

Crossing the Charles: An Analysis of Participatory Budgeting in Boston and Cambridge

A thesis submitted by

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Abstract

This thesis examines how participatory budgeting (PB) programs in Boston and Cambridge define, implement, and measure equity, particularly in relation to historically marginalized communities.

Through interviews, program documents, and comparative case studies in New York City, Chicago, and beyond, the study evaluates how outreach strategies, inclusive design, and institutional frameworks influence PB outcomes. While both Boston and Cambridge have made strides through youth leadership, multilingual access, and inclusive voting eligibility, gaps remain in representation, participation rates, and project impact. The thesis concludes that PB can help redistribute both resources and decision-making power when equity is intentionally embedded through program design, sustained political will, and strong community partnerships.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a democratic process in which community members directly decide how to allocate part of a public budget. Since its origins in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989, PB has been adopted in cities worldwide to deepen civic engagement, improve transparency, and advance equity (Participatory Budgeting Project, 2025). In the United States, municipalities have used PB to engage residents who are often excluded from formal decision-making, such as youth, immigrants, and low-income communities. PB has the power to serve as an entry point into civic participation, especially for those who have not typically engaged in civic life in the past. When paired with strong community partnerships, PB can help reach these populations, building trust and creating pathways for ongoing involvement in public decision-making.

This thesis focuses on Boston and Cambridge because I am interested in how they differ or align in their approaches to equity. These two cities are only separated by a bridge and share many similarities in values, yet their operating structures may lead to distinct ways of embedding equity into PB. Boston's PB journey began in 2014 with *Youth Lead the Change*, the first youth-led PB program in the country, which gives young people ages 12-25 decision-making power over part of the City's capital budget. More recently, in the 2021 Municipal Election, Boston voters approved a ballot measure to create the Office of Participatory Budgeting, leading to the launch of a citywide PB program in 2024 with an explicit focus on racial and social justice. Cambridge's PB program, running annually since 2014, is notable for its inclusive eligibility rules, multilingual outreach, and steady institutionalization. Examining these two cases side-by-side offers a valuable opportunity to analyze how different municipal contexts and design choices shape the ability of PB to advance equity in practice.

Positionality & Research Questions

My name is Maria Isabel Rodriguez Ortega, and I was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. I spent most of my childhood there before migrating at age 14 to Lawrence, Massachusetts, an immigrant-rich community, in 2014. I completed high school in Lawrence and later moved to Boston to attend UMass Boston, where I earned a bachelor's degree in Environmental Science with a minor in Latino Studies. After years of living in the United States, I have cultivated a deep passion for environmental justice, solidarity economies, and equitable community participatory processes.

As a Latina immigrant woman and first-generation college graduate, I approach this work not only with academic interest but also with lived experience shaped by inequities across both the Dominican Republic and the United States. Navigating systems that often marginalize immigrant and working-class communities has shaped my understanding of justice and equity, and fuels my commitment to participatory processes that shift power and center community voices. My positionality informs the lens through which I approach both research and practice, particularly in policy spaces that impact historically underserved groups.

My earliest hands-on experience with participatory budgeting was through helping manage a local nonprofit's PB initiative, where I focused on empowering youth in East Boston, particularly Spanish-speaking 5th and 6th graders, by facilitating idea collection sessions. This moment marked a stepping stone that ignited my passion and commitment to this work. Since then, I've remained a vocal advocate for PB across various professional opportunities. While it is often challenging to convince institutions to truly share power with the public, I've never stopped believing in PB's transformative potential, and in the fundamental idea that public funds should be decided by the public.

This passion led me to serve as the Public Policy Coordinator at Save the Harbor/Save the Bay in 2021, a nonprofit organization in Boston, MA. During my time there, I became involved in the organization's inaugural participatory budgeting (PB) program, which used funding from the Department of Conservation and Recreation to empower the public in deciding how to allocate state resources. This experience affirmed my belief in economic democracy as an effective way to manage public funding, and it allowed me to witness firsthand the transformative potential of participatory budgeting in action.

As a graduate student at Tufts University in Spring 2024, I built on this foundation through a course on Solidarity Economies. For my final group project, I focused on analyzing how equity goals are embedded in the design of municipality-led PB initiatives across the country. This academic exploration deepened my commitment to PB and ultimately inspired the topic of this thesis.

Through my research, I aim to explore the following question:

“How do the participatory budgeting (PB) programs in Boston and Cambridge define, prioritize, and operationalize equity in their design, implementation, and outcomes, particularly in addressing the needs of historically underserved and marginalized communities?”

Origins of Participatory Budgeting

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a democratic process that directly involves community members in deciding how to allocate part of a public budget. Since its origins in 1989 as an anti-poverty and citizen-empowerment measure in Porto Alegre, Brazil, PB has spread worldwide as a tool to deepen democracy and foster a more equitable distribution of resources (PB Project, 2025 & COB PB, 2024). In the United States, cities have adopted participatory budgeting (PB) with the goal of

empowering marginalized communities, enhancing civic engagement, embedding equity into budgeting processes, and using PB as an entry point to civic participation.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research topic, positionality, and research questions, and situates the study within the origins of participatory budgeting. Chapter 2 outlines the methodological framework, detailing the research design, data collection, and analysis strategies, including the use of case studies as a core component. Chapter 3 provides a critical review of the literature, situating participatory budgeting within broader discourses on equity, democratic governance, and civic engagement, while identifying key challenges and opportunities in institutionalizing equity. Chapter 4 presents detailed case studies of Boston and Cambridge, alongside comparative perspectives from other U.S. cities, highlighting diverse approaches to embedding equity in participatory budgeting. Chapter 5 synthesizes findings from budget allocation analyses, interviews, and thematic observations to assess how equity has been realized in practice. Chapter 6 advances equity-centered policy recommendations for participatory budgeting in Boston and Cambridge, with broader considerations for municipal leadership. Finally, Chapter 7 reflects on the implications of the findings, discusses ethical considerations, and identifies directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

Introduction to Methodology

This thesis uses a qualitative research approach to assess how the PB programs in Boston and Cambridge incorporate equity in their design, implementation, and outcomes. The research draws on interviews, case studies, policy and program documents, and contextual materials to examine the structures and practices shaping each city's approach.

Research Design

The study aims to understand how equity is defined and pursued within real-world PB processes, especially for historically underrepresented communities. A case study approach allows for in-depth analysis of Boston and Cambridge, supported by comparative insights from New York City and Chicago.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews: Six interviews were conducted with city staff, community partners, and advisory group members directly involved in PB programs. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted via Zoom. Questions explored roles, successes, and challenges in implementation, and approaches to equity.

Document and Policy Review

Rulebooks, websites, city reports, promotional materials, and external evaluations were reviewed to assess how equity goals and practices are embedded in PB frameworks.

Contextual Research

The study also drew on budget archives, online event recordings, and public engagement materials to build a deeper understanding of program evolution and communication strategies.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and documents were coded thematically, with attention to key categories such as equity definitions, outreach and access strategies, participant demographics, and institutional mechanisms. This thematic synthesis informed a comparative analysis of Boston and Cambridge's PB models. In addition, I analyzed each city's funded projects across all PB cycles included in the study, categorizing them into overarching themes, such as infrastructure, social equity, and environmental sustainability, to identify spending trends and assess alignment with equity goals. This classification helped reveal patterns in the types of communities and needs that were prioritized over time.

To further assess program strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, I conducted a SWOT analysis for each city's PB program, drawing from interview insights, program documents, and budget allocation data. The SWOT framework allowed me to synthesize qualitative and quantitative findings into actionable observations, highlighting both internal factors (e.g., program design, outreach capacity, institutional support) and external factors (e.g., political climate, community partnerships, emerging equity challenges). These analyses directly informed the equity-centered recommendations presented in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Review Introduction

This literature review examines how equity is conceptualized and operationalized within participatory budgeting (PB) programs, with a particular focus on racial equity, the inclusion of historically marginalized groups, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and immigrants, civic participation, and the challenges of institutionalizing equity. Drawing on peer-reviewed research, municipal reports, and program evaluations, it analyzes PB program designs, participant demographics, outreach strategies, and outcomes through an equity lens. The review seeks to assess the extent to which PB initiatives have fulfilled their promise of fostering more equitable civic participation and resource allocation, while identifying lessons from comparative experiences that inform future practice.

Participatory Budgeting and the Pursuit of Equity

Equity in Context: Scholars of public administration note a growing emphasis on “racial equity budgeting,” which seeks to incorporate a race-conscious lens into public budget decisions (McShea et al., 2024). PB is often cited as one mechanism to elevate the voices of marginalized communities in budgeting (McShea et al., 2024). By design, PB invites those who are often excluded from formal political processes, including youth, non-citizen immigrants, low-income residents, and communities of color, to propose projects and vote on spending priorities. This promise has made PB attractive as a tool for racial equity. As Taylor, Afshan, and Lawrence (2025) observe in a comparative study of ten U.S. PB programs, when PB is “designed with equity in mind,” it can promote access and fairness for marginalized groups, leading to tangible outcomes such as support for affordable housing, increased civic participation among underrepresented residents, and additional funding for community-identified needs in education and public services (Taylor et al., 2025).

PB has been described as an example of “empowered participatory governance” that, under the right conditions, allows ordinary residents (not just elite populations) to shape public spending (Fung, 2015). However, just opening the door to participation does not guarantee equitable representation. Critical race theory perspectives (Su, 2017) caution that power imbalances can persist even if PB may “include the voices of the marginalized” to some extent, but if the process focuses narrowly on voting and small discretionary budgets, it can “still limit” those communities’ influence over broader budget priorities and structural decisions. The study, *Promises and Challenges of Racial Equity Budgeting from the Perspective of Generally Accepted Performance Principle*, suggests that without explicit equity frameworks, PB might invite historically marginalized groups into the conversation yet fail to transfer significant decision-making power on core issues (e.g. policing, education funding) that drive inequitable outcomes (Shea et al, 2022). This tension underlies much of the literature on PB and equity: the process holds promise to “elevate the voices of marginalized communities,” but realizing that promise requires conscious design choices and political will (Shea et al, 2022).

Design Considerations for Equity in PB: Methods, Metrics, and Tools

A recurring theme in the literature is that the design of the PB process, from the voting system used to the way projects are evaluated, can greatly affect equity outcomes. Here we discuss some key design aspects and what research tells us about their equity implications:

- **Voting Systems and Outcome Fairness:** Traditional PB voting often lets participants vote for multiple projects (e.g., pick up to 5 projects) and then funds projects in order of most votes until the budget runs out. While straightforward, this method (sometimes called “greedy” allocation) can favor majority interests and more expensive projects, potentially leaving behind smaller projects that might benefit minority groups. Recent studies in computational social choice have explored alternative voting rules to make PB outcomes

more fair and representative. For instance, the Method of Equal Shares (MES) is a proportional algorithm that aims to distribute funding such that voters each get a more equal share of “satisfaction” (Maly et al., 2023). Analysis by Faliszewski et al. (2023) on real PB data found that MES would produce “considerably fairer” outcomes than the utilitarian greedy rule, by ensuring more balanced project selection across different voter preference groups. In practical terms, a rule like MES can automatically guarantee that not all funded projects come from one neighborhood or one issue category if the electorate is diverse. Another approach is the use of district or category quotas. Many PB processes (including NYC’s) segment the ballot by council district or by project type to assure some geographic and topical equity. However, this can reduce overall voter satisfaction (since a project that is in 6th place citywide might win because it’s the top in a certain category). The trade-off between proportional representation and impact is highlighted in a study by Maharjan et al. (2024): they found that a purely proportional rule like MES might sacrifice some total “impact” (e.g., funding fewer big infrastructure projects) but yield gains in “novelty” by funding more welfare, education, and cultural projects that might otherwise be overlooked. The key insight is that the choice of voting/aggregation method can embed an equity principle. Cambridge and Boston so far use simple vote-count methods, but they might consider proportional algorithms in the future to ensure, for example, that both high-income and low-income area projects get funded in some balance. Research by Yang et al. (2024) also found that participants perceived the Equal Shares rule as fairer than the traditional method, and that people *“desired the budget to be fairly distributed across city districts and project categories.”* This suggests public support for equity-focused rules exists if explained properly.

- **Equity Metrics and Ranking:** Some PB processes incorporate explicit equity metrics in project assessment. For example, Seattle’s citywide budget process developed a Racial Equity

Toolkit to score proposals; a similar logic can be applied in PB to prioritize projects that serve marginalized groups. Boston’s new PB introduced an “equity assessment” step, where proposals had to indicate the populations benefitting and whether they address an inequity. By using such metrics (e.g., does a project benefit a high-poverty neighborhood? Does it improve accessibility for disabled persons? Does it serve a minority group’s specific need?), officials or steering committees can ensure that the final ballot or final selection isn’t blind to equity. The risk, of course, is that if this is done too top-down, it might undermine the community’s choices (which could hurt trust in PB). The literature generally advises transparency: if equity criteria are used, they should be decided with community input and communicated clearly (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). Some PB evaluations have called for better data collection on who participates and who benefits, to enable iterative improvements. Pin (2020) critiqued Chicago’s PB for lacking comprehensive demographic data, which made it harder to spot if, say, Latino residents were under-participating (Shea et al, 2022). Going forward, cities are adopting surveys and even digital sign-ins to track participant demographics (voluntarily provided) to measure equity performance. This aligns with the broader performance management trend: McShea et al. (2024) suggest applying Generally Accepted Performance Principles (GAPP) to racial equity budgeting, meaning governments should set equity goals, measure results, and adjust. In PB, that could mean setting a goal like “participant demographics in PB reflect the city’s demographics within 10%” or “at least 30% of winning projects significantly benefit low-income communities,” and then evaluating each cycle against these targets.

- **Deliberation and Power-Sharing:** The design of the idea generation and proposal development phase can influence whose ideas advance. If these meetings are held only in downtown offices, working-class people might not attend; if they’re only in English,

immigrants may not contribute. Many cities, like Durham and NYC, use Steering Committees that include representatives from marginalized groups to plan the PB process (deciding meeting locations, outreach plans, etc.). This is a deliberate design choice to ensure diverse voices set the stage from the beginning. Additionally, some processes give budget delegate teams specific mandates to consider equity, e.g., in Oakland's PB for anti-displacement funds, one delegate committee was composed of low-income tenants tasked with ensuring the projects would benefit renters at risk. By structuring deliberation roles in this way, PB can go beyond raw voting to elevate certain perspectives in shaping the options. However, truly sharing power with the community also means governments must be responsive to PB outcomes. If officials routinely veto or fail to implement projects that won PB votes, especially if those projects serve marginalized areas, it undermines equity and trust. Successful cases like Cambridge and NYC generally boast high implementation rates of winning projects, which sustains participant confidence that their voice matters.

- **Funding Scope and Sustainability:** Finally, an often-overlooked design aspect is what portion of the budget is subject to PB and for how long. Equity may be better served when PB is not a one-off experiment but a recurring program that can grow. For instance, Cambridge started with \$500k and grew to \$1M, and its City Council has consistently backed it, making PB an expected part of budget planning. This consistency benefits equity because community organizations and residents learn about PB over time and those who missed out or were skeptical initially may join later once they see tangible results. In contrast, some cities launched PB pilots that were later discontinued (Seattle's youth PB, Vallejo's PB after political turnover), which can leave marginalized communities cynical or simply remove the opportunity. Institutionalizing PB via ordinances or charter amendments (as Boston did) can protect it from shifting political winds and ensure continuity. Also, scaling PB to include

operational funds or programmatic funding (not just capital projects) can deepen its equity impact, as operational projects might address social services, programming for vulnerable groups, or staffing of facilities in underserved areas, things that capital projects alone cannot do. Cambridge's inclusion of operating budget ideas in its 11th cycle is a step in this direction (City of Cambridge, 2024).

In summary, the technical design of PB is far from trivial when it comes to equity. Methods like proportional voting rules, use of equity criteria, broad eligibility, and strong outreach protocols are tools that cities have at their disposal. The emerging consensus is that design choices should be inclusive, making it as easy as possible for those who face barriers (whether logistical, linguistic, or psychological due to distrust) to engage, and structuring the process so that it doesn't inadvertently advantage the already-advantaged. As one study succinctly put it, "when designed with equity in mind, PB can lead to meaningful outcomes for marginalized groups" (Taylor, Afshan, & Lawrence, 2025).

