

Feeling excluded? Why ethnic minorities (do not) engage in participatory budgeting

Sergiu Gherghina, Paul Tap & Ionut Traistaru

To cite this article: Sergiu Gherghina, Paul Tap & Ionut Traistaru (21 Nov 2023): Feeling excluded? Why ethnic minorities (do not) engage in participatory budgeting, *Identities*, DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2023.2284533

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2023.2284533>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 21 Nov 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 263



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Feeling excluded? Why ethnic minorities (do not) engage in participatory budgeting

Sergiu Gherghina ^a, Paul Tap ^b and Ionut Traistaru^b

^aDepartment of Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK;

^bDepartment of International Studies and Contemporary History, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

ABSTRACT

The increasing use of participatory budgeting (PB) around the world has led to analyses covering people's attitudes towards the process, its empowering characteristics, and its transformational potential. However, we know very little about how people belonging to ethnic minorities position themselves towards PB. This article aims to address this gap and identify what factors determine the engagement of individuals belonging to ethnic minorities with PB. This study focuses on the multi-ethnic city of Cluj-Napoca and uses 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with ethnic Hungarians. The results indicate that engagement is driven by the possibility of a strong voice in the community, the opportunity to communicate with the public administration about their priorities, and the stimulation of social cohesion and civic spirit. Non-engagement is triggered by the limited details provided about PB, its online-only format, and several personal characteristics.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 31 May 2023; Accepted 14 November 2023

KEYWORDS Participatory democracy; ethnic minorities; budgeting; exclusion; community; information

Introduction

The theory and practice of participatory budgeting (PB) indicates concrete avenues which can be taken to improve governmental legitimacy, transparency, accountability, and effectiveness at local level (Sintomer, Herzberg, and Röcke 2008; Wampler 2012). It provides citizens the opportunity to influence policies in their community by deciding how the budget is allocated, to gain knowledge about how the government functions, and to hold that government accountable (Shah 2007). PB is often portrayed as a means to enhance democratic quality and an opportunity to engage ordinary citizens in specific co-governance arrangements related to the allocation of budgets for local

CONTACT Sergiu Gherghina  sergiu.gherghina@glasgow.ac.uk  Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

projects, and to provide more responsive and equitable budgets that meet community needs (Wampler 2012). PB allows experienced government and administrative representatives to share political power with citizens with the overarching goal of contributing to raising knowledge among the citizens, and more generally, improving their civic awareness and education (Talpin 2012). International organizations support PB as a model of good governance and a 'citizenship school' which educates and engages citizens in politics between elections (Shah 2007).

Due to these characteristics, PB was considered as one remedy to the crisis of representative democracy and as a potential strategy for collective empowerment (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014). However, there are also unintended consequences and risks linked to the capture of the process by politicians or interest groups seeking to reproduce social, economic, and political hierarchies (Shah 2007; Williams and Waisanen 2020). This mixed evidence raises questions about how individuals belonging to ethnic minorities see PB in their community. They have several options on how to position themselves towards this process. One possibility is to question assumptions about what it means to work together for a common goal, one of the key principles of PB (Holdo 2020). Another possibility is that PB is considered as a source of empowerment in which people learn about their rights and express their views to shape policies (Gherghina, Tap, and Soare 2022). By this view, ethnic minorities are often a vulnerable segment in community and so might expect the PB to give priority to their needs (Holdo 2020). Another possibility is to see the PB as a meaningless process hijacked by political actors and used for their purposes, steering attention away from the need for institutional improvement (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014; Peck and Theodore 2015)

In the light of these three different possibilities, we know very little about how people belonging to ethnic minorities position themselves towards PB. There is limited research about how inclusive they perceive the process and what makes them engage in PB. This positioning of ethnic minority citizens is important for at least three reasons: 1) it can provide information about what works well and what can be improved in PB, which reflects the continuity and success of the process; 2) it serves as a point of departure by which to understand the engagement of citizens from specific groups in community issues; and 3) it complements the existing research about why people engage in PB by zooming in on a specific segment in society.

This article aims to address this gap in the literature by identifying the factors that determine the engagement of individuals belonging to ethnic minorities with PB. In particular, we seek to understand whether the feeling of exclusion plays a role in that process. We focus on the critical case of Cluj-Napoca (Romania) where the local political authority initiated and maintained PB for several years. The mayor, who has held office for many years, is a strong

supporter of PB and started a pilot project at the district level in 2013, which then continued at the city level between 2017 and 2022 with a break in 2020 due to the COVID-19 restrictions. The city-level PB uses a digital platform onto which projects are uploaded and votes are cast, with thousands of citizens getting involved over the years. Our qualitative analysis uses 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with ethnic Hungarians from the largest ethnic minority group in the city – they comprise roughly 16.2% of the population according to the most recent census in 2022. We use inductive thematic analysis to interpret the answers provided by respondents.

