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Policymakers' Perceptions of the Benefits of Citizen-Budgeting Activities

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Abstract
Citizen budgeting has become an increasingly common practice in municipalities across the United States. It offers an alternative to traditionally technocratic budgeting processes, and can connect and engage citizens in decisions about services and funding. Little research has been conducted on how local policymakers perceive citizen budgeting and outcomes. This study examined the benefits local policymakers identified following two successive years of a citizen-budgeting process in a mid-sized Midwestern city. Interviews with 23 local policymakers (a mayor, city council members, and city department heads) identified nine types of benefits produced by the citizen-budgeting process. The study demonstrates that identifying perceived benefits of citizen budgeting processes can shed light on the question of the extent to which such budgeting methods are citizen-driven, leader-driven, or a combination of both.

Keywords: citizen budgeting, local government, public input, public participation.

In recent years, policymakers have been intentionally using public input to guide decisions on budgeting. Traditionally, citizens have provided budgeting input through public hearings (Baker, Addams, & Davis, 2005; King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998; Lando, 2003; McComas, Besley, & Black, 2010; Wang, 2001), voter referenda (Ehrenberg, Ehrenberg, Smith,

& Zhang, 2004; Feld & Grossman, 1984; Rushton, 2005), and contacting or lobbying their representatives or participating in online polls (de Z..iga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010; Roberts, 2004). A number of local governments have taken more proactive approaches to involving citizens in budgeting, such as engaging nonprofit organizations or neighborhood associations in decision-making (Berner & Smith, 2004; Callahan, 2002; Heikkila & Isett, 2007), conducting telephone surveys to assess citizen preferences in budgeting and public services (Ferris, 1982; Swindell & Kelly, 2000; Watson, Juster, & Johnson, 1991), using online forums to engage citizens about service issues (Erickson, 2010; Simpson, 2010; Smith, 2009), and employing deliberative dialogue models or combinations of engagement approaches (Calia, Guajardo, & Metzgar, 2000; Ebdon & Franklin, 2006; Simonsen & Robbins, 2000; Weeks, 2000). All these input processes differ in terms of how they engage the public and the dynamics of interaction (Beierle & Cayford, 2002; Bingham, Nabatchi, & O'Leary, 2005; Ryfe, 2002), but they illustrate the reality that involving the public in local budgeting processes has become a normal and expected exercise in governance.

A critical question then arises: What are the benefits of involving the public in local budgeting and governing decisions? In particular, what is the perceived value of involving citizens in budgeting decisions from the perspective of policymakers? There are a number of theoretical and practical reasons to involve citizens in budgeting. Citizen creation of public policy is an exercise in direct democracy (Fung, 2006). Citizen participation can facilitate transparency, build social capital, and foster a culture of idea sharing and debate (Konisky & Beierle, 2001; Stivers, 1990). Public involvement can also provide citizens with the information to understand complicated policy issues and offer meaningful input to assist public officials (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Luskin, Fishkin, & Jowell, 2002; Sabatier, 1988). Providing opportunities for citizen input may generate confidence in public officials, an encouraging goal in an age of decreasing trust in government (Luskin & Fishkin, 2002; Parks, Jowell, & McPherson, 1998). Public input has challenges as well. Public engagement techniques can be time-consuming and expensive (Jackson, 1999; Manring, 1998). Depending on the type of method used, engagement activities can be unrepresentative, nontransparent, and have limited influence on policy (Rowe & Frewer, 2000; Sanders, 1997). If participatory events are convened poorly, they can decrease trust or damage relationships (Involve, 2005; Rossi, 1997).

The issue of identifying the value of public engagement is an ever-present but unresolved discussion in the public participation literature. One school of thought asserts the importance of grounding public participation in the principles of citizen-driven democracy. This view reflects the argument that in a proper democracy, the public should be the principal entity that decides policy. Within Anglo-American political thought, this principle is associated with the views of Thomas Jefferson (Dewey, 1927, 1939; Du Bois, 1903/1989; Tocqueville, 1835/1969), and others who have stressed the involvement of ordinary citizens in voting, discussion, and engagement. The other major stream of thought can be described as a leader-driven, republican, or technocratic view, and is often associated with James Madison's Federalist writings about the need for representative institutions to check direct democracy (Madison, 1787). This view tempers the role of the public in governance because of the purported dangers of majority tyranny, lack of citizen competence, and excessive self-interest. Both these tensions were recognized by John Stuart Mill. In his Considerations on Representative Government (1861/1991), Mill concluded that the superior form of institutional democracy was the Madisonian type, in which "skilled leaders" conduct the work of government for the benefit of a public that lacks the capacity to create good public policy.

Contemporary proposals for participatory democracy often contain strands of both these competing ideas. This may not be an expression of normative preference, but recognition that policy decision-making requires both public input and consideration of its technical complexity. For example, Beierle (1999) has identified five wide-ranging social goals to evaluate outcomes of participatory activities. They span democratic idealism (e.g., "incorporating public values into decision-making" and "improving the substantive quality of decision") and strategic objectives of governmental sponsors ("educating and informing the public" and "increasing trust in institutions"), with political pragmatism ("reducing conflict") (Beierle, 1999). His framework thus acknowledges competing objectives aligned with both the public and policy leaders.

Many proponents of deliberative democracy have taken an intentional approach toward constraining the influence of the policymaking elite in participatory initiatives (Fiorino, 1990). Indeed, much of the modern participatory movement asserts the objective of "reclaiming" policy decision-making from the technical or governmental elite. James Fishkin's Deliberative Poll model, for example, emphasizes the importance of carefully structured citizen discussion to its outcomes. Although the provision of expert input is included in the deliberative poll as an educational component, the model rests on vigorous citizen discussion, debate, and exchange (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2004; Fishkin, 1997). Participatory mechanisms like the Deliberative Poll arguably give "the public" what it deserves: more voice, more involvement, and the ability to influence policy more directly. Conceptually, the problem of excessive elite involvement goes back to the Jeffersonian versus Madisonian tension: Shouldn't good participatory democracy be primarily driven by the public and not by policy elites? Participatory practitioners warn of the danger that policymakers may subvert participatory mechanisms. A primary concern is that government sponsors utilize the appearance of participatory democracy to manage public impressions for political gain (Arnstein, 1969). On the contrary, is it unrealistic to expect ordinary citizens to drive policy formation? Doesn't the complicated work of government require a strong role for technical professionals in making policy?

