





**“Smoke in the air?”**  
**An interview with Yves Cabannes**  
**on democratising democracy through**  
**participatory budgeting**

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**P**articipatory democrats consider Participatory Budgeting (PB) one of the most deeply established practices in contemporary democracies. Through giving citizens a say in policymaking processes, PB unlocks ideals of power-sharing between political elites and the citizenry (Sintomer et al., 2012). Thus, allocating a share of the public budget to participation is expected both to more consistently respond to citizen needs and to transform the state from within (Avritzer, 2006).

Originally launched in Brazil in the late 1980s, PB received enthusiasm from alter-globalist and leftist movements during the 1990s, particularly for its emphasis on social justice and inclusion. In the 2000s, global agencies endorsed PB, contributing to its now widespread dissemination. While the PB successes have garnered praise across different regions, there are concerns about whether and how this quintessential practice of participatory democracy continues to deliver on its original promise (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2012).

Inspired by his work on the historical trajectory and transformations of PB over recent decades (Cabannes, 2004), we invited Emeritus Professor Yves Cabannes – internationally recognised for his research and practice in this field – to share his insights. José Duarte Ribeiro and João Moniz, under the coordination of Roberto Falanga, held an interview with Yves in August 2023 as part of an ongoing collaboration with international experts on participatory

and deliberative practices, funded by the EU project INCITE-DEM.<sup>1</sup> In this interview, Yves Cabannes generously shared his personal perspective on different PB streams and, with his characteristic and contagious enthusiasm, reaffirmed his strong belief in democratising practices. He warned against “filtered” PB that serve only to dilute the transformative potential of participatory budgeting and leave nothing but smoke in the air.

Yves passed away in January 2025 to the great shock of all those who have drawn from his work, experienced the pleasure of knowing him personally and shared special moments together. To counter our grief, we hereby commit to keeping his legacy alive and sharing it with both older and younger generations of participatory democrats. In celebration of his lifelong dedication – as a scholar, practitioner, and activist – to making the world a better place, we present this edited version of the interview.



INTERVIEWERS (INT) *What are the main features of the historical trajectories of Participatory Budgeting? Why did this democratic innovation become such a deeply acknowledged and widespread practice around the world?*

YVES CABANNES (YC) I would say that, within the broad heterogeneity of Participatory Budgeting [PB], one iconic case is Porto Alegre [started in the late 1980s], which was one of the attempts to open up democracy – a blank page at that time in Brazil – and consolidate the power of the Workers’ Party and organise civil society. Yet, if you look historically at who was pushing to set up PB there, it was neighbourhood grassroot associations that belonged to different political parties, not necessarily the Workers’ Party, and there was also some push from the Communist Party.

There was then a unique moment due to changes in the transfer of resources from the central government to local governments. For the first time, the ‘Fundo de Participação dos Municípios’ made a certain amount of money available for discussion. It was a sort of *bonanza* that came about at a particular point in history.

The expansion of PB correlates closely with the decentralisation processes that took place across Latin America with significant effects.<sup>2</sup> Municipalities could

1 “INCITE-DEM – Inclusive Citizenship in a World in Transformation: Co-Designing for Democracy” is an EU-funded project (GA: 101094258). Further information available at: <https://incite-dem.eu/>.

2 Decentralisation began in the early 1980s, in parallel with other democratisation processes in Latin America (Nickson, 2023). As the transition from military to democratic regimes →

innovate and put together original processes, such as PB. Hence, movements, along with newly elected post-dictatorship mayors and local governments, experienced new conditions that made PB possible. Having said all this, there are also other places in the world and emerging trends that created different sorts of PB.

One tendency relates to the New Public Management.<sup>3</sup> I remember some debates with Yves Sintomer<sup>4</sup> when he participated in the first comparative analysis that I organised in the early 2000s on different experiences around the world. He highlighted how in Germany, PB more closely resembled what had been done in New Zealand and with the New Public Management tendency. I observed this in an article I wrote for the *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*.<sup>5</sup> PB under the influence of New Public Management differ completely from the Porto Alegre stream.

Then, there is this famous experience in Kerala,<sup>6</sup> where I worked in the early 1990s with some of my students. There, PB had a strong life thanks to the changes introduced to the Indian Constitution via the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which granted greater decision-making powers to people and states.<sup>7</sup>

A few other experiences in other places are also particularly significant. One is Ilo,<sup>8</sup> in Peru, where PB emerged as an offshoot of Agenda 21 that resulted from the environment conference in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>9</sup> The Ilo case led the way to national PB legislation in Peru. I was living in Ecuador at that time, and participated in

did not bring about immediate benefits in terms of income redistribution, local powers came to be perceived as more effective for addressing demands for social justice and inclusion.