The following section reviews the literature about PB and ethnic minorities and seeks to identify the potential reasons why they may engage or not with PB. Next, we discuss the research design and provide details about the case selection, data, and methodology. The third section briefly describes the PB process in Cluj-Napoca, while the fourth section presents the results of our inductive thematic analysis for interviews. The conclusions summarize the key findings and reflect on the implications of this analysis for the broader field of study.

PB and ethnic minorities

The guiding principle behind deliberative democracy is that the proposed laws and policies should be assessed through inclusive discussion and reasoning in relation to their merits and the evidence rather than simply the balance of voting power (Cinalli and O'Flynn 2014; Fishkin 2011). This requires a public who is willing to engage in such activities with a focus on policy (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). Since ethnic minorities are often underrepresented by traditional forms of political participation, they may search for alternative forms of political participation that are more inclusive and likely to generate neutral outcomes. PB is such a form, and could boost ethnic minorities' confidence that their voices matter in the political arena (O'Hagan et al. 2020) and stimulate their engagement in political action due to its empowerment potential. PB could also favour the engagement of ethnic minorities because it includes every individual in the process and sometimes prioritizes the participation of minorities or other vulnerable groups (Holdo 2020; Santos 2005). It promotes transparent mechanisms of selection, communication, decision making, and interaction with authorities; it stimulates non-discriminatory dynamics; and it also enforces the feeling of belonging to a community (Lerner 2011; Novy and Leubolt 2005; O'Hagan et al. 2020). The interactions between minority and majority groups favour the integration of ethnic minorities and within the communities that use PB exist less racial conflicts (Collins 2018).

PB enhances the participation of ethnic minorities in political actions because it is not contained by rigid legislative provisions. Every individual is free to participate as long as he/she lives or works in a specific community.

This feature stimulates the attractiveness of PB because not every member of ethnic minority groups can engage in traditional forms of political participation. Similarly, traditional forms of political participation lack direct contact between participants and local policy-makers. This gap, at least at the perception level, is deeper for ethnic minorities (Novy and Leubolt 2005). PB promotes direct interactions between participants and policy-makers, and members of ethnic minorities could find this possibility appealing (Novy and Leubolt 2005; Santos 2005). The quality of minorities' actions in terms of the language and arguments used was comparable with that of other ethnic groups. However, they have a considerably narrower interest than other ethnic groups when deliberating, appealing to the general interest in only a quarter of instances (Cinalli and O'Flynn 2014). Ethnic identity influences the quality of deliberation only when it is understood as ethnic enactment as opposed to moments when it is considered an individual characteristic (Schneiderhan, Khan, and Elrick 2014).

Reasons why ethnic minorities may not engage in PB

There are two categories of reasons why ethnic minorities may not participate in PB: general ones, and specific ones. One general reason – which is not limited to ethnic minorities – is the lack of interest in a political process that is not mandatory and may not generate significant changes in society (Jacquet 2017; Neblo, State, and Kennedy 2010). Also, members of ethnic minorities may not participate in PB because they do not see any reasons to engage in politics since there are already elected representatives in charge with decision-making (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). In addition, the prioritization of other personal activities (e.g. family, health issues, work) and the preferential allocation of resources may inhibit engagement in PB (Font and Blanco 2007).

The specific reasons for non-engagement are political alienation, limited trust in the process, and the improper format of PB. To start with political alienation, ethnic minorities' lack of motivation to participate in PB could be explained by a high level of political alienation. Political alienation is generated by a perceived sense of powerlessness and the belief that individuals cannot change political realities (Stoker 2006). While these characteristics are shared by all alienated individuals, ethnic minorities could experience higher political alienation due to their differences from the dominant majority groups (Heath et al. 2013; Marvin, Jennings, and Hughes 2013). Their alienation could also be enhanced by the perception that their different culture and ethnicity influence discrimination patterns. The latter are more vivid when it comes to political processes which favour the desires of majority groups (Marvin, Jennings, and Hughes 2013).

Another reason why ethnic minorities may not participate in PB is linked to their limited trust in the process. Although in theory the declared values of PB are inclusion, social justice, and transparency (Lerner 2011), in practice it may be not perceived as such by ethnic minorities. When the latter participate in PB, their voices count for less in comparison to the voice of majority groups (Pape and Lim 2019). This is not produced by a hidden intention to discriminate against them, but is simply due to the fact that the larger share of participants in PB comes from majority groups (Pape and Lim 2019). Other studies show that the final decisions are taken by politicians, groups that have access to more resources, and technical experts, so the minority groups are indirectly excluded from these stages (Barnes et al. 2003; Cornwall and Schatten Coelho 2007). Such a distrusting attitude has been quite common among ethnic minorities in other participatory processes (Mişcoiu and Gherghina 2021).

