

# Skeptic, enthusiast, guarantor or believer? Public managers' perception of participatory budgeting

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## Abstract

Participatory budgeting (PB) aims to enhance citizens' participation in local government. While there is a significant body of literature on PB, few studies investigate the role of internal actors in its management. This study aims to understand public managers' perceptions of the whole PB process. Using the Q-methodology on a sample of Italian local governments experienced in PB, we analyze the perspectives of public managers, revealing four approaches to PB, which we classify as skeptics, enthusiasts; guarantors; and believers. We find that managers have different approaches to how PB works and its potential effects, based on their role in managing the process. We also find that their attitude may influence citizens' participation in and perception of PB. Further research should consider the nexus between managers' perceptions and citizens' involvement in PB.

## Abstract

Il bilancio partecipativo (PB) mira a migliorare la partecipazione dei cittadini al governo locale. Sebbene esista un'ampia letteratura sul PB, solo pochi studi hanno indagato il ruolo degli attori interni nella sua gestione. Questo studio mira a comprendere la percezione dei manager pubblici dell'intero processo di PB. Utilizzando la Q methodology su un campione di enti locali italiani che hanno sperimentato il PB, il lavoro esamina le prospettive dei manager pubblici, rivelando quattro

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approcci al PB: scettici, entusiasti, garantisti e sognatori. L'analisi disvela che i manager hanno approcci diversi al funzionamento del PB e ai suoi potenziali effetti, in base al loro ruolo nella gestione del processo. Il loro atteggiamento può altresì influenzare la partecipazione e la percezione del PB da parte dei cittadini. Ricerche future potranno considerare il nesso tra le percezioni dei manager e il coinvolgimento dei cittadini nel PB.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Participation by citizens in organizational decision making is generally regarded in the public administration literature as positive and useful for all parties (Neshkova & Guo, 2012). A range of studies find that participatory budgeting (PB) is an effective tool to promote participation, gain strategic advantage (Shybalkina, 2022), improve budget equity (Hong & Cho, 2018), and enhance the effectiveness of public expenditure (Fung, 2015). However, few studies focus on the role of internal actors (politicians and managers) in managing PB (Bartocci et al., 2022). Yet, politicians and managers are important in making PB work—politicians make decisions and promote PB, while public managers define operational aspects and make any necessary changes to operational activities (Liao & Schachter, 2018; Migchelbrink & van de Walle, 2022). This paper therefore seeks to contribute to the literature by focusing on the public managers' perceptions of PB. In particular, we are interested in understanding how public managers perceive the role of, and relationships between, actors, the effects of PB, and the mechanisms and processes that may hamper or facilitate the implementation of PB. To do so, we focus on the opinions of public officials about PB in a sample of Italian local government organizations (LGs). This approach is consistent with previous literature discussing the role of managers in PB (Liao & Schachter, 2018; Marlowe & Portillo, 2006; Migchelbrink & van de Walle, 2022; Zhang, 2014; Zhang & Liao, 2011).

We use Q-methodology (Q-meth), a valuable tool for investigating human subjectivities (Brown, 1980). The Q-meth is based on a survey instrument through which respondents are required to rank a series of statements, reflecting the main issues relating to a specific topic, in a quasi-normal distribution grid (Q-sort). We used the Q-meth software to administer our survey, which took place from May to October 2021. Four factors emerged from the analysis of the 36 Q-sorts collected, providing new insights into PB. Our analysis revealed a varied landscape, with managers recognizing different roles for both citizens and politicians in PB implementation and distinctive approaches to the use of mechanisms and tools adopted.

Our empirical evidence provides a unique contribution to the literature on PB, specifically how internal actors in LGs perceive PB, revealing four different perspectives: skeptics; enthusiasts; guarantors; and believers. These different perspectives may affect the implementation of PB, so our findings have implications for policy makers. Our study responds to the calls for more empirical research investigating how internal actors perceive PB, given that they must work together with citizens as co-producers of public services (Manes-Rossi et al., 2023; Migchelbrink & van de Walle, 2022).

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. We first present the literature discussing PB, particularly studies dealing with the role of internal actors. Then we outline our methodology, explaining how the Q-meth has been operationalized. The following section presents the findings of our explorative study and discusses the results in the context of the existing literature. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of public officials' perceptions of PB for organizational processes and culture.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

PB has been generally defined as a budgeting practice organized around citizens' active participation in decision making. It is aimed at engaging citizens in political life and allowing them to consider how resource allocation can be distributed to meet the needs of the community (Bartocci et al., 2022; Ebdon & Franklin, 2006; Jung, 2022). PB is discussed in the literature of several disciplines, ranging from urban studies, sociology, public administration, public policy, and public financial management. The antecedents and consequences of PB have been discussed at length (e.g., Ewens & van der Voet, 2019; Shields & Shields, 1998), as have the social welfare aspects, such as political renewal (Shybalkina, 2022), poverty alleviation, and resource reallocation (Calabrese et al., 2020; Sintomer et al., 2008), particularly in a period of austerity (Cepiku et al., 2016). It has also been observed that the connection between PB and traditionally established budgeting routines can vary hugely, and that there is wide variation in the specific tools adopted to manage the PB process (Sintomer et al., 2008; Sintomer et al., 2012). While there is a significant body of literature on PB, the perceptions of the role of internal actors—namely politicians and managers—often remains in the shadows, despite their pivotal role in setting and managing the process.

