Beyond Entry: Divergent Participation Pathways in Participatory Budgeting

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Abstract

Participatory budgeting is commonly assessed in terms of inclusion, accessibility, and participation rates. This article shifts attention to what happens after citizens have already formally entered the process. Drawing on qualitative interviews with participants in Budapest's participatory budgeting process, it examines why formal entry into a participatory institution does not lead to similar participation pathways. Focusing on a selective subgroup of already-entered participants recruited through the municipal newsletter, most of them older adults, the article conceptualizes participation as a sequenced process and identifies three recurring mechanisms that help explain post-entry divergence: procedural navigation, mobilization capacity, and feedback and implementation legibility. It argues that formal openness does not eliminate inequalities within participation and that democratic quality cannot be assessed solely through access and turnout when later stages of participation remain unequally navigable.

Keywords: participatory budgeting; procedural inequality; post-entry differentiation; participation pathways; Hungary

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