The PB format could be another deterrent to engagement in some cases. PB could be discouraging for ethnic minorities because people belonging to these groups may have low levels of efficacy and knowledge required to build solid arguments (Jacquet 2017; Mişcoiu and Gherghina 2021), high levels of anxiety about the possibility of being publicly contradicted, or be afraid of conflict situations (Mutz 2006). Furthermore, there is limited potential to advance projects that target ethnic minority aims, because PB seek to address the needs of broader communities that may not overlap with the needs of ethnic minority groups. Finally, there is little transparency regarding the projects chosen for debate in the PB, and their selection may even be biased by ethnic stereotypes (Su 2017). All these potential causes formed the bases for the questions in the interview guide used for this study.

Research design

To understand the motivations of ethnic minorities for engaging with the PB or not doing so, we use the case study of Cluj-Napoca, which is the second most populous city in Romania and the first city in the country to use PB. This is a critical case for the following reasons: firstly, there is more than a decade of continuity in terms of a local administration that supports the PB (the mayor has continuously been in office since 2012). Secondly, the PB partially meets the minimum characteristics of the process, such as proposal design and submission, information about ideas, final voting, the implementation of projects at the city level, and regular organization (Sintomer, Herzberg, and Röcke 2008, 168). Thirdly, the city is home to a sizable group of ethnic Hungarians who enjoy formal representation in the local council. In general, the ethnic Hungarians in Cluj-Napoca participate to a similar extent to the Romanian majority in politics, as is reflected in the relatively stable share of votes for local elections irrespective of the general turnout.¹

We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews in May 2022 with ethnic Hungarians living in Cluj-Napoca. We used a snowballing technique to select the participants, and the selection sought to maximize variation in relation to several key variables such as gender, age, education, and profession (see [Table 1](#)). The respondents lived in different neighbourhoods and the average length of each interview was 15 minutes. We stopped at 20 interviews having reached the data saturation point. The interviews were conducted by telephone and recorded after receiving the interviewees' consent. Several respondents had engaged with PB in Cluj-Napoca either as voters or as applicants with projects for funding. The interviewees had different levels of knowledge about the PB in the city. The vast majority knew about the process and many provided details illustrating good knowledge during their interview. To ensure a meaningful discussion, the four respondents who heard for the first time about the PB during the interview were provided with an overview of the process. The interview guide ([Appendix 1](#)) sought to gauge which of the causes presented in the previous section could influence the non-participatory behaviour of ethnic Hungarians.

We used inductive thematic analysis of the themes identified in the answers provided by the respondents (Clarke and Braun 2017). In the absence of pre-established themes that could be derived from the literature, the inductive thematic approach provided an appropriate avenue to interpret meaning from the answers. We read all the answers and sought to assign sentences to sub-themes and then larger themes. The process of collecting, grouping, and analysing the data was divided into three phases after interview transcription: independent reading (by the authors) of the interviews

Table 1. Overview of the interviewees.

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation
I1	44	Female	PhD	University Professor
I2	69	Male	High School	Retired
I3	42	Female	BA	Secretary
I4	31	Male	MA	Chief services officer
I5	23	Male	BA	IT Worker
I6	39	Male	PhD	Scientific Researcher
I7	24	Female	BA	Bank Consultant
I8	23	Female	BA	Commercial Representative
I9	38	Male	High School	Chef
I10	35	Male	MA	Economist
I11	36	Male	High School	Local Manager/Administrator
I12	20	Female	College	Human Resources Recruiter
I13	44	Female	High School	Guesthouse Manager
I14	25	Male	BA	Business Analyst
I15	24	Male	BA	Project Manager
I16	19	Male	High School	Student
I17	33	Female	College	Nurse
I18	37	Male	High School	Bartender
I19	60	Female	High School	Maid
I20	24	Male	BA	Web Developer

and outlining of the initial themes, comparison of the themes, and reaching a decision about the final themes and interpretation. Based on the interviews we formulated two broad themes – the inappropriate format of the PB and the limited funds allocated to it – each of which had three sub-themes.

PB in Cluj-Napoca and attitudes of ethnic minorities towards PB

Cluj-Napoca is the second most populous city in Romania after the country's capital according to the 2022 census. It was the first city to implement PB, which it did in 2013 as a pilot project for one neighbourhood before moving PB online in 2017 (Gherghina and Tap 2021). Every person residing in the city who is at least 18 years old may propose and vote in the PB. Participation is straightforward: a person must create an account on the PB platform to submit applications or vote on projects. The participants have six domains in which they can propose or vote on projects: alleys, sidewalks, and pedestrian areas; mobility, accessibility and traffic safety; green spaces and playgrounds; arrangement of public spaces (urban furniture, public lightning); educational and cultural infrastructure; and digital city. All projects with a maximum value of 400,000 € (this sum was 150,000 € until 2021) that pass the technical eligibility enter the competition and the voting takes place online. Since 2021, each person has six votes: one vote per project, one project per domain. The winning projects are implemented by the City Hall. The PB receives a maximum of 2.4 million € which equates to less than 1% of the city's total budget.