PB is one of a range of participatory governance schemes related to participative democracy. Previous studies identify that organizational culture is key for the process to succeed. In particular, Vabo and Winsvold (2022) highlight the need for the cultural environment to change if PB is to be accepted by politicians in a participatory scheme. Ebdon et al. (2016) find that the extent to which politicians consider citizen input relevant for budget decisions is a context-dependent variable that may change according to how similar politicians' views are to those of citizens. Other studies explore PB as a tool to enhance: legitimate political decisions (Ganuzza et al., 2014); transparency in decision making (Brun-Martos & Lapsley, 2017); and encourage elected officials, civil servants, and citizens to work closely together (Sintomer et al., 2012). Political support and trust are considered key elements to support public managers' flexibility in analyzing PB proposals (Liao & Schachter, 2018; Zhang & Liao, 2011).

Citizens' expectations and attitudes to political life and decision-making processes may also impact the success of the participative process. Studies exploring citizens' perceptions include those examining: motivations for engaging in PB (Barbera et al., 2016; van Eijk & Steen, 2014); conflicts between different categories of citizens (Ganuzza et al., 2014); and the effect of social pressure on redistributive decisions (Hong & Cho, 2018). PB can be motivated by a willingness to give a voice to citizens in political decisions (Sintomer et al., 2008) but other studies find that citizens may lack knowledge of government processes and mechanisms, thus creating unrealistic expectations (Ianniello, Iacuzzi, Fedele, & Brusati, 2019). Also, internal factors connected to organizational capabilities and leadership, professionalism, and commitment of managers are identified in the literature as facilitators of the PB process (Bartocci et al., 2022). Complex entities with a large population are considered more inclined to promote civic inclusion in decision making and may have the financial, technical, and intangible resources to support the development of PB (Ewens & van der Voet, 2019).

The role of public managers in shaping the PB process is significant because they design the mechanisms that allow citizen participation, assist citizens in preparing proposals, and often decide if proposals are admissible and feasible. They work at the intersection of political willingness, administrative norms, spending proposals, citizen preferences, and available resources, playing a fundamental role in establishing equilibrium. Previous studies have analyzed determinants of public managers' attitudes toward public consultation in general (e.g., Migchelbrink & van de Walle, 2022) and PB in particular (Zhang & Liao, 2011; Zhang & Yang, 2009). van Damme and Brans (2012), drawing on democratic theory, highlight the positive effect of managerial autonomy and intensive process design and management, while questioning the normative assumption of the need for open process rules.

Studies also examine the traits required by public managers engaging in PB. To understand and respond to community priorities, public managers need to acquire competencies in communication and dialogue (Liao & Ma, 2019). Further, psychological character traits, motivation, and trust in citizens support managers' positive perceptions of citizen participation (Liao & Ma, 2019), and an ongoing relationship with the community, as well as positive previous experience, which may help managers to perceive citizens as partners (Liao & Zhang, 2012). Conversely, a technocratic orientation may negatively affect managers' engagement in public participation (Liao & Schachter, 2018). Pre-existing

political, administrative, and cultural conditions, including political structure and legal requirements, may also change the attitude of managers to public participation in decision making (Liao & Zhang, 2012; Manes-Rossi et al., 2023; Nabatchi, 2020). Similarly, organizational resources (including ICT, staff, budget, and time) may also impact public involvement. For instance, a lack of time or resources may be considered an obstacle to public participation.

Prior research also discusses the role played by public managers in educating citizens about participating in political decisions (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006; Marlowe & Portillo, 2006). Public managers' perception of citizen involvement may affect participation, and the way in which managers identify procedures to manage the PB process can affect the level of participation, facilitating or hampering the access of citizens to PB (Sintomer et al., 2008). Transparency across the process can enhance its effectiveness (Brun-Martos & Lapsley, 2017), as can education and open-mindedness (Zhang & Yang, 2009), and training activities (Liao & Zhang, 2012). Moreover, relationships between managers and politicians can affect both the design of the PB process and subsequent changes in participatory mechanisms (Uddin et al., 2019).

