

Local and Urban Governance

Karl Kössler
Erika Schläppi *Editors*

Citizen Participation in Local Governance

An Urban-Rural Perspective

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Editors

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Chapter 10

A Comparative Overview of Participatory Budgeting in Italy



Mattia Bottino and Martina Trettel

Abstract The last two decades have seen a rapid diffusion of participatory governance in local budgeting. First crafted in Brazil, participatory budgeting (PB) represents one of the most prominent and institutionalized democratic innovations at the local level. Its introduction has been concomitant with the adoption of participatory legislation at the subnational level. This chapter engages in a comparative study of the most recent PB editions in three Italian municipalities, namely Bologna, Caltanissetta, and Malles Venosta. These cases showcase different patterns of development of PB, providing a picture of its pace of consolidation. The presence of strong traditions of municipal self-government, civic associationism, and progressive municipal governments are shown as crucial for the entrenchment of PB into local practices. Regional and local legislation on participation are proven to be key variables for the institutionalization of PB, making its implementation systemic rather than episodic. Notwithstanding the intrinsic differences among the cases (geographic, socio-economic, and political), this chapter emphasizes the exceptional role that PB plays in Italy as one of the most well-established settings of decentralized participatory decision-making. While fostering participation in budgeting processes, PB is conceived by the authors as a tool for expanding the scope of local self-government and fighting democratic disenchantment.

Keywords Participatory budgeting · Participatory democracy · Democratic innovations · Local government · Decentralization

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10.1 Introduction

Participatory Budgeting (hereinafter PB) stands out as one of the most prominent tools within the realm of “participatory democracy” (Elstub, 2018). Over the past decade, there has been a significant global surge in the adoption of PB, particularly at the local level. Originating in the 1980s in Brazil, PB can be shortly defined as a democratic process in which community members collaboratively determine the allocation of a portion of public funds, employing consensus-driven and deliberative decision-making approaches (Ganuza & Francés, 2012; Röcke, 2014).

As elsewhere in the world, Italy has also embraced the practice of PB at all levels of government, especially at the local one. While all experiences of PB show common conceptual and design traits aimed at facilitating the deliberative engagement of non-elected citizens in public finance allocation, each experience remains unique due to diverse contextual factors, such as cultural, social, economic, political, and geographical conditions.

This chapter analyzes three distinct cases of PB that have unfolded in Italy at the local level, namely in Bologna, Caltanissetta, and Malles Venosta (in German, Mals).¹ These three case studies have been chosen because they represent very dissimilar realities: an industrialized metropolitan area in central-northern Italy (Bologna), a relatively poor medium-sized city in the southern island of Sicily (Caltanissetta), and a small and relatively wealthy rural municipality (Malles Venosta) located in a remote valley in South Tyrol, Italy’s northernmost and predominantly German-speaking subnational unit.

The chapter will illustrate how the same participatory practice has developed in profoundly different contexts, trying to trace common trajectories, and drawing comparative lessons and insights. These will be built upon the analysis of the relative regional and municipal legislation on participation and PB. The peculiar socio-political and cultural landscape of each case-study will be considered, and a concise contextualization will be provided thereupon, as to grasp the most salient features of the three different PB experiences. Particular attention will be paid to the most recent PB editions. Before delving into the specifics of these three experiences (Sects. 10.3, 10.4 and 10.5), a preliminary section will outline the structure of PB – defining its essence, origins, and key characteristics (Sect. 10.2). Section 10.6 of final and comparative reflections will close the chapter.

10.2 Participatory Budgeting: Origins, Conceptualization and Functions

In recent years, representative democracy has encountered significant challenges across all levels of government, manifested through diminishing voter turnout and a prevailing disinterest in matters pertaining to society and citizenship. While the

¹ Malles Venosta, as much of rural and mountainous South Tyrol, is inhabited by a German-speaking population. For reasons of clarity, we will use hereafter the Italian name for the municipality (Malles Venosta).

established mechanisms of representative democracy, centered around elections, remain the cornerstone of democratic governance, participatory democracy provides pathways for the renewal of democracy at large. Carole Pateman, one of the leading scholars in the field of participatory democracy, states that “‘participation’ refers to (equal) participation in the making of decisions, and political equality refers to equality of power of determining the outcome of decisions” (Pateman, 1970, p. 43). However, conceptualizations of participatory democracy are often disputed, and agreement on its definition has not yet been achieved. This concept encapsulates an amalgamation of practices, tools, and procedures designed to facilitate active and substantive citizen involvement in the decision-making processes of public authorities (Allegretti, 2015; Allegretti & Herzberg, 2004). For this chapter, which takes into account one specific participatory institution, the notion of “democratic innovations” may be more suitable (Talpin, 2015; Trettel, 2015, p. 85). Elstub and Escobar (2019, p. 14) define democratic innovations as “processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence”. More radical interpretations of democratic innovations have placed emphasis on their creative and transformative implications, equating them to “processes of institutional creation” which entail “continuous social incidence over the public power and its administrative apparatus, and therefore also over the political system itself” (Gunza Lavalle & Isunza, 2010, p. 19). The underlying common rationale of these innovative policy-making tools is threefold: to bolster the legitimacy of political decisions, to enhance the quality of democratic policymaking, and ultimately, to amplify the efficacy of these decisions.

