

Administrative Design Guide: Setting Up Successful Participatory Budgeting with Polls

Creating a successful participatory budgeting process isn't just about choosing the right platform—it's about thoughtful process design that aligns expectations, engages participants effectively, and delivers legitimate outcomes that stakeholders trust and act upon.

The Participatory Budgeting Project's classic process diagram shows the essential cycle: Design the Process → Brainstorm Ideas → Develop Proposals → Cast a Vote → Fund Winning Projects. But this simple cycle masks the complexity of design choices that determine whether your initiative strengthens democratic engagement or becomes a cautionary tale about consultation fatigue.

Whether you're running your first pilot or refining an established process, the design choices you make upfront will determine your success.

Foundation: Setting Clear Expectations

The most critical decision you'll make happens before anyone submits a proposal or casts a vote: defining what type of process you're running and being absolutely clear about it with all participants.

Consultative vs. Decision-Making: Will the results be advisory recommendations that inform a final decision, or will the community vote directly determine budget allocations? Both approaches have value, but participants need to know which one they're engaging with. Nothing kills trust faster than participants expecting their vote to be final, only to discover it was merely consultative.

Iterative vs. One-Off: Is this a single exercise or part of an ongoing democratic process? One-off processes can work well for specific projects, but iterative processes build institutional knowledge and deeper engagement over time. Set expectations accordingly.

Supplementing vs. Replacing: Are you enhancing existing decision-making methods (surveys, committee meetings, codesign processes) or replacing them entirely? Make it clear how this process fits into your organization's broader decision-making ecosystem.

The goal is eliminating the most common source of participant frustration: "This isn't what I thought I was signing up for." When expectations are clear upfront, participants can engage appropriately and evaluate success fairly.

Key Design Choice: Rank vs Range Voting

gives you two ballot options—ranked votes or range votes—and choosing between them significantly shapes your outcomes:

Ranked votes are better when you want to emphasize the positives of each project. This approach works well when there are limited negative consequences for any proposal and you want to surface the community's top priorities clearly.

Range votes are better when you want to reduce the negative impacts of each project. This approach works well when you want to build consensus that will keep everyone on board and avoid funding projects that strongly disappoint significant portions of your community.

Neither is inherently better or worse—they're just different tools for different goals. You can always run both approaches and have another round of voting between the two if they produce different results. This can be particularly valuable in contentious situations where building broad consensus matters more than identifying the single most popular option.

Understanding the Voting Mechanics

To design an effective process, administrators need to understand how 's voting system works behind the scenes. The platform uses sophisticated algorithms that maximize collective satisfaction while respecting budget constraints.

The Voter Wallet System: Each voter receives a virtual budget allocation that they distribute across proposals according to their preferences. This represents their proportional share of the real budget being allocated.

Proportional Allocation: Voters assign scores to proposals, and their wallet allocation is distributed proportionally. Strong preferences get larger shares of each voter's allocation.

Funding Thresholds: Projects receive funding when the total allocation from all voters meets or exceeds the project's cost. This creates a natural efficiency filter—projects must demonstrate sufficient community support relative to their price.

Reallocation Mechanics: When projects are funded, "extra" allocated funds return to voters' wallets and are automatically reallocated based on their remaining preferences. This ensures maximum use of available resources while respecting voter priorities.

Common Implementation Challenges

Real-world participatory budgeting reveals predictable challenges that thoughtful design can address proactively.

"I didn't like the outcome = I don't trust the platform": When participants' preferred projects aren't funded, they may question the fairness of the entire process. Combat this by ensuring transparency in how decisions are made, providing clear explanations of results, and emphasizing that legitimate democratic processes sometimes produce outcomes that disappoint individual participants.