Challenges in Institutionalizing Equity through PB

While there are many encouraging findings about PB and equity, the literature also identifies significant challenges and limitations:

- **Ensuring Broad and Ongoing Participation:** Even in the best cases, PB tends to engage just a fraction of the population. Those not participating are often the hardest to reach (e.g., extremely marginalized individuals such as the homeless, those with very limited English proficiency, or people deeply distrustful of government). For PB to truly center equity, cities must invest in outreach and civic education continuously. Cambridge and Boston's experiences show that turnout can grow over time, but it requires resources (staff,

partnerships, marketing) that not all cities commit to. There is a risk of participation fatigue: if the same civically active people dominate PB year after year, it may not fulfill the promise of including new voices in civic processes. Doherty et al. (2024) found in a survey of Cook County residents that interest in PB was higher among Black and Latino respondents and younger people than among whites and older people, a promising sign. However, they also found interest skewed toward those with higher socioeconomic status and those who already felt positive about their neighborhood. This suggests a theme: PB can attract new demographics into politics, yet it might still miss lower-income or more disaffected residents who feel alienated. Overcoming this means meeting people where they are (both physically and metaphorically) - holding PB events in public housing complexes, churches, and community centers; offering childcare and food at meetings; framing PB as a tool that *responds to frustrations* (e.g., “tired of that broken park? PB can fix it”) rather than a feel-good activity for the civically inclined. It also means accepting that building trust with historically marginalized groups is a long-term process; a few cycles of PB might not immediately bring in the most disenfranchised, but consistency and delivered results can gradually draw them in.

- **Political Will and Power Dynamics:** PB’s impact on equity is highly dependent on the support of elected officials and administrators. If key power-holders see PB as a threat or mere tokenism, they may constrain its scope or ignore its outcomes. For example, some city councils have been reluctant to allocate larger portions of the budget to PB or to allow PB to touch sensitive issues. Institutionalizing equity via PB faces internal resistance - budgeting is a core power of government, and sharing it requires political will to cede some control. In Boston, the charter change for PB signaled political will from both voters and the mayor, but the true test will be whether future administrations uphold and expand this commitment.

Another dynamic is elite capture: there is a concern (mostly theoretical so far in the U.S.) that local elites or organized interest groups could capture PB processes to direct funds to their priorities. This was a fear in Chicago's ward PB - that ward "bosses" or well-connected groups might sway the process. Evaluations didn't find overt capture, but they did note that more affluent areas sometimes turned out more voters, which, if not corrected, could skew results. Maintaining equity requires vigilance to ensure one group doesn't dominate the system. Transparency and a strong role for community-based organizations in overseeing PB can mitigate this risk.

- **Impact and Perception:** One challenge is proving that PB makes a difference for equity in the big picture. If PB funds a handful of projects, however welcome, some may question whether it's just a "*drop in the bucket*" relative to the inequities in city budgets. Activists in cities like New York and Oakland have increasingly looked at participatory budgeting as one piece of a larger push for budget justice, for instance, movements to defund or reallocate police funds, or to implement "people's budgets" that prioritize social services over infrastructure. PB alone might not achieve these sweeping changes, but it can build the civic muscle and public awareness that feed into larger budget reforms. However, if PB's connection to broader change isn't clear, public interest could decrease. There is also the issue of community expectations: once residents get a taste of decision-making, they may ask for more. This is a good problem in one sense (demand for more participation), but it can lead to disillusionment if the city doesn't expand opportunities or if winning PB projects face delays and bureaucratic hurdles. Ensuring the timely implementation of projects, publicizing their completion, and highlighting the community benefits are all crucial to sustaining momentum and proving that PB can produce equitable outcomes beyond just process.

- **Resource Intensity:** Running an equity-centered PB is resource-intensive. It requires staff to do outreach in multiple languages, facilitators to run meetings inclusively, data analysis to monitor equity metrics, and sometimes accommodations like translation, transportation, or stipends for participants (some cities offer small stipends to youth or low-income delegates to reduce financial barriers to volunteering). In tight budget environments, PB programs may struggle to secure funding for their own operations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, New York City suspended PB for 2020, citing budget constraints and logistical issues, which advocates feared would roll back gains in community engagement. (NYC has since restarted PB on a smaller scale.) The irony that an initiative meant to promote equitable budgeting can itself fall victim to budgeting decisions is not lost. This raises a meta-equity issue: ensuring that participatory processes themselves are equitably funded and sustained, so they are not a luxury only wealthy cities or boom times can afford.
- **Measuring Equity Outcomes:** Finally, evaluating PB's equity impact is an ongoing challenge. While participation rates and demographics can be measured, assessing how PB affects long-term equity (e.g., does it lead to reduced disparities in infrastructure quality between neighborhoods? Does it increase empowerment in marginalized communities?) is difficult. PB is often a small slice of the pie, so isolating its effect on broader equity indicators is complex. Nevertheless, some studies attempt to gauge these outcomes. For example, a study in *Public Administration Quarterly* (2022) asked "How successful is PB in promoting social equity?" and used NYC as a case, finding modest improvements in resource distribution but noting the limited scope of projects (Johnson, 2022). Going forward, more longitudinal research could examine if neighborhoods that experience PB show higher civic engagement or get more attention in other city programs. If PB is truly institutionalized, one might

expect a cultural shift in government to value community input across the board, which could translate into more equitable policies beyond PB.

Literature Review Conclusion

This literature review has examined the promise and limitations of participatory budgeting (PB) as a vehicle for advancing equity, with particular attention to racial equity, the inclusion of historically marginalized groups, and the challenges of institutionalizing such efforts. Across diverse contexts, the literature demonstrates that PB can facilitate more inclusive civic participation and direct resources toward community-identified needs. When intentionally designed, PB processes have empowered youth, immigrants, and low-income residents to influence public spending, fostering a sense of civic agency and belonging.

Yet the review also highlights significant structural and operational challenges. Power imbalances, limited funding scopes, and inadequate institutional support often constrain PB's ability to deliver transformative change. Design choices, such as voting rules, equity metrics, outreach strategies, and deliberative mechanisms, emerge as critical determinants of who participates and who benefits. Sustaining PB over multiple cycles and embedding it within broader governance frameworks appear essential for achieving durable equity outcomes.

Overall, the literature underscores that while PB alone cannot resolve entrenched inequities, it offers a vital tool for democratizing budgetary decision-making and advancing equity when coupled with strong political will and robust community partnerships. These insights inform the subsequent case studies, which explore how PB programs in Boston, Cambridge, and other U.S. cities have navigated these tensions and opportunities in practice.

CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDIES

To ground the theoretical insights of the literature review, this chapter examines case studies of participatory budgeting (PB) programs in U.S. cities. Case studies offer a critical lens to explore how PB initiatives operationalize equity in both process and outcomes. They allow for nuanced analysis of institutional design, community engagement practices, and the successes and challenges of embedding equity within municipal governance. Importantly, this chapter uses a comparative case study approach, focusing on PB programs in Boston and Cambridge, with additional perspectives from other cities, to identify patterns and lessons in advancing equity. In analyzing the funded projects from these programs, three broad project categories are used as an analytical framework: **Infrastructure** (physical improvements to public spaces or facilities), **Social Equity** (projects benefiting marginalized or underrepresented populations), and **Environmental Sustainability** (initiatives aimed at climate resilience, conservation, or green infrastructure). This categorization helps illuminate how each PB program's spending aligns with equity goals.

The Boston and Cambridge cases provide an opportunity for both intra-city and cross-city comparison, illustrating distinct approaches to institutionalizing PB with equity objectives. Boston's youth-focused PB program and its newly launched citywide initiative contrast with Cambridge's long-running citywide process driven by grassroots engagement. Comparative perspectives from New York City, Chicago, and other U.S. municipalities further place these examples in a broader national context, highlighting shared challenges, innovative practices, and key lessons for advancing equity through participatory governance.

Case Study: Boston's Participatory Budgeting Programs

The City of Boston offers a unique intra-city study of two PB initiatives with different origins and target populations: a youth-led PB program launched in 2014 and a new citywide PB program launched in 2024. Both aim to be inclusive, but they do so in distinct ways and contexts.

Youth Lead the Change (Boston, 2014-2023)

In 2014, Boston became the first city in the United States to implement a youth-led PB program with an exclusive focus on young people ages 12-25. Branded **Youth Lead the Change (YLC)**, this initiative gives Boston's young residents decision-making power over \$1 million of the City's capital budget each year (COB PB, 2024). The program's mission is explicitly to engage Boston's youth, particularly those from communities historically marginalized in city processes. YLC allows youth to propose and fund projects that benefit their communities (Augsberger et al., 2016). The process includes youth-driven idea collection, proposal development with the help of City staff, and a voting phase open to Boston residents aged 12-25. In essence, YLC is an effort to build civic empowerment among young people and to embed principles of racial and social justice in budgeting from the ground up (COB YLC, 2024).

Outreach and Representation: Evaluations of YLC indicate that the City and youth organizers employed targeted outreach to engage diverse young residents. For example, City staff partnered with the My Brother's Keeper initiative to recruit Black and Latino youth, and held assemblies in schools across Boston to reach students who might not typically engage in city programs. These efforts had notable results. In the program's third year, Asian and Black youth were slightly overrepresented among the "Change Agent" volunteers who led the process, while idea contributors (and voters) were heavily Black and Latino (Augsberger et al., 2016). This suggests YLC succeeded in empowering youth of color in key roles (Augsberger et al., 2016). Furthermore, about 70% of

YLC voters in one cycle were enrolled in Boston public schools, reflecting broad engagement across the city's youth population. Students from 76 of Boston's 125 public schools participated in voting, indicating outreach reached a wide array of neighborhoods (Augsberger et al., 2016).

However, early cycles of the program also revealed participation gaps. Researchers found that despite citywide outreach, participation skewed toward higher-achieving schools. Notably, 42% of all youth votes in one cycle came from Boston Latin School (an exam-based elite public school), meaning nearly 30% of voters were drawn from that one school alone (Augsberger et al., 2016). This overrepresentation of more privileged "exam school" students pointed to persistent challenges in reaching youth outside traditional power channels. Similarly, immigrant youth and non-English speakers were underrepresented, which led YLC organizers to prioritize language accessibility (for example, translating voting materials into Haitian Creole, Spanish, and Vietnamese the top languages identified by youth participants) (Augsberger et al., 2016). These findings underscore that racial and educational inclusivity were explicit concerns in YLC's design and that ongoing adjustments such as multilingual ballots and targeted recruitment beyond elite schools were needed to uphold equity goals (Augsberger et al., 2016).

Equity Outcomes: The types of projects funded through YLC reflect youth-defined equity priorities. Over the years, winning projects have included park improvements in underserved neighborhoods, Chromebooks for students lacking technology at home, transit subsidies for youth, and murals or public art celebrating minority cultures (City of Boston Youth Engagement Reports, 2015-2020). By directing resources to such projects, the youth PB process has funneled city funds toward needs identified by young people of color and other marginalized youth. In an evaluation of YLC's process, surveys showed participants gained civic skills and knowledge and felt that YLC gave them a voice in local government (Su, 2017). For instance, 92% of youth respondents in one survey

reported they better understood community infrastructure needs after attending a PB assembly, and 74% felt they had a better understanding of the city budget after voting (Su, 2017). These educational and empowerment benefits, while harder to measure than dollars spent, are a critical part of equity, demonstrating how PB can build capacity among those traditionally excluded from public decision-making. Still, the youth program's limited scope (allocating \$1 million out of a large city budget) and its restriction to capital projects only have constrained its transformative potential. As one analysis noted, giving youth power over a small pot of money does not necessarily shift how the city spends the rest of its budget on youth or racial equity issues (Su, 2017). In that sense, YLC has been a necessary but not sufficient step toward institutionalizing equity in Boston's budgeting; indeed, recognition of its limits helped spur the creation of a citywide PB process for all residents.

Boston's Youth Lead the Change PB Budget Trend Patterns Analysis (2014-2023, Cycles 1-8)

Youth Lead the Change (YLC) is Boston's youth-driven participatory budgeting program, allocating \$1 million of city capital funds each cycle to projects chosen by residents aged roughly 12-25 years old. Below is an overview of each annual cycle's budget, number of projects funded, and the general category of those projects. Each project has been classified into one of three categories:

Infrastructure (physical capital improvements like streets, facilities, parks), **Social Equity** (services or amenities benefiting underserved communities), or **Environmental Sustainability** (green infrastructure and climate resilience projects). *Note:* All YLC projects must be capital projects by design, but many also advance social or environmental goals. (Official YLC materials often group projects by themes like parks, education, or safety; here we use a simplified framework aligned with the categories defined above for consistency and cross-year comparison.)

Year	Cycle #	Money Allocated	Total Projects
2014-15 (pilot)	Cycle 1	\$1,000,000	7
2015	Cycle 2	\$1,000,000	4
2016	Cycle 3	\$1,000,000	5
2017	Cycle 4	\$1,000,000	5
2018	Cycle 5	\$1,000,000	3
2019-2020	Cycle 6	\$1,000,000	3
2021-2022	Cycle 7	\$1,000,000	N/A
2023	Cycle 8	\$1,000,000	3

Note: No standard YLC vote was held in 2021 (Cycle 7) as the program was temporarily paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a mayoral transition; the cycle resumed and concluded in 2022.

2014-15 (Cycle 1 Pilot): “Youth Lead the Change” Launch *Total Allocated:* \$1,000,000. Seven projects won funding in YLC’s inaugural cycle (making them the nation’s first youth-decided PB projects), focusing largely on parks and recreational spaces:

- Franklin Park Playground and Picnic Area Upgrade:** Major infrastructure renovation of Franklin Park’s playground (American Legion Picnic Grove), including new play equipment (swings, slides, monkey bars), benches, softer surfacing, and exercise stations. This project emphasized social equity by improving accessibility for children with disabilities (Participedia, 2014; Boston Makers, 2015).

- **Boston Art Walls:** Creation of designated free wall space for street art, where local youth and artists can legally display graffiti and murals, with volunteer upkeep. This provided physical infrastructure for creative expression, and also fostered social benefits by engaging young artists (Participedia, 2014; Boston Makers, 2015).
- **Chromebooks for High Schools:** Purchase of approximately 90 laptop computers (about 30 each) for three public high schools in East Boston, South Boston, and Charlestown. This technology infrastructure investment aimed to bridge the digital divide and improve educational resources a clear social equity effort benefiting students in under-resourced school communities (Participedia, 2014; Boston Makers, 2015).
- **Skate Park Feasibility Study:** A planning study to identify sites and design options for a new skate park (focused on neighborhoods like Dorchester, South Boston, and East Boston). While not a tangible structure yet, this set the stage for a future recreational infrastructure project and responded to youth recreational needs (Participedia, 2014; Boston Makers, 2015).
- **Security Cameras in Dr. Loesch Family Park:** Installation of 15-20 security cameras at a Dorchester park to improve safety. A physical infrastructure project with a public safety focus, it aimed to make this park (in a high-crime area) safer for the community (Participedia, 2014; Boston Makers, 2015).
- **Paris Street Playground “Extreme Makeover”:** Upgrades to Paris Street Playground in East Boston, including new creative water features, handicap-accessible play equipment, and even tech-enabled amenities like solar-powered charging benches. This infrastructure project had equity implications by bringing improved amenities to a dense immigrant neighborhood (Participedia, 2014; Boston Makers, 2015).

- **New Sidewalks for New Parks:** Sidewalk and lighting improvements around two recently renovated parks (Howes Playground in East Boston and Mount Pleasant Park in Roxbury). This infrastructure project improved pedestrian safety and access in park areas (Participedia, 2014; Boston Makers, 2015).

2014 Summary: The inaugural cycle was dominated by Infrastructure projects all seven winning projects involved capital improvements to parks, recreation facilities, or school resources.

Nonetheless, many had strong Social Equity dimensions: for example, the Franklin Park playground and Paris Street Playground upgrades improved accessibility for children with disabilities and neighborhood youth, and the Chromebook initiative targeted schools in underserved areas. Youth clearly prioritized improving public spaces (parks, playgrounds) and expanding access to technology and art. Environmental themes were less explicit in this first year, aside from indirect benefits of greener and safer parks. Overall, the first year set a precedent of tangible, neighborhood-focused projects chosen by over 1,500 young voters (Participedia, 2014; Boston Makers, 2015; Larson, 2016).

2015 (Cycle 2): Expanding Wi-Fi and Water Stations *Total Allocated:* \$1,000,000. Four projects won in the second cycle, reflecting a continued focus on city infrastructure with a growing emphasis on technology access and environmental amenities:

- **“Hubway” Bike-Share Expansion Infrastructure** \$101,600: Expansion of the Hubway bike-share system to additional neighborhoods. This project extended affordable bike transit into new areas, promoting mobility equity and sustainable transport (Participatory Budgeting Project, 2015).
- **“Wicked Free Wi-Fi” Expansion Infrastructure/Social Equity** \$119,000: Extension of Boston’s free municipal Wi-Fi network to neighborhoods lacking affordable internet, with an

emphasis on coverage around schools and community centers. This tech infrastructure project had a strong social equity rationale, aiming to bridge the digital divide for youth without reliable home internet (Participatory Budgeting Project, 2015).