From its origins in Porto Alegre in the late 1980s, PB swiftly diffused throughout the rest of Brazil in subsequent years before permeating into other Latin American countries (Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022). The Brazilian roots of PB should not be overlooked. The context of its emergence is indeed unique. Before looking at its replicability, it is important to stress how PB is expression of the re-democratization and decentralization process, championed by social movements, union groups, and leftist parties in post-dictatorship Brazil (Avritzer, 2009; Wampler & Avritzer, 2005). Before arriving to Europe, the meaning and scope behind PB were profoundly shaped by the visions of its political proponents, such as the Workers’ Party in Brazil (Baiocchi, 2005),² which in turn reflected the transformations of Latin American left in the 1970s–1980s (Fedozzi, 2015). Radical democratic understandings of democracy guided the original approach to PB, which was based on: (1) direct citizen participation in government decision-making process and control, (2) administrative and fiscal transparency, (3) concrete amelioration of urban infrastructure and services in favor of low-income classes, (4) political culture change, and cognizing of citizens as holders of democratic rights (Goldfrank, 2007, p. 95). Any assessment of PB must consider the early political rationale at the foundation of Brazilian PB, and the counterhegemonic role that PB was vested with in its early days (Baierle, 2007; Baiocchi, 2003).

²In Portuguese: *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT).

Deprived of its radical undertones, PB migrated to Europe in the 1990s, initially through pilot projects in Italy and Spain (de Vries et al., 2021). Since then, the number of municipalities adopting this process has constantly grown, including metropolitan cities such as Rome, Naples, Milan, and Bologna. In recent years, there has been a particular focus on promoting PB at the regional level, with some regions (e.g. Sicily) introducing legislation to support its implementation (Badia, 2022; Bassoli, 2012). As documented by the PB World Atlas, Italy is among the countries that have embraced PB more enthusiastically in Europe, which is in turn the continent with the most extensive utilization of this democratic engagement tool.³ With nearly 5000 instances of PB recorded, the geographical distribution of its adoption stands as follows: 46% in Eastern Europe, 46% in Southern Europe, 5% in Western Europe, and 2–3% in Northern Europe. This distribution underscores the diverse regional uptake of participatory democracy, reflecting variations in political culture, governance traditions, and societal priorities.

Given such a far-reaching diffusion, PB constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon, and a polysemous concept. This has turned any encompassing classification of PB hardly doable. It follows that several analytical frames have been put forward to study PB. Goldfrank (2002, 2007) outlines four normative approaches to this tool (radical democratic, orthodox leftist, liberal, and conservative). A more institutional typification of PB in Europe has been proposed by Sintomer et al. (2008) who identify six ideal types. Evaluations of the diverse forms of participatory governance in budgeting have distinguished between partial PB and full PB, based on the consultative or binding character of decision-making powers (Baiocchi, 2011). Other studies differentiate PB varieties based on the effective degree of citizen participation, which is then linked to the notion of co-production of public policies, encompassing co-planning and co-designing (Barbera et al., 2016). Integrated approaches, drawing from public management and governance studies, have been elaborated to grasp the complex ensemble of PB manifestations (Manes-Rossi et al., 2023). Despite the lack of overarching and cross-national frameworks of analysis, the essence of PB is straightforward: instead of vesting decision-making authority exclusively in elected officials or public authorities, citizens are asked to participate in determining how a portion of the tax revenue is expended (Ryan, 2021; Wampler, 2012; Wampler et al., 2021). Moreover, PB does not lead to “yes-or-no” decisions but to a compromise outcome that represents a synthesis of the diversified interests of pluralist societies, and that aims at complementing traditional decision-making procedures (Floridia, 2014; Palermo & Kössler, 2017, p. 115). In this respect, PB is fashioned to pluralize decision-making and concretize public deliberation, being the convergence point between radical democracy and radical pluralist thought (Mouffe, 1992).

The comparative study of the PB experimentations in the three selected case-studies is developed against the background set above. The paradigmatic shift from early Brazilian radical democratic PB to European institutionalized PB adaptations is fundamental to contextualize PB in Italy. The following analysis should therefore be taken as a step towards the full understanding of how PB has taken roots in Italy,

³For a better overview of the PB across Europe see the following link: <https://www.pbatlas.net/europe.html>.

being adjusted to local contexts and politics, and embedded into the different traditions of local self-government.