Citizen participation in local budgeting provides clear opportunities to examine these tensions. On one hand, public participation in budgeting has become a widespread and normal practice. Citizens should, as a matter of democratic principle, have significant involvement in local budgeting and service decisions that directly affect day-to-day life. However, even at its most local, the work of government can be complex and difficult to access. Effective administration of local services often relies on data-driven management, compliance with multiple regulations, and in-depth substantive knowledge (Nabatchi, 2010). The professionalized nature of public administration can thus prioritize technocratic expertise to achieve efficient outcomes (Ammons & Rivenbark, 2008; Hatry, 1978; Kim & Schachter, 2013; O'Toole & Stipek, 2002) and supplant values based on community input (Nabatchi, 2010). Further, government officials may have reservations about the ability of ordinary citizens to make decisions with minimal knowledge of substantive or regulatory issues (Heikkila & Isett, 2007), and believe citizens lack the time or level of trust to provide meaningful input (Yang & Callahan, 2007).

Public administration scholars have done considerable work examining the extent to which local governments convene public input activities for budgeting, and if they do, what types of input activities they favor. Poister and Streib's International City/County Management Association (ICMA) survey of administrators in cities larger than 25,000 found that about 38% of respondents reported using performance measurements in program budgeting and management, but only 17%of the respondents involved citizens in

their reviews, and less than 3% involved citizens in developing them (Poister and Streib, 1999). Berner (2001) conducted a study on the use of public input in local budgeting among city/county managers in North Carolina. The study found that 52% of responding cities and 29% of responding counties actively used public input in budgeting beyond required public hearings. The study did not report how managers used the input, but did note that they differentiated between input activities designed to educate the public and those that impacted decision making. Wang's (2001) survey of U.S. cities over 50,000 found that they employed a wide variety of public participation mechanisms, but with less direct involvement in program decision-making. Less than one third of responding municipalities involved citizens in high-level program policy development, and only 7% involved citizens in agency budgeting. However, there was much greater public involvement in service-level functioning decisions, such as zoning/development, parks and recreation, and public safety issues (ranging from 30% to 95% depending on the service area). Additionally, they found that citizen involvement was strongly correlated with perceptions by city managers that it positively impacted their ability to meet public needs, and build consensus (Wang, 2001).

In theory, citizen budgeting benefits municipalities by increasing organizational decision-making ability, especially if efforts are intentional and long-term (Kim & Schachter, 2013). Few studies, however, have examined what benefits policymakers perceive in citizen-budgeting processes. As the field of public administration has embraced principles of public participation, it may be presumed that local government managers bring corresponding values to practice (Zhang & Yang, 2009). Yang and Callahan's (2007) national survey of ICMA administrators found that managers' support for citizen input was a strong predictor of their utilization of citizen involvement, but managers' intentions may be balanced by other factors. Zhang and Liao's survey of administrators in New Jersey found that the municipalities more likely to use participatory budgeting had racially diverse city councils, and manager and mayoral support for citizen engagement (Zhang and Liao, 2011; see also Liao & Zhang, 2012). Qualitative examinations have shed light on the question of administrators' values. Nalbandian employed open-ended survey questions and panel discussions to explore city administrator attitudes toward contemporary management approaches (Nalbandian, 1999). Discussions with 26 managers across the country reflected a consensus that administrators are increasingly grounding their work in community-building and participatory orientations. Ebdon (2002) conducted interviews with 28 city finance managers in four Midwestern states that revealed nuanced and varied approaches to citizen involvement. She found that preferences for types of public input varied widely among managers, and that the local context was important to its influence. Still, despite the perceived costs of public input, the majority of respondents (77%) felt that public input ultimately influenced budget decision-making. However, there was a caveat in that respondents also believed that public input was primarily valuable as an educational tool or because of its political uses. Berner, Amos, and Morse (2011) conducted 40 interviews about the effectiveness of citizen participation in budgeting with officials and citizens in North Carolina municipalities, and identified common themes and areas of difference. Elected officials equated effective participation with reelection and lack of public complaints, whereas municipal staff valued citizen support for programs, and citizens valued more two-way communication and earlier engagement. Their work reflects the conclusion that different stakeholders approach citizen participation with fundamentally different values. On the other hand, some studies suggest that government actors are not favorable toward public input other than what is required by law (Berner & Smith, 2004;

Orosz, 2002). This explanation would comport with assertions that policymakers are more inclined to reserve decision making powers for themselves (Bishop & Davis, 2002; Gregory, Fischhoff, & McDaniels, 2005).

There is also a need to better connect what is known about perceptions of public input in budgeting with the larger environment of local government policymaking processes. It is generally considered a truism that "rational" public policy-making models emphasize the importance of weighing pros, cons, and associated trade-offs to determine optimal policy (Fischer, 2003; Hill & Hupe, 2002; Kingdon & Thurber, 1984). But the actual policy process is influenced by a political world of competing values and interests, bargaining, and public relations that muddy rational policy-making (Caplan, 2011; Slovic, 1999). Few studies have attempted to examine how these more ambiguous realities factor into public engagement initiatives at the local decision-making level, and have instead tended to focus on comparative macro-level analyses (Ebdon, 2000; Franklin, Ho, & Ebdon, 2009; Marlowe & Portillo, 2006). Notable exceptions include Franklin and colleagues' examination of the use and perceived value of different methods for public input in budgeting by administrators in Midwestern communities (2009), and Ebdon's analysis of citizen budgeting and city structure and political culture (2000). There is still a dearth of research, however, regarding how local policymakers view and process citizen-budgeting input, and for what reasons.

We conducted interviews with 23 city administrators and elected officials, including the mayor, of a Midwestern metropolitan city after two years of public input initiatives for city budgeting and services. We approached these interviews with multiple objectives in mind. We were primarily interested in identifying what benefits, either stated or latent, policymakers perceived in local citizen budgeting. This question is important for determining what drives policymakers to sponsor such activities. It also sheds light on the question of the extent to which citizen-budgeting projects reflect the needs of leaders, in addition to benefiting citizens. Additionally, because we also know that some proposed policy decisions were implemented following these input activities, and others were not, it provides context for understanding how influential this citizen input was, and how policymakers' perceptions mediated its value.