- **Water Bottle Refill Stations in Parks Infrastructure/Environmental \$260,000:**

Installation of new water fountain and refill stations in public parks to encourage reusable bottle use and keep park-goers hydrated. An infrastructure upgrade with clear environmental sustainability goals (reducing plastic waste) as well as public health benefits (Participatory Budgeting Project, 2015).

- **Boston Latin Academy Gym Renovation Infrastructure \$475,000:** Upgrades to the Boston Latin Academy school gymnasium, including new flooring, bleacher repairs, and painting (Participatory Budgeting Project, 2015). This infrastructure project improved a public school facility used by many youth, indirectly supporting social and educational outcomes.

2015 Summary: In YLC's second year, \$1 million funded fewer projects, with each receiving a larger share of the budget. Infrastructure still led the way, from transit and tech investments to school facilities. Notably, two projects addressed citywide access gaps: the free Wi-Fi expansion and the water refill stations, indicating youth interest in both high-tech connectivity and basic environmental amenities. The Wi-Fi and water station projects bridged Social Equity and Environmental Sustainability goals (digital inclusion and waste reduction, respectively), while the bike-share and gym projects were more squarely infrastructure (with equity considerations in expanding transit access and improving a school serving diverse youth). The winning projects, selected by ~2,000 youth voters, showed a balance between improving daily life for youth (internet access, recreation facilities) and advancing city sustainability initiatives. Infrastructure remained the dominant category by

spending, but the inclusion of an eco-friendly project (hydration stations) presaged a growing environmental awareness in later cycles (Participatory Budgeting Project, 2015; Larson, 2016).

2016 (Cycle 3): Tech for Equity and Inclusive Parks *Total Allocated: \$1,000,000.* In the third YLC cycle (2015-16), youth delegates developed a ballot of 14 proposals, and voters ultimately funded five projects totaling roughly \$1 million (sources differ slightly on the count, but about five major projects were selected). These projects continued to invest in physical infrastructure while introducing creative tech solutions and inclusive design:

- **“More Trash Cans and Recycling Bins” Infrastructure/Environmental/Social Equity** *approx. \$80,000:* Installation of new public litter barrels and recycling bins on streets in neighborhoods like Mattapan, Dorchester, and Roxbury that previously lacked them. This low-cost infrastructure project had both environmental benefits (cleaner streets, encouraging recycling) and social equity intent (improving city services in underserved areas) (Shepelavy, 2019; Richmond People’s Budget, 2025; Participatory Budgeting Project, 2016).
- **“Job and Resource Finder” Mobile App Infrastructure (Tech)/Social Equity** *approx. \$135,000:* Development of a smartphone app to help Boston youth find job opportunities, programs, free events, and scholarships citywide. This was an innovative tech infrastructure project squarely aimed at social equity, improving youth access to resources. It was noted as one of the year’s winning projects in the YLC evaluation (Augsberger et al., 2017; Participatory Budgeting Project, 2016).
- **“Parks are for Everyone” Inclusive Play Equipment Infrastructure/Social Equity** *approx. \$500,000:* A plan to add handicap-accessible and inclusive play features to up to 10 parks across Boston (e.g. adaptive playground equipment for children with disabilities in multiple neighborhoods) (Participatory Budgeting Project, 2016). As a large infrastructure

investment, this directly advanced social equity by promoting accessible recreation citywide.

It built on the prior year's theme of making play spaces more inclusive, but on a broader scale.

- **“Wicked Free Wi-Fi 3.0” Expansion Infrastructure/Social Equity** *approx.* \$150,000: A further expansion of free public Wi-Fi, focusing on key outdoor areas like sidewalks and MBTA bus stops, and adding phone charging stations at these hubs (Participatory Budgeting Project, 2016). This project continued the push for digital inclusion, extending internet access for youth on-the-go. By this year, Boston's youth PB had allocated funds to add Wi-Fi in schools, community centers, and other public spaces (Cyril, 2017).
- **Youth Community Center Dance/Recording Space (“Turn Up at Community Centers”)** *approx.* \$280,000: Upgrades to the BCYF Curtis Hall Community Center in Jamaica Plain, installing a dance floor, lighting, sound system, and DJ booth to create a safe party and performance venue for youth (Participatory Budgeting Project, 2016). This infrastructure project provided a social outlet for teens by promoting arts and culture; while it was essentially a capital amenity, it served social equity goals by offering a free, positive space for youth events in a neighborhood center.

2016 Summary: The third cycle saw a mix of physical and digital projects, reflecting broadening youth priorities. Traditional **Infrastructure** improvements (trash receptacles, park equipment) shared the stage with tech-based **Social Equity** initiatives (a jobs app, Wi-Fi access) and creative youth spaces. Notably, one of the largest projects explicitly targeted universal design in parks, showing a strong focus on equity and accessibility. Meanwhile, the trash/recycling bins project continued the theme of grassroots neighborhood improvements. The funded projects, selected by roughly 3,500 youth voters, spanned multiple categories: two were primarily infrastructure, two were

tech-centric equity projects, and one (the inclusive parks initiative) bridged infrastructure with social inclusion. Environmental concerns featured via the recycling bins project and indirectly through the notion of reusing and improving public spaces, but social benefits were the most pronounced. By the end of 2016, Boston's youth PB had funded a total of 17 projects over three years (approximately \$3 million in capital spending), and the program was garnering international recognition for empowering youth voices (Cyril, 2017; Larson, 2016).

2017 (Cycle 4): Youth Creativity, Jobs, and Enterprise *Total Allocated: \$1,000,000.* The fourth YLC cycle shifted toward inventive solutions for economic and creative opportunities, funding five projects (announced in July 2017) (City of Boston, 2017):

- **“Get Hired” Truck Infrastructure/Social Equity** *approx. \$250,000:* A mobile employment resource center (a van outfitted with computers and staffed counselors) to help youth with job searches, résumé building, and applications on-the-go. This capital investment (a vehicle) had a social equity mission, bringing job services directly to neighborhoods and youth who might lack access to such resources (Shepelavy, 2019; City of Boston, 2017).
- **Informative Homeless Resources Billboard Infrastructure/Tech, Social Equity** *approx. \$100,000:* A digital billboard or display providing real-time information on services, housing, and job opportunities for homeless youth. This project was strongly social-equity-oriented, aiming to support one of the city's most vulnerable youth populations through an infrastructure/technology solution (Shepelavy, 2019; City of Boston, 2017).
- **Performing and Visual Arts Studio Infrastructure/Social Equity** (budget not specified in sources): Creation of a dedicated arts space where people of all ages (especially youth) can produce music, dance, and visual art. Likely implemented by repurposing or upgrading an

existing facility, this infrastructure project promoted social equity by providing free arts programming space in the community, enriching cultural access for youth (City of Boston, 2017).

- **“Future Media Center” Infrastructure/Social Equity** (budget not specified): A youth technology/media center equipped with cutting-edge hardware and software, giving students access to media production tools otherwise unavailable to them. This was an infrastructure project (a physical lab space) with an educational equity goal, aiming to narrow the technology gap for underrepresented students (City of Boston, 2017).
- **Youth Retail Space (Mobile) Infrastructure/Social Equity** *approx.* \$260,000: A mobile retail cart or pop-up kiosk for youth entrepreneurs to sell products. By funding this physical platform, the project supported social equity in economic development, empowering young people (including those from low-income backgrounds) to launch small businesses (Shepelavy, 2019; City of Boston, 2017).

2017 Summary: Year 4 was marked by Social Equity innovation delivered through capital projects.

All five winning projects involved creating new spaces or tools to uplift youth focusing on employment, economic empowerment, arts, and supporting homeless youth. While they took the form of infrastructure (vehicles, equipment, facility upgrades), the intent was to address deeper social needs. Infrastructure remained the mechanism (since only capital purchases are allowed), but unlike prior years’ park and transit improvements, these projects had a more programmatic character (e.g. a “Get Hired” truck is essentially a roving job center). No explicitly green projects won in 2017; instead, the dominant theme was equity and inclusion (job access, creative expression, youth-led enterprise). This reflects a trend: as the YLC process matured, Boston’s youth increasingly prioritized projects targeting systemic social issues (employment, homelessness, creative

opportunity) in addition to improving physical amenities. The funding was spread fairly evenly across the five initiatives (roughly \$950k total for five projects), indicating a strategy of investing in multiple mid-sized ideas rather than one or two very large ones (Shepelavy, 2019).

2018 (Cycle 5): Climate and Comfort Fewer, Bigger Projects *Total Allocated:* \$1,000,000. The fifth YLC cycle (2018) funded only three projects the fewest to date as youth voters opted for larger-impact capital investments. The winning projects (ranked 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place) were:

- **Fans in Schools:** Installing electric fans in Boston public school buildings that lack air conditioning to provide a more comfortable learning environment during hot weather (City of Boston, 2018). This was a straightforward **Infrastructure** project (facility improvement) with a social equity rationale: extreme heat disproportionately affects students in older, under-resourced school buildings, and this project aimed to improve educational conditions for those students.
- **Youth Wi-Fi Lounge (City Hall):** Creating a dedicated youth lounge space in Boston City Hall with “Wicked Free” Wi-Fi, computers, and meeting areas for students to gather, collaborate, and access city resources (City of Boston, 2018). This project repurposed City Hall space into youth-friendly infrastructure, essentially building a civic tech hub. It served Social Equity goals by giving young people including those who might not have such resources elsewhere a free, safe place downtown with internet access and support for working on projects or homework.
- **Solar Panels on City Buildings:** Installing solar panels on city-owned properties to generate renewable energy, save money long-term, and combat climate change (City of Boston, 2018). A clear Environmental Sustainability project, this marked the first explicitly

“green” infrastructure funded by YLC. It involved physical infrastructure (solar equipment) but was driven by climate action goals shared by the youth.

2018 Summary: The selections in 2018 highlight a shift to bigger-ticket projects with citywide impact. Roughly one-third of the \$1M budget went to each of the three winning ideas, as opposed to being spread among many smaller ones. Two projects, the school fans and the City Hall youth lounge, continued the trend of capital investments addressing youth comfort and access (educational climate control and civic/tech accessibility), aligning with **Social Equity** priorities. The third project brought **Environmental Sustainability** to the forefront by funding clean energy infrastructure. Notably, prior YLC cycles had not directly tackled climate change; the solar panels project indicates that by 2018, Boston youth were increasingly prioritizing environmental initiatives alongside traditional community improvements. In terms of categories, infrastructure was still 100% of the spending (by requirement), but one project was explicitly green infrastructure, and the others had clear social inclusion benefits. This cycle also set a precedent for funding fewer, larger projects, a trend that would continue as the program evolved. By choosing only three winners, 2018 hinted at a “quality over quantity” approach that would characterize later cycles (City of Boston, 2018; Richmond People’s Budget, 2025).

2019-2020 (Cycle 6): Green and Equitable City Improvements *Total Allocated:* \$1,000,000. The sixth cycle of YLC (which took place over late 2019 into early 2020) saw youth priorities pivot even more toward climate resilience and helping vulnerable populations. Around three projects were funded (the process may have been slightly consolidated due to timing), including:

- **School Heating System Replacements:** Upgrading or replacing old heating/HVAC systems in public school buildings to improve winter conditions in classrooms. This

Infrastructure project addressed student comfort and energy efficiency; it had both **Social Equity** aspects (providing better learning environments in older, under-resourced schools) and **Environmental** benefits (new systems are likely more energy efficient) (YouthPB.eu, n.d.).

- **Homeless Shelter Improvements (“Enhancing a Shelter”):** Renovating and improving facilities in a youth homeless shelter to create more comfortable, welcoming spaces. A social-equity-driven capital project, this likely involved upgrades such as new furniture, fixtures, or layout changes to better serve homeless youth. By investing PB funds here, young voters demonstrated a focus on aiding marginalized peers through tangible improvements (Richmond People’s Budget, 2025; YouthPB.eu, n.d.).
- **Street Tree Planting Initiative:** Planting street trees and adding greenery along main roads and sidewalks in several neighborhoods as a climate adaptation and beautification effort. This **Environmental Sustainability** project provided green infrastructure by increasing the urban tree canopy to mitigate heat, absorb stormwater, and improve air quality. It also had equity elements, since low-income areas often have fewer trees; targeting those streets helped distribute environmental benefits more fairly (Richmond People’s Budget, 2025; YouthPB.eu, n.d.).

2019-2020 Summary: The Cycle 6 outcomes underscored a strong emphasis on **Environmental Sustainability** and **Social Equity**, often combined within the same projects. All funded initiatives still involved building physical infrastructure or improvements, but each addressed a pressing community need identified by youth: school facilities (heating) for better learning conditions, shelter upgrades to support homeless youth, and street trees to combat climate impacts. In effect, infrastructure spending was explicitly targeted at equity (schools, shelters) and the environment

(urban greening). This selection also continued the trend toward larger-scale projects instead of many small ones; a few big investments were chosen to maximize impact. The total number of projects funded was smaller than in the early years, as more of the budget was devoted to each priority. By the end of 2020, Boston's YLC had clearly matured into a platform for youth to push city government on climate action and social justice concerns, not just on parks and recreation.

(Note: The 2019-20 cycle coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Voting and project selection for that cycle were completed with many votes collected online, but some project implementations faced delays. The momentum for youth-led projects was sustained, but the next cycle's timeline was adjusted.)

2021-2022 (Cycle 7): Transition and New Priorities *Total Allocated: ~\$1,000,000 (planned).* No standard YLC vote was held in 2021, as the program was briefly paused amid the pandemic and a mayoral transition. During this hiatus, Boston voters approved a City Charter amendment (November 2021) to create a citywide PB process beyond the youth program. By late 2021, the incoming administration of Mayor Michelle Wu affirmed support for YLC and moved to establish a permanent Office of Participatory Budgeting. YLC resumed in 2022 with an infusion of new ideas reflecting contemporary issues; notably, youth successfully championed the creation of urban farms in Boston's "food desert" neighborhoods (Richmond People's Budget, 2025):

- **Urban Farms in Food Deserts:** This project involved acquiring land or equipment to start community urban farms or gardens in neighborhoods lacking access to fresh produce. As an Infrastructure investment, it might have included building greenhouses or raised-bed gardens, but the core goal was Social Equity (addressing food insecurity in low-income areas), achieved through Environmental Sustainability (promoting local, sustainable agriculture). The YLC allocation helped launch at least one such urban farm, demonstrating

youths' commitment to public health and climate-friendly food systems (Richmond People's Budget, 2025).

(Other 2022 proposals included continued Wi-Fi expansions and public art or streetscape improvements, but the urban farming initiative was a standout new direction. By the end of 2022, Boston had formally created the City's Participatory Budgeting Office, ensuring YLC would continue and potentially integrate with broader PB efforts.)

2021-2022 Summary: In this transition period, YLC maintained its Social Equity and Environmental focus even as the process shifted administratively. After a year off, the youth participants returned to fund an innovative urban agriculture project, marking a bold expansion of what “infrastructure” means in PB (from playgrounds to farms). This suggests that youth priorities were becoming increasingly intersectional tackling climate change, health, and inequality together. The support for urban farms, alongside previous projects like tree planting and shelter upgrades, highlights a sustained interest in community well-being and resilience. Geographically, projects in this era aimed to uplift underserved neighborhoods (from creating green spaces in food deserts to adding trees in low-canopy areas). Organizationally, the establishment of a formal PB Office demonstrated that the YLC model had proven its value, influencing city policy to broaden participatory budgeting for all ages while preserving YLC's core mission of youth empowerment in civic decision-making.

2023 (Cycle 8): Fewer Projects, Deeper Impact *Total Allocated: \$1,000,000.* By 2023, Youth Lead the Change had fully evolved toward funding a limited number of high-impact projects each cycle, in line with a new citywide PB framework on the horizon. Rather than splitting the \$1M into many smaller projects, the top one or two proposals received the bulk of funding (a shift formalized in the

subsequent 2024 cycle). In 2023, the youth ballot continued to reflect themes of equity and sustainability, and at least one major project was implemented:

- **Community Urban Farm & Garden Expansion:** Building on the prior year’s momentum, YLC 2023 funded the establishment of an additional urban farm and community garden in another Boston neighborhood. This Infrastructure project (e.g. converting a vacant lot into a functioning farm with raised beds, tool sheds, and irrigation) directly advanced Social Equity (improving healthy food access and offering youth jobs in urban farming) and Environmental Sustainability (local food production, creation of green space). (Richmond People’s Budget, 2025)

(Other leading proposals in 2023 included capital improvements for marginalized communities for example, further enhancements to shelters and community centers and public space upgrades in immigrant neighborhoods like Chinatown (e.g. streetscape safety improvements) (Chan, 2024). YLC voting results prioritized one or two such ideas to receive the full \$1M. Not all could be funded at once, but youth advocates continued to push for projects like expanded free Wi-Fi and safer public spaces for communities in need, even if those had to wait for future cycles.)

