**Random Ample: A representative mechanism for national budget participation**

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**Summary**

This brief proposes a mechanism for public participation in the national budget that consists of a random sample of 50-1000 citizens (depending on the size and heterogeneity of the country and the connection to other participatory mechanisms) to deliberate on the **sector allocation of the budget** before it is tabled in the national legislature. I propose an extension to within-sector deliberations as well. The use of a random sample ensures that the exercise brings together citizens of all types, including the marginalized, and the size of the sample can be increased to ensure enhanced physical representation from different groups. *A core claim is that the use of random sampling is* ***an ample response*** *to the challenge of broad participation, with improved representation from marginalized groups.*

**Why more public participation?**

When deciding on a national participatory mechanism, it is useful to consider what problem we are trying to solve. Greater participation may be thought to achieve various goals, but many of these are really about solving the *problem of representation*. The problem of representation is simply that even though most of the world now lives in some form of representative democracy, they do not feel very well represented. The current configuration of elected officials and unelected civil servants that make decisions about public policy do not appear to adequately represent the interests of the public. There are many reasons for this, some of which are intrinsic to election, and some of which can be mitigated by better campaign finance laws, voting rules that encourage rather than discourage participation, or a reduction in economic inequality. But the fact is that there are very few countries in which citizens can look at their elected officials and see a reasonable reflection of the great variation in ideology, class, race, gender, region and so on that comprise their countries.

To be sure, participation is not always understood as a solution to the problem of representation. But many of the additional problems that participation is meant to solve—such as low or declining confidence in public institutions, or government’s lack of information about the true conditions of life in communities—can really be seen as symptoms of the representation gap. If government was more representative, the public would have greater trust in it, and it would have better information about the conditions of life of people around the country.

If lack of representation is the problem, then clearly better representation is the solution. However, representation is not in and of itself enough to lead to good policymaking. Good representation will not necessarily mean that representatives are informed, and the adequate representation of different perspectives in a given society can bring more conflict over policy choices. Thus we have to link better representation to *a structured process that informs citizens and encourages deliberation to come to reasoned decisions.* We must seek a mechanism that ensures both adequate representation and adequate deliberation.

**Lessons from the past…and present**

Representative democracy relies on elections as its principle mechanism for ensuring representation. But election is not the only way to ensure representation. The ancient Greeks used a lottery system (random sampling) to populate the Council of 500, a participatory institution that in turn set the city-state’s policy agenda. This agenda informed the deliberations of the self-selecting Assembly, normally considered Athens’s preeminent democratic space, where all (male, non-slave) citizens were welcome and where policy decisions were taken. The Greeks therefore used both random selection and self-selection to achieve representation.

Self-selection can ensure that there is at least space for everyone’s voice to be heard (no one is refused entry), but it is also subject to some of the same weaknesses of modern election: there is a tendency for only some individuals or groups to participate, and they tend to be different from those that do not participate (often they are better educated, wealthier, better connected, and so on). This is often a problem in government participation forums, including many of those used for participatory budgeting.

This is the virtue of lottery: it ensures a genuine representation that is difficult to achieve through either election or self-selection. By combining lottery and self-selection, the Greeks sought to balance the desire for openness to all with a desire for maximum representativeness. They chose, moreover, to delegate *agenda-setting power* to the most representative body: as much as half of the policies discussed by the Assembly were selected by the Council of 500.

The use of lottery is not confined to ancient history. Modern opinion polling has its origins in the idea that the policy agenda should be informed by a random sample of the members of the public. There have been a number of recent attempts around the world to build on this logic by undertaking “deliberative polling,” where randomly selected citizens are polled but also given time and information that they lack in traditional rapid fire polls, in order to arrive at more informed views. Governments around the world have explored the use of “mini-publics” of different types in recent years, where citizens are chosen randomly to discuss policy decisions or revise laws and constitutions. Often these mini-publics then submit their recommendations to elected officials for a vote, but in some cases, the decisions are binding on government. There is evidence from these various approaches that they can lead to improved representation and evolution toward more informed public views.

Can we apply lessons from these experiments to pilot a mechanism for participation in national budget decision-making? I argue that we can, and that doing so can lead to better informed views and greater confidence in public institutions.

**Representation and deliberation about the budget….for what?**

In thinking about participation in the national budget, the government needs to make a decision: into which key national budget choices are we seeking public inputs? There are many possible answers to this question, and some of the details may be country-specific. As a general matter, however, there are at least two major choices in national budgets that the public should influence.