Context for the Research

The focus of our study was on a Midwestern metropolitan area with a population of roughly 250,000. The city has a strong mayor and city council government, in which the popularly elected mayor serves as chief executive officer and administrator of the city's government and services. The mayor proposes a city service budget and works with a seven-member council that reviews and ultimately passes the budget. The mayor may sign or veto the council's legislation. The citizen-budgeting activities were initiated in 2007, and introduced by the newly elected mayor and his chief of staff at the time. The mayor's office contracted with the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center to assist with administering the budgeting activities as a neutral third party. At that point, the city's $130 million budget was facing a large deficit of $8 million. The deficit was caused by a combination of problems. The national recession and housing crisis contributed to both a flat sales tax revenue and decreased property valuation, depriving the city of important sources of revenue. Civil servant salaries were dictated by a state law that mandated comparability with peer states, leading to increased public sector wages for employees that the city could not control. Additionally, even though the city's population, size, and demand for services had

been growing consistently, the property tax levy had not been raised in 14 years. The city had instead relied on temporary stopgap measures over the years to meet its service needs, such as drawing from the capital improvements budget. There was thus a pressing need to either raise revenue, cut city services, or both. As the head of city services, the mayor decided to implement a 2-year citizen engagement initiative about the city's proposed budgets. The purpose was to seek input from residents about various city budgeting and service issues. Specifically, the first year's focus was on establishing broad outcome priorities for the community. The focus of the second year was on identifying specific program budgets that aligned with the broader outcome priorities. The engagement mechanisms used each year differed in accordance with these objectives. The project researchers were present and observed the citizen-input activities during both years.

Year 1

Year 1 activities focused on citizens ranking broad city services and budget outcomes in order of importance. All activities took place after the various city departments had drafted their budgets, but prior to the submission of the final budget to the city council. This timing was designed to allow changes in the final submitted budget to be made in response to public input. A random-digit dialing-based, scientific telephone survey and deliberative discussion event based around the Deliberative Poll model was used to engage citizens. The process began with the phone survey, which was a recruitment mechanism for the deliberative event. A mixed-design sampling approach was used for the phone survey to obtain a representative sample of city residents. The total sample was composed of a random-digit dialing subsample (n .3,386, 62.5%), a randomdigit dialing oversample of neighborhoods with above-average minority populations (n .1,831, 33.8%), and a directory-listed oversample of Hispanic and Asian residents of the city (n .201, 3.7%). A total of 5,418 phone numbers were contacted during March 2008. Among the contacted sample, 54% were female and 9% were racial or ethnic minorities. In comparison, the city's population at the time was 50% female, 8.5% were non-White racial minorities, and 6.3% were of Hispanic ethnicity (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of specific city service sectors (e.g., fire and ambulance services, libraries, health department), and rank-order them in priority of importance. They were also asked to rate the importance of and rank-order budget sectors (e.g., safety and security, livable neighborhoods, environmental quality). Additionally, participants identified their preferences for funding and allocating tax revenue to these services and budget sectors.

A total of 605 individuals provided answers to the scientific telephone survey. At the end of the survey, all respondents were invited to attend a day-long deliberative event about the same issues based around the Deliberative Poll model. This model is based around facilitated discussions and interactions with expert informants to encourage informed discussion of public policy issues (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2004; Luskin & Fishkin, 2002). Of the 605 telephone respondents, 102 individuals agreed to attend the deliberative event in April 2008, and 51 (50%) actually attended. Among the attendees, 35% were female and 8% were racial or ethnic minorities. At the deliberative event, participants took a pre- and post-event survey about city services and budget sectors to gauge changes of opinion. Individuals were randomly assigned to six small discussion groups with a facilitator, and asked to deliberate about their priorities for services and budgeting sectors. Prior to the post-event survey, citizens had an opportunity to ask questions about city services and budgeting to a panel composed of the mayor and city department heads. In addition to the telephone survey and deliberative discussion, a nonscientific online poll was also

hosted by the city, as well as a series of open town hall sessions in order to increase the scope of engagement among the public. A traditional series of city council hearings on the final budget was also administered that was open to the public, but comparable surveys were not utilized at these events. A significant publicity campaign was also initiated to generate interest and participation in the effort.

Year 2

Year 2 activities focused on obtaining citizen input about specific service and funding questions facing the city. Feedback was obtained by using a nonscientific online survey, as well as paper versions distributed at library branches. Citizens were provided with information about select services and their costs, and asked whether to increase or decrease funding for them (e.g., Should property taxes be raised 16 cents a month to preserve police outreach programs in schools?). A total of 1,812 individuals completed the survey between April and May 2009, which was again promoted through local media outlets. At the end of the survey, all participants were invited to attend a day-long deliberative discussion about the same issues. A total of 180 individuals accepted the invitation, and 111 attended the event in May. Participants were randomly assigned to 16 facilitated small-group discussion sessions, and asked to focus on six specific city service budgeting issues. As in the previous year, citizens had an opportunity to ask questions of the mayor and city service heads during a panel discussion, and pre- and post-discussion surveys were administered to measure changes in opinion. These engagement activities were also convened following the city departments' draft structuring of their budgets, but before a final city budget was constructed and provided to the city council for review and formal hearings.

Methods

At the conclusion of each year's passage of the city budget, we interviewed the city department heads, including the chief of staff, the head finance officer, the mayor, and city council members. The purpose of the interviews was to gauge overall perceptions of the citizen-budgeting activities, and whether or how citizen input was used to change city services and construct the final budget. Because the scope of interest of our study spanned the individual department budgeting processes to the vote on a final budget by city council members, we intentionally included individual department heads along with elected council members in our interview pool as policymakers. We invited the entire city council and all the department heads to participate in our interviews. Interviews were conducted by phone or in person, audio-recorded, and transcribed. A total of 14 interviews were conducted after the Year 1 activities, and 9 interviews after the Year 2 activities. Each interview was conducted with a single individual, but all of them followed the same list of open-ended questions about perceptions of the process and its outcomes. Questions did not differ between department heads, city council members, or the mayor. All interviews were confidential and conducted under the auspices of an institutional review board at a major state university.