3 New Public Management is internationally acknowledged as the set of administrative and managerial reforms that apply private sector principles to the public sector to maximise productivity and service delivery efficiency (see Hood, 1991).

4 Yves Sintomer is Professor of Political Science at Université Paris 8. He has written extensively on democracy, representation, and critical theory.

5 See Cabannes (2019).

6 The Kerala Panchayati Raj Planning and Budgeting process, initiated in 1996, involves citizens in a four-phase annual cycle of planning and budgeting and decentralising decision-making to local governments. Further information available at: <https://participedia.net/method/kerala-panchayati-raj-annual-planning-budgeting-cycle>.

7 The 73rd Constitutional Amendment ratified in 1993 sought to endow more power on local governments in India. According to the literature, Kerala led one of the most determined efforts at democratic decentralisation (Heller and Chaudhuri, 2007).

8 Ilo, a port city in southwestern Peru, hosted the first PB in 1999. Further information available at: <https://participedia.net/case/participatory-budgeting-ilo-peru>.

9 The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the ‘Earth Summit’, was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on 3–14 June 1992.

formulating this national law. Together with a network of NGO, we wrote *cuadernos de trabajo* [working papers] which turned into a book<sup>10</sup> demonstrating how environmental movements had contributed to the emergence of PB in Ilo. This is also something you can find, for example, in Cascais Municipality in Portugal. If you look at the original PB in Cascais, the team was very closely linked to Agenda 21. Thus, I would say this represents another PB stream.

Then, I would also highlight the Chinese case, such as the experience in Chengdu, a city with a population of 20 million people. This other PB stream emerged in several cities as a ‘democratic window’ within the Chinese system. During interviews with Communist Party officials and colleagues of mine who were responsible for the Chengdu PB, I came to understand their own interpretation of PB. They saw it more as a policy than a common practice at the scale of major municipalities.

So, in summary, Porto Alegre is the most iconic and best known type of PB but it is not the only case and this requires remembering.

INT *Returning to the Porto Alegre case, did you come across any earlier debates about something similar to PB?*

YC I worked there for a couple of years and I remember that, during the dictatorship in Brazil, there were what they called “bionic mayors,” appointed by the authoritarian regime without any elections. From 1985, before the emergence of PB in Porto Alegre, mayors began discussing the budget but I never could put my finger on whether these discussions were instrumental in paving the way for PB. However, we do know of such experiences.

Among other precursors, the *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* [Ecclesial Base Communities,<sup>11</sup> known as CEB] portray the importance of the Catholic movements [behind PB] and influences arriving from other places, such as the Medellín council. Liberation theology and the communitarian perspective were very important for what they call in Portuguese “*pastoral*” or “*pastoral social*”, “*pastoral do índio*”, “*pastoral dos jovens*”. At that time, I was coming from Mexico, and I could see how important it was to understand democratic innovation.

Communitarian movements, such as the CEB, were practicing resistance. In 1989, I started working in Fortaleza, one of the 4 or 5 Workers’ Party

10 See Cabannes (2003).

11 The *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* are grassroots Catholic communities in Brazil that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, focused on social justice, community empowerment, and active participation in political and economic issues, particularly in marginalised areas (see Azevedo, 1985).

municipalities in Brazil. I was part of these movements. For instance, the landless movement was absolutely irrigated by the social role and resistance from the Church. That was a very fertile ground cultivated by Catholic grassroots communities for 20 years or so. I was impressed by their role in mobilising people. Although their contribution is sometimes overlooked, from my direct experience, their role was unmistakably clear. This period coincided with my work in Kerala, and it became evident to me that church and community-based organisations were also integral there.

INT *Is there also a Catholic basis to the origins of Kerala's PB?*

YC In Kerala, there was a convergence between church and Gandhian ideas of self-sufficiency. And I would add another: as the apostles migrated after Christ died, Saint Thomas went to Kerala. So, the Church has been present there for a very long time. These were the communities which I was working with through the NGO that provided support and actively participated in the PB. There were no significant differences in the democratic innovations practiced in Kerala compared to Porto Alegre. It is interesting to make this connection and moving beyond the differences in PB models to recognise that there was a shared underlying substrate and fertile ground.

