

## **Media: PB as a useful tool for empowering democracy and equal distribution of resources**

Participatory budgeting (PB) has emerged as a major democratic innovation involving citizens in the process of deciding how public money is spent. Through PB citizens can have a direct say on how local funds are invested in their communities. Lately, participatory budgeting processes become increasingly popular in democracies, especially in Europe, which hosts 39% of worldwide PB exercises. Benefits arising from PB are multiple for empowering a community, for instance democratization of policy-making, and fair dissemination of public budgets in accordance to the citizens' needs and priorities.

The DEMOTEC project, funded by the EU Horizon 2020 Framework, investigates the role of PB in fostering informed citizen engagement in policy-making. The three years project, launched in March 2021, involves in-depth research on participatory budgeting and mediated deliberation in the public sphere with real-world experiments.

Given the impact of the media in shaping citizens' perceptions and evaluations of political phenomena, DEMOTEC studied media representations of PB; in doing so, DEMOTEC identified the main frames PB is discussed through, and what meanings are assigned to PB. To substantiate this, framing analysis was conducted using generic frames from political communication, on a subset of the DEMOTEC news media corpus (random selection of 1,638 news stories in nine languages). Frames are guides structuring a message and directing people to interpret what they see in a specific perspective; they signal what is salient, what can be ignored, and allow us to infer missing information according to the context.

The analysis identified four main framings that largely structure the way in which PB is represented in news media. Between 80 and 90% of all frames detected were accounted for by the following dominant frames:

(1) a **"democratic values" frame** that represents PB as a solution, a form of civic empowerment or as a mechanism to improve accountability and transparency; The strongest associations with PB were accordingly democratic values such as "accountability", "democratic solution", and empowerment".

(2) a **competing frame** that has a more utilitarian aspect and emphasises "resources" and how PB funds are allocated. The strongest associations with PB were accordingly "resources" and "implementation issues".

Although far more infrequent, two additional frames were also uncovered: (3) an "implementation" frame that centers on problems faced during the implementation of PB, and (4) a more negative frame that focuses on "conflict" be it partisan or in terms of political patronage. In addition, the saliency of PB in a news story was found to matter. Broadly speaking, half of the framing corpus contained news stories in which PB was mentioned in passing, while for the remaining half the topic of PB was more salient. Focusing on the stories in which PB was salient, approximately 90 percent of coverage had a positive or mostly positive tone, while the remaining 10 percent was more negative in its coverage. Despite the overall positive media representations, the findings raise concerns on implementation issues and applicability of PB. Additionally, there were interesting insights from the comparative analysis,

for instance, regarding the news articles collection. High volume of articles in Polish were detected and high number of media sources in Spanish was found to count the 1/3 of the corpus, in contrast to Greece or Netherlands. This may relate to whether PB is a common phenomenon and whether the corresponding audiences are familiar with PB.

In general, the conclusions ensued from the framing analysis show a tendency in news reporting to associate the PB with positive valence, and assign meanings relating to positive social values. Also, the frequency of media coverage of PB may relate to the familiarity with PB in each sociocultural context indicating that proactive media agendas regarding democratic innovations are missing.

See the full Participatory budgeting framing analysis report: <https://demotec-project.eu/reports/>

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