The interviews were conducted by two of the authors, audio-recorded, and transcribed for analysis. Interview content was then reviewed and analyzed for themes using a grounded-theory, constant comparative approach (Glaser, 1965; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A qualitative analysis application (ATLAS.ti) was used by the authors to review transcripts and identify common themes across interviewees. Transcription content was reviewed and coded using the qualitative analysis application. The authors reviewed transcripts

independently and then discussed themes that arose from the interviews as results. After successive rounds of review by the authors and agreement on identified themes, illustrative quotations were identified and subsequently reviewed again for consistency with our results framework.

Results

Decision-Making Context

To establish a general context for how budgeting decisions were made, we asked interviewees for insight into the internal decision-making process behind each year's budget. Interviewees noted that the budget-making situation, prior to the initiation of the Year 1 engagement activities, had largely been an exercise in incremental budgeting. This largely reflected a bureaucratic, data-driven approach. At the same time, policymakers also talked about ways in which they typically gathered input from the public about particular services. Thus, it appeared that the budgeting process was very organic and contextual in nature, and outcomes varied for individual programs:

> In a perfect world, there is the ability to raise revenue and cut costs. [The city] has really restricted that over the past 10 years, and said that to raise revenue is really not part of our formula, unless we have a great year and we're able to raise money through the sales tax. So, that puts everything in the mode that it becomes not about what are we going to do, but what services are we going to cut. You're working backwards to get to a number, unfortunately, and I don't know if that's the best way to do it.

From a bureaucratic standpoint, several interviewees indicated that they normally considered multiple factors and sources of input when making decisions about the city budget. Regulatory requirements tend to drive a significant number of administrative choices, and many of the technical aspects are unknown to the general public. Additionally, interviewees recognized that making budgetary changes required having support from community leaders. Priming community support was an important preface to making significant changes to the budget:

> It's a question that has varying answers at different levels. There are certain things that we're obligated to do from a state fire standpoint. There are certain things we're obligated to do by national standards, some of them are regulations, some of them are requirements.

> Keep in mind here there is [sic] probably 500 people that comprise the opinion leader class in the city. What they're thinking and saying about you is influencing everything else. Because they all belong to Kiwanis, they all belong to the churches, they belong to all the other constituent groups that have some sort of interaction with you. Whether it's day-to-day or once a year … I think that opinion-deader crowd was really in a tough spot, in that they could see what had happened in the last decade, where we weren't really making any progress, weren't really cutting anything, weren't really doing anything about the revenues, and keep in mind the opinion leader class, more than any others, depend on some sort of resolution here.

City council members, who retain final authority to review and pass the city service budgets, made clear that they regularly engaged the public about services, taxes, and other policy issues. Their approaches to budget review reflected an organic interaction of public interests with their own personal and policy preferences:

> I give speeches at a number of civic clubs through the course of the year and I'm always trying to shorten my remarks and then engage the audiences in a question/answer period so that I can understand more what's on their mind. And, of course, on a daily basis, I utilize e-mail extensively and, as you can appreciate in this day and age of e-mail, there's a voluminous amount that comes in from people. We get correspondence through our city council office, we get our public hearings; just even walking down the street or in the grocery store, I'm stopped and somebody has concerns. And so I try in my humble way to assimilate and understand a current topic on someone's mind, versus something that's more important to the intermediate or long-term needs of the city.

Thus, the interviews indicated few or no uniform procedures for approaching and processing public input for policy decision-making. Rather, it was a very context-dependent and organic process which varied by department, topical area, or individual policymaker.

Impact of Citizen Engagement in Budgeting

The budgeting process began with the various departments drafting their separate budgets. Departmental budgets were then combined and provided to the mayor, who consolidated and combined them into a single city budget for submission to the city council. Several city service heads noted that the public input offered in 2008 had an effect on how they had drafted their departmental budgets:

> I think it made everybody concentrate and focus on what the people wanted, and some of the cuts that were made were made based on the comments from the people … about what was high priority and what was low priority … . I think everybody tried to combine projects, and staffing things that could have been changed. Everybody went back and put the pencil to what could or could not be done in their departments. And I think it focused all the department heads on the budget process and on what the people actually wanted.

Several city heads noted that the 2008 public-input activities were only the beginning of a more strategic engagement initiative. They viewed it as the initiation of an entirely new approach toward using public input to address strategic objectives that city leaders had regarding budget and city service issues:

> I think it situated everybody's awareness of the budget problems that we have in the community. This did not, by any means, solve any problems. We just got through this year with this process and the cuts that we made. The problem is still there, we do not have enough money to run the city each year. We're going to have this deficit and we've been cutting jobs the last couple of years. But it did raise an awareness of the problems that are out there and we'll be going through this same process again next year.

There were also some very specific changes that occurred as a result of the citizens' budget preferences from the 2008 activities—specifically, a desire to outsource certain public services to private or nonprofit entities:

> One of the things that we heard was that the city should look at developing new partnerships. That the community said that perhaps human service agencies, as opposed to the city, should be providing some of the youth services. And so we went through a process this summer to transition before- and after-school programs to some of the human service providers in the community.

Because of the budget deficit the city was experiencing, the citizen preferences also impacted thinking on what program cuts could be made by city department heads. As examples, services that either had high levels of satisfaction or were ranked relatively low in terms of priorities could experience funding decreases to balance the budget:

> For instance, the decision not to add additional police officers at this time was based upon the fact that people felt comfortable with the existing workforce … and that's always a significant issue as far as preparing the budget. So I thought that it did have a fairly significant impact on the initial formulation of the budget.

> We recently were offered park land and we've essentially had to say … the community thinks that we need to be real careful in accepting land because of the ongoing resources that it takes to maintain that. And so it has affected our thinking in a variety of ways.

This rationale was also used in 2009, when citizen input was focused on specific service questions that the city was examining:

> Let me take the example of snow plowing. I think that city government and public works felt that there were some issues where there clearly was consensus. One of the issues where people were not suggesting that we spend was snow plowing. They were satisfied with the level of effort on plowing residential streets that we were providing now. I think that was the kind of input that was helpful to at least reinforce the policies that had been established.