All our interviewees share the view that PB is a transparent initiative that is beneficial to the community because it contributes to the city's development and provides citizens with the chance to decide how local money should be spent. The interviewees considered it as 'a very good initiative' (I3), an 'overall good and useful possibility' (I4) to advance their ideas, a 'very good thing (...) it is our right' (I11), a 'good idea' (I12), and a 'very good programme' (I16). Some outlined specific reasons behind their support: 'playgrounds for kids were developed (...) trees were planted, which is very good because the pollution in the city is very high' (I19). The PB is also seen as an extra path of communication between the City Hall and citizens, and an attempt to ensure transparency and involvement in the decision-making process (I6). Other interviewees emphasized that PB is a collective process in which the outcomes reflect the desires and voices of the inhabitants rather than those of politicians or interest groups (I1, I7, I16, I17). The PB is considered a 'complementary investment mechanism for the development of the city (...) a smart city means to create a synergy between the local administration, the community, the leadership and ordinary people' (I6). All these views are in line with the key functions and desired outcomes of PB which have been outlined in the literature (Dias, Enríquez, and Júlio 2019; Sintomer, Herzberg,

and Röcke 2008). These indicate that ethnic Hungarians in Cluj-Napoca have a similar view of the process to that recorded elsewhere.

The ethnic minorities' perceptions about the exclusive or inclusive character of the PB provide supplementary information about their general attitudes. Only three respondents mentioned feeling discriminated against. For instance, an interviewee who proposed a project for the introduction of the Hungarian language on the information boards in Cluj-Napoca explained:

I believe that the regulation is discriminatory because it specifies projects with a political and ethnic character are not subject to funding. (...) In Cluj-Napoca live more than 50,000 Hungarians who pay taxes. Perhaps they want something for the Hungarian community and if a Hungarian inhabitant of Cluj-Napoca proposes a project for the Hungarian community, he cannot participate, which seems discriminatory. The City Hall did not want to change the regulation and to exclude the notion that refers to ethnicity. (I4)

This view was shared by I15, while a third respondent stressed that Hungarians are somewhat discriminated by the PB, which should 'consider to a larger extent our projects that preserve our values' (I18). The latter two interviewees referred to the same case, in which a project was rejected due to its ethnic-oriented aims.

The other interviewees underlined that PB is an inclusive initiative where everybody is treated equally. They explicitly rejected the idea of discrimination, which was one reason why the word was so prominent in their answers (see [Figure 1](#)). One respondent argued 'I would not say that there is a difference based on ethnicity, I am overall quite involved in decision-making' (I5), while another claimed, 'I do not think that it has any relevance if I belong to another ethnicity. I believe things moved beyond this hurdle and given that I am from Cluj, I do not think [ethnicity] matters' (I17). Some respondents emphasized that they felt no difference on ethnicity grounds (I1, I2, I12 and I19), while another stated, 'I am 100% convinced that [the projects] are considered depending on how good they are; I do not believe to be a problem in this regard' (I14). Others argued that PB should not even be associated with the idea of discrimination since the projects do not have to fulfil the interests of specific groups of individuals – which may indirectly generate conflicts between individuals – but rather to provide benefits for the entire local community rather than ethnic communities such as the Hungarian or the Roma (I6 and I10).

Most interviewees considered the PB as a process free of political interference. For example, one stated, 'I do not feel, I do not see something political (...) but the fact that we have many young and open-minded people, citizens of Cluj-Napoca (...) talented, with modern visions to frame the projects' (I7). Similarly, I6 emphasized that although initiated and supported by politicians, PB is a process that works in parallel with the political process

available budget' (I14). They engage in PB to harness this right that allows 'ordinary people to express their opinion and come up with ideas (...) I mean, if I want, I can look to the X sum and say how it can be spent' (I3). Similarly, I13, I15, I18 and I20 all outlined that PB represents a good opportunity for all segments of the community – including the youth and ethnic minorities – to get involved in urban development and be active contributors to the future of the local community.

