, there are spaces that are thriving business areas, there are thriving commercial spaces where people do exist within the City of Sacramento and there's also disparity and inequity. How do we center the needs of those committee members first and foremost, and really demonstrate and share how we can center their voices in decision making,

not just here with PB, but in everywhere and every part and every facet of our decision making as a city.

- Everything that you said about practice and exercising a muscle is a lot of what we see in the economy when we cover things like work around co-ops. What we hear is that the thing people are least experienced and familiar with is decision making in a group with lots of other people. It's just not what they get much practice at in this country. So listening to you, I think that this is a well timed initiative for people to get some practice in exercising their democracy, which in lots of places feels kind of moribund but needs actually to get deeper and more expansive and us all to get better at it. That all brings me to the question that I ask at the end of these programs, which I'd love to ask the two of you, which has to do with the story you think the future will tell of now, like, what do you think will be how we look back at this moment.

- For me, if I think about how we look back and the story of now, I can see it being sort of a tipping point in a moment where we've had to really interrogate is the status quo working for us and are we brave enough to do something new? And so I hope that it's kind of a jumping board for that new thing, that new opportunity and that PB, participatory budgeting can be just one piece of a range of tools and practices that we start to use to mend and heal and connect and allow us to expand what equity, what decision making looks like more transparently, more collaboratively as a whole, really shifting our idea, what did we mean when we say democracy? Do we really mean everyone? And I hope that we can look back and say, maybe we didn't then, but we do now.

- I hope then we look back on this time that we're able to say that was a moment when we changed. I hope that my family is able to say that was a moment when I changed, that was a moment when we changed together. I hope that this is a moment that we look back on and reflect on how much more we can change 'cause I also wanna name that as we imagine the future, I hope that what's in it is that regular practice of us being able to change in ways that center people most impacted by decisions.

- Kristania De Leon and Shari Davis, thank you both. It's great talking to you and good luck with the project, I hope it catches fire. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the former president of Haiti used to say that elections weren't democracy. They took the temperature of the democracy. The democracy was what happened in between elections. I've been thinking about that while we think about the crisis of democracy in this country, a lot of people talk about the crisis that it is facing, but I think we most often associate democracy with a person or people, presidential candidates more often than not, a few individuals. And we see a whole lot of dysfunction in Congress when it comes to the relationship between what people vote for and what they actually get. But what if we looked at not the person, but the process. The story of participatory budgeting suggests that the process is alive and well, and people want more of it where they live. And the process may

not be expanding the budgets of cities around this country, but it's expanding people's experience of democracy and that it seems to me is a good thing right now. You can find out more of my interviews about participatory budgeting through the archives at our website and find our full uncut conversation from today's episode through our podcast feed. Thanks for joining me, till the next time. Stay kind, stay curious, I'm Laura. For more on this episode and other forward thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast, it's all at lauraflanders.org.