> We've been steadily cutting the parks maintenance budget over the years. But then the citizen satisfaction survey showed a wildly high percentage of satisfaction without really maintaining the parks. Well, there's only one conclusion to draw from that—we've got room. In other words, we could probably afford to cut back there. As much as we hated doing it … . We were much more in control of the front end of the budgeting process than we ever have been before.

Additionally, at least some of the engagement activities had an impact on city council members who were in a position to review the formally proposed budget. Council members interpreted or relied on the citizen input in different ways:

> I don't know how much difference it made for the mayor. Speaking for myself personally, the telephone survey had a huge effect on how I approached the budget process.

At the same time, city policymakers also believed that the citizen input indicated public support for measures to increase revenue, something the city had not done in several years:

> There would not have been a tax increase last year had we not been doing this. Letting them know where the city was at in term of its finances and the decisions we were having to make, really laid it on the line. And what we heard back was, "Look, some of these two or three things you've asked us about going away, we are incredibly uncomfortable with." And that gave us the confidence to go ahead and say, "OK, if that's the case, then you're paying more on your cell phone bill next year." And we did that. That did not happen without this process.

Perceived Benefits of Citizen Input on Budgeting

City administrators perceived a number of different benefits from the citizen budgeting activities. We define benefits in this context broadly, as any significantly valuable or helpful result or effect of the citizen-budgeting activities. We identified nine such benefits from the interviews: impacting internal culture change and morale, direct engagement with the public, building trust in government, validating policy perceptions, educating the community about the budget and services, furthering political objectives, furthering long-term policy goals, preference for scientific methods, and mitigating risks. Discussions of individual themes are presented below, in no particular order, but taken together they comprise an integrated explanation of perceptions among the policymakers we interviewed.

Impacting Internal Culture Change and Morale

Interviewees believed that the citizen-budgeting activities had a valuable internal impact on city service department heads and workers. The engagement activities exposed technical experts and bureaucrats to the views of the general public, and helped them understand how services were perceived by citizens. This was a new perspective that many city service heads and workers may not have previously heard:

> If you look at my public works department, for example, certainly they're driven by sets of rules that come down from the federal government and state government, even our government. But being engineers by nature, they like to follow those rules very carefully. They're driven by the goals of those rules, which are maximizing safety, and are cautionary in terms of being sure they have enough material and resources to do the job well. They're driven by other factors relating to saving citizen time and getting from place to place, for example if you're talking about roads. But generally speaking, they are not involved in the process of thinking broader in the sense of how much does all of this cost? … I think connecting them to the public through these kinds of surveys and focus groups has broadened tremendously their view of what their job is, or at least softened them to the idea that their ideals are not the only yardsticks in this game.

> It pretty clearly, also, had an impact on the directors, who really were very isolated from the public portion of their discussions. Now, they really didn't ever have to face an election, they didn't ever have to face the consequences of their actions from a broader perspective, i.e., they always got the 25 people who came down during a public hearing on the budget, complaining about a particular piece they were cutting, but I don't think they ever had that wider view of the public.

Public interaction during the budgeting activities also increased the morale of city department heads and frontline employees. Interviewees thought this interaction had important internal effects for city service staff:

> I think it's been extremely helpful to our own internal people … . I think it is, obviously, a two-way street. Internally, our own people are understanding better what the public wants and how the public feels. Some of these citizen satisfaction things have been good for their morale because some of them were so positive … reinforcing the work that they're doing.

> I think it was really very positive for our staff and our directors. I think in government, the isolation I spoke of earlier sometimes becomes an us versus them kind of situation. "They don't understand us," "They don't understand the challenges," that whole bit. There was validation of some of the things we're doing. It made them a little more confident in the decisions they were making … . There were real living and breathing people out there that appreciated the services that are being provided to them.

> The guys who are filling the potholes kind of like to have a standard. They love it. And they want to know what the public thinks about that standard. That's kind of their thing. To give you the most basic example, they were really interested in telling people their story. You could see them really start to take ownership of that process.

Direct Engagement with the Public

A number of interviewees clearly valued opportunities to interact with members of the public in new venues and formats. Previous engagement activities were restricted to "business as usual" forms of interaction, such as the annual city council budget hearings or citizen advisory committee hearings, letters to the editor in the daily newspaper, or interactions with special-interest groups. Very few of the department heads, in particular, had engaged with members of the public directly in discussions about city services. Some department heads had little direct experience of interacting with the public in any way. The citizen budgeting activities offered an entirely new platform for engagement with members of the public who did not typically participate in the more traditional forums. Nor had many department heads ever before been asked in-depth questions in structured, small-group deliberative formats. Many interviewees noted that this input from "ordinary" members of the public resonated with them differently than input from organized interest groups, which is what they were used to:

> I was at all the public forums, and I listened to people who had questions. I went up to talk to them, and they sure understood their issues and were actually able to clarify a lot of those issues. I listened to them very closely, and their input factored into how we constructed our budget.

> I've been with the city a long time, and never gone to that in-depth of an explanation of budget and services, and asking what the citizens want. So you know, this

> is about the first time in 40 years that I've seen this thing, that much information, being shared and given out to the citizens. So from that standpoint, I thought it was worth the time and worthwhile for the city and the community.

One department head noted that he found value in understanding how the public perceived other department services, not just his own:

> My overall perspective of it was certainly very positive. It gave us an opportunity to speak to and listen to individuals in the community that have a very active interest in services … how they value certain services, and whether or not they're satisfied. We had an opportunity to listen to an unfiltered, significant drawing from the population from varying backgrounds. In fact, it was very enlightening for me, because as a fire chief, I don't always have the opportunity to hear people's perspectives—I always hear it about the fire service, but I don't have so much perspective always about people's feedback about the entire city and other departments, so I thought it was very advantageous for me.

One city council member remarked how he believed the scientific phone survey provided valuable input because it was different from the usual perspectives heard from organized interest groups:

> It certainly gave me an excellent idea of what the citizens did not want to spend tax money on. The survey was very, very clear about that. And those kinds of groups of people supporting those kinds of causes are very noisy and very loud, and they made themselves apparent at the budget process. But the survey really gave me backbone, because I knew … we were just dealing with a small group that's very noisy.