Second, many respondents argued that the mayor and the local public authority do not understand the needs of citizens in their communities better than those who actually live there. Therefore, citizens engage in PB to inform the authorities about how they should most effectively spend public money on projects that will enhance the quality of local communities (I5, I7, I8, I9, I17). This approach allows the local authorities to see that 'there are some priorities in the city and eventually they will come up with some ideas there' (I5), and 'without the citizens the mayor will not know which are the problems. We signal them, he checks them and then decides if he wants to address them' (I19). According to many of the respondents, the citizens see their community's needs from a more practical point of view. One interviewee explained that, 'the public administration sees problems from a different standpoint. If both parts help to this process, I say that it is much better because we can solve the things easier and simpler. And the citizens can reveal some things that have not been identified by the public administration' (I8). In line with this, several interviewees stated that they engaged in PB because this created a stronger linkage with the local authorities and allowed them to engage in closer cooperation in solving the city's problems (I7, I10, I17).

Third, through the PB, people become more united and involved in their communities, and managed to develop their civic spirit, irrespective of ethnicity (I8, I10). PB helps citizens in finding solutions to social matters of common interest, which is an important driver for engagement (I10, I16, I17). Some of the interviewees emphasized that citizens are encouraged to participate in PB when they see that the projects advanced through this process are implemented (I8), and I10 stressed that PB 'helps the population that wants to get actively involved, it is an instrument that can be used and it is available to anyone'. Similarly, other interviewees said that PB creates opportunities to discuss project ideas with their friends and to influence each other to become more active in civic initiatives (I15, I16). I17 stressed that PB stimulates civic engagement by enhancing citizens' confidence that they can change something. In addition, the PB enhances participation because, as one interviewee put it, 'as a citizen of Cluj-Napoca I have the obligation to vote (...) and to help my community' (I16). All these points were also summarized by an interviewee who underlined that:

I voted in PB, I talked to my friends (...) I always had a civic spirit, I like to get involved, to inform about the themes that are related to the development of the city, about what happens in my city. It seemed a good idea, this PB, and I consider it as important as going to vote. If I have to option to decide or to engage myself in a decision, then I consider that it is my duty to participate. (I15)

Reasons why ethnic Hungarians do not engage in PB

The interviewees' answers indicated two categories of reasons why they do not engage in PB in Cluj-Napoca: administrative (on the supply side) and personal (on the demand side). The administrative reasons refer to insufficient promotion of the PB and an inappropriate format. The personal reasons were less frequently cited, and related to a lack of time and interest in PB, other personal motivations, and a feeling of powerlessness. Therefore, with a sole exception (I4) who said that the PB regulation is to some extent discriminatory and this discourages ethnic minorities from participating, the other respondents did not link their lack of engagement with any discriminatory belief. The next paragraphs clarify these matters.

The insufficient promotion of this project by the local authorities was one of the major reasons given as to why people do not engage in PB (I2, I3, I5, I7, I8, I9, I12, I13, I17, I20). While two respondents said that PB was sufficiently promoted by the local authorities (I10) or underlined that 'it is false to believe that if we stick more PB posters to every block of flats or to every street corner, people will come up with ideas' (I6), many others had a different opinion. When they were asked about the reasons why they did not engage in PB, they said 'perhaps, because I did not know' (I2); 'honestly, I did not hear about PB, I was not invited and I did not know how it happens' (I8); 'I was not asked to attend, I did not know about this thing' (I9); 'sincerely, I did not see an advertising or promotion of this thing' (I12); 'I heard for the first time [about PB] when you [the interviewer] wrote me' (I13); and "sincerely, I did not know' (I20).

Following these remarks, the respondents mentioned that PB is an important initiative for the city, but that unfortunately, very few citizens know about it. One interviewee supported this statement by underlining that 'everybody should know that PB exists, I say that only 20% – 30% of the population know about this PB (...) [the local authorities] should let the people know about this PB, then I believe that it will be different if everybody knows about it' (I12). The respondents converged on the idea that the local authorities should be much more involved in promoting PB, not only due to the importance of this initiative but because by doing so, the number of participants would definitely increase (I20).

The unsuitable format of the PB was another reason mentioned by respondents to explain their lack of engagement. In this case, some

interviewees stated that the fact that PB is now exclusively online is unfavourable for citizens who do not have access to the Internet or for those less acquainted with digital tools – especially elderly people (I8, I17, I18, I19). Although two of the respondents said that the online format is suitable for this initiative because most activities and operations today are performed online to increase efficiency (I14) or mentioned that the format is not the real reason for the lack of engagement in PB (I6), most of the respondents adopted different standpoints. For instance, I1 outlined that ‘the senior people or pensioners do not have access [to PB] (...) The pensioners have also a word to say (...) Perhaps it should be a good idea to print [information about PB] in magazines and newspapers and to have some [physical] addresses that could be accessed by anyone who is interested’.