2023 Summary: The eighth cycle underscored a “quality over quantity” approach. YLC concentrated its entire budget on one or two transformative projects that embodied the values cultivated over the past decade: racial and social equity, climate resilience, and neighborhood inclusion. The funded urban farm project exemplified this approach, touching on economic justice, public health, and sustainability all at once. By focusing on fewer projects, the youth PB process in 2023 ensured each funded idea could be fully realized at scale. This year also solidified the alignment of YLC with broader city priorities the youth’s choices mirrored ongoing policy discussions in Boston around food justice, climate adaptation, and equitable development. With thousands of

young Bostonians having participated in YLC by this point, their cumulative voice was beginning to influence municipal budget priorities in tangible ways. The stage was set for 2024 and beyond to integrate the youth PB experience with the city's new all-ages PB initiative, while retaining YLC's core mission of youth empowerment.

Trends and Trajectory (2014-2023): Over its first decade, Youth Lead the Change exhibited clear shifts in the types of projects funded and the focus of youth priorities:

- **From Parks and Playgrounds to Climate and Equity:** In the early years, YLC projects were largely traditional capital improvements refurbishing parks, playgrounds, school facilities, or adding amenities like benches, Wi-Fi, and art murals. These addressed immediate neighborhood needs (safer parks, updated equipment, connectivity). As the years progressed, the portfolio expanded to more systemic issues: youth increasingly funded projects to help underserved populations (e.g. homeless youth, jobless teens) and to advance environmental sustainability (solar panels, tree planting, urban farming). By the late 2010s and early 2020s, a substantial portion of YLC funding was going to climate resilience or public health-related infrastructure, signaling a maturation of youth interests toward global challenges at the local level.
- **Persistent Social Equity Focus:** Across all years, a through-line of YLC has been investment in projects benefiting marginalized communities and neighborhoods. Many YLC projects specifically targeted areas or groups that had been neglected or under-resourced: for example, installing trash and recycling bins in Roxbury and Dorchester where they were lacking, improving playground accessibility for children with disabilities, bringing free Wi-Fi to public housing areas, or creating art and cultural spaces for youth of color. The Social Equity category consistently dominated (or co-dominated) YLC's narrative. Even when

projects were physical infrastructure in nature, they often aimed to level the playing field whether in access to technology, recreation, or basic services. Notably, YLC organizers made efforts to engage diverse groups in idea collection (for instance, in 2018 extra outreach was done to include LGBTQ youth, homeless youth, immigrant youth, etc.), resulting in projects that reflected those voices (Richmond People’s Budget, 2025; YouthPB.eu, n.d.).

- **Infrastructure as a Means, Not the End:** Because YLC funds come from the city’s capital budget, all winning projects had to be infrastructure or equipment investments by rule. However, Boston’s youth found creative ways to use Infrastructure to serve deeper purposes. A truck or a room renovation became a vehicle for job assistance or art programming; park improvements were designed to be inclusive for all ages and abilities; a solar panel installation was justified by environmental education and climate action. In essence, the category mix of YLC projects often overlapped most infrastructure projects also produced social benefits, and some delivered environmental benefits as well. An initiative like the urban farm spans all three categories (physical infrastructure of a garden, social/economic benefit in a food desert, and an environmental improvement). This overlap was acknowledged by YLC organizers, and many projects can be seen as multi-category (e.g. an accessible playground = Infrastructure + Social Equity; solar panels = Infrastructure + Environmental). (Gakhal, 2020; City of Boston, 2018)
- **Fewer Projects, Larger Scale:** Over the years, the number of projects funded each cycle generally declined, while the average size (budget per project) grew. In 2014, seven small projects were funded (average \approx \$142k each). By 2018, only three projects were funded (average \approx \$333k each). In the most recent cycles (2022-2023), effectively one or two big projects received the full \$1M. This trend indicates that youth gravitated toward making a bigger impact on key issues by concentrating resources, rather than scattering funds among

many modest upgrades. It also reflects learning and pragmatism: some early projects took years to implement, and later cycles may have aimed for more impactful, “shovel-ready” investments. One side effect of this shift is that the dominance of any single category could vary year to year. For instance, in 2014 infrastructure was 100% of projects by definition, but by 2017 nearly every project also had an explicit social focus. Overall, **Infrastructure** remained the common thread (by necessity), but Social Equity emerged as the heart of YLC’s mission, and Environmental projects became more common in later years as youth priorities expanded.

- **Geographic and Demographic Equity:** Reviewing the project locations and target populations from 2014 to 2023 shows an effort to distribute investments across Boston’s neighborhoods and communities. Early on, parks in East Boston, Dorchester, Roslindale, and other neighborhoods got attention; later, citywide initiatives (Wi-Fi, trees, urban farms) ensured multiple areas benefited. The Mayor’s Youth Council structure intentionally included youth from all neighborhoods, which helped generate ideas from across the city. Additionally, some cycles tried (informally) to fund at least one project per major theme (e.g., one arts project, one tech project, one recreation project), though ultimate choices depended on vote totals. The Boston City Record noted that by 2018, over five years, \$6 million had been allocated and “many more” ideas from youth had been implemented, ranging from Wi-Fi to water stations to trash barrels and security cameras, illustrating the breadth of impact (City of Boston, 2018; Larson, 2016).

In summary, Boston’s Youth Lead the Change (2014-2023) demonstrates a remarkable trajectory. What began as a novel experiment to give teens a say in capital spending evolved into a sustained platform for youth-driven civic innovation. Early allocation patterns were weighted toward

Infrastructure for recreation (playgrounds, parks) and connectivity (Wi-Fi, laptops). Over time, the balance shifted toward projects with explicit Social Equity missions (supporting homeless youth, job training programs, cultural and creative spaces) and eventually toward Environmental Sustainability (solar energy installations, urban greening, food justice initiatives), aligning with the heightened social and climate consciousness of Boston's youth. Many projects defied a single-category classification, marrying social and environmental goals, a reflection of how youth have approached city problems holistically. Notably, official YLC reports often categorized projects by city department or theme, but the spirit is similar: for instance, a "Parks and Recreation" project might also be described as an equity or public health initiative. Our simplified framework highlights that Boston's youth consistently invest in physical improvements that deliver social value and promote sustainability. By 2023, YLC had cemented itself as a national model of youth-led budgeting, one that not only builds new basketball courts or installs solar panels, but also builds a new generation of engaged, socially conscious civic leaders (Cyril, 2017; City of Boston, 2018).

Storytelling Examples: PB Outcomes with Lasting Equity Impact

One powerful way to understand the equity potential of participatory budgeting is through stories of specific projects that have emerged from these processes. In Boston, the earlier Youth Lead the Change (YLC) initiative - the nation's first youth-only PB - produced ideas that translated into real programs benefiting marginalized communities. Two standout examples frequently cited by interviewees are the Wicked Free Wi-Fi network and the MBTA Youth Pass program. These illustrate how PB, even on a small scale, can catalyze broader equity-focused changes.

Expanding Internet Access: "Wicked Free Wi-Fi." In 2014, Boston's YLC youth participants proposed an idea to expand free wireless internet access in Boston, particularly in underserved neighborhoods where the digital divide was evident. At the time, many low-income families in

Boston, especially those in public housing, lacked affordable broadband. The youth proposal, dubbed “*Wicked Free Wi-Fi*,” aimed to provide free Wi-Fi in parks, community centers, and major bus stops. This idea resonated with young people who saw internet connectivity as essential for education and opportunity. It was placed on the YLC ballot and won funding. With ~\$150,000 allocated by youth voters (City of Boston, 2016), the City piloted Wi-Fi hotspots in key locations. Over the next few years, the project grew into a city-backed initiative to create an open-access Wi-Fi network. According to a city press release, “*Wicked Free Wi-Fi 3.0*” was implemented, bringing free internet to sidewalks and bus stops across Boston (City of Boston, 2016). The network specifically reached neighborhoods like Grove Hall in Roxbury, “*an area of Boston where many families live in public housing and can’t afford speedy [internet service]*” (Greater Grove Hall Main Streets, 2024). Today, Wicked Free Wi-Fi has expanded to libraries, public housing developments, and commercial districts, directly addressing digital inequity (Gazette Staff, 2015). This project’s genesis in youth PB is a testament to how lifting up ideas from underrepresented voices (youth) can lead to tangible equity outcomes. The youth identified a gap (internet access) that city officials had not fully addressed, and through PB, they secured resources to fill it. The impact is lasting: years later, Boston’s digital equity strategy explicitly includes “*launching and expanding Boston’s Wicked Free Wi-Fi open air access network*” as a key goal (City of Boston, 2022). In short, a \$150k youth-proposed project scaled into a citywide infrastructure benefiting disadvantaged communities. As one interviewee put it, “*One of the ideas is free Wi-Fi - Wicked Free Wi-Fi... [it] expanded to public parks*” (Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview). This story highlights PB’s power to bridge the digital divide and why centering equity (youth, in this case) in PB can yield outcomes city leaders might not otherwise prioritize.

Youth Mobility and the MBTA Youth Pass. Another idea born from Boston’s Youth Lead the Change was a push for affordable transit for low-income youth. Boston’s youth noted that while students could get a discount pass for school commute, there was no option for those out of school

or in college, and many struggled with transit fares. During YLC, a proposal emerged to create a “*Youth Pass*”, a heavily discounted monthly MBTA transit pass for young people. Youth researchers documented the “affordability crisis” youth faced with transit, linking it to lost opportunities for jobs and education (Youth Way on the MBTA, 2011). They initially proposed a \$10/month pass for 12-21 year-olds (Youth Way on the MBTA, 2011). While a transit fare program is not a one-time capital project (and outside the direct scope of PB funding), the idea gained momentum through advocacy. The visibility and legitimacy from PB (hundreds of youth voted for it) put pressure on transit authorities. Youth organizers, some of whom were involved in PB, collaborated with MBTA officials to pilot the program. In 2015, the MBTA launched a one-year Youth Pass pilot offering a \$26 monthly pass for eligible youth 12-21 in Boston and surrounding cities (Cranley, 2015). An MBTA official credited “*a collaborative process between MBTA... staff and youth advocates*” for making the pilot happen (Cranley, 2015). This shows how PB can dovetail with advocacy to influence outside agencies. Over time, the Youth Pass became a permanent MBTA program and even expanded. Today, the MBTA Youth Pass provides reduced fares to low-income young adults up to age 25, thanks to sustained advocacy and proof of concept from the pilot. One interviewee excitedly recounted this story: “*MBTA Youth Pass - \$30 [monthly pass] is an idea submitted by a youth!! [The] MBTA adopted [it].*” He emphasized that including young voices is so important, as they brought forward a solution that adults hadn’t delivered (*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*). The Youth Pass outcome is a clear equity win - it improves transit access for low-income youth, which is linked to better access to jobs, education, and civic life (Youth Way on the MBTA, 2011). It also illustrates that PB outcomes can extend beyond the city budget to influence regional policy. In this case, a PB idea led to a program that reduces transportation barriers for thousands of young people in Greater Boston. It underscores the point that equity-centered ideas often emerge when those most affected (e.g. youth facing transit hardship) are at the decision-making table.

These examples, free Wi-Fi and the Youth Pass, serve as “*proof of concept*” that participatory budgeting, when inclusive of marginalized groups, can generate innovative solutions with lasting equity impacts. They also highlight a few factors critical to success: city support to implement ideas (Mayor Walsh’s administration embraced Wicked Free Wi-Fi, and the MBTA listened to youth advocates on the pass), and alignment with broader equity movements (digital equity and transit justice, respectively). As Boston now scales up PB citywide and Cambridge continues its PB program, these stories aim to keep equity at the center. They also provide lessons, for instance, ensuring PB processes remain open to non-traditional ideas (like a transit pass) and finding ways to implement worthy ideas even if they don’t neatly fit budget rules.

Ideas in Action: Boston’s Citywide PB (2024-Present)

After several years of advocacy, Boston voters in the November 2021 municipal election approved a ballot measure to create an Office of Participatory Budgeting (COB OPB). This established an official city agency charged with expanding public engagement in budgeting and “achieving and embedding equity and inclusion into City practices” (COB PB, 2024). In July 2024, Mayor Michelle Wu launched “*Ideas in Action*,” Boston’s first citywide PB initiative open to all Bostonians. The inaugural PB cycle (often referred to as PB Cycle 1) gave the public decision-making power over \$2 million in one-time city funds (Wintersmith, 2025). The PB process was designed with multiple equity considerations from the start: an External Oversight Board of community representatives was set up to guide the rules, materials were provided in over 10 languages, and broad eligibility rules allowed all Boston residents (regardless of age or citizenship status) to participate in idea submission and voting (COB PB Rulebook, 2024). The OPB explicitly frames PB as a way to address racial and social justice, in line with the city’s equity goals (COB PB, 2024).

Community Participation and Priorities: The response to Boston’s first citywide PB suggests significant public interest. Between July 2024 and January 2025, residents submitted over 1,200 ideas for projects (COB OPB, 2025). These ideas were reviewed and refined (with support from OPB staff, volunteer proposal developers, and members of the External Oversight Board), ultimately resulting in a ballot of proposals that residents could vote on. Voting took place from mid-January to mid-February 2025, with 4,462 Boston residents casting ballots to choose the winners (Wintersmith, 2025). The six projects that received the most votes and were funded from the \$2M pot illustrate a strong equity focus: among them were the installation of benches at high ridership public transit bus stops, community garden expansions, rat control in neglected areas, a program to support incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth, and a rental assistance fund for young adults, ages 16-24 (COB OPB, 2025). The inclusion of projects addressing reentry support and housing affordability for vulnerable youth signals that residents prioritized investing in marginalized populations. As one community organizer involved in PB observed, *“so many people came together and decided that breaking the cycles of incarcerated folks being alienated from resources needed to happen”* (Wintersmith, 2025). This quote, from Sukhai Rawlins of the Youth Justice and Power Union, highlights both the “communal nature of the process” and the fact that the results “prioritized vulnerable youth”, which they and others see as a meaningful step for equity in Boston (Wintersmith, 2025). The rental assistance project is likewise seen as crucial in a high-rent city where young people of limited means struggle to remain, an equity issue tied to preventing displacement of lower-income, often minority, youth (Wintersmith, 2025).

Comparison with Past Practice: The institutionalization of a city-wide PB program via COB OPB marks a departure from Boston’s earlier ad hoc experiments in participatory budgeting (like YLC). By embedding PB as an ordinance within the city's charter and providing dedicated staff and an oversight board, Boston has taken steps to institutionalize equity in budgeting, attempting to shift

from one-off engagement efforts to a sustained, formal mechanism. Early evidence from Cycle 1 is encouraging in terms of who and what was funded, but questions remain about representation among participants. For instance, 4,462 voters is a modest number in a city of ~675,000 people (roughly 0.7% of residents). It's not yet clear how demographically representative these participants were; data on the racial or income breakdown of PB voters in Cycle 1 have not been released in detail. Public statements suggest an emphasis on including immigrants, non-English speakers, and youth in the process (Boston OPB, 2024), but future evaluation will be needed to see if those goals were achieved. The deliberative component in Boston's PB also requires attention: the OPB convened volunteer budget delegates (drawn from the community) to vet and prioritize proposals, aiming for a diverse group in that stage (OPB Board Minutes, 2024). If those delegates are diverse and empowered, they can ensure that equity considerations (like geographic distribution to underserved neighborhoods or accessibility of projects to disabled residents) are built into the final ballot. Boston's rulebook for PB Cycle 1 explicitly included an "*equity tool*" to assess proposals, assigning higher feasibility scores to projects that serve disadvantaged groups, which demonstrates an attempt to bake equity into the decision criteria (City of Boston OPB, 2024). This kind of design choice echoes recommendations in the literature that equity metrics or rankings be used to guide project selection, rather than relying solely on raw vote totals (Participatory Budgeting Project, 2018). Boston's approach, still evolving, will be an important test case of whether a U.S. city can not only invite marginalized communities into budgeting but also deliver outcomes that materially advance racial and social equity.