Building Public Trust in Government

City leaders were clearly motivated by a desire to increase public trust in city services and in government generally. Interviewees acknowledged that increasing trust was good for public relations:

> There's a feeling that the city council and city government in general just does [sic] what they want with little or no regard to what the public thinks. The mayor, and certainly the majority of the city council, doesn't agree with that, does think we try to listen, although sometimes it's extremely difficult to get everybody's wants and needs met.

There was a common belief among interviewees that conducting activities to increase trust in government would lead to more frequent and better-quality citizen involvement in budgeting. Interviewees also believed that the citizen budgeting project was one of the most significant confidence-building activities the city had sponsored in recent years, and should be done on a recurring basis to increase trust in government:

> There is a mistrust of government, and I'm hoping that the more we do this open process, maybe some of those trust issues will go away … . When we get people the correct information, we tell the truth and build some trust, then we can in-

> crease their knowledge of us, the specific things we do. They actually make great decisions.
>
> It gave the public the message that we're thinking for them, we gain credibility with them far beyond the actual subject matter tested or run by them. It's helped us in terms of the confidence level people have in government … . Doing a process like this—I intend to do it constantly, make it a regular part of the process.

Validating Policy Perceptions

A major theme was the value of citizen input in affirming beliefs that department heads and city council members already had in regard to programs and budgeting. Policymakers felt that the citizen-engagement activities were opportunities to confirm, question, or change their policy preferences. This public validation had the internal impact of increasing policymakers' confidence that they were properly stewarding city services, and the external impact of serving as an accountability mechanism for city leaders:

> Obviously, we had a general idea. I think it reaffirms some of those, and other areas that people felt were more important than others. It just solidified our views on where we should focus our resources.
>
> I kind of know what the hot-button items on the public's list are. Firefighters and police officers are unfunded, I put them at the top of the list because I think I've got a feeling that I know what the realities are, and we aren't going to be laying off cops and firefighters. So it was a factor, certainly in some of the parks and rec programs and the transportation things. We took it into account.

Several city council members indicated that they were pleasantly surprised that the results from the scientific phone survey seemed to validate perceptions they personally had about budgeting priorities:

> I was a little bit skeptical on this process early on. Based on my experience, I felt I had a pretty good handle on the community's prioritization. When the results were brought forth to us, most of the results were a confirmation of what I had realized or had ascertained about the citizens' priorities … . Another advantage was that it gave a third-party report to which we could look as elected officials and policymakers, and say, "Look, this is what was obtained third-party-wise." It wasn't just who spoke the loudest, which wheel squeaked the most.
>
> It validates what you're hearing. You drew in a completely diverse group of residents that typically aren't the ones who are writing in to the newspaper, who aren't contacting their council members or the mayor's office, and you drew from an extremely diverse crowd—rightfully so … . And what this did was validate what the general public was thinking as well. To confirm what we'd heard from the years prior to that, I think was very valuable to me at least.

Educating the Community About Budget and Services

Interviewees indicated that a major factor motivating the citizen-budgeting activities was the opportunity to educate the citizenry about the city's budget. This included educating

residents about the city's limited revenue sources and the effect of this on the budget deficit, or details about individual programs and their objectives. Interviewees consistently noted that they believed the average citizen did not understand these budget or program dynamics, and thus that informing the public was, in itself, a beneficial outcome of the citizen-budgeting process:

> It's difficult for citizens to make good decisions unless they understand what they're deciding on, and what services they're talking about. I think that would be the one area that I think people need a little more education in, the services …. People are apathetic and there's a lot of things going on in the world and people's lives. And yep, they like city government to provide services, but I don't think they understand, nor do they take the time to realize when you make big budget cuts you're going to have some consequences, that you're not going to have those services there.

> [It was a] concerted effort to try and get people educated. I think we still need to try and focus more on that, and I wish I had better answers. We talk at directors meetings, and during the budget process every year, about "How can we get them to understand?" And I guess just repetition … is maybe the best thing, just to keep hammering it into their heads that we're not making this stuff up, this is what it is.

City department heads specifically noted that the discussion sessions were good opportunities to provide information to citizens about particular programs:

> Air quality—we got a chance to explain that, but they didn't understand the childhood injury thing at all, and they thought we were just trying to tug on some of their heartstrings and say, "We've got to stop these poor children from getting head injuries." But we had the opportunity to explain, "Now here's what the program actually does, here's data that shows how well it works, because we've seen a huge decrease in injuries in these specific areas that we've applied the programming."

> Just speaking from the perspective of our own department, we always thought that what we did was very important, but we were unsure whether the community understood how important it was. We got feedback from them regarding programs that they didn't quite understand, and then we were allowed to really explain that in different forms, different mechanisms, so that we can make people see that this specific program might not benefit me personally, but it obviously benefits quite a few people in the community. So from that perspective, it was extremely valuable.

Furthering Political Objectives

A number of interviewees indicated that the citizen-budgeting activities had political objectives. For example, one significant objective was intentionally to reach out to members of the public who were not typically represented by organized interest groups that lobby the city council during the budgeting cycle:

> One reason was the feeling, among probably the mayor and some other city staff members, that the squeaky wheel is the one that gets oiled, and that we needed

> to at least supplement the process of public hearings and lobbying that goes on to make budget decisions with something that is more rational.

There was also a perception that the deliberative activities, in particular, were opportunities for the city to argue for the value of certain programs or budgetary choices:

> They had certain issues they wanted to promote. I think they wanted to use this opportunity to promote the things they were interested in promoting. I think it was twofold, I think that they wanted to know where the public was, and then I think they wanted to take that information and try and use it in the best way possible to promote what they wanted.

> Essentially, the city directors had six hours to make their case on why their budget shouldn't be cut … . To me, if you really, really wanted to be objective about it, you wouldn't have one single department head there. You would have some totally neutral moderator person or people presenting information and presenting both sides. That would be the only way to do it in a neutral sort of fashion, but I don't think the goal of this survey necessarily was to be neutral.