Yet, despite its importance, managers' perceptions have been discussed by only a few studies. Liao and Ma (2019) reveal that self-confident managers may consider citizens' input as having lower value, while Eckerd and Heidelberg (2019) find that managers may perceive their role mainly as administrators, with the need to find the right balance between different requests to achieve the best outcomes. In a recent study, Migchelbrink and van de Walle (2022) underline the importance of investigating public managers' perceptions of PB, because of its likely impact on the efficacy of the process. They find that "public managers with a citizen-centric role perception likely increase the efficacy of participatory budgeting" (Migchelbrink & van de Walle, 2022, p. 21). Their call for further research on the topic motivates our study, which aims to understand public managers' perceptions of the PB process, by examining the role of other actors (citizens and politicians) and mechanisms and tools adopted while implementing and managing PB. We also explore the different perceptions of the expected benefits and consequences of PB, which we consider to be pivotal to understanding the conditions that support successful PB or otherwise.

## 3 | METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 | Q-methodology

Our study uses Q-meth (Brown, 1980; Stephenson, 1953), which offers a scientific approach to studying human subjectivity. Q-meth is able to combine the depth and diversity of more interpretative approaches (Brown, 1980; Eden et al., 2005) in order to take a systematic approach to identifying "quantification of patterned subjectivities" (Shemings, 2006, p. 147). It relies on qualitative and quantitative instruments for data collection and analysis. In brief, Q-meth is able to sort a set of statements (the Q-sample) made by participants about a particular issue, which have been sought by the researchers. The final ranking of statements (Q-sort) of participants is analyzed using factor analysis techniques, producing a set of factors that identify groups of respondents who similarly rank statements. Thus, factors reflect the different viewpoints about the topic under investigation.

Implementing a study based on Q-meth involves five stages (Ellingsen et al., 2010). In the first stage, the discrete ideas, concepts, or usually statements about the topic are collected. This activity, called sampling the concourse, may include several strategies, such as interviews with relevant actors, focus groups, analysis of existing literature, or a mix of these. Our study developed the concourse from interview data collected in previous research projects, and the academic literature on PB, as discussed above. We decided to use a mixed approach to ensure that as many issues as possible were covered to ensure we captured the participants' views. Initially, we developed a concourse of 109 statements.

In the second stage, the statements collected were reduced to produce a manageable Q-set of 36 statements. We used "a discourse analysis matrix" to narrow down the number of statements (Dryzek & Berejikian, 1993). The matrix consists of two dimensions, the discourse element on the columns and the type of arguments on the rows.

**TABLE 1** Set of representative statements.

	Facilitating/hampering mechanisms and processes	Actors	Motivation/goals
Definition	PB generates competition between projects and proposers	Through PB citizens can define the allocation of resources	PB allows you to allocate resources more consistently to the needs of the community
Fact/opinion	PB takes time to be adopted as it requires the collaboration of the different sectors of the administration	Politicians fear that participation would lead to the financing of projects not in line with the political vision	PB can strengthen social cohesion
Prescription	When preparing the first participatory budget it is preferable to start with a simplified program	The local authority must identify the structure of the participatory budget (e.g., by territory, by themes, etc.) that favors a dialogue between citizens	To obtain the expected results, the participatory budget must include a monitoring system for the implementation of the projects

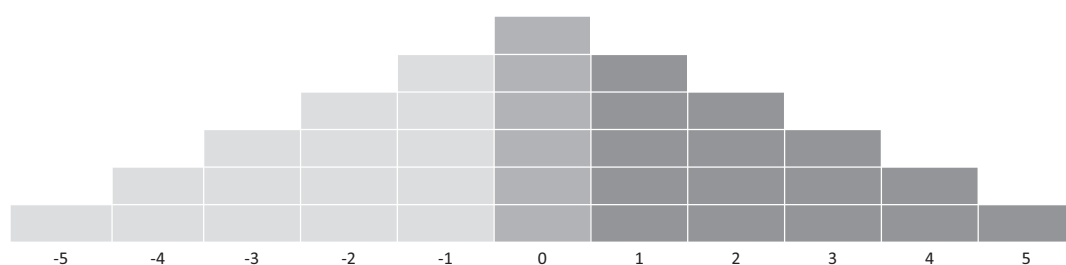
Each dimension is articulated in three components. For the first dimension, consistent with our research aim, we established enabling/hindering mechanisms and processes, the role of actors involved, and goals and consequences. For the second dimension, following Dryzek and Berejikian (1993), the three categories used were: definitions, opinions, and prescriptions. After excluding duplicates and unclear statements, we allocated the statements to each cell. The allocation process resulted in more than four statements in each cell, thus the final set of statements per cell was selected by ensuring that they were well-written and clear in meaning, different from each other, and as diverse as possible (van Eijk & Steen, 2014). The selection process resulted in a list of 36 statements. Table 1 provides a statement sampling grid with some examples of statements in the Q-sample.

In April 2021, the selected statements were pre-tested on a pool of five public-management scholars, consultants, and municipal managers, whose comments produced some adjustments to the original version of the Q-sample.