10.3 The Case of Bologna

Bologna lies in the southern portion of the Po Valley, in the region of Emilia-Romagna, of which it is the regional capital. It has ca. 392,000 inhabitants (ISTAT 2024),⁴ plus daily “users”, namely workers and students. Bologna represents the paradigm of what has been called the “Emilian model” (De Maria, 2012, 2014), where social democratic policies are matched with administrative efficiency and government accountability and rely on a vibrant civil society. Just as much of central-northern Italy, Bologna is characterized by an old and solid tradition of local self-government, epitomized by the Medieval Italian *comune* (Hyde, 1973; Putnam, 1993). While feudalism and a vertical hierarchy of power prevailed in the rest of Europe, in Bologna a more horizontalized approach to governing emerged. Just as in the rest of Northern and Central Italy, this remains a vivid narrative, stuck in the collective memory, and often employed to explain the high levels of social capital and civic engagement (Tanzini, 2014). It is also in the light of such historical legacy that modern Italian municipalism and grassroot democracy—conceptually rooted in the constitutional principle of horizontal subsidiarity (Article 117)—could blossom (Ascheri, 2006).

As a forerunner of PB, Bologna demonstrates how the implementation of participatory devices is tightly related to the rescaling of decision-making processes at the subnational and local level, exposing interrelation between democratic innovations and decentralization (Alber & Valdesalici, 2015; Trettel, 2020). The activation of participatory mechanisms is complementary to the enlargement of the spaces of deliberation at the sub-municipal level, as posited by pluralized and radicalized understandings of democracy (Bookchin, 2006, 2015; Kohn, 2003). Here, neighborhood-level constituencies are involved in a series of participatory mechanisms. PB in Bologna resembles late 1980s Porto Alegre’s PB, whose creation was directly connected to neighborhood movements’ struggle for public goods and inclusive policies, as a means of participatory local self-government (Avritzer, 2002, 2010).

The introduction of the PB in Bologna has followed the application of Regional Law 3/2010 Norms on the Definition, Reorder and Promotion of the Procedures of Consultation and Participation to the Elaboration of Regional and Local Policies. This act has been substituted by Regional Law 15/2018 Law on the Participation to the Elaboration of Public Policies. Besides, the Municipal Council of Bologna was the first in Italy to approve a regulation on the commons,⁵ offering a normative

⁴Data extracted from ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica): http://dati.istat.it/index.aspx?datasetcode=dcis_popres1.

⁵More details can be accessed at Labsus (*Laboratorio per al sussidiarietà*) website: <https://www.labsus.org/>.

framework for the shared administration of common goods in Article 3 of the Municipal Statute (Salati, 2022, 2023). This paved the way for the implementation of other participatory devices.

In Article 4ter, the Municipal Statute defines PB as an instrument of direct democracy that involves the citizenry in the decision-making processes concerning the allocations of the resources that are part of the annually forecasted municipal expenditure. The same article specifies that a portion of each year's estimated budget must be used for the realization of PB, which will be implemented at the level of neighborhoods. In 2015, Bologna's Municipal Council approved a new regulation on decentralization, reshaping the size and functions of neighborhoods. Article 21bis(1) and Article 27decies of this regulation establish that neighborhoods' authorities are responsible for organizing PB every year. The activation of PB therefore falls within the responsibilities of the neighborhoods, that were reduced in number (from nine to six), but whose role was enhanced for what concerns the promotion of *active* citizenship. An ad hoc regulation on PB (hereafter PB regulation), adopted in 2016, further details how PB shall be managed. Article 5(2) of the latter states that municipal authorities entrust a third qualified subject with the tasks of supervision and methodological support to guarantee "impartiality" and "adequacy". The third qualified body which is responsible for these functions is the *Fondazione per l'Innovazione Urbana* (FIU).⁶ FIU is a multi-disciplinary center that works on urban regeneration, social inclusion, and democratic innovations. It is the operational hub that rallies scientific know-how and manages the implementation of participatory processes such as PB (Allegrini & Paltrinieri, 2020b). It promotes patterns of coproduction of public policies via other innovative means such as the neighborhoods' laboratories,⁷ which constitute the settings within which participatory mechanisms, such as PB, are enacted (Allegrini & Paltrinieri, 2018, 2020a, 2020b).

On a procedural level, PB is activated by the municipal government once it has heard the Conference of the Presidents of the Neighborhood Councils ("Conference") (Article 6(1)). The "Conference" monitors the implementation process and works with the municipal government to ensure that the PB achieves the best results (Article 6(2)). The neighborhoods' councils, which are directly elected representative bodies, adapt PB to territorial peculiarities (Article 6(3)). As provided for by Article 3 of the regulation on decentralization, the neighborhood council "represents the needs of the corresponding community ... and favors and promotes the participation and involvement of citizens in the decision-making process cure and management of common goods". Municipal decentralization can be said to be the backbone of local self-government and participatory democracy.

Article 4 of the PB regulation lists the holders of participation rights: (1) citizens registered in the electoral lists of the municipality of Bologna; (2) people residing in Bologna who have already turned sixteen; (3) non-resident citizens who either work or study in Bologna; (4) foreigners and stateless individuals who either work or

⁶See <http://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/fondazione-innovazione-urbana-home>.