At the same time, the citizen-budgeting activities may also have provided the political ability to make program cuts in certain areas. Lack of public support for particular services helped support decisions to make reductions:

It probably made it easier for the mayor to propose budget reductions in transit service. I was kind of surprised to see that in his initial budget, and then those were sustained eventually. But I think because they were rated as a low priority, even though I think we understand that not every service hits every citizen equally, it did give the mayor some more maneuvering room to make that proposal.

Another manifestation of this theme was the perception that the lack of citizen support for one or another program helped dissuade department heads from using a traditional, incremental approach to program budgeting:

> It really gave directors permission for the elimination of programs, is the simple way to describe it. The prioritization process taught them to think a little bit more about how the average citizen views that service programmatically …. When we actually went through the prioritization and got public feedback, the director thought he had to do this because we were getting federal money, and we weren't putting a lot of city money in it. But what he came to realize is that he basically got permission to not do it, that the public told him no.

Several different interviewees asserted that the budgeting activities facilitated political objectives. Although the stated examples were highly situational, they all lent support to the notion that the citizen-budgeting initiatives had some degree of perceived political value.

Furthering Long-Term Policy Goals

City administrators believed that citizen-budgeting activities had significant value if done on a consistent and long-term basis to create strategic policy opportunities. As noted by

one administrator, prolonged citizen budgeting would ideally lead to improved long-term planning by the community's leadership:

> This is something I think we could monitor over time. One of the things that's happened with the budget process over the last probably seven or eight years is that the council has gotten more and more into the line-item detail of things, and less focused on big-picture policy direction of the city. I think this is a good tool to get the council back in their appropriate role of policy-setting.

Interviewees also expressed a hope that consistent involvement by citizens in budgeting activities would lead to greater public awareness of the city's fiscal challenges, more civic involvement, and potentially greater support for revenue increases over the long term:

> I don't think it's something that's going to happen overnight. I don't think it's going to happen in a year or two, but I think if we put our hands on the plow and start working to really get out there and educate people, when we do these surveys, people will be enlightened about how city services work. I don't think that's something to be scared of, because it's important for them to know what they're getting.

> We believe there is an important nexus between some sort of public consensus and our ability to put out a budget that may rely on either revenue enhancements or some pretty fantastic cuts … . We mostly muddled along, spending down on reserves, using one-time solutions for ongoing problems—the city took a walk for about eight years here. So, more than anything, I think the process has been important in letting people know you can't operate like this. So, from that perspective, it really has changed the cultural discussion of the city.

Preference for Scientific Methods

A number of interviewees commented on the engagement methods used in the citizen-budgeting initiatives. All the interviewees who talked about the methods stated correctly that the random-sample phone survey was the most scientifically accurate method for a representative sample of the city's population, and therefore the most reliable source of information for policymaking. It was thus an important tool for accurately measuring public preferences for budgeting. This also meant that there were public relations advantages to citing the scientific survey to support budgeting decisions. In contrast, the forums which were more vulnerable to sample bias, such as the open town-hall sessions and online survey, were perceived as being less valid, and thus potentially harmful from a political standpoint:

> I was disappointed that the city decided to conduct the online survey. I thought that it would be attacked as not being credible, especially for it to occur in the heat of a budget season where special-interest groups were kind of rabid about their special interests … . I think when you do a survey, it's got to be done under very strict provisions in terms of being a sample, and it got a lot of criticism. My concern was that it created some credibility problems … . So I thought it was hard to pay too much attention to the results of the survey because of the way it was handled, and I think that it just didn't help our credibility.

City council members who reviewed the final budget had similar perceptions of the different methods employed. They clearly preferred relying on the random-sample survey because of its scientific validity:

> You get a much better feel for what the water temperature is in the city when you're going out and doing a survey that is scientific, versus the normal "We'll just call people," or "We'll just run a poll," or those kinds of things that tend to be like a media blog … . There's a way to jerry-rig the systems so that you can skew the results.

> If what a person wanted to glean from the survey was information about how the vast majority of citizens think, the telephone survey provided a pretty accurate snapshot. It appeared to be statistically relevant. It got their off-the-cuff reaction, which, really, when you're dealing with citizens or you're dealing with voters, off-the-cuff is usually the best you get … . [I] probably found the most value in the telephone survey because I felt that probably really did reflect where the community was.

Mitigating Risks

Some interviewees stressed that the political environment created risks associated with conducting citizen-budgeting activities. The identified risks included the fiscal costs associated with citizen budgeting, process-related challenges, not knowing the outcomes of citizen-budgeting preferences ahead of time, and the perceived neutrality of the engagement activities. All these factors were considered, and had to be successfully addressed:

> I don't think we ever caught a political negative for surveys—scientifically done surveys … . But on things that were less than what maybe people would consider "scientific" … those are more open to the criticism that you're trying to shape the result. The more you can do to structure mechanisms that are resistant to that kind of criticism, the better.

An advantage of involving citizens in the budgeting process was not only to gather their input, but also to ensure that the process had been thoroughly vetted, and had the support of a cross-section of the community through their direct involvement. The citizen-budgeting process itself was thus considered a way to mitigate the potential risk of public backlash:

Be very careful about not being viewed as partisan or having an agenda in the way you formulate this. Be careful about what you're asking and how … . That leads to the buy-in from constituency groups. I think the one thing we did extremely well at the start was the timing. We included a bunch of people at the table and asked them to review questions with us. When people are part of the process, it's very difficult for them to be subsequently critical of the process. They put themselves on the line, their credibility is at stake, too.

Despite the risks involved with implementing the citizen-budgeting activities, the potential benefits were ultimately viewed positively. Both city department heads and city council members believed that the outcomes of the budgeting exercises, particularly the preferences expressed by the citizens, had either political or substantive value:

> Well, the mayor did make himself vulnerable. He was attacked just because we were paying for the study, so I think he did subject himself to a little bit of criticism. But he was in a honeymoon period. He might not have been able to do it if he was wanting to try and do it the second year, so I think he had a little range to be able to do something like that. And I think that the public did appreciate the fact that they were being asked about budgeting in a different way.