The third stage of the study encompasses the selection of the group of individuals (participants) who will complete the Q-sort (known as the P-set or P-sample). For our study, the P-set consisted of Italian public managers involved in PB. Italy is one of the European countries where PB is expanding, especially in the last few years, thus creating an interesting setting to observe (Mattei et al., 2022). PB was first adopted in 1994 in the municipality of Grottammare, and several national and regional legislative interventions have supported its development, especially at the local level, also making use of PB (Mauro et al., 2020). To identify managers to be involved in the research, we began by selecting all LGs with more than 60,000 inhabitants. This initial selection is consistent with previous studies (Bartocci et al., 2022), assuming that medium and large municipalities have some degree of internal and external complexity, several layers of management, and might better support the PB process. Then we implemented a second step, following previous studies in the Italian context (Bassoli, 2012; Magliacani, 2020; Mattei et al., 2022; Mauro et al., 2020), by adding Italian LGs already included in previous analysis on PB even if they have fewer than 60,000 inhabitants. The initial sample comprised 118 Italian LGs that have voluntarily adopted PB. As a third step, we analyzed the website of each LG to verify the existence of a PB process already completed, in order to ensure that the respondents had full awareness of the PB process. The final sample consisted of 93 entities, after having excluded the LGs that have begun the PB process but have not yet applied it. We contacted all the managers involved in the PB process of the 93 LGs scattered across the country, and 31 responded. This number of respondents is considered sufficient in Q-studies to identify the viewpoints on a topic (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

In the fourth stage, data were collected by asking the participants to rank the statements in the Q-set according to a suggested quasi-normal distribution grid. The administration of our study took place from May to October 2021. Participants were contacted by email and required to complete the Q-sort electronically through the app Q-method software ([www.app.qmethodsoftware.com](http://www.app.qmethodsoftware.com)). Participants were asked to express their point of view on participatory budgeting by ordering the statements provided in random order in a grid in which there are 11 possible representations of the level of disagreement/agreement on a scale ranging from  $-5$  (strongly disagree) to  $5$  (strongly agree) (see Figure 1).

In the fifth and final step, the responses collected were analyzed using a by-persons factor analysis that shows how subjects are grouped through the Q-sorting process (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). In this kind of factor analysis, individuals, rather than variables as in traditional factor analysis, are the subjects analyzed, and each factor represents a group of individuals with similar preferences about the topic of the study. Each group (factor) is described by a set of specific statements called distinguishing statements. Stata was used to analyze the 31 Q-sorts obtained in our study. In particular, we ran the `qfactor` command (Akhtar-Danesh, 2018) with the principal component method for extraction, varimax for rotation, and Cohen's effect size ( $d$ ) to identify distinguishing statements. To select the number of factors we relied on explained variance and eigenvalue, and, at the same time, the number of significant persons loading on each factor (Jeffares & Skelcher, 2011). We opted for a four-factor solution that explains 55% of the total variance. Table 2 shows the number of respondents loading onto each factor and the total variance explained by each factor. Table 3 reports the item scores for each factor and highlights *distinctive statements* (*ds*) that contribute to distinguishing between any identified factors. Conversely, the statements placed consensually across all factors are defined as *consensus statements*. In our study, we found five consensus statements with no significant difference in scores across the four factors (Cohen's effect size smaller than 0.8). These statements are: "Administrators must deal with inevitable confrontation and conflict that citizen participation creates" (statement 31); "The implementation of the budget must be linked to a political will and commitment" (statement 28); "It is important to invest in forms of communication and approaches that favor an increase in the response of citizens to convocations" (statement 15);



**FIGURE 1** Q-sort distribution view as provided by [qmethodsoftware.com](http://qmethodsoftware.com).

**TABLE 2** Numbers of respondents loading on each factor and total variance for each factor.

Factor	1	2	3	4
N. respondents loading onto factor	8	6	6	6
Eigenvalues	8.289	3.396	3.067	2.276
% expl.var.	27	11	10	7
Cum% expl.var	27	38	48	55

