

Review of: "Participatory budgeting for public involvement in environmental sustainability at a Thai university"

Simon Tremblay-Pepin¹

¹ St. Paul University

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The article presents a pedagogical experiment that happened at a Thai university. Students were asked to submit projects to a selection process inspired by the participatory budgeting experiences that have been happening around the world. The article presents the process and the results of this consultation. It also shows an analysis of the data collected from two questions asked to the participants after filling out the consultation form. These answers show a high level of satisfaction from the participants.

The pedagogical experiment that is the subject of this article is stimulating. Teaching students through experiential learning and adding a participatory part to this activity by involving the rest of the university's community seems an excellent way to engage the students in their learning process. The consultative approach also complements the more technologically-centered training this specific university offers. This introduction to democracy should allow the students to develop soft skills they will need throughout their careers. As a teacher, I am happy to have learned about this inspiring initiative.

However, reading it as a research article on participatory budgeting, I remain with three concerns that I think the author could further develop to better the paper.

My first concern is about the deliberative aspect of democracy (Pateman 1970^[1]; Cohen and Rogers 1983^[2]). The article underlines that participatory budgeting must be about decision-making and not only about consultation. This assertion is true. But democracy does not stop there; neither does participatory budgeting; it also consists of collective deliberation (Azevedo & Fernandes 2005^[3]; He 2019^[4]; Russon Gilman 2012^[5]; Russell & Jovanovic 2020^[6]). Democracy is the task of an assembly discussing an option, learning from different arguments, and reaching a decision together. The process put forward in the pedagogical experiment studied by the article does not give much space to deliberation. If I understood correctly, people selected their preferred projects via an internet platform. This individualized process does not provide the opportunity to transform these separated people into a community deciding for itself. The risk here is that instead of being transformed into an assembly taking a political decision – the idea at the center of democracy – they remain separate individuals stating their preferences. I think the article needs, at the very minimum, to make explicit the reasons why a deliberative process was not implemented and to assess the consequence of this choice from a democratic standpoint.

Secondly, I think the article would help readers that don't know the Thai context – which is my case – if it stated the political situation regarding democratic institutions in Thailand more clearly – if writing about this question is possible for

the author, obviously. Democracy is not only a formal procedure but also a personal ethos and a mode of society. This mode of forming a society proceeds through the constant participation in the institutions themselves – what the ancient Greeks called *paideia* (Castoriadis 2012^[7]). Therefore, implementing a democratic process in a given society involves knowing the political location from where people are starting. People used to an authoritarian regime, to the false pretenses of liberal democracy, or to more authentically democratic procedures will react and integrate the type of participatory process presented in the paper differently. The authors give us some information about how universities are managed in Thailand (p.4) which is helpful. Still, more information about the general context would help the readers better understand the reactions to the procedure implemented.

This importance of knowing what previous experience people have of democracy brings me to my third concern, mainly about how the evaluation of the procedure was conducted. I fully understand how a survey of two questions after filling out the allocation questionnaire can seem the simplest way to get as many answers as possible. However, I think there is an important risk of bias here. First, suppose the university is usually managed in a very top-to-bottom way like the author mentions it is. In that case, it is possible that (a) people are used to offering polite answers showing their support to the university administration, (b) that they believe that the participatory process comes from the university administration or that their answer could be transferred to the administration. Therefore, the data collected could be disingenuous to some extent because they try to please an imagined reader linked to the administration – and I think some of the answers shared in the article could lead us to think this way. Second, the way the questions are written does not leave much space to understand *why* people did appreciate the participatory process. Maybe a question that makes them give more details on these reasons would give us a clearer view of this personal ethos mentioned in my second concern and of the nature of respondents' relationship with democratic processes like the one tested.

I encourage the author to continue his research on that crucial subject and thank him for the stimulating pedagogical experiment he shared.

References

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