⁷In Italian: *laboratori di quartiere*.

study in Bologna. The fields on which citizens can have a say through the PB are (Article 2(2)): extraordinary maintenance; requalification and reorganization of spaces; urban regeneration; urban equipment and furniture. Unlike in Caltanissetta, no explicit exclusion criterium is set regarding the right to participate in PB.

The PB is then articulated in four phases (Article 7(1)):

1. involvement of citizens, information, communication and hearing;
2. co-projecting of the proposals and verification of feasibility;
3. voting of admitted proposals and publication of results;
4. realization of the proposals.

The overall duration of phases one, two and three cannot exceed six months (Article 7(2)). Phase one of the PB is realized through the holding of public meetings and laboratories (Article 8(2)). The co-projecting of the proposals is then supported by facilitators and municipal experts (Article 9(4)). The proposals are then analyzed and verified by municipal technical boards that examine technical and economic issues as well as timing (Article 9(5)). The proposals admitted are those that positively pass this analysis. Phase two is concluded with the publicization of admitted proposals (Article 10(1)). After advertisement, citizens are called to vote (electronically), and thereby express their preference among the admitted proposals. Each citizen can vote for one proposal. The voting phase only lasts for 20 days, after which the results are published (Article 11). The selected projects are the most voted ones in each neighborhood (in total six citywide), within the limits of available resources (Article 12(1)). Once the selection process is over, the municipal authority is responsible for updating information about the state of the PB process and the implementation of the selected proposals (Article 13(1)).

Since the introduction of PB, this participatory mechanism has been enacted in 2017, 2018, 2019/2020, and 2023.⁸ The overview of the salient figures of the four PB editions is illustrative to framing the main developments of this mechanism throughout the years.

For the first and second editions, the available budget was 150,000 EUR per neighborhood. In 2017, PB involved 1900 citizens. This figure decreased to 1800 in 2018. The PB process included a wide range of activities such as public meetings and consultations through which citizens and representatives of organized civil society could engage. Proposed projects were refined in a co-projecting phase with the aid of municipal technical staff. 27 and 33 projects proposals were admitted to the voting phase, in which 14,584 and 16,348 citizens participated in 2017 and 2018 respectively.

In the 2019/2020 PB edition, the funds made available by the city of Bologna doubled to two million EUR, allocated for two categories of proposals on which citizens could vote separately. 150,000 EUR were destined to the funding of projects of requalification at the level of neighborhoods, mainly targeting public buildings and infrastructure, public gardens and parks, public furniture and equipment.

⁸See the Bologna municipality website on participation <http://partecipa.comune.bologna.it/bilancio-partecipativo/storico/> and the FIU website on PB <http://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/progetto/bilanciopartecipativo>.

The remaining part of the funds was allocated to projects centered on sport, environment, culture and society, and economics. Six public assemblies were realized in the context of the new town-planning scheme (*Piano urbanistico generale del Comune di Bologna*) and 1000 citizens took part. 600 citizens participated in the second phase and designed 157 proposals. An additional 268 proposals were submitted online. Later, 22,247 citizens participated in the voting phase online which was delayed due to Covid-19 pandemic.

The ongoing fourth edition of PB has seen another increase in the budget reserved, which now amounts to 500,000 EUR per neighborhood. The six *laboratori di quartiere* and online form collected 385 proposals. 19,327 citizens participated in the voting phase. All the projects are to some extent related to the aims set by *Bologna Missione Clima*, according to which Bologna is committed to reach climate neutrality by 2030.

The winning projects in the four PB editions mainly regarded the requalification of public gardens, the renovation of public buildings, and the implementation of cycle paths, public art spaces, public furniture, urban greenery, and inclusive public spaces.

The pioneering role played by Bologna's PB experimentations can be confirmed for a variety of reasons. Allocated funds have been constantly rising, allowing for a diversification of the areas of public intervention. Citizen participation has followed the same upwards trend until 2020, after which the number of voters saw a decrease. Women have shown to be more inclined to participate. Throughout the four PB editions, they have always outnumbered men by a significant percentage: 58% in 2017, 56% in 2018, 54% in 2019/2020, and 57% in 2023.

All in all, PB experimentations in Bologna are certainly seen as reference cases. The engagement of citizens in the co-projecting and decision-making phases of PB is matched with institutional accountability and transparency and followed by the effective realization of the proposals – as regularly reported by the municipality's website. Although PB is spreading throughout Italy, Bologna represents an exceptional case when it comes to political participation. Its uniqueness within the Italian context is tantamount to that of Porto Alegre with respect to the rest of Brazil. PB can flourish more vigorously in those municipalities with a high rate of associative activity and popular militancy (Abers, 2000; Avritzer, 2003). The consolidation of PB is also part of the broader progressive posture of the current municipal government.

10.4 The Case of Caltanissetta

Caltanissetta is a municipality in the center of Sicily, an island, and the southernmost and biggest Italian region. It has a resident population of over 58,000 people (ISTAT 2024).⁹ From a socioeconomic point of view, Caltanissetta is comparatively poor. In the province of Caltanissetta, the GDP per capita is around 18,100 EUR

⁹ See http://dati.istat.it/index.aspx?datasetcode=dcis_popres1.