**TABLE 3** Factor Q-sort values for each consensus statement.

Statement number	Statement	Factors			
		1	2	3	4
1	The implementation of PB involves organizational costs and changes	1	-5	-2	-3
2	PB generates competition between projects and proposers	-1	-2	-4	-4
3	The potential of PB lies in its ability to create a space governed by clear rules that ensure the participation of every citizen in the decision-making process regarding spending priorities	-1	-4	-2	0
4	The provision of information on the origin of resources and public expenditures plays a primary role	-2	-3	-1	-5
5	Through PB citizens can define the allocation of resources	-1	-2	-3	0
6	Citizens' proposals must be evaluated by experts to assess their feasibility	3	-3	-5	-2
7	The local government must guarantee the credibility of the initiative and the implementation of the projects.	2	1	-4	1
8	The dialogue among citizens helps to develop creative and expressive proposals of different points of view and needs	0	5	-3	-2
9	PB fosters transparency on the allocation of resources	-2	-2	-3	2
10	PB allows allocation of money more consistently to the needs of the community	-3	-1	-1	4
11	PB gives a voice to community members by fostering dialogue between citizens, councilors, and municipal employees	-2	1	-2	1
12	PB helps to strengthen the sense of belonging and motivation of administrative staff	-5	0	-2	-3
13	An inclusive process fosters a positive perception of PB by citizens	0	4	-1	2
14	PB takes time to start as it requires the collaboration of the different sectors of the administration	1	-1	1	0
15	It is necessary to invest in forms of communication and implementation methods that can facilitate citizen participation	1	0	-1	1
16	Citizens' interest in PB initiatives is limited	-1	-3	1	-3
17	By bringing together certain associations, religious bodies, trade unions or other intermediate bodies, the distances between the government and the groups of citizens who are difficult to contact is reduced	-4	1	0	-1
18	Public managers are concerned about the additional workload from PB	0	-1	-1	-1
19	PB allows citizens to exercise their right / duty to participate in local policies, as a form of active citizenship	2	2	4	4
20	Politicians fear that participation would lead to the financing of projects not in line with the political vision	0	-4	0	3
21	PB can strengthen social cohesion	-3	2	0	3
22	Giving citizens a voice about which choices are most necessary and urgent improves the overall impact of public spending	-3	-1	4	1
23	The comparison fueled by PB favors innovation in the offer of the services/programs implemented	0	1	0	3
24	PB makes it possible to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of local action	-1	0	2	2

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Statement number	Statement	Factors			
		1	2	3	4
25	Administrators need to be “re-educated” to appreciate more the role of participation	1	-2	1	-2
26	In formulating proposals for PB, citizens must balance parochial needs with general ones	-2	0	0	-2
27	When preparing the first participatory budget it is preferable to start with a simplified program (e.g. starting with only one district)	-4	0	1	-4
28	The implementation of PB must be linked to political will and commitment	2	2	1	2
29	The local authority must organize information meetings to guide the community to participation	3	3	0	0
30	When a municipality allows citizens to propose ideas to be realized with PB a clear and transparent framework with eligibility criteria is needed	5	3	3	-1
31	Administrators must face the inevitable confrontations and conflicts that citizen participation creates	2	0	2	1
32	The directors must contribute to spreading a participatory culture in the institution	0	-1	2	-1
33	In PB the ideas to be implemented need a clear reference period	1	1	3	0
34	To obtain the expected results, PB must provide a monitoring system for the implementation of the projects	4	3	2	-1
35	If the municipality reserves the right to modify or not implement the projects that result from the consultation of PB, citizens can lose confidence in the process	4	2	5	5
36	The local authority must identify a structure for PB (e.g., territorial, by themes, etc.) that favors dialogue among citizens	3	4	3	0

“Public managers are concerned about the additional workload resulting from PB” (statement 18). Table A in the appendix displays the participants' loading by factor.

## 4 | RESULTS

The Q-meth analysis identifies the emergence of four types of managers' approaches to PB: (1) skeptics; (2) enthusiasts; (3) guarantors; and (4) believers. We analyze these four approaches by considering the consensus statements presented in Table 3 and the relevance of the distinguishing statements (ds) summarized at the end of each following subsection (Tables 4–7). For each factor, we shed light on the public managers' perceptions by considering their focus on the PB process versus the PB use/effects and the degree of involvement of citizens, either limited or intense.

### 4.1 | Factor 1: Skeptics

The first factor represents 27% of the total variance and shows an eigenvalue of 8.289. Eight respondents are significantly associated with this factor. Public managers loading on the first factor are skeptical about PB use/effects.



**TABLE 4** Distinguishing statements for factor 1.

Number of Q-sorts loaded on factor 1 = 8	F_1	F_2	F_3	F_4
30 When the local government allows citizens to propose ideas to be implemented, it is necessary to have a clear and transparent set of eligibility criteria	5	3	3	-1
6 Citizens' proposals must be evaluated by experts to assess their feasibility	3	-3	-5	-2
1 The implementation of PB involves organizational costs and changes	1	-5	-2	-3
22 Giving citizens a voice about which choices are most necessary and urgent improves the overall impact of public spending	-3	-1	4	1
21 PB can strengthen social cohesion	-3	2	0	3
17 By bringing together certain associations, religious bodies, trade unions or other intermediate bodies, the distance between the government and the groups of citizens who are difficult to contact is reduced	-4	1	0	-1

**TABLE 5** Distinguishing statements for factor 2.

Number of Q-sorts loaded on factor 2 = 6	F_1	F_2	F_3	F_4
8 Dialogue among citizens helps to develop creative and expressive proposals of different points of view and needs	0	5	-3	-2
35 If the Entity reserves the right to modify or not implement the projects selected, citizens can lose confidence in the process	4	2	5	5
20 Politicians fear that participation would lead to the financing of projects not in line with the political vision	0	-4	0	3
1 The implementation of PB involves organizational costs and changes	1	-5	-2	-3

They do not think that the involvement of citizens in PB generates a positive impact on public spending (statement 22, ds), strengthens social cohesion (statement 21, ds), allocates money more consistently to the needs of the community (statement 10), and reaches out to citizens who are more difficult to contact (statement 17, ds). Conversely, they do not believe that PB helps to strengthen the sense of belonging and motivation of administrative staff (statement 12) and that actors from civil society, such as nonprofit, religious, and nongovernmental organizations, may effectively help recruit groups of citizens who are more difficult to contact (statement 17).