Discussion

Policymakers perceived a number of different benefits deriving from the citizen budgeting activities, which helps explain their interest in sponsoring the engagement initiative. Although the benefits we identified were not necessarily related to one another, they were consistent with a generally positive view of citizen budgeting activities. Our main inquiry was to identify what the perceived benefits were from the perspective of policymakers. It was apparent from our interview results that the public-input activities provided significant value to policymakers in a variety of ways. If we categorized the perceived benefits in terms of whether they primarily accrued to either policymakers or the public, it could be argued that some primarily benefited one to the exclusion of the other, whereas others may have benefited both policymakers and citizens. However, this calculation is difficult to make, as some benefits are diffuse in their application and effects, and may or may not aggregate for long-term impacts.

For example, our interviewees indicated that the citizen-budgeting process positively impacted the internal morale of city department heads and workers, and also created opportunities for the city to advance political objectives— benefits which seem to primarily serve the interests of policymakers. Additionally, interviewees indicated that educating the community about the city's budget situation and services had the immediate objective of creating support for particular city programs. However, it can also be argued that greater policy education enhances civic engagement, social capital, and community attachment, increases community capacity to understand and successfully resolve policy problems, and reduces the likelihood of "conflict" events, such as special or recall elections, lawsuits, or other confrontational situations— benefits which accrue to the community as a whole.

Other benefits identified by policymakers, such as building trust in government, can have benefits for both policymakers (e.g., increasing citizens' willingness to pay taxes) and citizens (e.g., increasing their participation in policy and decreasing the potential for elite capture). Our study thus indicates that the benefits do not consistently bifurcate exclusively into either citizen-driven or leader-driven conceptions. Regardless of how the perceived benefits allocate, our interviews suggest that multiple and, at times, indeterminate motives and interests are reflected in how policymakers perceived the benefits of public input. In this case although a number of perceived benefits seemed to align with policymaker interests, suggesting a leader-driven dynamic at work, it should be noted that these citizen-budgeting activities led to significant changes in budgeting—including cuts—by various city departments, and major policy changes that citizen participants supported. This included the privatization of some city services, as well as a tax increase—contentious issues that required public support. This indicates that the citizen component of citizen budgeting played a central role in budget creation.

The results of this analysis hold a number of practical implications for public

management and performance. First, the results made clear that one of the primary goals of the public-input effort was to enhance the public's trust and confidence in the local government that sponsored the events. Research has indeed shown that the structured use of public-input processes can increase citizens' perceptions of governmental fairness, and that perceptions of fairness may lead to greater public acceptance of policy decisions even by citizens who did not directly participate in the engagement process (Herian, Hamm, Tomkins, & PytlikZillig, 2012; see also Van Ryzin, 2007). Our research suggests that the public engagement effort may well have had the intended effect on public attitudes. Second, while we are unable to provide a systematic assessment of the current status of the public engagement process in the city, we can note that a formal public engagement effort continues to this day in the city that is the subject of this article. Thus, it is clear that the initial public engagement efforts in the city described in this article have led to a sustained effort on the part of the city—among both elected and nonelected officials—to continue to formally include the public in its budgetary decision-making. The continued use of public engagement methods ensured not only that the local government was able to pursue a long-term policy objective, but also that the public was directly involved in its long-term budgetary goals. From a leader-centric perspective, the sustained involvement of the public contributes to a shared-governance model where public managers continue to take the lead on highly technical aspects of budgeting, but where citizens share in the burden of governing on issues that are amenable to public input.

As noted above, the public engagement efforts consisted of multiple methods, including random and nonrandom surveys, and a structured public deliberation. Using the work of Beierle (1999) to illustrate, we can see how different engagement methods may have yielded differential benefits. First, it is possible that information yielded by the survey portions of the engagement process increased the quality of decisions and identified public values and preferences. Further, the public deliberations served to educate the participants through daylong discussions on the budget, and also brought together disparate interests from across the city. A broad public outreach effort by the city accompanied the use of the various public participation methods and helped to publicize the city's use of citizen engagement. Both television stations and local newspapers covered the city's efforts. The outreach may have contributed to greater trust in governmental decisions in this case, as a substantial number of city residents became aware of the city's use of public engagement. In sum, the multimodal nature of the public engagement process likely produced a greater number of benefits than would any single method used alone. Additionally, the different forms of outreach had different benefits. The scientific phone survey broadened the scope of impact among residents, and assured policymakers that citizen input was based on established, scientifically reliable polling methods. At the same time, the deliberative discussions allowed for richer person-to-person interaction between citizens and policymakers, opportunities to strengthen trust between citizens and city leaders, and to communicate information and concerns in more nuanced and detailed ways. Thus, from a practical standpoint, broadening civic engagement methods by using multiple strategies can increase the beneficial outcomes for both citizens and public managers. Our experience indicates that this was the case in the city that was the subject of our study, and that using multiple strategies was a relatively viable and easy goal to accomplish. The greater yield in benefits and public goodwill were worth the additional time and expense.

Conclusion

There are several caveats to this study. We conducted interviews with 23 city administrators and city council members. The universe of views and experiences of the citizen-budgeting activities examined in this study were thus restricted to that group of individuals. There were no discernible differences between categories of policymakers (e.g., city council members vs. city department heads). Additionally, the context in which the citizen-budgeting activities took place was clearly relevant to the dynamics and substance of the budgeting process and outcomes. Relevant considerations include the overall fiscal situation facing the city, the political context, and personalities and relationships within and between city department leadership and the city council. Interpretation of the results from our interviews should thus consider the unique combination of these and other factors.

This study has examined a significant question in the practice of public budgeting and engagement: What benefits do policymakers obtain from citizen-budgeting projects? Our interviews identified nine areas where distinct categories of benefits arose from the citizen-budgeting activities of a Midwestern metropolitan city. The identified benefits seemed to impact both the public and policymakers in positive ways, suggesting that significant leader-driven and citizen-driven interests together drove this citizen-budgeting process. We recommend that future research be done in this area, particularly as there are very few studies examining these questions. This may be because the highly situational nature of citizen-budgeting processes defies the easy use of a comparative method of analysis. Our framework of analysis—identifying perceived benefits and the interests they serve—may be broad enough to be utilized in other citizen- budgeting contexts. Although we would expect future studies on perceptions of citizen-budgeting processes to reflect the unique context and situation of the community at hand, a common analytical framework to identify the value created by public budgeting creates, and for whom, would shed much needed light on this fast-growing practice.

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