1. **How will the increment in the national budget for a given year be distributed across the main sectors?** In most countries, most of the time, the budget encompasses a set of ongoing commitments, and there is a small increment of additional revenue that can be distributed across government priorities each year. In a country following standard international classifications, there will be roughly 10 government sectors (e.g., education, health, economic affairs, social protection), and therefore the key question is: which of these sectors most deserves an increment in the coming budget year?
2. **How will the increment allocated to each sector for the coming budget year be prioritized among the competing priorities within each sector?** In this case, we take the increment given to, say, the health sector, as given, and ask how that increment should be spent (the relative importance of more nurses, versus more medicines, versus more equipment, versus more facilities, etc.).

These are decisions over which the public is likely to have identifiable preferences, if they are structured in a meaningful way. They are not the only possible questions over which the public should have influence; questions related to the overall size of the deficit, or the prioritization of national capital projects, may also be relevant. Starting with a sector approach may be a sensible first step, however.

In experience with small samples (albeit not randomly selected) in Kenya, IBP has found that citizens need sufficient background information about the sectors over which they are allocating funds, and that it is helpful to understand both the current distribution of funds and the government’s own proposal. This helps to put some structure on an otherwise overly complex set of decisions. Deliberation requires carefully selected background materials and guided facilitation through learning, deliberation and decision-making.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**A Double-Barreled Mechanism: National Citizens Convening(s) on the Budget**

A random sample of citizens can be drawn for a convening in the first stage of the process, in which an increment is determined for each of the ten sectors. It is reasonable to bring together somewhere between 50 and 1000 people for this discussion, depending on the size and diversity of the country and the costs. In this stage, participants will be presented with information about the nature of the ten sectors, their current activities, and their current share of the national budget. They will also be informed about the plans that each sector has for the coming year (formulated as a wish list based on that sector receiving the full increment in the budget). They will then deliberate on the relative importance of each of the sectors receiving additional funds and agree on a schedule. This agreement will likely be the result of a vote, or an averaging of preferences, though consensus is also possible.

The result would look something like Exhibit A, which includes a proposed share of the increment, as well as a rank ordering based on those shares of relative priority given to each sector. It is assumed that citizen preferences for the distribution of the budget should be interpreted as directional, rather than as precise allocations, given that citizens lack precise costing information about every aspect of an agency’s budget. We could thus interpret the citizen schedule using the rank order rather than precise shares.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Exhibit A: A schedule of increments for 10 key sectors**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Sector | Share of Current Budget | Proposed Share of Increment | Rank Ordering |
| General Public Services | 10% | 1% | 5 |
| Defense | 8% | 1% | 5 |
| Public Order & Safety | 11% | 5% | 3 |
| Economic Affairs | 27% | 20% | 2 |
| Environmental Protection | 2% | 1% | 5 |
| Housing and Community Amenities | 2% | 5% | 3 |
| Health | 9% | 30% | 1 |
| Recreation, Culture & Religion | 3% | 5% | 3 |
| Education | 25% | 30% | 1 |
| Social Protection | 3% | 2% | 4 |

The executive would receive a report from the citizens’ convening with their preferred schedule and a rationale for the relative ranking of allocations. Minutes will also be published of the meeting. Members may also publish minority reports if they disagree strongly with the majority view. The procedure would require the executive to respond to this report from the citizens’ convening in its written submission to the national legislature, stating where it agrees and disagrees with the recommendations and why. The national legislature would then have to respond, in its own report on the budget and any amendments to the citizen proposal and the executive proposal directly, publishing its rationale for accepting or rejecting citizen and executive recommendations.

A second stage consultation would occur around the sectors. For this stage, a combination of random selection and direct invitation to sector experts from academia and civil society would be utilized to create groups of 50 participants per sector (10 sectors\*50 people=500 people). Participants would be provided with information about the sector’s current budget and its proposed budget for the coming year, as well as information from experts on priority areas within the sector. Sector citizen panels would report out to departmental/sector committees of the national legislature on their preferred use of the sector’s budget increment, and the sector committee would be obligated to include this in their submissions to the national budget committee.

**Considerations**

While random selection ensures that everyone has a voice, structuring such deliberations still faces challenges. First, where societies are deeply unequal, the ability of everyone in a randomly selected group to participate is not likely to be equal. For example, the government will need to decide how to prepare for illiterate participants, especially given that much of the information needed to discuss sectors is technical, written material. In diverse societies, language may also be an issue, and proper translation will be necessary to ensure full inclusion. Various other special needs for those who are blind or deaf also need to be considered. In order to ensure that everyone is ready to deliberate, there may be a need to provide additional support to some participants in the weeks or days before a deliberation is to take place. This support could be provided by civil society organizations that already work with such populations and who would coordinate with government to ensure that budget deliberations are successful. Rather than provide support to participants directly, then, the Ministry of Finance might provide some initial training to these civil society groups to facilitate their understanding of the budget, and then defer to them to work with those participants that need extra support each year.