Case Study: Cambridge's Participatory Budgeting (2014-Present)

Cambridge, MA, launched participatory budgeting in 2014 and has held it annually, making it one of the longest-running citywide PB programs in the U.S. The Cambridge process is notable for its

consistency and its efforts to lower barriers to participation. Each cycle, residents propose and vote on projects to be funded with a ~\$500,000 to \$1,000,000 portion of the city's budget (the amount has varied by year, reaching \$1 million in recent cycles) (City of Cambridge, 2024). Over 11 PB cycles, Cambridge residents have decided on the allocation of more than \$9.5 million, funding 72 community projects as of 2023 (City of Cambridge, 2025). The city frames PB as a way to “ensure that the City's budget reflects the priorities of Cambridge residents” and to “foster civic engagement and community spirit” (City of Cambridge, 2025). While not explicitly labeled a racial equity initiative, Cambridge's PB has included several design elements aimed at inclusion: broad eligibility, multi-lingual outreach, and flexible voting methods, all of which have equity implications.

Inclusive Design Features: Cambridge has been proactive in making PB open and accessible. All residents 12 years of age or older, including minors, college students, and non-U.S. citizens, are eligible to vote in PB (City of Cambridge, 2025). This policy ensures that groups often excluded from formal electoral politics (youth under 18 and non-citizen immigrants) have a voice in PB decisions. The city also provides many ways to vote (online, by phone, or in-person at community events) and conducts outreach in multiple languages and venues (libraries, senior centers, public housing complexes) to encourage participation across demographics. In the most recent cycle (PB Cycle 10, early 2024), Cambridge recorded a “record 10,522 residents” casting votes, a significant turnout in a city of about 118,000 (City of Cambridge, 2024). This turnout represented a 20% increase over the previous year and suggests that roughly 9% of the city's residents (including youth) took part (Fox-Sowell, 2024). Such engagement is relatively high for a voluntary civic program and is indicative of successful outreach. Importantly, Cambridge explicitly allows non-English speaking residents to participate; materials and the PB ballot are provided in multiple languages, and the city partners with community groups to reach immigrant communities (City of Cambridge Budget Office, 2022). By lowering age and citizenship restrictions and actively engaging cultural

communities, Cambridge's PB strives to be demographically inclusive, aligning with best practices for equity in participation.

Project Selection and Equity: Cambridge's PB process has funded a wide range of projects, many of which address quality-of-life improvements that benefit diverse communities. Past winning projects include upgrades to a youth center in an underserved neighborhood, planting of hundreds of street trees in areas lacking green cover, installation of public drinking fountains in busy squares, adding laundry facilities in public schools for low-income students, and accessibility improvements like braille signage and ramps (Fox-Sowell, 2024). Several of these projects (e.g., laundry access in schools, youth center upgrades) directly respond to the needs of lower-income or otherwise marginalized groups, suggesting that the proposals coming out of Cambridge's PB often have an equity orientation. This may reflect the input of the volunteer "Budget Delegates" - Cambridge residents who sign up to vet ideas and develop proposals each cycle. Typically, around 50-70 delegates (diverse in age and background) meet over a series of weeks to research ideas and winnow them down to a final list of feasible projects (City of Cambridge, 2025). Through deliberation, these delegates can consider equity in terms of which projects address the greatest community needs or which neighborhoods have been historically under-resourced. Indeed, Cambridge initially imposed some informal category targets (for example, trying to ensure projects from different issue areas like parks, transportation, arts, etc., made it to the ballot) to achieve a balance, though unlike New York City it did not rigidly divide funds by district - all projects competed citywide. In recent research on PB voting rules, Faliszewski et al. (2023) note that some cities (implicitly including Cambridge) use such category schemes to ensure less popular types of projects (which might serve minority interests) still get funded. However, Cambridge's latest cycles allow both capital and operating projects to compete together, and winners are purely those with the most votes until the budget is exhausted (City of Cambridge, 2025). This raises a question: Does a pure popular vote serve equity?

There is some debate in the literature. On one hand, letting the community vote freely can legitimize the results as the “people’s choice.” On the other hand, wealthier or more organized groups might mobilize votes for projects they favor, potentially crowding out projects that would benefit marginalized residents.

Cambridge’s experience shows both the potential and pitfalls of open voting. A commentary in *Cambridge Day* criticized the PB process as “*essentially an Internet popularity contest*” that could favor “segments of the population that are more Internet-responsive and enabled,” thereby “*amplifying existing disparities*” if not carefully managed (Cambridge Day, 2024). The letter argued that tech-savvy, resource-rich residents might dominate online voting, skewing results away from truly underserved groups (Cambridge Day, 2024). City officials and PB proponents responded by emphasizing Cambridge’s extensive on-the-ground outreach to mitigate this bias, going to schools, senior centers, public housing, and community events to help less-connected residents vote (Cambridge Budget Office, 2024). Indeed, Cambridge’s use of paper ballots and roaming voting booths has been cited as a way to include those without easy internet access (IndyWeek, 2019). According to city reports, voters in Cambridge PB are relatively diverse: for example, in an earlier cycle, 25% of PB voters identified as born outside the U.S., and significant numbers of teenagers participated (City of Cambridge report, 2017). While detailed recent demographic breakdowns aren’t published, the steady increase to over 10,000 participants suggests that PB has moved beyond a narrow slice of activists to engage a broader swath of the community. Nonetheless, Cambridge’s approach relies on continued commitment to outreach; it lacks structural safeguards (like weighted votes or set-asides for disadvantaged areas) that some equity advocates recommend. So far, the outcomes - funding many projects in low-income neighborhoods and for vulnerable groups- indicate that equity can emerge from the grassroots priorities when broad engagement is achieved. Cambridge stands as an

example of incremental institutionalization of PB (it is run by the Budget Office with official support each year), combined with persistent community outreach to uphold inclusion.

Comparative Perspectives: Equity in PB Across U.S. Cities

To put Boston and Cambridge in context, it's useful to compare them with other PB initiatives in U.S. cities, particularly New York City and Chicago - two early adopters often highlighted for scale and diversity, as well as brief notes on others (e.g. Seattle's youth PB, and efforts in cities like Durham, Greensboro, and Oakland). These comparisons reveal common challenges and effective practices in centering equity.

New York City: Enlarging the Tent, but Limits of Scope

Background: New York City's participatory budgeting, known as PBNYC, began in 2011 with four City Council districts and has since expanded to many districts (though not all). By the late 2010s, PBNYC was the largest PB process in North America, with tens of thousands of residents voting each cycle on capital projects in their communities. Each participating Council Member typically dedicates \$1 million of their discretionary capital funds to PB in their district. NYC's process is frequently studied for its potential to engage underrepresented populations in a large, diverse city.

Representation and Turnout: Early evaluations of PBNYC found that PB engaged more low-income residents, immigrants, and people of color than normally participate in local elections, although not always in proportion to their share of the population. In the pilot year, for example, over 60% of PB voters citywide were people of color, a higher share than among general election voters, and many PB participants were non-citizens or youth who could not vote in regular elections (Community Development Project, 2012). By Cycle 3 (2013-2014), the demographics had shifted further toward inclusivity: only 40% of PB voters identified as White, down from 64% in the previous cycle, moving closer to the overall population makeup (in those districts, about 35% of adults were White).

This meant communities of color were voting in PB at rates nearer to their population share, and notably, PB voters were more racially diverse than even the typical local election electorate, which was about 47% White in the same areas. Such data led researchers to conclude that PBNYC “successfully enfranchised” many marginalized residents, at least in the act of voting and proposing projects. (Su, 2017) found that immigrant communities in NYC felt PB gave them a new voice in neighborhood improvements, and some formerly disengaged residents became active through this process.

However, alongside these successes, there were cautionary signs. Analysis of outreach in PBNYC showed that who participates can depend heavily on how they hear about PB. City Council offices and official channels tended to reach more privileged constituents: for instance, among people who learned about PB via a City Council newsletter or website, a disproportionate 57% were White, and 93% spoke English as a primary language. In contrast, outreach through community organizations and schools brought in a more diverse crowd, helping to balance participation. Additionally, certain voting locations skewed demographics - a survey noted that 74% of people who cast PB ballots at a Council member’s office were White, compared to much lower white representation at voting sites in public libraries or housing projects. These findings underscore that intentional outreach partnerships with community groups are critical to PB’s equity impact: relying only on government venues or digital outreach might bias participation toward groups with higher trust in government or better access to information. New York’s PB has continually adapted by working with civil society organizations (like community-based groups, immigrant advocacy networks, and tenant associations) to run assemblies and advertise voting, seeking to keep the process open to those who might not respond to City Council outreach.

Impact and Limitations: In terms of outcomes, many PBNYC projects have channeled funds to underserved schools, public housing facilities, and street safety in neglected areas, reflecting priorities of marginalized communities. Examples include installing Wi-Fi in public housing developments, renovations to immigrant-majority schools, and adding streetlights in high-crime areas. These micro-level improvements are meaningful. Yet, several scholars point out that NYC's PB operates at the margins of the overall city budget. By focusing on small capital projects within individual districts, PB cannot address citywide inequities in core services like police, education, sanitation funding, etc (Shea et al, 2022). Council districts that use PB still only allocate at most a couple of million dollars this way, whereas billions are decided through the traditional budget process. As Su (2017) argues, this structure "limits marginalized communities' ability to influence budget criteria and funding dynamics in key areas" (Shea et al, 2022). In practice, that means while PB might fund a new park or laptops for a school in a low-income neighborhood, it doesn't alter how the police department deploys resources or how school operating budgets are distributed, decisions that often have larger racial equity implications. PBNYC is a double-edged sword for equity: it expands civic participation and gives communities a taste of decision-making power, but it can also be seen as siloed from "real" power over big budget line items. Some community groups in NYC have pushed to broaden PB's scope (for instance, experimenting with PB for expense funds or advocating to integrate PB results into agency spending), seeking to leverage PB's participatory legitimacy to influence mainstream budgeting.

From a comparative perspective, New York City demonstrates that scale alone does not guarantee equity. Even with tens of thousands of diverse participants, careful design (beyond the district level) and political commitment are needed to make PB more than a symbolic gesture. Still, PBNYC's relative success in drawing in minority, immigrant, and low-income residents (compared to traditional politics) is frequently cited as evidence that PB can *"enhance democratic engagement and*

empower marginalized communities” - provided the process is accessible (Cambridge Day, 2024). The NYC case also yields a lesson on deliberation vs. direct vote: some critics label the PB vote a “popularity contest,” but NYC does include substantial deliberation in the idea generation phase via neighborhood assemblies and delegate committees. Those deliberations often raise equity concerns that inform what ends up on the ballot (e.g., delegates may merge proposals to ensure a housing project in a poor area competes alongside a playground in a richer area). The design of multi-stage PB (assemblies → delegate proposal development → voting) can implement equity considerations before the vote even occurs.

Chicago: Early Innovation and the Push for Inclusivity

Background: Chicago’s experience with PB began at the ward level. In 2009, Alderman Joe Moore of the 49th Ward (a diverse, majority-minority ward on the city’s far north side) launched the first PB in the U.S., allocating \$1 million of his capital “menu money” for community decision. Over the next few years, a coalition of aldermen expanded PB to other wards. By 2013-2014, three wards (49th, 45th, 22nd) were doing PB, and by 2015-2016, as many as eight wards participated in what became known as *PB Chicago*. The process in each ward was similar: residents brainstormed project ideas, volunteer committees developed proposals, and residents 16 or older (some wards even allowed 14+) voted on how to spend that ward’s \$1 million discretionary capital budget. Chicago’s PB was explicitly motivated by a desire to break from “machine politics” and closed-door budgeting, and to give ordinary residents, including youth and noncitizens, a voice in shaping their neighborhoods.

Participation and Outreach: Research by the Great Cities Institute (GCI) at the University of Illinois at Chicago evaluated PB Chicago’s early years. Key findings from 2013-2014 showed increases in participation by people of color, low-income individuals, and youth compared to the first PB year.

In the 49th Ward's second PB cycle, for example, African Americans increased their share of PB voters by 7 percentage points and low-income individuals by 9 points over the prior year.

Importantly, Chicago's PB deliberately targeted youth: about 30% of voters in the 22nd Ward and ~10% in the 49th and 45th Wards were under 18, thanks to assemblies held in schools and lowering the voting age to include teenagers. This indicates that design choices like *when and where to hold PB events* can significantly broaden who takes part. By bringing the process into high schools, PB Chicago engaged young people (many from communities of color) who otherwise might never interact with local government.

The GCI evaluation also compared PB voters' demographics to those of local electorates. They found that participation by people of color and other historically underrepresented groups in PB was generally consistent with (or slightly more representative than) their participation in local elections. For instance, in the 22nd Ward (a predominantly Latino ward), PB voters were somewhat more representative of the ward's demographics than voters in the most recent regular election, and included some non-citizens who are normally disenfranchised. This meant PB Chicago was reaching deep into the community, even capturing those 9% of PB voters who said they were not eligible to vote in regular elections (due to age or citizenship). Such inclusion of non-voters (noncitizens and youth) is a notable equity achievement, effectively giving voice to those excluded from other democratic processes.

To achieve this, Chicago's organizers employed extensive grassroots outreach. They partnered with community organizations in each ward (e.g., immigrant advocacy groups in a largely Mexican-American ward, block clubs in African-American wards) to publicize PB and assist residents in voting. Some creative tactics included multilingual assemblies (Spanish translation was common in the 22nd Ward), door-to-door canvassing about PB, and informational materials highlighting that no

ID or citizenship was required to vote (this was crucial to assuage fears among undocumented residents). Despite these efforts, challenges persisted. As Pin (2020) notes in a study of PB Chicago, non-citizens and undocumented people still faced barriers - for example, some voting sites required an ID check for security, deterring those without government IDs (Shea et al, 2022). Additionally, Chicago did not systematically collect detailed demographic data on PB participants beyond optional surveys, which made it harder to identify gaps (Shea et al, 2022). Pin's interviews suggested that racial disparities in participation lingered: while PB was open, the most active participants (budget delegates, organizers) were not always representative of the ward's racial makeup, and structural inequities (like unequal access to information or time to volunteer) influenced who could lead the process (Shea et al, 2022). In short, PB Chicago made strides in inclusion, but it had to continuously work to "overcome racial disparities in participation and address structural inequity in representation" (Shea et al, 2022).

Institutionalization and Equity Impacts: A positive development in Chicago was the gradual institutional support for PB. By 2015, the City of Chicago hired an Assistant Budget Director to help aldermen implement PB, signaling a step toward making PB a regular feature of city budgeting. In 2021-2022, the city government (under Mayor Lori Lightfoot) took an even bigger step by piloting a citywide PB process using federal recovery funds, each of the city's 50 wards was given around \$1.5 million in PB, with an emphasis on funding ideas to aid COVID-19 recovery and racial equity (City of Chicago, 2022 report). This city-led PB initiative explicitly used a Budget Equity Tool (BET) to guide spending, requiring departments to analyze how proposed projects would advance racial equity (City of Chicago Racial Equity Report, 2022) - effectively merging PB with a formal equity framework. While the results of that citywide PB pilot are still being evaluated, it represents Chicago's attempt to scale PB with equity as a core goal, moving beyond the volunteer-driven ward experiments.

At the ward level, the projects funded in Chicago PB have ranged from basics like street lights, sidewalk repairs, and tree plantings to community gardens and youth program funding. Notably, in the 45th Ward, PB voters chose to invest in making a local park accessible to children with disabilities (using PB funds to leverage additional state and private funds), a win for disability equity. In another ward, PB funded ESL programs and bike lanes in immigrant neighborhoods. These suggest that when given the chance, residents often direct funds to advance equity (disability inclusion, immigrant integration, etc.). Participatory budgeting provided “a space for civic learning” about ward needs, and surveys found 92% of participants felt more informed about local infrastructure after engaging in PB. This educational aspect can empower underrepresented citizens to advocate beyond PB as well.

However, similar to NYC, scale and scope limitations meant PB in Chicago did not radically redistribute city resources on its own. It did institutionalize a more participatory culture in some wards, and those aldermen became champions of community engagement in other policy areas. But critics argue that as long as Chicago’s PB dealt only with a slice of “menu money,” it was a contained reform. The more recent citywide PB with equity criteria is an attempt to address this by tying PB into broader budget decisions (using one-time recovery funds in an equitable way). Early indications from Chicago and elsewhere are that embedding PB in a larger equity budgeting framework can enhance its impact (McShea et al., 2024). For example, if city departments are required to consider PB results or ensure that PB-funded projects align with equity goals in their budgeting, PB can influence mainstream budget priorities indirectly.