INT *It is great to hear there was a substrate, a long history of soil under preparation to grow the PB.*

YC Last year, I was in Brazil and a good friend of some of the original COP<sup>12</sup> members in Porto Alegre told me that this process was something that evolved naturally when all these forces were present.

So, you had people there practicing resistance and who did not care if they would be brought tumbling down. Then you had the Workers' Party, open to new solutions, although the essential impulse for the emergence of PB came from the bottom.

When I read work from colleagues who have been working on Porto Alegre, I find most of it is limited. They are putting forth theories on top of limited, hard facts. We need to make an analysis of the composition of the Workers' Party and the different tendencies therein – around eleven, including the social housing movements that I was part of. If you do not unpack what the Workers' Party was at that time, in the specific cities where PB was born, you cannot understand the emergence of PB. Very few people – in Porto Alegre you can still find them – can help you to unpack what was the party at the beginning, how it changed, who took power, what its governance was.

12 Yves Cabannes refers here to the civil society elected PB council members of the first PB.

At the beginning, you had influences inspired by the Soviet models, the idea of communes like the *Commune de Paris* or the Commune of St. Petersburg. This was what was behind some of the proposals from the most advanced people there, politically speaking. However, due to this, they could not withstand the influence of the tendencies and models of the Workers' Party. There is still a lot to be understood about the origins of PB.

INT *One of the often-cited reasons for PB's global success seems to be its "depoliticisation" on moving out of Latin America. Do you agree?*

YC I think that is untrue. After I came back from Brazil, in 1997, I became the UN's coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean, and this was the first time we established a relationship between Porto Alegre and the UN. I remember inviting Fortunati who was the vice-mayor<sup>13</sup> to the UN's building in New York. We invited *Causa Radical*<sup>14</sup> [Radical Cause] from Venezuela, who had been practicing some forms of PB, and then you had the URB-AL<sup>15</sup> program supported by the EU, between Europe and Latin America, especially with Brazil, for PB cooperation. This is when we launched the first analysis in the context of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. I must tell you that those who participated in URB-AL, who set up the 15 projects there, were municipalities holding that idea of the radical democratisation of democracy.

In Spain, people from Córdoba and then Seville were either from the Communist Party or libertarians also shared this idea of radicalising democracy. When we started in Peru, the first meeting was in Villa El Salvador, a town self-managed by radical movements.<sup>16</sup> If you look at the first experience in Ecuador, in Cotacachi, with the first indigenous mayor,<sup>17</sup> it went even further because it was reclaiming the traditional First Nations based democracy, *asamblea cantonal* [cantonal assembly], where you had the time you wanted for debate. Again, I remember in Bolivia with the mining works in El Alto and the Paulo Freire movement. This was the spirit. If you look in Chile at the beginning, the people involved were from the Communist Party. So, PB had not yet been

13 José Fortunati is a Brazilian politician and former Vice Mayor (2009-10) and Mayor (2010-2017) of Porto Alegre, known for his involvement in local governance and his leadership in implementing PB in the city.

14 *Causa Radical* is a Venezuelan left-wing political group founded in the 1970s.

15 URB-AL is a European Commission (EC) program fostering decentralized cooperation between sub-national authorities in Europe and Latin America, aligning with the political priorities and shared interests of both regions.

16 Villa El Salvador is an urban, largely residential coastal district on the outskirts of Lima, Peru. It began in 1971 as a squatted area and evolved into a self-organised urban settlement.

17 Auki Kanaima Tituaña Males served as Mayor of Cotacachi between 1996-2009.

instrumentalised, the influence of the 'Good Governance'<sup>18</sup> had yet to arrive. I would say that the co-optation of PB started with the good governance strategy promoted by the UN and the World Bank, which is today the dominant model. Many of my colleagues think they are still innovating but they are just implementing an ideology of good governance instead of democracy.

So, you had this approach from the UN; then you had the New Public Management approach; and the 'democratising democracy' information rising either from the grassroots or from the libertarians. These three forces, politically speaking, were still in dispute at this time.

INT *Thus, where would you place the 'technocratic variant' of PB in that set of competing logics?*

YC The technocratic variant aligns with New Public Management. When the PB is hooked to the ministry or department of finance, it tends to have this technocratic bias because it is about the financial optimisation of resources, taking people as clients and not as citizens. In these cases, PB focuses on financial transparency as a substitute for political transparency.

I was heading an NGO working with social movements in countries which had passed through violent revolutions. So, it was a strategic move to say we needed to build democracy from the bottom with local governments that are open to this. That is why we decided to focus on Fortaleza in Brazil.