During the actual deliberations, facilitators have to play a dual role of informing and guiding discussion without inserting their own preferences. This is a role that requires considerable preparation and training. At the same time, facilitators have to ensure that everyone is participating, and this can be challenging, especially as the size of the group rises. This can create a conflict around how to achieve inclusiveness: more participants means more possibilities for inclusion, but smaller groups also make inclusion of those participating more likely. In order to ensure adequate facilitation, the government could consider working with teacher training colleges or other educational institutions in the country to develop a program for skilled policy and budget facilitation, and draw on faculty and students in this program to facilitate budget convenings (and other policy events involving citizens).

It is likely that in the first year or two of implementing such a mechanism, the process will be both substantive and educational, as the idea that the public should be aware of the sectors of government and the budget increment will be new for most citizens (and government officials). Over time, however, there will be more attention paid to this process, and to the deliberations revealed in published minutes, by media, government and citizens. Both participants and non-governmental organizations that monitor the budget will increasingly use the information generated from the process to shape their own ideas, and their advocacy, even though the exact participants will be different each time the exercise is conducted. The balance will therefore shift away from education toward more substantive deliberations on the budget, though public education will remain an important objective of the process.

**Annex: Two case studies**

*UK PARLIAMENT: CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLY ON SOCIAL CARE*

In 2017, two parliamentary committees of the UK Parliament commissioned the Citizens’ Assembly on Social Care to consider how adult social care in England should be funded sustainably in the future. The citizens’ assembly brought together 48 randomly selected citizens who were demographically representative of the English population. They met over two weekends and heard evidence from a range of sources, before making recommendations on how they thought social care should be funded. Find out more: https://www.involve.org.uk/our-work/our-projects/practice/how-can-we-find-sustainable-solution-funding-adult-social-care

*AMERICA SPEAKS: OUR BUDGET, OUR ECONOMY*

In 2010, the (now defunct) non-profit organisation America Speaks brought together 3,500 Americans across 57 locations to consider the federal budget. Each event took place over a one full day, during which participants learned about, discussed and voted on 42 policy options drafted by fiscal experts from across the political spectrum. The stated goal of the options was to reduce the budget deficit by $1.2 trillion in 15 years. The process found that participants moderated their views in order to find compromise, with conservatives becoming more supportive of raising taxes for the wealthy and liberals becoming more supportive of cuts to discretionary programmes. Across the events, 2/3 of groups agreed packages that reduced the deficit by more than $1 trillion. Find out more: https://participedia.net/case/470

**Selected References**

James Fishkin, “Reviving Deliberative Democracy,” September 2013. Available here: <https://cdd.stanford.edu/mm/2014/09/fishkin-reviving-deliberative-democracy.pdf>

Helene Landemore, “Inclusive Constitution-Making: the Icelandic Experiment,” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, March 2014.

Bernard Manin*, The Principles of Representative Government,* Cambridge University Press*,* 1997.

**Additional cases of Deliberation**

**Deliberation in Africa and Asia**

There have been a number of deliberative experiments in Africa in recent years. These deliberative mini-publics have looked at complex policy issues, and have demonstrated that such approaches can yield meaningful deliberation…and greater trust in government…

**Example 1: Deliberative Poll in Senegal, 2017**

<https://cdd.stanford.edu/mm/2017/09/Senegal_PrelimResults-ENGLISH-FINAL.pdf>

Participants can deliberate and change their views….

*“Participants deliberated about policy proposals relating to two topics: food security and WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene). The policy proposals on food security included the promotion of micro-gardening through the formation of women’s groups, training people interested in small craft trades, and training and encouraging households to participate in raising rabbits, pigeons, guinea fowl and other animals. The policy proposals on WASH included the offering of pit toilets at low cost to households, connecting more households to the municipal sewage system, and closing the Mbeubuess landfill. There were 18 policy proposals relating to food security and 24 policy proposals relating to WASH. Of the 43 policy proposals between the two topics, all but nine of the policy proposals changed significantly with deliberation. In total almost 80 percent of the proposals had significant opinion change.”*

Deliberation can also yield increases in trust in government….

