Minnesota Journal of Business Law and Entrepreneurship

Volume 2026, No. 2

ISSN: 1540-3270

Do Local Voices Shape Local Services? Assessing Participatory Budgeting in Municipal Governance

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Abstract

Background: Local self-governments face persistent challenges in delivering essential services while maintaining accountability and transparency. Participatory budgeting (PB) has emerged as a democratic innovation that allows citizens to directly influence municipal spending decisions. While PB has been widely studied in Latin America and large cities globally, little is known about its effects in mid-sized Indian municipalities, which face unique fiscal and administrative constraints.

Purpose: This paper addresses the research gap by examining whether participatory budgeting can improve municipal service delivery and accountability in mid-sized Indian cities. It outlines a conceptual framework and research design to assess the mechanisms through which PB operates and the conditions under which it produces positive outcomes.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A mixed-methods approach is proposed, combining quasi-experimental impact evaluation with process tracing and household surveys. The design compares municipalities with PB initiatives to matched non-adopters, focusing on changes in budget allocation, project execution, complaint resolution, and citizen satisfaction. Qualitative data from interviews and document analysis will complement quantitative findings to explain mechanisms.

Findings: While this paper presents a research framework rather than empirical results, expected scenarios suggest that PB can enhance priority alignment, accelerate project execution, and increase citizen satisfaction when supported by administrative capacity and transparency. Risks of elite capture and implementation bottlenecks remain important challenges.

Originality/Value: By focusing on mid-sized Indian municipalities, the paper contributes to an underexplored area of local governance research. It provides a rigorous methodological framework for evaluating PB and offers practical guidance for policymakers seeking to strengthen accountability and service delivery through participatory processes.

Keywords: Participatory budgeting, local self-government, accountability, service delivery, municipal governance, India

Introduction

Local self-governments play a pivotal role in delivering essential services that directly shape citizens' quality of life, including sanitation, water supply, local roads, and street lighting. Their performance is central to both the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the trust citizens place in government (Shah, 2006). Yet, municipalities across many developing contexts struggle with limited fiscal capacity, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and weak accountability structures (Rao & Bird, 2010). These challenges are particularly pronounced in mid-sized municipalities, which often lack the administrative resources of metropolitan cities while carrying the growing responsibilities of urbanization (Paul, 2012). Participatory budgeting (PB) has been advanced as a democratic

innovation that can help address these governance challenges. First introduced in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989, PB has since spread worldwide and is celebrated for enhancing transparency, redistributing resources, and increasing citizen engagement (Baiocchi, 2005; Wampler & Avritzer, 2004). At its core, PB allows citizens to participate directly in budgetary decision-making, typically at the level of municipal investments. Scholars argue that this process not only aligns public spending with community needs but also strengthens accountability by subjecting local officials to closer citizen oversight (Sintomer, Herzberg, & Röcke, 2008).

In India, the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 formally recognized urban local bodies as the third tier of government and provided them with constitutional legitimacy. This reform created opportunities for deepening participatory governance at the municipal level. However, most scholarly attention in India has been directed toward rural panchayats or large metropolitan corporations such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore (Heller, Harilal, & Chaudhuri, 2007; Mitlin, 2008). Mid-sized municipalities defined here as those with populations between 100,000 and 500,000 remain underexplored despite their growing demographic and political importance. These municipalities face unique governance constraints: they rely heavily on state transfers, have limited own-source revenues, and operate with stretched administrative capacities (World Bank, 2015).

The significance of studying PB in mid-sized municipalities lies not only in their demographic weight but also in their potential as laboratories for democratic innovation. Unlike metropolitan governments, which often deal with complex and fragmented bureaucracies, mid-sized municipalities provide settings where participatory processes may be more easily institutionalized and where the effects of citizen engagement on budgetary outcomes may be more directly observable (Goldfrank, 2011). At the same time, the relatively limited fiscal space of these municipalities raises questions about whether PB can produce tangible improvements in service delivery or whether it risks becoming a symbolic exercise (Pateman, 2012). Existing research underscores both the promise and limitations of PB. Comparative studies in Latin America demonstrate that PB can increase pro-poor investments, reduce clientelism, and strengthen civic capacity (Avritzer, 2009; Gonçalves, 2014). Yet, critics highlight risks of elite capture, uneven participation, and administrative bottlenecks that undermine effectiveness (Nylen, 2003). In the Indian context, there is growing evidence of participatory practices in rural settings, such as Gram Sabhas, influencing resource allocation (Besley, Pande, & Rao, 2012). However, little is known about whether similar mechanisms operate in urban municipalities, where political competition, fiscal pressures, and bureaucratic systems differ substantially.