I still do believe that but, when you agree to be the UN's coordinator, you also need to understand the different forms and forces at play and need to slightly change your approach. Yet, I still support the 'democratisation of democracy', and it costs me a lot to say we did very little to advance that.

Faced with political changes, ruptures, and interruptions, only organised people can continue the trajectory of PB. If you do not invest in people, there is no social sustainability. You have those PB as a practice for optimising resources or cushioning the structure with very little money. There is the populism, whether from the left or from the right, that becomes meaningless because most of the time there is no social distribution or inversion of priorities.

PB can play a role in kicking off major changes despite the little amount of money allocated, which is always meagre in relation to the needs and expectations of people. The importance of having people at the core is a big dividing line between the different types of PB. Social sustainability existed in

18 Good Governance is a school of thought promoted by global agencies, including the European Union, that promotes participatory decision-making to enhance transparency and accountability, to minimise corruption and protect human rights (see Rothstein and Teorell, 2008).



Porto Alegre at one point in time, in Belo Horizonte at another. It was also in place for a time in Guarulhos [a municipality in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, Brazil] when they invited the Paulo Freire Institute to train people that saw PB as a starting point to spread to other councils within the country. Another aspect of social sustainability is the need for large amounts of money, and this is not what I see in most places. The amount per inhabitant is usually 10 euros or even below that: when it is a city of 1 million people and they assign 2 or 3 million to the PB, the consequence is that social redistribution, any social inversion of priorities benefiting the excluded, cannot happen. What happens is the PB produces a façade or cosmetic changes.

But, if you have €20-€50 per inhabitant per year – and there are such cases, although they are not so well known – the changes can be significant. I have been examining thousands and thousands of projects while very few of my colleagues are looking at projects. Instead, they are looking at the processes. When projects focus on domestic violence, or workshops and actions in marginalised areas, they tend to transform society for greater social benefit and thus contribute to social sustainability. I think the role of projects could be better considered in research.

INT *Initially, PB seemed to be a radical alternative to representative democracy but, over time, we learned it is also very malleable.*

YC I do not see PB as elastic. What I do see is huge levels of co-optation. When I read the ATLAS,<sup>19</sup> this mismatch typically falls under what we can call ‘self-named PB’. In some cases there is no clear definition, and when you go over countries, everything gets mixed up and you cannot recognise apples from pears. This mix is not politically useful.

What I observed in the original cases of PB implied a triple inversion of priorities: social inversion to reach out to social groups that have been historically excluded. Spatial justice is at its heart, thus reaching out to territories such as rural areas or historical centers which are going through decline, as well as *favelas*, places which were under-equipped or non-legal settlements. And, finally, the political inversion of priorities is based on giving power to the powerless. This was and still is part of the debate in various cities where PB still remains the instrument for this triple inversion but, if you lack the political inversion of priorities, you do not achieve anything meaningful.

I can speak about Paris where they supposedly put in a lot of money but you cannot attain social, spatial or environmental sustainability without the

19 Yves Cabannes is here referencing the ATLAS published by Oficina, which provides an overview of PB around the globe. More information at: <https://www.oficina.org.pt/publicacoes>.

political inversion of priorities. If you do not have communitarian ties and elected citizens acting as a pillar of counter-power, you do not get very far. Councils of people have their problems too and we need to work on them but if you do not have the rules [on PB] set by people, and not by local governments, people become powerless. You have institutionalised participation instead of institutionalising participation, which is a major difference. So, the rest I do not necessarily call PB but they call themselves PB.

INT *So, is it accurate to name a practice as PB if it fails the political inversion?*

YC Do you remember the cigarettes when they started having a filter? Those are filtered PB, no nicotine, just smoke. It is the best image I can give you.

I am on the jury for the International Observatory for Participatory Democracy and, this year [2023], there were about 26-27 PB out of the hundreds of entries for the award. I looked at each one of them and many were just symbols or *façades*, smoke in the air, a shop view of what you want to attain with a minimum budget. It is like two-legged walking when one leg is very short and the other very long, with no funds for discussing. Usually, when one of the legs is very short, you fall over very quickly, and you cannot walk very far. It is just meaningless and does not help anyone. It is time for the academy and politicians to scrutinise and clarify just what they really want to do and attain.

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FALANGA, R., RIBEIRO, J.D., MONIZ, J. (2025), *Interview* "‘Smoke in the air?’ An interview with Yves Cabannes on democratising democracy through participatory budgeting". *Análise Social*, 254, LX (1.º), e25500. <https://doi.org/10.31447/2025500>.

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