Other Notable U.S. Examples: Beyond NYC and Chicago, several other cities have tailored PB to equity aims:

- **Seattle, WA:** In 2015-2016, Seattle launched “*Youth Voice, Youth Choice*,” a PB process focused on youth ages 13-19, inspired in part by Boston’s YLC. With \$700,000 allocated, Seattle’s youth PB explicitly sought to engage youth of color and from low-income families in proposing projects. The winning projects included support for homeless youth and improvements in under-resourced school facilities (City of Seattle, 2016). Though relatively short-lived (Seattle folded the program into other youth initiatives after 2 years), it demonstrated the model of using PB to uplift youth perspectives on equity issues (e.g., the need for safe spaces and services for marginalized youth).
- **Greensboro, NC:** This city was the first in the U.S. South to adopt PB citywide (starting in 2015). Greensboro’s process, with an annual \$500k budget, heavily emphasized outreach in its Black and Latino communities and allowed participation from age 14 up. An evaluation noted that a majority of PB voters were African American in some cycles - a contrast to typical city election turnout, which was predominantly white (Gilman, 2016). Projects funded included things like neighborhood bus shelters and park improvements in historically Black neighborhoods, indicating PB’s potential to address racial spatial inequities. However, Greensboro also faced low overall turnout and had to work to build trust in PB among residents unfamiliar with the concept.
- **Durham, NC:** Durham’s PB (begun in 2018) incorporated an interesting equity design: the city divided the PB funds among its three geographic wards based on a formula that gave more weight to areas with higher poverty and larger non-white populations. This meant each part of the city had its own PB ballot and money, ensuring that wealthier areas couldn’t dominate the vote to snag all funds. The city also created a Steering Committee with representatives from marginalized groups to set PB rules. As a result, Durham’s first PB cycle saw strong participation from communities of color and funded projects like

playground upgrades in neglected parks and solar-powered Wi-Fi benches in low-income areas (City of Durham, 2020). This model of explicitly allocating PB funds with equity criteria (geographic and demographic) is often pointed to as a best practice for equity-centered PB.

- **Vallejo, CA, and Oakland, CA:** Vallejo was the first U.S. city to do citywide PB (2012-2016). It emerged from bankruptcy and hoped PB would rebuild public trust. While not initially framed in racial equity terms, Vallejo is a diverse city, and PB projects reflected the needs of communities of color (e.g., street repairs in long-neglected Filipino and African-American neighborhoods, youth scholarships, etc.). Oakland ran a PB process in 2018 for allocating anti-displacement funds, intentionally involving low-income tenants in deciding how to spend money to fight gentrification (Public Agenda, 2019). These examples show PB's adaptability: it can be geared to very specific equity issues (like housing justice) if designed that way.

In summary, the broader U.S. experience suggests that PB can be a vehicle for equity, but it is not automatic. Cities that have had the most success in centering equity, whether by achieving broad, diverse participation or by directing funds to marginalized communities' priorities - have typically done at least one of the following: (1) lowered entry barriers (age, citizenship, language) and conducted intensive outreach in marginalized communities; (2) devoted resources to PB that are significant enough to matter (or explicitly earmarked for underserved areas); (3) embedded equity criteria in the PB rules or funding structure; and (4) maintained strong political support to implement winning projects and integrate PB into normal budget processes. Boston and Cambridge illustrate some of these factors (Cambridge with outreach and low barriers, Boston with significant political buy-in and now an equity mission for PB). NYC and Chicago highlight both the

possibilities (large-scale inclusion) and the constraints (limited scope, need for integration with broader budget equity efforts).

Conclusion

The literature and cases reviewed demonstrate that participatory budgeting can indeed center equity, but achieving this outcome is contingent on careful design, genuine political commitment, and robust community engagement. In Boston and Cambridge, we see two municipalities embracing PB as a tool for inclusion: Boston's new citywide PB, backed by a voter mandate, explicitly aims to address racial and social justice in city spending, and its first cycle produced projects benefiting incarcerated youth and housing-insecure young adults. Cambridge's steady, grassroots PB process has empowered residents (including youth and immigrants) to direct funds to a variety of community improvements, from playgrounds in immigrant neighborhoods to accessibility features in public spaces, thereby gradually aligning city resources with the needs of those often unheard.

Comparisons with New York City and Chicago highlight that while PB processes have successfully brought more diverse participants into budgeting, engaging people of color, low-income individuals, non-citizens, and youth at higher rates than typical political processes, they also face limitations in scope and representativeness. PBNYC showed the importance of outreach and the constraint of being limited to small capital projects. PB Chicago illustrated innovations in youth engagement and the need for ongoing efforts to overcome structural barriers to participation. Other cities' experiences reinforce these points and suggest that tailoring PB to local equity challenges (be it youth empowerment, anti-displacement, or neighborhood revitalization) can increase its impact.

Key cross-cutting findings:

- Lowering barriers to participation: (age, citizenship, language, digital access) is fundamental for equity. Boston and Cambridge did this by opening voting to teens and non-citizens; NYC and Chicago by providing translated materials and allowing undocumented residents to vote. The more inclusive the eligibility and outreach, the more PB lives up to its promise of *“elevating the voices of marginalized communities”* (Shea et al, 2022).
- The design of PB matters: seemingly technical choices like voting rules or project eligibility criteria carry equity implications. As research suggests, adopting voting methods that ensure proportional representation of voter preferences or explicitly prioritizing projects for disadvantaged groups can make PB outcomes more equitable. Cities should be transparent and deliberate in these design choices, ideally co-creating them with community input.
- Equity is both process and outcome: An equity-centered PB process not only results in resources for underserved communities but also builds civic skills and confidence among participants from those communities. The act of deciding of *being heard* has intrinsic value. Youth who helped run Boston’s YLC gained leadership experience; immigrant residents who voted in NYC PB felt a sense of belonging in civic life. These are harder to quantify, but no less important in evaluating PB’s success.
- Institutionalization helps, but must be paired with accountability. Boston’s creation of an Office of PB and Chicago’s hiring of PB staff show that embedding PB in government structures can provide stability and resources. Yet, institutions must remain accountable to the community’s equity goals through oversight boards, public evaluations, and continued advocacy. Otherwise, there’s a danger of bureaucratization diluting the radical intent of PB. Maintaining a strong partnership between government and civil society is critical: community organizations often act as guardians of the equity mission, reminding officials of who PB is meant to serve.

- Challenges remain in scaling up participation, integrating PB results into larger budget decisions, and measuring long-term impacts. These challenges are not reasons to abandon PB, but rather to innovate further. For instance, some scholars propose hybrid models of participatory budgeting and deliberative polling to engage a truly representative sample of residents (Fishkin et al., 2021). Others call for participatory governance beyond budgeting, such as participatory policymaking in areas like policing or education, to complement budget-focused PB.

In conclusion, participatory budgeting in Boston, Cambridge, and other U.S. cities offers encouraging evidence that with intention and effort, equity can be put at the center of a public budgeting process. PB has opened channels for historically marginalized BIPOC communities, immigrants, youth, and low-income residents to shape investments in their neighborhoods. It has been demonstrated that ordinary people, when given information, support, and a platform, often choose to invest in inclusive public goods and services that benefit those with the greatest needs, and an opportunity to deliberate together across differences. However, PB is not a silver bullet; it works best as part of a broader commitment to participatory democracy and equity-driven governance. As cities continue to experiment and refine PB, ongoing research and evaluation will be vital. This literature review has synthesized current knowledge up to 2025, but the field is evolving, especially as more cities like Boston fully implement citywide PB and as technology and methods for engagement improve. The lessons learned so far underscore that “empowered, informed, and inclusive participation can enhance social fairness in local governments” (Taylor, Afshan, & Lawrence, 2025). The task ahead is to sustain and deepen these efforts, ensuring that participatory budgeting not only redistributes some resources but also helps redistribute power and voice in our urban democracies.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the core findings of the study, organized into three main components: (1) Analysis of funding allocation trends, (2) Thematic synthesis of stakeholder interviews, and (3) SWOT analysis for each city's PB program. This structure separates quantitative trends from qualitative insights and strategic evaluations for clarity. This chapter presents findings of Cambridge's funding patterns and an overview of Boston and Cambridge, followed by interview-driven themes and a SWOT summary. Together, these sections illuminate how Cambridge and Boston define, implement, and experience equity in participatory budgeting.

Cambridge PB Funding Trends (2014-2023)

Cambridge's participatory budgeting program, running annually since 2014, has allocated roughly \$1 million per cycle to projects chosen by residents. Over Cycles 1-10 (2014-2023), Cambridge funded 71 projects totaling about \$9.5 million. Understanding what types of projects get funded through PB provides insight into each city's priorities and the extent to which equity goals manifest in spending. Each project has been classified into one of three categories: **Infrastructure** (physical capital improvements like streets, facilities, parks), **Social Equity** (services or amenities benefiting underserved communities), or **Environmental Sustainability** (green infrastructure and climate resilience projects). This provides a framework to evaluate how Cambridge's PB investments align with community needs and equity goals.

Funding Allocation by Year (Cambridge Cycles 1-10): Cambridge's PB began with a pilot Cycle 1 in 2014-15, funding 6 projects with \$528,000. The budget grew over time, reaching \$2,065,000 for 8 projects in 2023. Below is a summary of each cycle's total funding and project count, illustrating the program's expansion and capacity to fund more or larger projects over time.

Year	Cycle #	Money Allocated	Total Projects
2014-15 (pilot)	Cycle 1	\$528,000	6
2015	Cycle 2	\$600,000	7
2016	Cycle 3	\$706,000	7
2017	Cycle 4	\$867,000	7
2018	Cycle 5	\$925,000	6
2019	Cycle 6	\$1,125,000	8
2020	Cycle 7	\$525,000	7
2021	Cycle 8	\$1,140,000	7
2022	Cycle 9	\$1,065,000	8
2023	Cycle 10	\$2,065,000	8
2024	Cycle 11 (current)	\$1,060,000	7

Cambridge PB Cycles 1-10: Budget Allocations and Projects Funded

- **2014-15 (Cycle 1):** \$528,000 allocated for 6 projects.
 - *Infrastructure (~\$332k):* Public toilet installations and bike repair stations.
 - *Social Equity (~\$76k):* Bilingual books for ESL children, laptops for a community computer lab, and free public Wi-Fi.

- *Environmental (~\$120k)*: Planting of 100+ street trees.

Cycle 1 Reflection: Infrastructure dominated this inaugural cycle (~60% of funds), while smaller investments in education and connectivity supported equity goals.

Environmental sustainability made an early entry with significant tree planting to mitigate urban heat.

- **2015 (Cycle 2):** \$600,000 for 7 projects.

- *Infrastructure (\$410k)*: Bike lane separators, safer Mass. Ave biking infrastructure, and bus transit improvements.
- *Social Equity (\$150k)*: School furniture upgrades and a food rescue freezer van for a local pantry.
- *Environmental (\$40k)*: A water bottle refill station on a public campus.

Cycle 2 Reflection: About two-thirds of funds went to transit-related infrastructure, with one-quarter for community amenities and a modest investment in sustainability (refill stations).

- **2016 (Cycle 3):** \$706,000 for 7 projects.

- *Infrastructure (\$104k)*: Crosswalk safety upgrades with flashing beacons.
- *Social Equity (\$105k)*: Youth center improvements and a public art trail.
- *Environmental (\$497k)*: Solar panels, solar-powered bus trackers, kinetic energy tiles, and hydration stations.

Cycle 3 Reflection: Marked a major shift toward environmental innovation, over 70% of the budget supported climate-tech and green infrastructure, while social and safety projects played a secondary role.

- **2017 (Cycle 4):** \$867,000 for 7 projects.

- *Infrastructure (\$176k)*: Crosswalk lighting enhancements.

- *Social Equity (\$350k)*: Homeless outreach kits, public school musical instruments, and youth center renovations.
- *Environmental (\$341k)*: Tree planting, “moss wall” air filters for pollution mitigation, and park water fountains.

Cycle 4 Reflection: Funding was split nearly evenly between social equity (~40%) and environmental (~39%) projects, with the remainder to safety infrastructure. This balance showed broad support for health, safety, and inclusion.

- **2018 (Cycle 5):** \$925,000 for 6 projects.
 - *Infrastructure (\$360k)*: Smooth cycling street resurfacing and firefighter health equipment upgrades.
 - *Social Equity (\$0)*: No directly equity-focused projects were funded this cycle.
 - *Environmental (\$615k)*: Citywide tree planting, new park water fountains, a neighborhood clean-up initiative, and rain gardens.

Cycle 5 Reflection: This year heavily emphasized environmental sustainability (~66% of funds) while social equity projects were notably absent. Green infrastructure (trees, stormwater management) took priority as climate awareness grew.

- **2019 (Cycle 6):** \$1,125,000 for 8 projects.
 - *Infrastructure (\$500k)*: Crosswalk signal upgrades and public restrooms.
 - *Social Equity (\$100k)*: Free laundry access for public school students and expanded free public Wi-Fi.
 - *Environmental (\$525k)*: Tree planting, water bottle-filling stations, pollinator habitat corridors, and sidewalk recycling bins.

Cycle 6 Reflection: Environmental projects received ~47% of funds (supporting

urban tree canopy and waste reduction), infrastructure 44%, and social equity ~9% addressing basic needs and digital access.

- **2020 (Cycle 7):** \$525,000 for 7 projects (note: a smaller budget due to that year’s fiscal constraints).
 - *Infrastructure (\$140k):* Bicycle traffic signals and pedestrian crossing upgrades.
 - *Social Equity (\$135k):* Library Wi-Fi hotspot lending program, student Chromebooks for digital access, and inclusive playground swings for children with disabilities.
 - *Environmental (\$250k):* Urban “micro-forest” tree plantings, rain gardens, and sidewalk trash barrel upgrades.

Cycle 7 Reflection: Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, this cycle prioritized tech access and inclusive recreation equally alongside green infrastructure, effectively splitting funds among equity (26%), sustainability (48%), and safety (27%).

- **2021 (Cycle 8):** \$1,140,000 for 7 projects.
 - *Infrastructure (\$460k):* Public restrooms in high-need parks and additional cycling safety signals.
 - *Social Equity (\$350k):* Resource kits for newly housed residents, youth STEAM program equipment, and historical memorials honoring Black and Indigenous communities.
 - *Environmental (\$330k):* Expanded public recycling initiatives and new EV charging stations.

Cycle 8 Reflection: Spending was balanced across infrastructure (~40%), social equity (~31%), and environmental (~29%). Notably, this cycle introduced projects focusing on cultural equity (e.g., historical recognition) and housing justice.

- **2022 (Cycle 9):** \$1,065,000 for 8 projects.

- *Infrastructure (\$180k)*: Audible and visible crosswalk alerts for pedestrian safety (serving those with visual/hearing impairments).
- *Social Equity (\$470k)*: Tech upgrades at youth centers, expansion of free public Wi-Fi, and new community murals in underserved neighborhoods.
- *Environmental (\$390k)*: Park tree planting, solar-powered trash compactors, EV charging infrastructure, and cargo bikes for tree watering.

Cycle 9 Reflection: Cambridge residents continued to prioritize environmental (~39%) and social equity (~44%) outcomes, with infrastructure (~17%) targeted to accessibility and safety improvements.

- **2023 (Cycle 10):** \$2,065,000 for 8 projects (the largest PB budget to date, boosted by one-time federal funds).
 - *Infrastructure (~\$900k)*: Citywide pedestrian safety upgrades and public toilet improvements.
 - *Social Equity (\$135k)*: Free menstrual product stations and infant care supply stations, plus care kits for unhoused residents.
 - *Environmental (~\$1,000k)*: Tree canopy expansion, shaded seating in parks, rodent control measures, and solar-powered waste bins.

Cycle 10 Reflection: This was the first cycle allowing some non-capital expenditures, enabling projects addressing basic needs (hygiene stations) for vulnerable populations. Nearly half the funds supported climate resilience and green infrastructure, with infrastructure still a large share and a smaller portion to urgent health and dignity needs.

Trends and Trajectory (Cambridge): Over ten cycles, Cambridge's PB spending has evolved from a strong Infrastructure focus toward a more diversified portfolio that increasingly includes Environmental and Social Equity projects:

- **Infrastructure as a Constant Backbone:** Capital improvements (especially streets, transit, and public facilities) were funded every cycle, but their share of the budget gradually declined as other priorities emerged. Early cycles invested heavily in bike and pedestrian infrastructure and city facilities; these remain important, but now compete with social and environmental projects for funding.
- **Rising Environmental Consciousness:** Green projects have featured in every cycle (from tree plantings and rain gardens to solar panels and EV chargers) and garnered growing support. By the late cycles, roughly 40-50% of Cambridge's PB funds went to Environmental Sustainability initiatives, reflecting strong public interest in climate resilience and open space improvements.
- **Growing Social Equity Focus:** In Cambridge's early years, equity-related projects were smaller (e.g. bilingual books, free Wi-Fi hotspots), often folded into broader categories. In recent cycles, Social Equity projects have come to the forefront, addressing the needs of unhoused residents, expanding digital access for low-income students, or elevating underrepresented histories. The introduction of operating budget items (Cycle 10) allowed Cambridge to fund hygiene and care projects directly benefiting marginalized groups.
- **Larger Budgets, Broader Impact:** The PB funding pool expanded from about \$500k in 2014 to over \$2 million in 2023. This growth enabled fewer but higher-impact projects, shifting from many small improvements to a mix of citywide initiatives and big-ticket items

that can reshape public spaces or services. For example, by 2023, one project alone (tree canopy expansion) received \$1 million, something not possible in earlier cycles.