(2020),¹⁰ which is below the Sicilian average, and by far below the Italian average of 30,136 EUR (2021), as well as that of the provinces of Bologna (43,500 EUR in 2020) and Bolzano (49,600 EUR in 2020), where Malles Venosta is located. The gap between Southern and Northern Italian regions and cities has characterized Italy's history since its unification in 1861. It is so deep that the post-pandemic Recovery and Resilience Plan is intended to tackle such social and territorial inequalities by dedicating 40% of the resources available to Italy's South.¹¹ Moreover, Caltanissetta, and the rest of the province, is still profoundly affected by the harmful repercussions of organized crime, i.e. the Sicilian mafia.

Highlighting the material poverty of the region, its economic stagnancy, and the deep rootedness of mafia organizations is crucial to fully grasp the meaning and impact that the introduction of democratic innovations entails in Caltanissetta. In addition, low levels of political participation, in terms of electoral turnout, deeply characterizes Caltanissetta, just as Sicily and the rest of Southern Italy. In the 2022 Italian elections, the voter turnout in Caltanissetta was around 55.7%, against a national average of around 64%.¹² In the 2022 Sicilian regional election, the voter turnout in the city of Caltanissetta was approximately 49%,¹³ compared to Malles Venosta's 75.6%¹⁴ and Bologna's almost 70% in similar subnational elections.¹⁵ A first comparison among these figures may infer that Caltanissetta will show lower levels of civic involvement in participatory mechanisms, such as PB. From a general perspective, it is indeed against the background of citizens' disaffection towards the traditional forms of representative democracy that participatory democracy might offer new venues for the involvement of citizens in the local public and political life, augmenting the interest towards electoral moments as well.

PB has been used several times in Caltanissetta based on Regional Law 5/2014. This law establishes that all Sicilian municipalities must employ at least 2% of the financial transfers coming from the region in "forms of participatory democracy", by using the devices that engage the citizenry for the deliberation over actions of collective interest' (Article 6(1)). PB duly qualifies among the forms of such kind. To better regulate this field, the municipal government adopted in 2016 a regulation on civic participation. Article 50 of this regulation introduces PB in the municipality of Caltanissetta as a means for the "involvement of citizens" who can play an "active role" by sharing proposals with the local administration, and eventually voting the ones they prefer. According to this document, participation in PB is a right held by the "population of the community", meaning every citizen above sixteen years old

¹⁰ See https://www.sisreg.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=102&Itemid=75.

¹¹ See <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/280052>.

¹² See <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=C&dtel=25/09/2022&tpa=I&tpe=C&lev0=0&levsut0=0&lev1=24&levsut1=1&lev2=2&levsut2=2&lev3=1&levsut3=3&levsut4=4&ne1=24&ne2=242&ne3=2421&es0=S&es1=S&es2=S&es3=S&es4=N&ms=S&ne4=210180040&lev4=180040>.

¹³ See http://www.elezioni.regione.sicilia.it/regionali2022/rep_6/Caltanissetta/affluenzaProvincia-leCL3.html.

¹⁴ See https://civis.bz.it/vote/landtag2018/results/awf_li_vg.htm.

¹⁵ See <https://wwwservizi.regione.emilia-romagna.it/elezioni2020/Affluenza.aspx?prov=013>.

in Caltanissetta. However, the regulation also outlines who must abstain from participating in the PB: elected officials at all levels of government; members of the administrative councils of any kind of body with public participation; members of the leading organs of political parties and unions; associations who are related to political factions; and public officers of the Caltanissetta municipality (Article 52). By minimizing the clout of organized groups and stakeholders on PB, the regulation tries to guarantee the actual emergence of citizens' needs. These criteria of exclusion intend to reduce the risks of neo-corporatism (Sintomer et al., 2012), and infringements on PB by interest groups (Cortes & Gugliano, 2010; Fedozzi & Martins, 2015).

The management of PB is entrusted to a working group formed by members of three municipal bodies, namely the general secretary (*Segreteria Generale*), the data processing center (*Centro Elaborazione Dati*) and the Office for Participation (Article 53). PB is articulated in six phases (Article 53):

1. Information. Citizens are informed about the thematic areas and resources allocated to the PB via a public call;
2. First voting phase. Citizens can vote only one thematic area;
3. Submission of the project proposals related to the three most voted thematic areas;
4. Feasibility evaluation of the proposals by an ad hoc commission;
5. Second voting phase. Feasible projects are put to a vote. The vote is telematic and citizens can only vote once for one project;
6. Publication of the results, and realization of the most voted projects.

PB was implemented every year since 2017. The resources allocated has been decreasing. Between 2017 and 2019 allocated resources amounted to 54,000 EUR with a decrease to 40,000 in 2020 and to 30,000 in 2023. To those figures further 90,000 and 50,000 EUR of capital expenditures were added in 2018 and 2019, respectively. Although implemented yearly, the material impact of the PB is diminished due to the reduction of the allocated budgets. For reasons of comparability, it is appropriate to focus on the last three PB editions.