The research problem addressed in this paper is whether participatory budgeting in such contexts can shape service delivery outcomes and strengthen accountability. While there is substantial descriptive and comparative evidence on PB, the literature provides limited causal analysis of its effects in mid-sized Indian municipalities. Existing studies largely focus on metropolitan centers or on Latin American and European contexts, leaving open important questions about scale, mechanisms, and institutional conditions (Wampler, 2012; Cabannes, 2004). The objective of this paper is twofold. First, it identifies the research gap concerning the mechanisms and outcomes of PB in mid-sized municipalities. Second, it develops a conceptual and methodological framework that can generate rigorous evidence on this question. By situating the analysis within broader debates on decentralization, democratic innovation, and local accountability, the paper aims to contribute to both theoretical scholarship and policy reform.

Literature Review and Research Gap

The scholarship on participatory budgeting (PB) has grown rapidly since its introduction in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989, producing a wide range of descriptive, comparative, and causal studies. Early case-based works such as Baiocchi (2005) and Nylen (2003) emphasized the transformative potential of PB in empowering marginalized citizens, reshaping state–society relations, and fostering new deliberative cultures of governance. In the Indian context, Heller, Harilal, and Chaudhuri (2007) highlighted how institutionalized participation in Kerala deepened democratic practices, although their analysis was primarily situated in the rural sphere rather than in urban municipalities. Comparative studies, such as those by Sintomer, Herzberg, and Röcke (2008) in Europe and

Avritzer (2009) in Brazil, examined the diffusion of PB across contexts and pointed to the importance of political will and institutional design in shaping outcomes. Similarly, Goldfrank (2011) argued that PB can strengthen civic organizations and improve pro-poor investments, though such studies are often limited to Latin American or European settings.

More recent evaluations have attempted to establish causal relationships, with Gonçalves (2014) showing that PB in Brazil increased municipal investments in sanitation and health while reducing infant mortality, and Touchton and Wampler (2014) finding broader improvements in social well-being linked to the adoption of participatory institutions. Other studies suggest that PB may also foster trust in government and reduce clientelistic practices by providing transparent allocation processes (Wampler, 2012; Cabannes, 2004). Despite these advances, important limitations remain. Many descriptive accounts provide rich details of institutional design but do not connect these processes to measurable service delivery outcomes, while comparative studies often rely on correlations rather than causal inference. In addition, the overwhelming concentration of empirical studies in Latin America limits our understanding of how PB operates in different governance and cultural contexts.

Three critical gaps are evident. First, the majority of rigorous evidence comes from large Latin American cities, leaving mid-sized Indian municipalities where fiscal constraints, limited administrative capacity, and different political dynamics prevail largely unexplored (Rao & Bird, 2010; Paul, 2012). Second, while existing research documents budgetary shifts, it pays limited attention to the mechanisms through which citizen participation translates into actual improvements in service delivery, such as faster project implementation, improved oversight, or enhanced bureaucratic responsiveness. Third, there is little systematic analysis of the conditions under which PB succeeds or fails; factors such as fiscal health, administrative efficiency, and political competition are rarely tested explicitly (Pateman, 2012). This paper seeks to address these three gaps by focusing on mid-sized Indian municipalities, developing a framework to trace mechanisms of impact, and designing a mixed-methods research strategy to test both outcomes and contextual moderators.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The preceding review highlights that while participatory budgeting (PB) has been widely studied, significant gaps remain in understanding its impact within mid-sized Indian municipalities. This study is guided by a central research question: Does participatory budgeting improve municipal service delivery and accountability in mid-sized Indian municipalities? This overarching inquiry reflects both the scholarly concern with causality and mechanisms, and the practical concern with whether PB can be a viable tool for strengthening local self-government. Building on this, three secondary questions emerge. First, through which mechanisms does PB influence municipal governance? Specifically, does it alter budgetary priorities, improve project execution rates, and enhance responsiveness to citizen complaints? Second, under what institutional and political conditions does PB generate the greatest impact? This question is important because municipalities vary considerably in fiscal health, administrative capacity, and levels of political competition, all of which may shape the effectiveness of participatory processes. Third, how do citizens perceive and experience PB, particularly in relation to trust in local government and satisfaction with services?