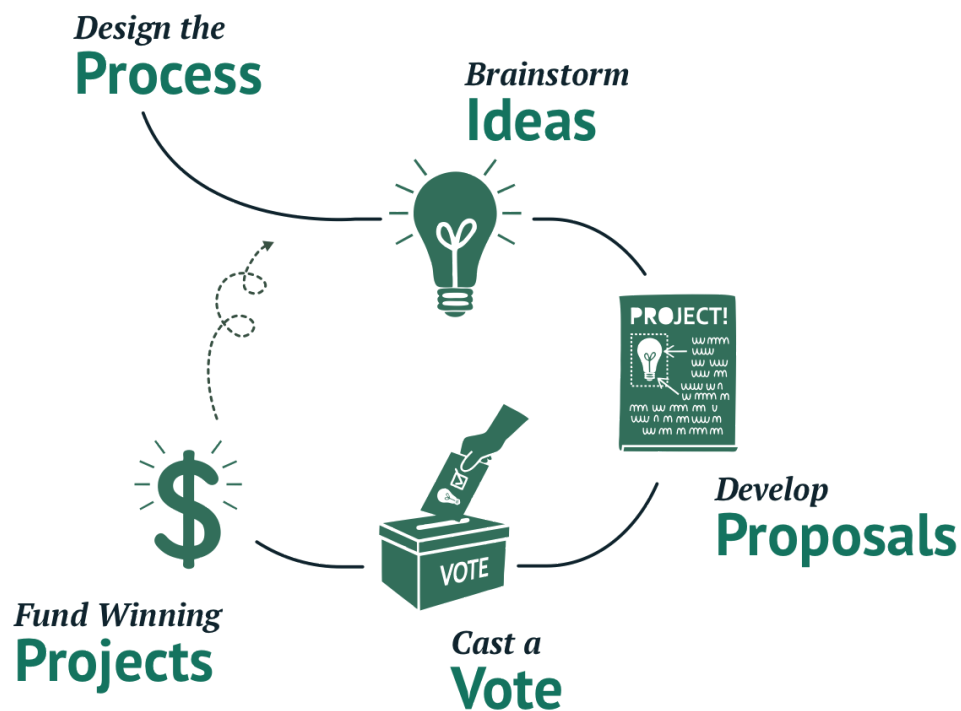
Leftover money dilemmas: Participatory processes often end with unallocated funds because project costs don't perfectly match available resources. Plan for this upfront. Options include: funding smaller complementary projects that use remaining funds, allocating remainder to already-popular projects that could be expanded, or carrying forward unused funds to future processes.

Technical onboarding barriers: Not everyone is comfortable with new digital platforms. Provide multiple support channels: written guides, video tutorials, live help sessions, and phone support. Consider the digital divide in your community and plan assistance accordingly.

Proposal design matters: You'll receive everything from polished professional proposals to hastily written ideas. Decide upfront whether you'll provide proposal development support, set minimum requirements, or accept submissions as-is. Each approach has implications for equity and quality.

Supporting the Process Beyond the Poll

The voting platform is just one component of successful participatory budgeting. The surrounding process design often determines success or failure, and each stage of the participatory budgeting cycle requires careful attention.



Source: [Participatory Budgeting Project](#)

Design the Process Stage: This is where you make the fundamental choices outlined above. Take time to think through your goals, constraints, and community context before launching.

Brainstorm Ideas Stage: Build awareness and understanding before launching idea generation. Hold information sessions explaining the process, provide examples of successful proposals, and create opportunities for informal discussion about community priorities.

Develop Proposals Stage: Consider proposal development workshops that help potential applicants craft stronger submissions. Decide how much support to provide and what minimum standards to maintain.

Cast a Vote Stage: Maintain momentum through regular updates on participation levels, reminders about deadlines, and celebrations of community engagement. Monitor for technical issues and respond quickly to participant questions. Consider providing real-time updates on which projects are attracting support—this can encourage strategic voting and coalition-building.

Fund Winning Projects Stage: The vote is just the beginning. Communicate results clearly, explaining not just what was funded but why. Provide timelines for implementation and regular

updates on progress. Celebrate successful projects and learn from challenges. Most importantly, close the feedback loop by showing how community input shaped real outcomes.

Building Long-Term Trust

Trust in participatory processes builds slowly through consistent, transparent action. Deliver on commitments made during the process. Be honest about limitations and challenges. Gather feedback on the process itself and incorporate improvements over time.

Treat your first implementation as a pilot, regardless of scale. Gather systematic feedback from participants about their experience: Was the process clear? Did they feel heard? Would they participate again? What would they change?

Common refinements include adjusting voting periods based on participation patterns, modifying proposal requirements based on submission quality, and enhancing communication based on participant feedback.

The goal isn't perfection—it's continuous improvement toward more effective democratic engagement that produces legitimate outcomes your community trusts and acts upon.

Try It Out: Retrospective Design Exercise

Ready to practice participatory budgeting design? Start with a collection of activities you've recently funded. Bring your team together to think about how you would design a PB process that would allow you to consider a number of different proposals while working with the timelines and rhythms of your team.

Map out each stage of the process:

- How would you have framed the opportunity differently?
- What support would proposers have needed?
- How would voting have worked given your team's constraints?
- What would implementation and follow-up have looked like?

Think through what would've gone differently if you'd applied this approach to the last round of projects you funded. This retrospective exercise helps you understand the design choices that matter most for your specific context before you launch a live process.

Remember: participatory budgeting isn't just about allocating money more democratically. It's about building organizational capacity for collective decision-making that can strengthen democratic engagement across all your activities while supporting a culture of trust, collaboration, and innovation.