In 2021 and 2022, with allocated resources amounting to 40,000 EUR, selected projects could not cost more than 8000 EUR. Citizens were called to vote for three of the seven thematic areas chosen by the municipal government: culture, integration and inclusion; environment and sustainability; conservation of the old town; sport; economic development; tourism; protection and wellbeing of animals. The most voted thematic areas were culture, sport, and conservation of the old town. Citizens submitted 23 proposals and the ad hoc Commission responsible for the admission of the proposals decided the feasibility of the projects on the basis of the following criteria: juridical and technical feasibility, estimated cost, estimated time of realization, compatibility with the thematic area, financial resources available, and ongoing public fields of intervention. Of the 23 proposals, 18 were admitted to vote. Of the five most voted projects—which covered the 40,000 EUR budget—two were related to sports, two to culture, and one to the conservation of the old town. The PB edition of 2022 did not differ from the previous edition. Citizens showed

almost the same preferences concerning thematic areas, while proposed projects decreased to 20 of which 13 were deemed feasible.

In 2023, however, allocated resources fell to 30,000 EUR, which is 10,000 less than previously. Citizens have been duly informed on the PB phases via the municipality's channels of communication but also by local television named *Tele Futura Nissa*. The latter has also broadcasted two brief reports on the 2023 PB process in Caltanissetta on YouTube, thus allowing citizens to have access to the process by not-written means.

So far, projects included a wide variety of interventions such as the building of a mini-basket field, the realization of a social garden (for inclusive urban gardening activities), the promotion of sport activities to tackle socio-economic exclusion of children and teenagers from low-income families, the realization of networks of proximity to tackle social exclusion and loneliness, a talent show for the promotion of arts, the valorization of the city's historical-architectural patrimony via artistic and technological means and the production of short films for cultural and touristic promotion.

Altogether, the realization of PB in Caltanissetta is a significant achievement. The overall low socioeconomic indicators, the comparatively weaker participation of citizens in the elections, and the pervasive and longstanding presence of organized crime are certainly not conducive to the strengthening of democratic governance. However, in a context that displays comparatively higher levels of poverty such as Caltanissetta, PB, if duly implemented, can foster political inclusion and social equality (Abers, 1998; Wampler, 2015), constituting a tool of "redistributive democracy" (Fedozzi, 2000; Santos, 1998, 2002) or "affirmative democracy" (Navarro, 1998), just as evidenced in early Brazilian PB (Marquetti, 2000, 2003; Marquetti et al., 2008).

However, a proper evaluation of the impact of PB in Caltanissetta would require the in-depth examination of each single edition, as well as of the socio-demographic profile of participants and their satisfaction with the process at large. The simple fact that PB took root in a complex political environment such as that of Caltanissetta stands out in the context of Sicilian politics. For any evaluation of PB in comparatively poorer and politically apathic societies "should be valued more for its provision of citizenry [...] rather than for the material gains it brings" (de Vries et al., 2021, p. 183).

10.5 The Case of Malles Venosta

Malles Venosta is a municipality in the autonomous province of Bolzano, located in the north-eastern part of Italy. As an autonomous province, Bolzano enjoys a significant degree of legislative, administrative and financial autonomy. Within its borders, multiple linguistic groups coexist, in particular the German-speaking, the Italian-speaking and the Ladin-speaking communities. A standout feature of the province of Bolzano is its remarkable economic prosperity, evidenced by its high GDP per

capita. The South Tyrolean People's Party (Südtiroler Volkspartei/SVP) has played a pivotal role in the province's politics. In Malles Venosta, which is characterized by a strong predominance of the German language group (nearly 97% of the population), the SVP has ruled without interruption since 1948 (Alber, 2017; Larin & Röggl, 2019). Interestingly, this municipality spreads over a huge territory of 250 km², making it one of the larger municipalities in the region, and has a population of 5279 residents (ISTAT 2024).¹⁶ The primary economic activities of Malles Venosta include farming, particularly apple orchards, and tourism, mainly driven by its alpine surroundings. All these characteristics make it very interesting to analyze how Malles Venosta decided to shape and implement PB (Trettel, 2021).

Noteworthy, the municipal government in office from 2009 to 2020, led by the mayor Ulrich Veith (SVP), strongly championed the participatory approach to public decision-making. His government invested a lot in direct and participatory democracy, specifically PB, which was carried out in 2016 and 2017. The interest of this municipal administration in democratic innovation is even more evident from the introduction in the municipal statute of a new Article 39 dedicated to citizen participation. Article 39(4) states that PB "is introduced as a public form of participation related to the development of the municipal budget and its priorities. Through this form of participation, the municipality promotes transparency and accountability for both the public expenditures as much as for the possibilities of savings". However, as the mayor changed in 2020 (even if coming from the same political party, the SVP) interest in PB also waned. In fact, after 2019 this form of participation was no longer implemented, although the statutory provision is still in place.