From these questions, three hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis 1 is that municipalities implementing PB will allocate a higher share of capital budgets to services prioritized by citizens, relative to comparable municipalities without PB.

Hypothesis 2 is that PB will improve project completion rates and reduce delays, particularly in municipalities with moderate to high administrative capacity; conversely, impacts will be weaker or negligible where capacity is low.

Hypothesis 3 is that PB will enhance both perceived and measured responsiveness reflected in faster complaint resolution and higher citizen satisfaction but these effects will be conditional on the existence of transparency measures such as open budget data and publicly available meeting minutes.

Minnesota Journal of Business Law and Entrepreneurship

Volume 2026, No. 2

ISSN: 1540-3270

Together, these research questions and hypotheses provide a framework for assessing whether, how, and under what conditions participatory budgeting strengthens local self-government. By moving beyond descriptive accounts and examining both outcomes and mechanisms, the study seeks to generate evidence that is academically rigorous and practically relevant for municipal governance.

Conceptual Framework

Participatory budgeting (PB) is expected to influence municipal governance outcomes through a set of mechanisms that link citizen participation to changes in resource allocation, project execution, and accountability. The framework for this study identifies three principal pathways: priority alignment, monitoring and enforcement, and behavioral change in officials. Priority alignment occurs when citizen input shifts municipal spending toward underfunded but locally valued services. Monitoring and enforcement mechanisms arise as citizens oversee project implementation, making it harder for officials to delay or divert resources. Behavioral change reflects the reputational and political incentives that motivate local officials to be more responsive under conditions of public scrutiny. The framework also recognizes that the effectiveness of PB is contingent upon contextual factors. Municipalities with greater fiscal health, stronger administrative capacity, higher political competition, and stronger transparency practices are more likely to translate participatory processes into measurable improvements in service delivery. By contrast, municipalities with weak institutional environments may experience limited or even negative effects from PB. To illustrate these pathways, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework guiding this study. It shows how citizen participation feeds into mechanisms of change, which then shape municipal outcomes, with moderating conditions influencing both mechanisms and results.

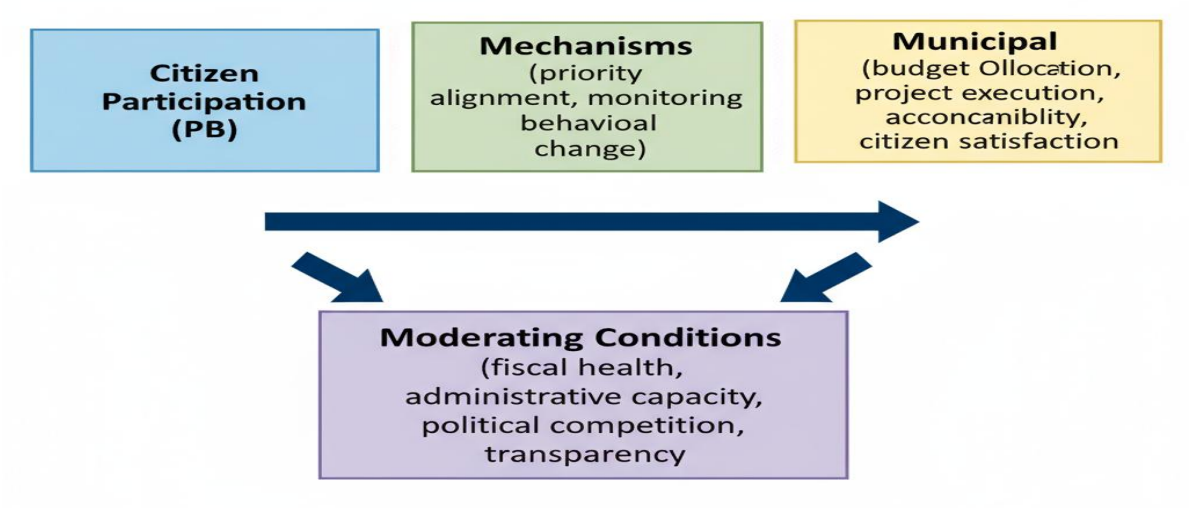

Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Participatory budgeting and municipal outcomes.

Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a comparative mixed-methods design to evaluate whether participatory budgeting (PB) enhances service delivery and accountability in mid-sized Indian municipalities. The research focuses on six municipalities with populations between 100,000 and 500,000, three of which have adopted PB in the last three years and three comparable municipalities that have not. Case selection will rely on matching criteria such as population size, fiscal indicators, political party composition, and baseline service delivery outcomes, reducing

selection bias and enhancing comparability (Rao & Bird, 2010). Given that random assignment of PB adoption is not feasible, a quasi-experimental identification strategy will be employed. Specifically, a difference-in-differences (DiD) approach will compare pre- and post-adoption changes across treatment and control municipalities, supplemented by robustness checks using synthetic control methods where data allow. Similar quasi-experimental approaches have been successfully applied in PB evaluations in Brazil, demonstrating that the method can credibly identify program impacts (Gonçalves, 2014; Touchton & Wampler, 2014). Data collection will draw on multiple sources, including municipal budget documents, project registers, and administrative records of project completion and tendering processes. Citizen complaint logs and grievance redressal registers will be used to assess responsiveness. To complement administrative data, a stratified household survey of 600 households per municipality will measure citizen satisfaction, perceptions of service delivery, and awareness of PB initiatives. In addition, semi-structured interviews with elected representatives, municipal engineers, finance officers, and civil society actors will provide insights into institutional dynamics, while analysis of PB meeting minutes and council proceedings will help trace how projects are proposed, debated, and implemented.

The primary outcomes to be measured include the share of municipal capital budgets allocated to citizen-prioritized categories, project completion rates, average complaint resolution times, and citizen satisfaction scores. Secondary outcomes will focus on transparency improvements, such as the publication of budget data and inclusiveness of participation, measured by gender, caste, and income representation among PB participants. To unpack mechanisms of change, qualitative process tracing will be conducted, enabling a better understanding of whether observed impacts arise from shifts in priorities, enhanced monitoring, or behavioral changes in officials. The analytical strategy will employ DiD models with municipality and year fixed effects, while interaction terms will test for heterogeneity, such as whether municipalities with greater fiscal health or administrative capacity demonstrate stronger impacts (Paul, 2012). Mediation analysis will assess the relative importance of resource reallocation versus improved execution. Complementary qualitative evidence will be thematically coded, guided by the conceptual framework, to provide explanatory depth. By combining quasi-experimental techniques with qualitative methods, this design strikes a balance between internal validity and contextual richness. It provides an opportunity not only to assess whether PB matters for municipal outcomes but also to explain how and under what conditions it produces effects. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on decentralization, democratic innovation, and local accountability (Avritzer, 2009; Wampler, 2012).

Findings and Hypothetical Scenarios

Although this study is designed as a research framework rather than a completed empirical evaluation, plausible findings can be anticipated based on existing evidence and theoretical reasoning. A positive outcome scenario suggests that municipalities adopting participatory budgeting (PB) will demonstrate significant improvements in both resource allocation and service delivery. Comparative evidence from Brazil suggests that PB can redirect expenditures toward pro-poor sectors, such as sanitation, health, and basic infrastructure, while simultaneously improving developmental outcomes, including reduced infant mortality (Gonçalves, 2014). In Europe, PB has been associated with greater transparency and stronger civic engagement, which can in turn lead to better oversight of public spending (Sintomer, Herzberg, & Röcke, 2008). Similar results could be expected in mid-sized Indian municipalities, where citizen input may prioritize essential services like water supply, waste management, and street lighting. In such cases, PB is also likely to increase citizen satisfaction by making service delivery more responsive to local needs (Wampler, 2012). A mixed outcome scenario is also plausible. In municipalities with weak administrative capacity, PB may succeed in reshaping budget priorities but fail to translate these changes into tangible improvements in service provision. Scholars of decentralization argue that without parallel investments in bureaucratic systems, monitoring institutions, and procurement efficiency, participatory reforms risk remaining largely symbolic (Rao & Bird, 2010; Paul, 2012). For example, projects identified through PB might be included in municipal budgets but remain incomplete due to delayed tendering, insufficient funds, or lack of technical expertise. Under such circumstances, citizen expectations may rise without corresponding service improvements, potentially generating frustration or skepticism about participatory processes.