While being skeptical about the benefits of involving citizens in the allocation of public money, the managers for this factor are mainly concerned with defining the procedural and organizational framework that should regulate and underpin the operational implementation of PB (statement 36). They highlight a need for clear eligibility criteria for projects (statement 30, ds), and also for experts to be involved in assessing the feasibility of the projects (statement 6, ds). Similarly, they consider the implementation of PB as a process that should be supported with meetings to guide the community (statement 29), and a monitoring system (statement 34).

## 4.2 | Factor 2: Enthusiasts

The second factor represents 11% of the total variance with an eigenvalue of 3.396. Six respondents are significantly associated with this profile. Managers loading on this factor are enthusiastic about citizen involvement through the PB process. They see interaction among citizens as leading to the development of creative proposals and combining and integrating divergent needs and points of view in an original way (statement 8, ds); they do not see it as a threat for politicians, as reflected in their disagreement with statement 20 (ds)—“Politicians fear that participation will lead

**TABLE 6** Distinguishing statements for factor 3.

Number of Q-sorts loaded on factor 3 = 6	F_1	F_2	F_3	F_4
22 Giving citizens a voice about which choices are most necessary and urgent improves the overall impact of public spending	-3	-1	4	1
33 In PB the ideas to be implemented need a clear reference period	1	1	3	0
16 Citizens' interest in PB initiatives is limited	-1	-3	1	-3
21PB can strengthen social cohesion	-3	2	0	3
7 The local government must guarantee the credibility of the initiative and the implementation of the projects	2	1	-4	1
6 Citizens' suggestions must be evaluated by experts to assess their feasibility	3	-3	-5	-2

**TABLE 7** Distinguishing statements for factor 4.

Number of Q-sorts loaded on factor 4 = 6	F_1	F_2	F_3	F_4
10 PB allows allocating money more consistently to the needs of the community	-3	-1	-1	4
20 Politicians fear that participation would lead to the financing of projects not in line with the political vision	0	-4	0	3
9 PB allows for greater transparency regarding the allocation of resources	-2	-2	-3	2
36 The local authority must identify a structure for PB (e.g., by territory, themes, etc.) that favors dialogue between citizens	3	4	3	0
34 To obtain the expected results, PB must include a monitoring system for the implementation of the projects	4	3	2	-1
30 When the local government allows citizens to propose ideas to be implemented, it is necessary to have a clear and transparent set of eligibility criteria	5	3	3	-1
4 The provision of information on the origin of resources and public expenditures plays a primary role	-2	-3	-1	-5

to the financing of projects, not in line with their political vision.” They do not think that implementing PB means costs and changes to the organization (statement 1, ds). They firmly believe that the promotion of inclusivity (statement 13) and the settings that foster dialogue among citizens (statement 36) are central elements enhancing PB. While *Enthusiasts* recognize that citizens' trust is diminished when selected projects are not modified or realized by the municipality, they are not particularly concerned about this issue (statement 35, ds). *Enthusiasts* are so confident about the benefits of dialogue with and among citizens that their focus is the design of the process to promote and facilitate citizen interaction and empowerment, rather than other mechanisms and rules needed for the implementation of PB.

### 4.3 | Factor 3: Guarantors

The third factor represents 10% of the total variance and displays an eigenvalue of 3.067. Similar to factor 2, six respondents are significantly associated with factor 3. Public managers loading on this factor believe that PB gives citizens a voice about which choices are most necessary and urgent to improve the overall impact of public spending (statement 22, ds) and allows citizens to exercise their right/duty to participate in local policies (statement 19), but they recognize the limited interest of citizens in being involved as co-producers of budgetary decisions (statement

**TABLE 8** Participatory budgeting, main elements for each manager approach.

	<b>Skeptic</b>	<b>Enthusiast</b>	<b>Guarantor</b>	<b>Believer</b>
Actors	Emphasis on the role of experts for ensuring feasibility	Emphasis on interaction among citizens	Concerned about political and administrative interference	Concerned about political interference
Motivations/Goals	Low confidence in the benefits of PB	Confidence in the value of citizens' dialogue	Confidence in the ability of PB to improve the impact of public spending	Confidence in the ability of PB consistent allocation of resources in relation to community's needs
Mechanisms and Processes	High importance for operational implementation	Low importance	Importance limited to a transparent and clear framework	Low importance

16, ds). At the same time, they strongly disagree that managers have an instrumental role in getting citizens' proposals adopted by evaluating them from an expert point of view (statement 6, ds). In the same vein, they think that LGs do not have to guarantee the credibility of the PB initiative and the implementation of the projects (statement 7, ds). However, they highlight the importance of having a transparent framework underpinning the process with clear eligibility criteria for projects (statement 30) and reference periods in which the proposals will be realized (statement 33, ds). In addition, they strongly agree that citizens can lose confidence in the process if the local government reserves the right to modify or not implement the projects chosen by citizens (statement 35). They are particularly concerned about the potential political and administrative interference of the government in the process and place great importance on the transparency and coherence of the process.