In this regard, it must be noted that PB processes—such as all democratic innovations—often strongly depend on the political will of the municipality (especially its mayor) to function and be carried out regularly. Hence, a change of the dominant political force or just the mayor in very small municipalities can interrupt a practice of participatory democracy if there is no national or regional obligation for the municipality to do so. This is an inherent limit of democratic innovations. Even if Malles Venosta went a step further by introducing PB in the Municipal Statute, thus granting this instrument a legal guarantee, the current local government could simply ignore this provision. The issue of the effectiveness of democratic innovations and their institutionalization in legal sources is very prominent in current literature (Bobbio, 2018; Papadopoulos & Philippe, 2007).

Regarding the functioning of PB in Malles, every resident of the municipality, both citizens and non-citizens, had the opportunity to submit up to three proposals for the allocation of a specific portion of the annual budget, determined by the municipality for each fiscal year. The proposals could be submitted online or by hand/post-delivering to the appropriate offices and were subsequently presented to fellow residents in specially organized assemblies facilitated by the municipality. After the submission and presentation stages, the municipality collaborated with a council of 15 randomly selected citizens to assess each project's legal, technical,

¹⁶ See <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=18959>.

and financial feasibility. If a proposal was found unfeasible due to any of these reasons, a clear justification was provided.

The municipality of Malles Venosta has put in place a comprehensive set of regulations for PB. These regulations encompass a range of important guidelines:

1. Unrestricted citizen participation: All citizens are empowered to endorse and support proposals, ensuring inclusivity and open participation.
2. Exclusion of city council and committee members: City council and city committee members are expressly barred from submitting proposals, thus preventing potential conflicts of interest.
3. Diverse proposal scope: Proposals have the flexibility to cover investments within the municipality as well as measures aimed at economizing municipal finances, expanding the scope of potential initiatives.
4. Proposal alignment: Proposals sharing similar goals or objectives have the opportunity to be combined after consultation with involved participants, streamlining the process for projects with common aims.
5. Individual proposal submissions with collaborative support: While proposals must originate from individuals, they can be strengthened by garnering support from others through signatures, promoting collective input.
6. Exclusion of associations and interest groups: Proposals from organized associations and interest groups are not considered, emphasizing the direct involvement of individual citizens.
7. Transparent and non-anonymous process: Suggestions and ideas must be transparently attributed to individuals and are not accepted in anonymous forms, ensuring accountability and openness.
8. No legal obligations for submitted proposals: The submission of project proposals does not impose any legal obligations on the municipality, preserving flexibility in the decision-making process.
9. Stringent feasibility criteria: Proposals are rigorously assessed based on criteria that encompass legal, financial, and technical feasibility, guaranteeing responsible allocation of resources.

In the 2016 PB edition citizens submitted a total of 33 projects. Out of these, 10 were voted the most promising and received funding from the 200,000 EUR allocated for that year. Nine of these projects were successfully carried out in 2017, while one was implemented in 2018.

PB in Malles achieved its primary objective of involving citizens in the budgetary decision-making process. Moreover, the manageable population size of the municipality facilitates information dissemination and exchange, resulting in relatively higher engagement compared to larger urban areas. Also, the most popular ideas generated through PB have been translated into tangible actions by the local administration. Despite these positive outcomes, it is again important to underline that with the change of mayor, the willingness to continue this experience has been interrupted. Information on the past editions of the PB has been removed from the website. This demonstrates that legal provisions are meaningless if not accompanied by a strong political will and a deep knowledge of the functioning of

participatory procedures. This phenomenon is even more prominent in other municipalities of the Province of Bolzano. In fact, participatory budgeting is also provided for in the municipal statutes of Selva di Gardena and Cortaccia sulla Strada del Vino. However, to date, these provisions have never been implemented (Alber, 2023).

Table 10.1 Comparative data on PB in the three case studies

	Bologna Emilia Romagna	Caltanissetta Sicily	Malles Venosta South Tyrol
Geographic setting	Center-North limit	Island/southern Italy	Northern/Alpine Arch
Population ^a	392,000 (+one million daily 'users')	58,000	5300
GDP per capita PPP ^b	43,500	18,100	49,600
Political party in power ^c	Center-left coalition	Center-left and center-right coalition	Big-tent regional party ^d
Last regional election voter turnout	70%	49%	75.6%
Total number PB editions	4 (+2024)	7 (+2024)	2
Current status of PB	Ongoing	Ongoing	Suspended
PB allocated funds per capita	7.65 EUR	0.51 EUR	37.7 EUR
PB institutionalization	Yes (by municipal statute)	Yes (by ad hoc municipal regulation only)	Yes (by municipal statute)
Regional/provincial law on participation	Yes	No	Yes
Participation rights' holders	Residents over 16—non-residents who work/study in Bologna	Residents above 16	Residents above 16
Number of voters ^e	(19,327)	(646)	n.a.
Actors involved in PB	Citizens and civic associations	Citizens and civic associations	Citizens and civic associations
Facilitators	Technicians and FIU proximity experts	No	No
PB devices	Neighborhoods' laboratories, public meetings, and hearings	Public meetings	Public meetings
Voting phases and forms	One; online	Two (on thematic area and on project); online	One
Bindingness of most voted proposals	Yes	Yes	Yes