Finally, a negative or perverse outcome scenario must be considered. Research on democratic innovations highlights risks of elite capture, where wealthier or politically connected groups dominate participatory forums, skewing budgetary outcomes toward their interests (Nylen, 2003; Pateman, 2012). In contexts of low transparency and limited inclusivity, PB may reinforce existing inequalities or be co-opted by local political actors for electoral gain. Instead of strengthening accountability, PB could then undermine trust in local government by failing to deliver promised benefits. The Brazilian experience demonstrates that when PB is disconnected from broader institutional reforms, its impact can diminish over time, especially as political leadership changes (Avritzer, 2009). Taken together, these scenarios highlight that PB's effectiveness is highly contingent on contextual conditions. Where fiscal resources, administrative capacity, and transparency measures are strong, PB is likely to generate meaningful improvements in municipal service delivery. Where these foundations are weak, the impact of PB may be muted or even counterproductive. The proposed study, by systematically examining both outcomes and mechanisms, is expected to clarify not only whether PB works in mid-sized Indian municipalities but also the conditions under which it is most effective, thus offering guidance for both scholars and practitioners.

Contribution to Literature and Policy Relevance

This study makes two distinct contributions one to the academic literature on participatory governance and decentralization, and the other to policy debates on strengthening local self-government in India. From a scholarly perspective, it addresses a critical gap in the literature by shifting attention from large metropolitan centers and Latin American cases, which dominate existing research, to mid-sized Indian municipalities that remain underexplored (Paul, 2012; Rao & Bird, 2010). While pioneering works on PB in Porto Alegre and other Brazilian cities have demonstrated its capacity to redistribute resources and empower marginalized groups (Baiocchi, 2005; Avritzer, 2009), the contextual differences between Latin America and South Asia raise important questions about transferability. Mid-sized Indian municipalities face constraints of fiscal dependency on state transfers, limited technical capacity, and fragmented political competition. By focusing on these municipalities, this study extends the literature by exploring whether PB can operate effectively under such conditions, thereby contributing to comparative theories of participatory governance. Methodologically, the study advances rigor in a field often dominated by descriptive or normative accounts. By combining quasi-experimental techniques such as difference-in-differences with qualitative process tracing, it demonstrates how PB's effects can be studied systematically across multiple dimensions. This approach responds to calls in the literature for more attention to mechanisms, heterogeneity, and the conditions of effectiveness (Pateman, 2012; Wampler, 2012). Importantly, the integration of household surveys, administrative data, and interviews ensures triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of findings. The research framework proposed here could serve as a model for future studies not only in India but also in other developing contexts where mid-sized cities play an increasingly critical role in governance.

For policymakers and practitioners, the study provides actionable insights into the design and sustainability of PB initiatives. Evidence from Brazil suggests that PB can generate developmental gains when institutionalized and supported by strong administrative systems (Gonçalves, 2014; Touchton & Wampler, 2014). However, when introduced as ad hoc experiments without adequate resources or transparency safeguards, PB risks being captured by elites or losing credibility over time (Nylen, 2003; Sintomer, Herzberg, & Röcke, 2008). By adapting these lessons to the Indian context, the study emphasizes that PB should not be treated as a one-size-fits-all reform. Its success depends on embedding participation within broader governance frameworks, including transparent procurement systems, effective grievance redressal, and inclusive outreach strategies that ensure marginalized groups have a voice. The policy relevance of this research lies in its potential to inform ongoing decentralization reforms in India. State governments experimenting with participatory approaches can benefit from evidence on when and how PB contributes to improved service delivery. At the municipal level, elected representatives and administrators can use the findings to design participatory processes that are realistic, transparent, and aligned with fiscal and administrative capacities. Development partners and civil society organizations may also draw lessons from the study to strengthen accountability and citizen engagement initiatives.