Overall, Cambridge’s PB model shows a trajectory toward equity and sustainability. It started as an *open-door, generalist process* (funding popular amenities and infrastructure) and gradually moved toward explicitly addressing social and environmental justice concerns. Cambridge’s program is now a leading example of resident-driven democracy in action, where green infrastructure, social equity, and civic amenities evolve together to reflect community values.

Thematic Synthesis of Stakeholder Interviews

Beyond the numbers, this study drew on interviews with community stakeholders in Cambridge and Boston, including city staff, PB volunteers, community organizers, and advocates, to understand how each program defines and pursues equity. The following synthesis distills key themes from those interviews. It first examines each city’s approach in turn, then highlights common challenges and tensions that emerged. (To conserve anonymity, all interview quotes are cited as “*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview.*”)

Cambridge Stakeholder Perspectives on Equity in PB

In Cambridge, a recurring theme was that broad inclusion has been the guiding principle of PB, rather than an explicit equity mandate. Since its launch in 2014, Cambridge’s PB intentionally *did not* codify a specific definition of equity or target demographic groups, an approach described by one official as: “When [Cambridge’s PB] began, there was no equity embedded or defined; we just wanted to expand representation, period” (*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*). The only informal guidance was to prioritize the “underserved and underheard,” but without clear criteria or structures to do so. Over ten cycles, this “fully open process”, no citizenship requirement to participate, ideas

accepted from anyone (even non-residents), and voting eligibility for all residents age 12 and up, was seen as inherently equitable in terms of access. As one interviewee put it, *“Cambridge didn’t get equity-specific; the goal was just broader engagement.”* (Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview).

Inclusive Eligibility and Access - Cambridge’s PB prides itself on lowering barriers to

participation: *“Our approach is fully open. You don’t even have to be a Cambridge resident to submit an idea.*

That low barrier to entry is intentional, it’s about making it easy and welcoming.” (Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview). From idea collection through voting, Cambridge avoids requirements that might exclude

people. Notably, Cambridge does not collect personal demographic data from participants, out of concern that forms or surveys might deter participation. This has created a very large and diverse top-of-funnel (e.g., over 1,300 ideas were submitted in the most recent cycle), but it also means the city lacks information on who is being reached or left out. A Cambridge staff member admitted uncertainty: *“Does the voting process ensure equitable participation? I don’t know. There’s an intentional lack of data... we basically assume we haven’t achieved it and keep trying.”* (Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview).

This philosophy assumes there’s always more to do, drives Cambridge to continuously seek new participants without explicitly focusing on particular groups.

Volunteer-Driven Process - Strengths and Limitations: A hallmark of Cambridge’s PB is its heavy reliance on volunteer PB Delegates. Each cycle, 50-80 residents volunteer to turn raw community ideas into final proposals (an 8-12 week process of meetings, research, and deliberation). Many interviewees praised this model for its deep civic engagement: volunteers learn city government workings and build community connections. Cambridge has also institutionalized youth involvement by recruiting a cohort of high school-aged Youth PB Delegates each cycle (usually 8-15 students) and providing them a stipend as compensation. *“On the plus side, we do pay our Youth Delegates. That’s been a great investment, it brings youth to the table and values their labor.”* (Community

Stakeholder, 2025 Interview). This has ensured that youth voices are included in proposal development, often resulting in youth-oriented projects making the ballot (e.g., a teen center renovation, a girls' sports program).

However, Cambridge's volunteer-centric approach also raises equity concerns. Because the work is unpaid (for adults) and time-intensive, those who volunteer tend to have the privilege of extra time (e.g., retirees, college students, professionals with flexible schedules). As one interviewee observed, *"There's a tension: do we want as many people involved as possible, or do we want to prioritize those most impacted? Often, the ones who can spend hours on this are more affluent. PB delegates who can dedicate their time are often white and wealthy, so marginalized voices might be lost during proposal refinement."* (*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*). This dynamic means that even if idea collection is broad, the filtering and project selection can skew toward the perspectives of those able to volunteer. Cambridge has recognized this issue: meetings are English-only, potentially excluding non-English speakers, and no stipends (beyond youth) or supports like childcare are provided. A staff member acknowledged, *"We need to facilitate multilingual meetings for volunteers across diverse groups."* (*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*), indicating awareness that more inclusive practices are needed in the proposal phase.

Outreach Philosophy - Breadth over Targeting: Cambridge's outreach strategy has emphasized reaching as many people as possible citywide, rather than targeting specific demographics. The city's Community Engagement Team conducts multilingual outreach and partners with immigrant services, housing authorities, and adult learning centers to spread the word. They also host events like "voting parties" at schools to engage youth and parents. Because anyone with an interest in Cambridge can submit an idea, the process casts a wide net, even drawing in non-resident daytime workers or students. This broad approach aligns with Cambridge's ethos of open participation. The upside is large numbers; Cambridge has consistently high turnout (10,000+ voters in the latest

cycle). The downside, as interviewees noted, is that breadth can come at the expense of depth in reaching marginalized groups. Cambridge does little demographic targeting or tracking, so it's unclear whether the voices of, say, low-income immigrants or residents of historically underserved neighborhoods are proportionately represented. As one Cambridge organizer summarized, *"The city's approach was: if we remove barriers, people will come. And they did, but simply having lots of people doesn't guarantee equity in who is participating or whose ideas win."* (Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview).

Project Selection and Equity Implications: In Cambridge, after volunteers vet and refine ideas, the public votes on a ballot of ~20 final projects (each voter can choose several, and the top-voted projects win until the budget is exhausted). This *direct democracy* aspect is valued, it entrusts ordinary residents with decision-making. Importantly, Cambridge's voting rules are inclusive: non-citizens, teens (7th grade and up), and others often excluded from voting can participate. Ballots and materials are translated into 8=10 languages to facilitate access. These practices are strengths in terms of equitable access to voting.

However, Cambridge has no formal equity criteria in deciding which projects go on the ballot or which win; it's purely by vote counts. Unlike some PB processes elsewhere, Cambridge does not weight projects or areas based on need. This means final outcomes depend on who votes and what they support. Interviewees noted that without intentional equity checks, there's a risk that projects benefiting active, resource-rich communities could win out over those targeting marginalized groups (who may have lower turnout). For instance, a niche but widely appealing project (say, citywide bike infrastructure) might outpoll a project serving a smaller low-income community, even if the latter addresses a more urgent need. According to a Cambridge staffer, *"We don't have an equity filter on what wins; we assume if we did the outreach right, the results will reflect the public's priorities. But we also acknowledge that without data, we can't be sure we're reaching who we need to."* (Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview). This

reflects Cambridge's stance of prioritizing participation and hoping equity will be an indirect outcome, rather than explicitly engineering it.

In summary, Cambridge's interview findings portray a PB process that is highly accessible and community-driven, with notable innovations in volunteer engagement and youth inclusion. Yet the city's avoidance of explicit equity strategies, no targeted outreach, no data collection on demographics, and no weighting for underserved groups leaves some questions about who truly benefits. Cambridge's approach has lowered the barrier to entry admirably, creating a PB culture of enthusiasm and trust, but it relies on broad participation to generate equitable outcomes, an assumption that stakeholders themselves view as a work in progress.

Boston Stakeholder Perspectives on Equity in PB

Boston's participatory budgeting journey differs from Cambridge's in that equity was explicitly embedded from the start of its citywide PB program (launched in 2024 after the YLC years).

Interviews with Boston officials and community partners reveal a city grappling with how to turn those bold equity commitments into reality, while navigating structural constraints and the legacy of youth PB. Key themes include formal equity frameworks vs. practical gaps, community partnerships in outreach, and challenges in voting access and decision-making power.

Formal Commitments and Definition of Equity: From the outset, Boston framed its PB in terms of racial and social justice. The City's ordinance establishing PB and its official Rulebook both prominently feature equity goals. Boston even worked with the Office of Equity & Inclusion to design an "equity framework" for PB. In theory, this meant Boston had a clearer definition of equity than Cambridge, at least on paper. A city staff interviewee noted, *"One of the main goals of [Boston's PB] process is to ensure that equity is embedded and to advance racial and social justice."* (Community Stakeholder, 2025

Interview). However, community advocates observed that the city's initial equity language was too broad and lacked teeth. *"Equity goals weren't clear enough, a step in the right direction, but not articulate enough,"* said one member of the grassroots coalition that campaigned for PB (*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*). Advocates had pushed for very specific provisions, for example, reserving a portion of funds for high-need neighborhoods, or requiring an equity impact scoring for project ideas, but, *"that did not end up getting in"* to the final rules (*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*). In short, Boston's PB launched with strong equity rhetoric but fewer concrete mechanisms than some had hoped.

This gap between equity on paper vs. in practice became a tension. The legal department reportedly cautioned against naming certain groups or allocating funds by neighborhood (to avoid potential lawsuits in the wake of backlash against race-conscious policies). So the city took a general approach, stating equity as a priority but not explicitly prioritizing, for example, "projects benefiting communities of color" in the rules. An advocate described this as a fundamental choice Boston faced: *"The program needs to decide who in this process benefits and is prioritized, and be unambiguous about it."* (*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*). Boston is still finding that balance; both city officials and community members acknowledged that equity remains more of an aspiration until more specific guidelines and tools are adopted.

Outreach and Community Partnerships: One area where Boston operationalized equity was through an outreach strategy centered on community partnerships. In the first citywide PB cycle, Boston provided mini-grants to community-based organizations (CBOs) to help with idea collection and public education about PB. Neighborhood groups in historically marginalized areas, East Boston, Roxbury, Dorchester, etc., were funded to host workshops and engage residents. This approach leveraged trusted local organizations to reach people who might not respond to city hall-led outreach. An interviewee noted, *"Idea collection sessions and workshops led by local organizations were*

crucial to increasing participation among communities that typically have low engagement in government.” (*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*). The city also invested in translation and interpretation; PB materials (flyers, ballots, websites) were provided in 10 languages, and interpreters were present at meetings. For example, meetings in East Boston were conducted in Spanish via partners, which was “crucial for engagement” in that predominantly Latino community (*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*).

The result of these efforts was a notably diverse pool of participants in Boston’s PB pilot. Many immigrant and youth residents took part, and idea submissions came from across the city’s neighborhoods. One advocate recounted that Latino community turnout at in-person assemblies was among the highest, showing the impact of culturally tailored outreach. This partnership-driven model is seen as a strength of Boston’s approach, it not only gathers ideas from underrepresented groups but also builds community capacity and trust. As a cautionary note, interviewees flagged that in later stages (voting, etc.), some of that initial diversity wasn’t fully sustained (more on that below). But overall, Boston’s outreach was far more targeted and resourced for equity than Cambridge’s volunteer-led, broad approach.

Voting and Implementation Challenges: Boston’s first citywide PB cycle revealed some structural challenges in achieving equitable participation. Unlike Cambridge, Boston limited voting in 2024 primarily to online ballots and a few in-person sites (like City Hall). Several interviewees pointed out that this may have excluded residents lacking internet access or those uncomfortable coming to government buildings. One organizer noted, “*Reliance on online/City Hall voting in the first cycle may exclude folks without internet or those wary of official spaces*” (*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*). In response, community groups improvised; they shared voting links via text, social media, and even set up informal voting help at libraries and community centers. Still, without deliberately placing voting booths in marginalized neighborhoods (as YLC had done in schools and community centers),

the risk was that voting skewed toward more connected populations. A Boston official acknowledged this gap and indicated plans to diversify voting locations and methods next time.

Power Dynamics and Trust: Boston's PB is overseen by a new Office of Participatory Budgeting (OPB) and an appointed PB Steering Committee/Oversight Board. Interviewees from the community side expressed some distrust or frustration with how this structure played out. The Oversight Board in the first cycle was largely composed of mayoral appointees (some of whom were ex-city staff or officials), with only a few seats for community representatives. This led to a perception of top-down control: *"There's a feeling that the Oversight Board is dominated by City Hall insiders, so it doesn't fully have the community's voice"* (Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview). For example, when designing the process and rulebook, some advocate recommendations (like those stronger equity measures mentioned earlier) were not adopted, leading to disappointment.

This highlights a broader challenge of institutionalizing PB without losing community trust. In Cambridge, PB is run by the Budget Office and has no independent board, which centralizes control but has also run smoothly due to the staff's community ethos. In Boston, creating an OPB was meant to empower PB, yet if the community perceives it as another bureaucracy, it could alienate the very groups PB is meant to uplift. A Boston advocate observed that after many years of pushing for PB, community coalition members wanted a significant role in shaping it; feeling sidelined by the City's implementation choices was disheartening. To Boston's credit, the city has continued to engage with the coalition and is revising the PB ordinance and structure for the next cycle, an opportunity to adjust the power balance (e.g., giving community members more influence on the Oversight Board, clarifying decision-making processes, etc.).

Early Outcomes and Optimism: Despite the challenges, Boston interviewees shared a sense of optimism and commitment to making PB work for equity. They pointed to successes from the Youth Lead the Change era as proof of concept: *“Biggest lesson: young people have amazing ideas. The MBTA Youth Pass? That came from a youth! Wicked Free Wi-Fi? Youth idea. We need to include those voices, they bring solutions city leaders might not prioritize.”* (Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview). This sentiment underscores that bringing historically excluded voices (youth, immigrants, low-income residents) into budgeting can yield innovative projects with real impact. Boston’s stakeholders are leveraging this narrative to maintain support from city leadership and the public. There is also recognition that Boston’s strong *formal* commitment, having an ordinance and dedicated office, is an asset that many cities lack. It provides a mandate and resources that, if guided well, can eventually produce the equity outcomes envisioned.

In summary, Boston’s interview findings reflect a participatory budgeting program at an early, formative stage: the will for equity is there (in language, funding, outreach efforts), but the way to achieve it is still being refined. Boston has put equity front and center more explicitly than Cambridge, yet it also faces higher expectations and scrutiny because of that. The first cycle revealed gaps between intention and execution, something the city and community are actively working to bridge in subsequent cycles. The themes of formal commitment vs. implementation, partnership outreach, inclusive vs. accessible voting, and shared governance will continue to shape Boston’s PB as it matures. Both cities’ experiences, as the next section explores, highlight common challenges in centering equity through PB.

Equity Challenges and Trade-offs (Cambridge & Boston)

The interviews illuminated several cross-cutting challenges and tensions that both Boston and Cambridge face as they strive to center equity in PB. Despite different program designs, many fundamental questions are shared between the two cities:

Defining Equity vs. Avoiding It: A core challenge is whether to explicitly define target groups and equity goals in PB. Boston chose to articulate a mission of racial and social justice in its PB ordinance and rules, but then struggled with how specific to be. Officials feared that naming particular neighborhoods or demographic groups could invite political or legal pushback (in fact, city attorneys were reportedly *“worried about DEI lawsuits”* if language was too explicitly race-based ~*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*). Cambridge, on the other hand, initially avoided any formal definition of equity, preferring a broad “everyone is welcome” stance partly to maximize participation and avoid controversy. The trade-off here is clear: *vague equity aims* (Cambridge’s approach) risk diluting impact because no one is specifically prioritized, whereas *very explicit equity targeting* (what some advocates wanted in Boston) can trigger backlash or even be struck down. Both cities are grappling with this balance. Interviewees in Cambridge wondered if it’s time to be more explicit about equity goals, while those in Boston debated how to add specificity (like priority criteria for marginalized communities) without running afoul of political constraints. This tension underscores that defining equity is a political choice as much as a technical one.