^a This figure refers to the last year of implementation of PB in each case-study

^b Data refer to the entire Province. Respectively: Province of Bologna, Province of Caltanissetta, and Autonomous Province of Bolzano

^c This refers to the all PB editions in each case-study

^d SVP, the party of German- and Ladin-speaking minorities in South Tyrol

^e Reference years are different: Bologna (2023), Caltanissetta (2022)

10.6 Conclusions

The popularity of democratic innovations has led to the proliferation of PB experimentations throughout many Italian municipalities in the last two decades. The introduction of participatory mechanisms and the engagement of citizens in the decision-making stages of public policymaking have been set up to respond to the unfading popular request for improved political participation. The three selected case studies display different patterns of development of PB, rooted in the socio-demographic, geo-cultural, and economic characteristics of the municipality (Ryan, 2019).

Each of the municipalities analyzed bears a different degree of social complexity, as well as distinct institutional histories and collective resourcefulness. In this respect, Bologna is a *unicum*, a paradigmatic case where civic engagement is extraordinarily deeply rooted (Carlone & Landi, 2020). The centuries-long legacy of local self-government, the predominance of progressive forces within local elected bodies, the vibrancy of civic, social, university, and union movements throughout the twentieth century, led to the development of a tight interrelation between an extremely dynamic citizenry, and very responsive local authorities. PB in Bologna discloses the complexity and impact of democratic innovations in metropolitan areas. The introduction of participatory mechanisms is indeed intertwined with the high degree of municipal decentralization (division in neighborhoods) and is aimed at tackling not only the involvement of citizens in public policymaking, but also political inclusion, social and territorial equality (Massarenti, 2017). In addition to its distinguished municipalist tradition, Bologna proves to be a fertile ground for democratic innovations, embedding forms of citizen participation in sub-municipal decentralization. This combination has been characteristic of the post-authoritarian and new left in both Latin America and Europe and aligns PB in Bologna with that of Porto Alegre (Goldfrank, 2015; Robinson, 1992).

The intranational comparative analysis outlined in this chapter deepens the understanding of PB when applied to different contexts within Italy. It unveils the noncorrelation between economic prosperity and the consolidation of democratic innovations at the municipal level. From a financial perspective, in Malles Venosta, the budget share per capita reserved for PB (in the last year of implementation) was proportionally higher than those of Bologna and Caltanissetta: 37.7 EUR in Malles Venosta, 7.65 EUR in Bologna and 0.51 EUR in Caltanissetta. Such a rough quantitative overview demonstrates that PB has no longer been implemented where fundings available are comparatively higher. In Caltanissetta, the least thriving municipality among the selected cases, PB seems to be a rather consolidated participatory institution. Indeed, PB in Caltanissetta has been uninterruptedly implemented since 2017, just as in Bologna, where PB was suspended only in 2021 and 2022 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Apparently, the consolidation or institutionalization of PB is not exclusively dependent on one municipality's wealth, but it is rather a matter of political will and perseverant and participatory-minded elected authorities and public officers. Among the analyzed cases, Malles Venosta is the only municipality where PB, although institutionalized at the statutory level, has been *de facto* suspended. Still, only an in-depth ethnographic study of this

predominantly German-speaking, socio-politically homogenous and prosperous alpine municipality could explain the reasons behind the decline of PB there (e.g. Talpin, 2012). On the contrary, PB in Caltanissetta resisted the change in power between center-left and center-right municipal governments.

PB can certainly be praised for promoting transparency and accountability when using public funds, which, besides citizen participation, is a crucial aspect of democratic governance. Nonetheless, comprehensive democratic accountability cannot be fully achieved through this means because of the limited share of local public spending covered by PB. As for the patterns of inclusion and representation generally associated with PB, no comparative analysis can be provided in this chapter, since only the municipality of Bologna provides access to some data on the profiles of participants.

Overall, the use of PB in Italy has proved to be a powerful tool for fostering democratic engagement, community empowerment and inclusive decision-making. Its successful implementation in metropolitan cities, medium-sized towns, and even small rural communities showcases the adaptability and effectiveness of this approach in diverse contexts. As Italy continues to embrace participatory practices, it holds the potential to strengthen the social fabric of its cities and towns, while also promoting active citizenship and collective responsibility among its citizens. In this perspective, PB represents a more recent manifestation of the inherent deliberative potential of local constituencies, intended as association of individuals, who happen to pronounce themselves on the matters they deem important for their community life. Further research is needed, however, to provide a more extensive assessment of citizen participation, inclusion, representation and the impact of PB throughout Italy.

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