By clarifying the potential and limitations of PB in mid-sized Indian municipalities, this study makes a significant contribution to both comparative scholarship and the design of actionable reforms. It positions PB not as a panacea but as a conditional tool whose effectiveness depends on the alignment of citizen participation, institutional capacity, and political incentives. In doing so, it provides a foundation for further empirical research and offers guidance to policymakers striving to enhance accountability and improve the quality of urban governance.

Policy and Practical Recommendations

The findings anticipated in this study have direct implications for policymakers, municipal administrators, and civil society organizations seeking to strengthen local self-government through participatory budgeting (PB). First, PB should be paired with capacity-building measures for municipal administrations. Research on decentralization underscores that participation alone cannot improve service delivery unless administrative systems are capable of implementing projects efficiently (Rao & Bird, 2010; Paul, 2012). Training in procurement, financial management, and project monitoring is therefore essential to ensure that priorities identified through PB are translated into timely and effective outcomes. Furthermore, municipalities should develop internal guidelines on how PB proposals are integrated into budget documents to reduce ambiguity and prevent delays during implementation. Second, transparency must be institutionalized as a core component of PB. Experiences from Brazil and Europe demonstrate that public disclosure of meeting minutes, budget allocations, and project implementation data enables citizens to monitor progress and hold officials accountable (Sintomer, Herzberg, & Röcke, 2008; Wampler, 2012). In the digital era, this means going beyond traditional notice boards to embrace online platforms, mobile applications, and open-data portals. In contexts where digital access remains limited, municipalities can rely on community radio, printed bulletins, and in-person public forums to disseminate information. Regular publication of progress reports, accompanied by clear timelines and responsibilities, can help create a culture of accountability and reduce opportunities for corruption or clientelism.

Third, inclusivity in participation must be emphasized. Without deliberate outreach, PB processes risk being dominated by local elites or organized interest groups, which undermines the redistributive and democratic potential of the reform (Nylen, 2003; Pateman, 2012). Municipal governments should adopt strategies such as rotating meeting locations across wards, scheduling consultations at times accessible to women and workers, and offering translation or interpretation in local languages. Civil society organizations, neighborhood associations, and grassroots women's groups can be crucial partners in mobilizing underrepresented communities. Incentivizing participation for instance, through recognition of community groups or integration with social programs may further broaden engagement. Fourth, PB should initially be piloted in specific sectors, such as sanitation, small infrastructure projects, or neighborhood improvements, before being scaled to larger portions of municipal budgets. Evidence from Latin America suggests that gradual institutionalization, supported by political commitment and administrative learning, is more sustainable than large-scale adoption without adequate preparation (Avritzer, 2009; Goldfrank, 2011). Pilots allow municipalities to experiment with different models of participation such as neighborhood assemblies, online voting, or hybrid formats and adapt these mechanisms to local realities. Lessons from pilots can then inform broader institutional reforms, including municipal by-laws that formalize PB processes and ensure continuity beyond electoral cycles.

Fifth, monitoring and evaluation systems should be embedded within PB. Establishing measurable indicators such as project completion rates, citizen satisfaction levels, and complaint resolution times enables municipalities to track progress and adjust implementation strategies. Independent audits, citizen monitoring committees, and partnerships with universities or research institutes can strengthen the credibility of these evaluations. Evidence-based reporting also helps state governments and development partners allocate resources more effectively by identifying municipalities that demonstrate commitment and capacity. Performance-linked incentives, such as conditional grants or recognition awards, can motivate municipalities to institutionalize PB more robustly.

Finally, PB must be situated within a broader framework of democratic deepening and fiscal decentralization. Without adequate fiscal autonomy and predictable transfers, municipalities may lack sufficient resources to

implement citizen-prioritized projects, regardless of the quality of participation. Likewise, reforms to strengthen grievance redressal, right-to-information systems, and public financial management are essential complements. By embedding PB within these broader reforms, policymakers can ensure that participation is not symbolic but materially consequential. Taken together, these recommendations underscore that PB should not be viewed as a standalone reform, but rather as part of a holistic governance strategy that integrates participation, capacity building, transparency, accountability, and fiscal empowerment. When carefully designed and supported, PB has the potential to not only improve service delivery and citizen satisfaction but also enhance trust in democratic institutions. Conversely, poorly institutionalized PB risks generating disillusionment, reinforcing inequalities, or being captured by local elites. Policymakers must therefore approach PB as a conditional tool that requires supportive institutional environments to achieve its transformative potential.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