The usefulness of the offline component, as a supplement to the existing online platform, to augment the participation of older segments in the population was also explicitly outlined in the answers given by several other interviewees (I15, I17 and I19). The basis of their arguments were low Internet literacy and limited experience with online services among this specific segment. In addition to these arguments, the online format was criticized because it may not be as efficient for communication and decision-making as offline alternatives. One interviewee raised this point and argued that ‘you cannot talk to a person online as well as when you are face-to-face; some ideas may be lost, and the reaction is not so quick and honest. So, it would be better to be offline than online; the online environment has some advantages, but offline is better’ (I8).

The answers also outlined the role of personal characteristics as drivers for non-engagement with the PB. One of these reasons was having enough time: ‘unfortunately, I did not participate because I do not have the time. I consider that personal development is much more important now. But, of course, if an opportunity arose or if I had to, or put in situation of choice, with great pleasure’ (I7). A similar view was shared by I20, who explained that ‘not necessary because of the lack of information but because the lack of time to involve in PB. I let the others make good choices’. In essence, these answers indicate that PS is a low priority in their lives, hence not allocating more time to it, as was explicitly mentioned by I7 in the quote above. This low priority was reflected in the answers of other respondents that explicitly referred to a lack of interest in the PB process. Several respondents welcomed the PB initiative, and did not criticize it in any way, but stressed the importance of other priorities in their lives (I10, I12, I17, I18).

Other interviewees explained their absence as being due to reasons such as lack of knowledge about the projects, the main ideas, or administrative issues. For instance, I3 said ‘I do not know how complicated the procedure is, I mean how the project should be done (...) I would not have time to take

care of this, I make a project of 30 pages (...) I do not have the time and energy to make a project' and (I17) stressed that 'I was busy with some personal health issues, with the job and the child'. Another claimed that 'My ID card does not show residence in Cluj-Napoca and I did not involve [myself] in such projects in the community where I live [very close to the city of Cluj-Napoca]' (I13). The latter explanation reveals limited knowledge of how voting in PB takes place: anyone living or working in the city at the moment of the vote can engage because the platform uses the IP address of the device from which the vote is cast, but this was not understood by all interviewees.

Several respondents explained that they believed that the local authorities did not give too much importance to this initiative. For this reason, they preferred to avoid wasting their time and energy on something that would have no results. In this regard, I6 mentioned that:

Initially I was reluctant not because I disliked the idea, but simply because I observed that there is no responsiveness from the local administration. It does not consider [PB] a key element for the development of the local community. The local administration in Romania, in general, thinks like 'Now I am the local administration, I decide what it is good for the population and the people, civil society should stay in their place because we know better'.

Another reason why respondents did not engage in PB was a perceived low level of political efficacy. More precisely, several explicitly argued that they saw themselves as irrelevant in the decision-making process on political and social changes. Some believed that only politicians' voices are heard in deciding the future of the city. Accordingly, I12 stressed that their lack of interest in PB was fuelled by the fact that the investments 'are made according to what they want [the local administration] and not what the people want, and if they consider some things correct, although we need something else, they will invest in what they want (...) it is pointless to fight something that does not change'. Another interviewee used a similar argument and stated that 'only if I were a politician would I be considered; as an ordinary citizen, my opinion does not count (...) I do not believe anyone in the City Hall takes my opinion into account' (I11).

Discussion and conclusion

This article has aimed to explain the reasons why people belonging to ethnic minorities engage with, or stay away from, PB. We used the case of Cluj-Napoca and conducted semi-structured interviews with members of the largest ethnic minority in the city to understand the drivers of their behaviour. The findings of our inductive thematic analysis are summarized in [Figure 2](#). Most respondents perceived the PB process as inclusive and only isolated

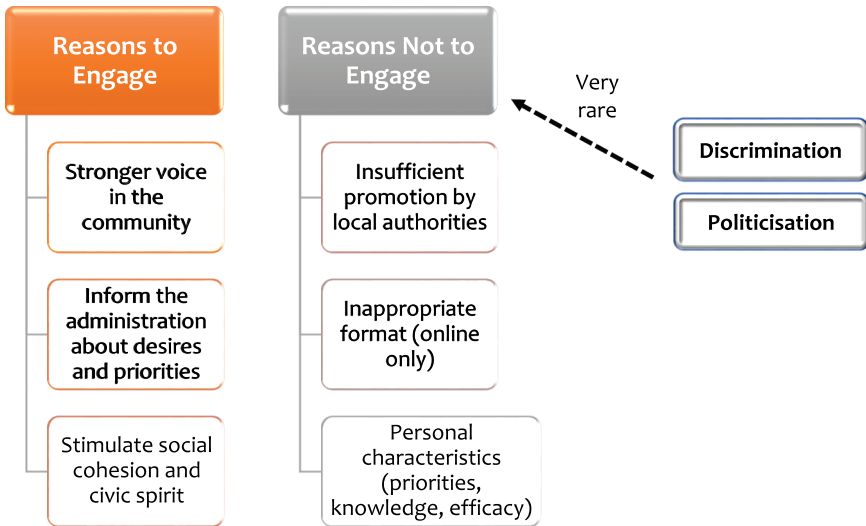


Figure 2. An Overview of determinants for engagement and non-engagement in PB.

concerns about discrimination were expressed. There was also a consensus that the budgeting works for the community, and it is not politicized. The ethnic Hungarians engage in PB because they feel it gives them the opportunity to decide how the city's budget is spent, they wish to communicate with the public administration about their priorities, and they believe that the process encourages social cohesion and civic spirit.