#### 4.4 | Factor 4: Believers

The fourth factor represents 7% of the total variance and shows an eigenvalue of 2.276. Six respondents are significantly associated with this profile. Managers loading on this factor do believe that PB allows more consistent allocation of resources in relation to a community's needs (statement 10, ds). However, they recognize that PB may result in projects and priorities not aligned with the political vision (statement 20, ds). In this respect, they highlight that citizens may lose confidence in the process if projects resulting from PB consultation are not implemented or modified (statement 35). They pay more attention to the effects of PB than to the technical characteristics of the process through which it is implemented, such as the adoption of a monitoring system (statement 34, ds) or a framework with eligibility criteria for projects (statement 30, ds), the availability of information on the origin of resources and public expenditures (statement 4, ds), and the adoption of simplified programs (statement 27). In addition, they are neutral about the creation of opportunities for fostering wide participation and dialogue between citizens. Thus, the managers loading on this profile seem to be focused on the possible benefits of PB use while being less concerned about the technical features of its implementation.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

This study analyzes the subjective perception of local public managers in relation to PB. Applying Q-methodology, we identify four different manager perspectives on PB. How managers perceive PB also indicates what they perceive

as their role in the PB process. Our results provide evidence that extends existing studies of the views of managers on PB (Migchelbrink & van de Walle, 2022; Zhang & Yang, 2009). A synthesis of the four perspectives emerging from the analysis is presented in Table 8.

We find that three approaches (*Enthusiasts*, *Guarantors*, *Believers*) suggest a more positive perception from managers about the involvement of citizens in the allocation of resources to different public programs, services, and investments. In particular, *Enthusiasts* see the direct involvement of citizens as a means to better solutions and are not concerned about the organizational structures and rules needed for PB implementation, instead focusing on how to facilitate and foster participation. As they think citizens have a strong interest in PB, they see themselves as facilitators in delivering inclusiveness and entering into dialogue, and do not focus on the idea that the PB initiative may create additional costs and changes for LGs. *Guarantors* see the potential of PB, especially in terms of greater impacts generated by public spending when involving citizens in its allocation; they point out that citizens may have limited interest in being involved, while also highlighting that local government interference in the decisions taken by citizens should be avoided. They value having a clear framework. *Believers* see the potential of involving citizens in the allocation of public money, especially in making decisions that are more consistent with the needs of the community. However, they are not interested in the technical features of the process.

The fourth profile emerging from the analysis is less enthusiastic about PB. *Skeptics* are concerned about the potential benefits of PB, focusing instead on mechanisms and processes for its implementation. Specifically, it seems they are concerned about losing control of the allocation of public spending and see transparency, involvement of experts, and monitoring systems as tools to protect their role.

By comparing the four profiles emerging from the analysis, it appears that managers have different opinions about the impact of PB, how it unfolds, and what type of mechanisms are important to its implementation. Some managers (*Believers*) welcome PB as a form of participative democracy through which decision-making power is returned to citizens. In their view, PB can strengthen social cohesion, increase the efficiency and effectiveness of local action, support resource allocation that is consistent with citizens' needs, and improve overall public spending. At the same time, they feel that the PB initiative does not need particular processes or mechanisms for it to work. PB is seen as a tool for citizens and public managers do not see any specific role for themselves in the process. Other managers (*Enthusiasts*) recognize the citizen-centric role in the PB process but stress the need to adopt mechanisms that can foster inclusiveness, dialogue among citizens, and participation. They believe that PB should be supported by mechanisms designed to increase and facilitate participation by citizens. Another group of managers (*Guarantors*) are worried about the procedural transparency of rules through which citizens participate in budget decisions. Finally, *skeptics* have a significantly different perspective, characterized by feeling threatened by the involvement of citizens through the implementation of PB. They react by seeking implementation that is more "technocratic." This is consistent with previous studies in the coproduction literature, which highlight that it is not easy for public sector officials to accept citizens as partners (Cepiku et al., 2020; Sicilia et al., 2016). They see themselves as holding specialized knowledge (Parrado et al., 2013), and feel more comfortable with a hierarchical *modus operandi* (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013; Verschuere et al., 2012). They may also lack the competencies to manage participative initiatives (Liao & Ma, 2019).

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

This study provides an analysis of public managers' perceptions of PB, filling a gap in the current literature. Using Q-methodology, the paper shows that public managers adopt four perspectives toward participatory budgeting, especially with reference to the role of, and relationships between, actors, the effects of PB, and the mechanisms and procedures that may hamper or facilitate its implementation. In particular, our results highlight that public managers approach and think of the participatory budget in different ways, with some of them more positive and enthusiastic and others more worried and skeptical.