This study has several limitations. First, participatory budgeting (PB) is not randomly adopted, and municipalities that implement it may already differ in political competition, leadership, or capacity, creating risks of selection bias (Rao & Bird, 2010). Although techniques such as difference-in-differences and matching can mitigate this issue, they cannot fully eliminate it. Second, municipal data on budgets, projects, and grievance redressal may be incomplete or inconsistently maintained, which could affect measurement accuracy; triangulation with surveys and interviews will help address this concern (Paul, 2012). Third, by focusing on a limited number of municipalities, the findings may not be generalizable to all Indian contexts. Ethical considerations are equally important. All participants in surveys and interviews will provide informed consent, and their confidentiality will be protected. Care will be taken to avoid raising unrealistic expectations among citizens about immediate service improvements. Researchers must also manage the political sensitivity of evaluating government programs, ensuring transparency and building trust with municipal officials (Pateman, 2012; Wampler, 2012).

Conclusion and Agenda for Future Research

This study presents a conceptual and methodological framework for evaluating whether participatory budgeting (PB) can enhance service delivery and accountability in mid-sized Indian municipalities. Building on insights from international experiences and theoretical debates on participatory democracy, the paper identifies three key gaps in existing literature: the lack of evidence from mid-sized Indian cities, limited understanding of the mechanisms through which PB influences outcomes, and insufficient attention to the conditions under which PB is most effective. By proposing a mixed-methods design that integrates quasi-experimental evaluation with qualitative process tracing, the study offers an approach that can generate both robust causal evidence and rich contextual insights. The conclusion that emerges from this analysis is that PB has significant potential, but its effects are highly conditional. In contexts with adequate fiscal resources, administrative capacity, and transparency, PB is likely to enhance service delivery, accelerate project implementation, and increase citizen satisfaction. Conversely, where these conditions are weak, PB may yield only symbolic participation or, in some cases, reinforce existing inequalities. This reinforces the idea that PB should not be treated as a universal solution to governance challenges, but rather as a tool whose success depends on institutional design, political incentives, and the broader governance environment. Recognizing PB as a conditional rather than universal reform is critical for both scholars and policymakers seeking to strengthen local democracy.

The agenda for future research is threefold. First, empirical studies should test the proposed framework in a wider variety of Indian municipalities to assess whether the hypothesized mechanisms and outcomes hold across different institutional and political contexts. Comparative studies between municipalities with different levels of fiscal autonomy, political competition, and administrative effectiveness would help clarify the conditions under which PB thrives or fails. Second, future work should adopt a longitudinal perspective, examining whether PB's effects are sustained over time or whether they diminish as political leadership changes or administrative priorities shift. The durability of PB as an institution remains a critical question, as experiences in Brazil suggest that

political turnover can weaken or dismantle participatory institutions (Avritzer, 2009; Goldfrank, 2011). Third, researchers should explore the interaction between PB and other governance reforms, such as fiscal decentralization, digital transparency initiatives, and grievance redressal mechanisms. Understanding these synergies could shed light on how PB interacts with broader reforms to produce cumulative impacts on accountability and service delivery. A fourth line of inquiry involves examining PB's inclusivity. While much of the literature emphasizes PB's potential to empower marginalized groups, empirical research is needed to test whether women, low-income households, and socially disadvantaged groups are meaningfully represented in PB processes in Indian municipalities. Scholars should investigate how participation patterns vary across social categories and what institutional designs can enhance inclusiveness. Finally, future research should explore the role of civil society and non-state actors in sustaining PB. Evidence from Latin America suggests that robust civic organizations are often crucial for ensuring continuity and preventing elite capture (Wampler & Avritzer, 2004). Similar dynamics may be relevant in India, where civil society networks can facilitate citizen mobilization and hold municipal officials accountable.

By addressing these research priorities, scholars can advance theoretical debates on participatory governance while providing policymakers with actionable guidance. Ultimately, strengthening PB in mid-sized municipalities has the potential not only to improve service delivery but also to deepen democratic practices, foster trust between citizens and local governments, and demonstrate the viability of democratic innovation in contexts beyond the metropolitan centers that dominate current research.

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