The main reasons behind low engagement in PB are the limited details provided about PB, its online-only format, and some personal characteristics such as giving it a low priority, limited knowledge, or lack of belief in its efficacy. The latter is in line with previous research about PB in Cluj-Napoca and its relatively limited empowerment potential also for majority groups (Gherghina, Tap, and Soare 2022). A feeling of exclusion on ethnic grounds does not appear to have played a role in staying away from the PB. These drivers for engagement and non-engagement are in line with previous findings regarding the involvement of citizens in deliberative practices, which show that ethnic minorities follow general trends.

These findings have two broader implications for the study of ethnic minorities and deliberative practices which reach beyond the case study analysed here. On the one hand, we show that the existing deliberative practices do not raise obstacles to the engagement of individuals belonging to ethnic minority groups. Often praised for their potential to improve the quality of democracy, such practices appear to provide an appropriate avenue for ethnic minorities to participate in the decision-making process without facing the exclusion that can be

associated with other means of participation. On the other hand, the analysis of ethnic minorities' engagement in PB confirmed the existence of the problems identified by previous research with respect to people's engagement in deliberative practices. This means that such participatory processes still have flaws, and that many people continue to perceive them as relatively weak decision-making mechanisms. As such, at least according to our respondents who belong to ethnic minority groups, they do not appear to be an efficient and effective empowerment tool.

Note

1. The city also has a Roma community of several thousand people, which is underrepresented, rarely engaged politically and deprived. We did not focus on this minority because it is likely that these three characteristics keep them away from this participatory process. In the case of the Hungarians, the answer remains unknown.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Sergiu Gherghina  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6627-5598>

Paul Tap  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6476-2563>

References

- Baiocchi, G., and E. Ganuza. 2014. "Participatory Budgeting as if Emancipation Mattered." *Politics & Society* 42 (1): 29–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329213512978>.
- Barnes, M., J. Newman, A. Knops, and H. Sullivan. 2003. "Constituting 'The Public' in Public Participation." *Public Administration* 81 (2): 379–399. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9299.00352>.
- Cinalli, M., and I. O'Flynn. 2014. "Public Deliberation, Network Analysis and the Political Integration of Muslims in Britain." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 16 (3): 428–451. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-856X.12003>.
- Clarke, V., and V. Braun. 2017. "Thematic Analysis." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12 (13): 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>.
- Collins, J. 2018. "Urban Representation Through Deliberation: A Theory and Test of Deliberative Democracy at the Local Level." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 40 (7): 952–973. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2018.1427507>.
- Cornwall, A., and V. Schatten Coelho. 2007. *Spaces for Change?: The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas*. London: Zed Books.