The study is relevant from both research and practice perspectives. From a research viewpoint, the study makes two contributions. First, the paper contributes to the still-limited literature that investigates PB from the perspectives of public managers, whose attitudes may significantly impact the design and implementation of this practice. Second, the paper is one of the few studies that relies on Q-method in the public administration field and doing so makes it possible to explore the variety of perspectives managers have on the practice of PB. In particular, the four perspectives emerging from our study enrich the typology identified by Migchelbrink and van de Walle (2022) by developing a typology based on managers' perspective on PB that incorporates the role of, and relationships between, actors, the effects of PB, and the mechanisms and processes that may hamper or facilitate the implementation of PB.

From a practice viewpoint, the paper offers interesting evidence for governments and policy makers in the implementation of PB. Particularly, the analysis makes clear that the practice of PB is not necessarily welcomed by manager, some of whom perceive it as a threat, which entrenches a technocratic approach to budgeting. These findings suggest that participatory practices require not only education and training of citizens, but also of managers, to provide them with the skills and mindset to face the challenges of co-participation and involvement of citizens. Similarly, managers who are more positive about PB may need training to gain the competencies needed to translate participation into practice and shape the conditions for effective involvement of citizens in decisions about the allocation of public money.

This study provides a novel contribution to the literature in identifying managers' perceptions and their approach to the PB process, opening opportunities for further investigation, and providing empirical evidence of the extent, context, and LG administrative culture, as well as personal characteristics or previous experiences of managers, that influence PB. However, as with any research, this paper comes with some limitations. First, the perspectives emerging from the analysis may not be exhaustive; other perspectives may exist. Our study has covered a specific country and has involved managers willing to participate in the research. Future research could replicate the analysis in other settings to assess whether the results also hold in different countries with a distinct culture in terms of citizen participation. Second, the results of this study are based on a limited number of respondents. Although Q-meth does not require high-N, it can negatively affect the robustness of results. Thus, future investigations may replicate the study with a larger sample to improve robustness. In addition, we conducted the Q-sorting online, relying on software. The online procedure has several advantages, enabling more comprehensive recruitment, convenience in terms of time and space, and reducing the likelihood of data being recorded erroneously. However, it should be noted that when administering Q-sorting online, it is impossible to interact with the participants and assist them in real time during the sorting. To address this issue, we provided respondents with precise instructions in addition to those offered on the online platform in each step of the Q-sorting exercise. Nonetheless, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also possible that the timing of the study had an influence on managers' perceptions. Replicating the study in the future may enlarge our knowledge on managers' perception about PB mechanisms and processes.

Future studies may also consider to what extent personal attitudes of public managers may affect their perceptions of the PB process and if their previous experiences, as well as results in terms of success or failure in involving citizens, influence their stance.

Overall, we believe the PB process deserves further research attention to better understand if the role played by public managers and their engagement in the PB process influences the impact and effectiveness of participatory democracy.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

#### **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## APPENDIX A

TABLE A Factor loadings for the Q-sorts.

Q-sort	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
1	0.2939	-0.0948	0.3861	0.5051x
2	0.0761	0.8541x	0.2298	0.1560
3	0.1881	0.1882	0.1490	0.6994x
4	0.3386	0.3847	-0.0243	0.2371
5	-0.0760	0.2912	-0.0792	0.6882x
6	0.1434	0.2159x	-0.5290	0.1579
7	0.2696	0.3226	0.4183	0.3535
8	0.4908x	0.0045	-0.0638	-0.1257
9	0.0583	0.7177x	-0.0651	0.3061
10	0.1798	0.6244x	0.3676	0.2603
11	0.4874	0.5320x	0.0106	-0.0725
12	0.6785x	-0.0855	0.0577	0.2134
13	0.6018x	-0.0223	0.1088	0.1859
14	-0.1295	0.2775	0.3881	0.4961x
15	0.4784	0.4804	-0.3033	-0.2122
16	0.5895	0.3127	0.5689	-0.0260
17	0.3658	0.1905	0.7292x	0.1601
18	0.3905x	0.1608	0.3125	-0.0202
19	0.0386	0.2229	0.6179x	0.5137
20	0.0294	0.2641	-0.6724x	-0.0036
21	0.7475x	0.0664	0.1556	-0.1315
22	0.2012	0.4758x	-0.1239	0.3106
23	0.0516	0.3663	0.7687x	0.0983
24	0.2010	0.2047	0.6332x	0.0787
25	-0.1632	0.3000	-0.0119	0.4746x
26	-0.0353	0.8180x	0.2078	0.0188
27	0.7474x	0.2082	0.2983	0.0532
28	0.4912x	0.0901	-0.0463	0.3265
29	0.3812	-0.2262	0.0513	0.7282x
30	0.7836x	0.3703	0.0957	0.1459
31	-0.3190	0.1748	-0.4390	0.4565

Note: x indicates a defining sort.