*“Participants rated the seriousness of the government 0.874 out of 1 after deliberations (the mean before deliberation was the same). And, rated their confidence in the government at 0.847 after deliberations. The mean increased statistically significantly from 0.788. That is, participants became more confident the government would utilize the results from this event after deliberations. Furthermore, the participants also became more confident that the community would utilize the results after deliberation, a statistically significant increase from 0.732 to 0.854 after deliberations.”*

**Example 2: Deliberative Poll in Tamale, Ghana, 2015**

<https://cdd.stanford.edu/2015/a-report-on-the-first-deliberative-poll-in-tamale-ghana/>

<https://cdd.stanford.edu/mm/2019/04/chirawurah-jpd-ghanas-first.pdf>

*“An extensive advisory group of stakeholders, NGOs, academic experts and government officials developed and vetted briefing discussion materials…The two days of discussion were divided as follows: Livelihood and Food Security on day one, then Water, Sanitation and Hygiene on day two. Given the low literacy rate of the population, a fifteen-minute video version of the briefings was produced and shown at the beginning of each day of deliberation.”*

In these deliberations, people confronted trade-offs and affirmed support for specific policies:

*“Participants were significantly more willing to emphasize clean water to avoid disease even at the cost of food security. This trade-off is also reflected in the policy option: “Ban the use of untreated waste water for gardening” an option that increased from 8.53 on the ten point scale to 9.09, an increase of more than half a point and a strongly significant change (p=.0004).This option shows the willingness to require a ban on the practice...”*

*“The sample was representative, the participants changed their views in many statistically significant ways, they did so for identifiable reasons, they became demonstrably more informed, they increased their sense of efficacy as citizens, and they identified specific policy solutions that can help address Tamale’s urgent problems.”*

**Example 3: Deliberative poll from rural Uganda on “resettlement, land management and population pressure”**

<https://cdd.stanford.edu/mm/2017/06/fishkin-daedalus-uganda.pdf>

People can change their views on effective policies….

*“Rezoning high-risk areas for no settlement began with only 46 percent of respondents endorsing it as important before deliberation; but after deliberation, the level rose twenty points to 67 percent. Support for an early warning system using text messaging went down from 60 percent to 42 percent, while support for an early warning system using sirens went up from 79 percent to 92 percent. We think that the unreliability of electric power for charging and the unreliability of the cell connections moved people to support sirens as a more dependable system than text messaging.”*

**Example 4: Deliberation over local infrastructure projects in China**

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pad.1853>

Use of deliberation in combination with participatory budgeting has led to greater transparency and accountability for local infrastructure budgets…

“Through deliberative PB, Zeguo Township made its budget public, and government officials presented reports and answered questions during the plenary session. The project has placed pressure on the Township government to continue to be accountable. The 2009 experiment included a report on the implementation status of 2008 projects. Deliberative PB has led to more accountability in the use of government funds in Zeguo. By increasing financial transparency, as a direct result of earlier DP experiments, government officials have become more careful about using public funds and abiding by the budget.”

“Citizens do not need to be accountants to respond to the technical questions posed. They can easily identify and choose the priorities through coherent reasons. This was proved by the 2005 Zeguo experiment in which the participants chose clean water and sewage treatment plants over the “image” projects. All the Zeguo cases (also see the Mongolia case; Fishkin, 2018) clearly show the competence of participants expressing their value‐laden priorities for coherent and identifiable reasons, both in the questionnaire results and in the discussions.”

“In the face of popular pressure and vested interests, to achieve a balanced budget is an issue in all PB. Zeguo used random selection methods to minimise the bias of one particular group and developed a dual‐decision‐making model that involved both the people's voice and deputies' deliberation. It imposed the balance rule, that is, increasing the budget for one project must decrease the budget for another project. This ensures a balanced budget but rules out many budget proposals from citizens.”

**Example 5: Deliberation over local infrastructure and national constitutional amendments in Mongolia**

<https://www.stanforddaily.com/2017/05/04/mongolia-adopts-deliberative-method-developed-by-stanford-professor/>

Mongolia uses deliberative approaches for local budgets and national constitutional amendments…

“The mayor of Mongolia’s capital city, Ulaanbaatar, eventually reached out to [Professor James] Fishkin, hoping to leverage the [deliberative polling] process toward improved government outreach. In 2015, over 300 Ulaanbaatar residents convened to deliberate on a variety of infrastructure proposals. The exercise helped sway participants away from supporting a metro system and conveyed to the mayor the value citizens placed on improving heating in the city’s schools.

Based on the exercise in Ulaanbaatar, Zandanshatar successfully brought deliberative polling into national politics. A law requiring that the polling take place before changing the Mongolian constitution passed on Feb. 9, and the country held its first such poll in late April.”

1. For some reflections on how to prepare for and guide budget deliberations, see <https://www.internationalbudget.org/publications/deliberating-budgets-in-kenya-tools-and-examples/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an argument in favor of “directional” voting on shares, see <https://www.internationalbudget.org/publications/how-do-kenyans-prioritize-sectors-public-vs-government/>. This could change with time, as knowledge develops about the budget. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)