- Dias, N., S. Enríquez, and S. Júlio, eds. 2019. *Participatory Budgeting World Atlas*. Cascais: Municipality of Cascais.
- Fishkin, J. S. 2011. *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Font, J., and I. Blanco. 2007. "Procedural Legitimacy and Political Trust: The Case of Citizen Juries in Spain." *European Journal of Political Research* 46 (4): 557–589. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2007.00701.x>.
- Gherghina, S., and P. Tap. 2021. "Ecology Projects and Participatory Budgeting: Enhancing Citizens' Support." *Sustainability* 13 (19): 10561. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131910561>.
- Gherghina, S., P. Tap, and S. Soare. 2022. "Participatory Budgeting and the Perception of Collective Empowerment: Institutional Design and Limited Political Interference." *Acta Politica* 58 (3): 573–590. no. online first. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-022-00273-4>.
- Heath, A. F., S. D. Fisher, G. Rosenblatt, D. Sanders, and M. Sobolewska. 2013. *The Political Integration of Ethnic Minorities in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hibbing, J. R., and E. Theiss-Morse. 2002. *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs About How Government Should Work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holdo, M. 2020. "Contestation in Participatory Budgeting: Spaces, Boundaries, and Agency." *American Behavioral Scientist* 64 (9): 1348–1365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764220941226>.
- Jacquet, V. 2017. "Explaining Non-Participation in Deliberative Mini-Publics." *European Journal of Political Research* 56 (3): 640–659. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12195>.
- Lerner, J. 2011. "Building Community Agreement Around Tough Budget Decisions." *National Civic League* 100 (2): 30–35. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ncr.20059>.
- Marvin, L., M. E. Jennings, and S. Hughes. 2013. "Critical Race Pedagogy 2.0: Lessons from Derrick Bell." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 16 (4): 603–628. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2013.817776>.
- Mișcoiu, S., and S. Gherghina. 2021. "Poorly Designed Deliberation: Explaining the Banlieues' Non-Involvement in the Great Debate." *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 34 (5): 694–711. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2021.1978283>.
- Mutz, D. C. 2006. *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Neblo, M. A., O. State, and R. P. Kennedy. 2010. "Who Wants to Deliberate-And Why?" *American Political Science Review* 104 (3): 566–583. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055410000298>.
- Novy, A., and B. Leubolt. 2005. "Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre: Social Innovation and the Dialectical Relationship of State and Civil Society." *Urban Studies* 42 (11): 2023–2036. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980500279828>.
- O'Hagan, A., C. MacRae, C. Hill O'Connor, and P. Teedon. 2020. "Participatory Budgeting, Community Engagement and Impact on Public Services in Scotland." *Public Money and Management* 40 (6): 446–456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2019.1678250>.
- Pape, M., and C. Lim. 2019. "Beyond the 'Usual Suspects'? Reimagining Democracy with Participatory Budgeting in Chicago." *Sociological Forum* 34 (4): 861–882. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12550>.
- Parkinson, J., and J. Mansbridge, eds. 2012. *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Peck, J., and N. Theodore. 2015. *Fast Policy: Experimental Statecraft at the Thresholds of Neoliberalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Santos, B. D. S. 2005. *Democratizing Democracy: Beyond the Liberal Democratic Canon*. New York: Verso Books.
- Schneiderhan, R., S. Khan, and J. Elrick. 2014. "Deliberation and Ethnicity." *Sociological Forum* 29 (4): 791–807. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12120>.
- Shah, A., ed. 2007. *Participatory Budgeting*. Washington DC: World Bank.
- Sintomer, Y., C. Herzberg, and A. Röcke. 2008. "Participatory Budgeting in Europe: Potentials and Challenges." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32 (1): 164–178. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2008.00777.x>.
- Stoker, G. 2006. *Why Politics Matters*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Su, C. 2017. "Beyond Inclusion: Critical Race Theory and Participatory Budgeting." *New Political Science* 39 (1): 126–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2017.1278858>.
- Talpin, J. 2012. "When Democratic Innovations Let the People Decide. An Evaluation of Co-Governance Experiments." In *Evaluating Democratic Innovations: Curing the Democratic Malaise?*, edited by B. Geissel and K. Newton, 184–206. London: Routledge.
- Wampler, B. 2012. "Participatory Budgeting: Core Principles and Key Impact." *Journal of Public Deliberation* 8 (2): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.138>.
- Williams, D., and D. Waisanen. 2020. *Real Money, Real Power? The Challenges with Participatory Budgeting in New York City*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

- (1) How would you characterize the evolution of our city in the last 10 years?
 - (2) What do you consider that are the advantages that participatory budgeting offers for the development of our city?
 - (3) Could you, please, describe in which form did you participate in participatory budgeting (voting, online discussion, project proposal)?
 - (a) How many times did you participate until now?
 - (b) When did you participate the first time?
 - (c) On what kind of projects do you engage in discussions/voting?
 - (d) Is there any particular category of projects that you find appealing?
 - (4) What are the reasons for which you engage/do not engage in participatory budgeting?
 - (a) To what extent is our right to express ideas about how the public money should be spent?
 - (b) To what extent the result of participatory budgeting encourages/discourages you to participate?
 - (c) To what extent do you consider that this project brings utility to our city?
 - (5) How would you characterize the process of participatory budgeting in our city?
 - (a) What is your opinion regarding the possibility to discuss the projects?
 - (b) To what extent do you consider that this is only an attempt of the politicians to keep us busy?
 - (c) What is your opinion about its organization exclusively online?
 - (6) To what extent do you consider that the process of participatory budgeting allows citizens to have a real say about the spending of public money?
 - (a) What do you think about the existence of collective decision in this process?
 - (b) Do you consider that the allocated budget is suitable for this process?
 - (c) To what extent do you consider yourself involved in the decision-making as a member of an ethnic minority community?
-
- (1) In your opinion, does the political factor plays a role in the decision-making through participatory budgeting?
 - (2) In your view, what should be improved in the participatory budgeting of our city?

Note: The numbered questions were asked to all respondents, while the ones with letters were follow-up that were asked depending on the generality of previous answers or context.