Broad Engagement vs. Deep Equity Impact: Another dilemma is the tension between engaging as many people as possible vs. focusing on those who are most marginalized. Cambridge exemplifies the “broad engagement” ethos; its PB involves thousands of residents at some level (ideas, voting, volunteering). This creates a big tent but may not empower any one group deeply. As one Cambridge staffer reflected, *“There’s a tension between engaging people and engaging them meaningfully... PB is*

fun, but at what point do you decide you've achieved [equity]?" (Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview). They recognized that lots of participation doesn't automatically equal equity, if the most marginalized aren't the ones driving decisions, breadth can mask inequality. Boston's experience echoes this: their coalition observed a *"trade-off between broad engagement and deep engagement"*. For example, Boston's large idea assemblies collected many suggestions (broad), but then the detailed proposal development fell to a smaller group of delegates or staff, where *"equity can get lost... those who can dedicate time are often white and wealthy"* (Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview), as noted earlier. In both cities, simply maximizing participant numbers may favor those easiest to reach or most eager to engage (who are not always the marginalized groups). Achieving deep equity impact might mean focusing more effort on enabling underrepresented residents to participate fully, even if it reduces overall turnout. This is a fundamental PB trade-off: *Quantity of participation vs. quality (in terms of inclusion of the disadvantaged)*. Both programs are learning how to strike a better balance, such as providing extra support for marginalized participants (through stipends, childcare, personal outreach) to enable their "deep" engagement, rather than just counting heads.

Resource Constraints: Limited funding and staff capacity present practical threats to equity in PB. In Boston, a major setback came when the promised PB budget was cut from \$5 million to \$2 million due to city budget pressures. Advocates noted this not only shrank the scale of PB's impact but also specifically hurt equity efforts; fewer funds meant some equity-focused ideas were left unfunded or scaled down. One interviewee gave an example: a proposal for heated bus stop shelters (to help transit riders in low-income neighborhoods in winter) had to be reduced to standard shelters with no heating because of budget limits. The lesson is that austerity can undermine equity, since innovative or targeted solutions often require sufficient investment. Cambridge has steadily increased its PB pot to \$1 million, with one cycle hitting \$2 million (thanks to a federal grant), but it

too faces competition for city funds. Both cities' stakeholders stressed the need for robust, sustained funding to achieve PB's equity goals. A Boston advocate continued to push the slogan of dedicating "1% of the city budget" (which would be \$40+ million) to PB, an aspirational goal to ensure meaningful impact. On a related note, staff capacity is a constraint: PB processes that aim to reach marginalized groups often require more outreach time, translation, and support per participant. Without allocating sufficient resources (money and people), even well-designed equity measures could falter in implementation.

Data Collection and Equity Measurement: A significant challenge is how to measure who PB is serving and benefiting, which feeds back into adjusting strategies. Here, the two cities took opposite approaches, each with downsides. Cambridge's "intentional lack of data" means the program does not collect demographic or socioeconomic information from participants (no sign-ups or surveys that ask for race, income, etc.). The upside: this likely lowers barriers (people don't feel surveilled or judged). The downside: Cambridge has essentially been flying blind on equity metrics. They rely on anecdotal evidence or secondary hints (like how many ballots were cast in Spanish or Chinese) to infer if they're reaching immigrant communities. Without solid data, it's hard to identify gaps or make the case for course corrections. Boston initially did not implement robust data collection either, perhaps to simplify the process or for similar concerns about discouraging participation. As of the first cycle, Boston lacked a feedback loop on who submitted ideas, who voted, and who benefited (demographically or geographically). A Boston official mentioned plans to work with an external evaluator (Data & Society, as referenced) to introduce metrics and surveys. The paradox both cities face: asking for demographic data can reduce participation among those wary of sharing information, but not asking for it leaves equity to guesswork. There is a middle ground being considered, e.g. voluntary surveys attached to the PB ballot, or post-process evaluations, that gather

data in a non-intrusive way. Cambridge is considering this for future cycles (like adding an anonymous questionnaire about voter demographics). Both cities recognize that to truly evaluate equity, they need better data, an essential tool to move from anecdotal reassurance to evidence of impact.

Institutionalization vs. Community Control: As PB becomes part of city government structures, maintaining authentic community leadership is a challenge. In Boston, as described, the creation of an official PB Office and a mayor-appointed board risked marginalizing the grassroots coalition that birthed the PB idea. There's inherent tension when a radical idea (citizen control of budgets) gets absorbed into city bureaucracy. One advocate noted that in Boston's first cycle, the Mayor's Office moved quickly to launch PB on its terms (with the best of intentions to get it off the ground), but in doing so, they *"included less community co-creation than expected."*, some activists felt sidelined. In Cambridge, PB has always been run internally by city staff, and while they are responsive to the community, there is no independent oversight. The Budget Office ultimately calls the shots, which could theoretically override community preferences (though interviewees didn't cite any egregious examples of this). The larger point is that embedding PB in government (for longevity and stability) must be balanced with sharing power with the community (for legitimacy and equity). Potential strategies emerged from interviews: ensure oversight boards or committees have significant representation from community members (not just political appointees), build in formal roles for youth or marginalized group representatives, maintain transparency in how decisions are made, and perhaps most importantly, keep the process flexible enough to respond to community feedback. Boston is learning this in real time by revisiting its governance structure; Cambridge might also consider whether more formal community oversight or co-management could enhance trust as its

program grows. Both cities want PB to be an ongoing institution, but sustaining grassroots energy and trust is key to PB's equity mission.

In essence, Boston and Cambridge are navigating similar obstacles on the road to equitable PB. Some challenges are external (e.g., political shifts, legal environment, budgetary pressures) and some are internal (e.g., volunteer biases, lack of data, power imbalances). The fact that these issues surfaced in both contexts suggests they are inherent to participatory budgeting, not easily solved, but possible to manage with intentional strategies. The interviews show that officials and advocates alike are aware of these pitfalls and are committed to learning and adapting. Both cities are still relatively early in figuring out how to truly “redistribute power” through PB, but recognizing these trade-offs is a critical step in that journey.

SWOT Analysis for Cambridge and Boston PB

To synthesize the findings and evaluate each city's participatory budgeting program through an equity lens, a SWOT analysis was conducted for Cambridge and Boston. The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) framework summarizes internal strengths and weaknesses of the programs, as well as external opportunities and threats that impact their ability to advance equity. This analysis draws from interview insights, program documents, and the funding trends discussed above.

SWOT Analysis of City of Cambridge Participatory Budgeting

Cambridge's PB program, with 10+ cycles under its belt, has had time to establish processes and learn from experience. Table 5.2 presents a summary of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to centering equity:

Strengths:

- **Long-running, community-driven program:** Cambridge has completed 11 PB cycles (2014=2024), building public awareness, trust, and a refined process. This longevity is an asset; over a decade, PB has become part of the city’s culture (e.g., record 10,000 voters in 2023), and officials/residents have experience to draw on.
- **High participation and enthusiasm:** Turnout in Cambridge is consistently robust, with thousands of ideas submitted and votes cast each year. The open eligibility (age 12+, non-citizens, etc.) and user-friendly process have fostered a strong civic engagement culture around PB. There is broad community support and recognition of the PB program.
- **Low barriers to entry:** Cambridge’s “fully open” approach (no ID or sign-up required, multilingual materials, simple online voting) makes participation accessible. By removing common barriers (e.g., citizenship or registration requirements), Cambridge encourages input from diverse groups, including immigrants and youth, who might be excluded elsewhere.
- **Youth inclusion institutionalized:** The inclusion of paid Youth Delegates and youth-focused outreach has empowered teenagers in Cambridge’s PB. This brings fresh perspectives and invests in the next generation of civic leaders. It’s both an equity strength (amplifying youth, often not heard in government) and a pipeline for sustained engagement.

Weaknesses:

- **No explicit equity framework:** Cambridge lacks a clearly defined equity mandate or criteria in its PB design. Equity isn’t defined in the rules or formally considered when selecting projects. This absence means there’s no systematic method to ensure projects benefiting marginalized groups are prioritized, equity is left to happen organically (or not).

- **Limited data on participants:** The “intentional lack of data” approach means Cambridge doesn’t know who it is (or isn’t) reaching. Without demographic or geographic data on participants, the program cannot identify equity gaps or measure its success in engaging underserved communities. It’s hard to fix what isn’t measured.
- **Reliance on unpaid labor:** The heavy dependence on unpaid volunteer delegates could unintentionally exclude those who can’t afford to give time. This may skew representation toward more affluent, older, or otherwise privileged residents in the proposal phase, as discussed earlier. It also risks volunteer burnout and inconsistency across cycles.
- **Inaccessible for non-English speakers:** While idea collection and voting have multilingual options, the core volunteer process (meetings, proposal writing) operates only in English. Non-English-speaking residents effectively cannot participate deeply as PB delegates, a weakness in serving a city where many speak Spanish, Haitian Creole, Chinese, etc. There’s a missed opportunity to involve those communities beyond voting.

Opportunities:

- **Adopt explicit equity measures:** Cambridge has the chance to update its PB model with second-generation equity practices. As other cities innovate (e.g. Seattle weighting votes from historically disadvantaged areas, etc.), Cambridge could incorporate tools like equity scoring for projects, targeted outreach campaigns for underrepresented groups, or reserved funding for priority communities. Embracing such measures would reestablish Cambridge’s leadership as an equity-centered PB program.
- **Deepen community partnerships:** Unlike Boston, Cambridge has not extensively partnered with external community groups for outreach (it’s been mostly city-led). There is an opportunity to collaborate with local nonprofits, tenant associations, youth organizations,

and others to reach pockets of the community that city channels miss. This could improve participation among immigrant communities, low-income residents, etc., by leveraging trusted messengers.

- **Innovation in process design:** With its credibility and experience, Cambridge can afford to experiment (pilot new ideas) without fear of jeopardizing the whole program. For example, Cambridge could try participatory grant-making for certain groups, incorporate deliberative assemblies for equity-focused discussions, or test digital engagement tools, any innovation that might enhance equity outcomes. The program’s stability gives it latitude to try new approaches.
- **Leverage political support for growth:** Cambridge’s city leadership has thus far been supportive of PB (incrementally raising the budget). With equity becoming a larger civic priority generally, there’s an opportunity to advocate for expanding PB funding (beyond \$1M) or integrating PB with other city equity initiatives. For instance, if ARPA (federal relief) funds or other grants are available, Cambridge could channel them through PB to explicitly address equity gaps (as it partially did with the Cycle 10 boost). Growth and alignment with citywide equity goals can amplify PB’s impact.

Threats:

- **Stagnation without equity focus:** If Cambridge continues without explicit equity outcomes, there’s a risk PB could be seen as a “nice civic exercise” rather than a necessary tool for justice. In a city proud of progressivism, not demonstrating tangible equity impacts could lead to waning interest or political support. Essentially, *complacency is a threat*, PB must keep evolving to stay relevant.

- **Volunteer fatigue and representation imbalance:** Over-reliance on the same pool of civic volunteers (who skew older/whiter) might worsen representational imbalances over time. If those voices dominate proposals year after year, PB could inadvertently favor already-privileged neighborhoods or interests. This threatens the legitimacy of “community-driven” outcomes and could alienate marginalized groups who don’t see their ideas advancing.
- **Political or budget changes:** Although Cambridge’s PB has bipartisan support locally, any shift in city priorities or a budget crunch could threaten the program’s funding. Unlike Boston’s voter-approved measure, Cambridge’s PB exists at the discretion of city management. A new city manager or council could reduce or eliminate it if it’s not showing clear benefits. Economic downturns or competing budget demands (e.g., post-COVID fiscal strain) could also pressure the continuity or size of PB funds.
- **External limitations (legal, structural):** Cambridge, like any government, must work within certain constraints (e.g., capital funding rules, procurement laws). As PB tries to target deeper equity issues, it may bump up against things like state laws (for instance, if they wanted to prioritize certain demographics, is that legally sound?) or practical limits (city staff capacity to implement many small projects). These external factors could threaten the implementation of equity-focused projects (for example, a project to aid undocumented residents might face legal hurdles, etc.).

Overall, Cambridge’s SWOT analysis shows a program with strong foundations and community support (strengths), but one that needs to address strategic gaps (weaknesses) to fully realize its equity potential. The opportunities suggest a path forward by updating and innovating the model, while the threats remind us that progress isn’t guaranteed without vigilance and adaptation.

Cambridge PB SWOT Reflection: Cambridge’s PB has demonstrated that a sustained, volunteer-powered process can thrive; it engages a broad cross-section of residents and has delivered numerous community improvements. These are significant strengths. To date, however, Cambridge’s PB has been more effective at fostering civic participation than at targeting social inequities. The analysis above indicates that by integrating a sharper equity focus, Cambridge could amplify the social justice impact of an already successful program. If Cambridge seizes its opportunities (e.g., adopting explicit equity criteria, partnering with community groups) and addresses its weaknesses (data gaps, inclusion barriers), it can mitigate the threats of stagnation or skewed representation. Given Cambridge’s history of innovation in PB, the city is well-positioned to evolve its model. The next chapter’s recommendations will suggest ways that Cambridge can build on its strengths, such as its enthusiastic base and inclusive ethos, to ensure that participatory budgeting not only engages many people (which it already does) but also makes a tangible difference for those who need it most, solidifying Cambridge PB as a tool for urban equity.

SWOT Analysis City of Boston Participatory Budgeting

Boston’s participatory budgeting program is much newer and still in flux, having completed its first citywide cycle in 2024 (with roots in the youth PB). The SWOT analysis for Boston (Table 5.3) focuses on how its early design and first implementations position it for equity outcomes:

Strengths:

- **Formal commitment to equity:** Boston’s PB is backed by a city ordinance that explicitly names racial and social justice as core goals. The creation of an Office of Participatory Budgeting (OPB) with dedicated staff and resources shows high-level buy-in. This strong

mandate and institutional support provide a solid foundation (and signal to the public) that equity is at the heart of the program, not an afterthought.

- **Dedicated infrastructure (OPB) and staff:** Having an official office and full-time staff means Boston's PB has the capacity for extensive outreach, translation, data analysis, and coordination. This is a strength compared to volunteer-reliant models. The OPB can build expertise, ensure continuity year to year, and drive improvements (such as working on better equity metrics, as they plan with an evaluator).
- **Community partnerships and coalition:** Boston benefits from a robust network of community organizations that advocated for PB (the Boston Budget Justice Coalition, etc.) and are now partners in implementing it. These groups (e.g. neighborhood nonprofits, social justice orgs) have deep roots in communities of color and low-income neighborhoods. Their involvement in outreach, idea generation, and oversight is a major asset in reaching marginalized residents and maintaining public trust.
- **Youth PB legacy:** The decade of Youth Lead the Change provides Boston with a wealth of lessons learned, success stories (like Wi-Fi and Youth Pass), and even alumni of the process who are now young adult leaders. This legacy creates goodwill and a proof of concept that PB can deliver equity wins. It also established networks in schools and youth programs that the citywide PB can leverage. Essentially, Boston isn't starting from scratch; it's building on a youth empowerment model that already centers many equity issues (even if informally).

Weaknesses:

- **Equity framework not fully realized:** Although Boston has equity goals on paper, interviewees noted gaps between those ideals and actual practice. For instance, there was no specific criterion to prioritize high-need communities in Cycle 1; all ideas competed equally,

and selection depended on voting totals without a high-priority neighborhood filter. Some advocates felt the city's equity guidelines were too general, leading to confusion about how to operationalize them. This misalignment means the program risks over-promising and under-delivering on equity if concrete practices don't catch up to rhetoric.

- **Limited community decision power:** In the initial structure, key decision-making bodies (like the PB Oversight Board) were dominated by mayoral appointees, with relatively few seats for community-nominated members. This gave an impression of top-down control, potentially limiting the community's influence on process design and project vetting. If residents, especially those from marginalized groups, feel they're not in the driver's seat, it could erode trust. Ensuring the governance model truly shares power remains an area for improvement.
- **Voting access issues:** Boston's first cycle relied heavily on digital voting and a central in-person location, which may have excluded some residents (e.g., those without internet or who are uncomfortable in government spaces). This is a logistical weakness, the voting mechanism wasn't as accessible as it could be. Without diverse, decentralized voting options (community sites, mobile voting booths, etc.), turnout might skew away from the very groups PB aims to empower.

Opportunities:

- **Ordinance revision in progress:** Uniquely, Boston has the chance to revise its PB ordinance and rules early on (after the first cycle). This is a rare opportunity to course-correct. By incorporating lessons learned and community feedback, Boston can add clearer equity provisions, for example, explicitly naming priority groups (e.g., neighborhoods with

health disparities) or mandating an “equity impact score” in proposal evaluations. Essentially, Boston can bake in stronger equity requirements now, setting a precedent for future cycles.

- **Increased funding potential:** The initial \$2 million annual PB fund could grow. Advocates continue campaigning to restore it to \$5 million or even higher (some envision a charter amendment for 1% of the budget to PB). If successful, more funding means more projects, possibly allowing a dedicated stream for equity-focused projects (e.g., a certain amount each cycle reserved for proposals from high-need areas). The city’s current political climate (with a progressive Mayor and active advocacy groups) makes this a plausible opportunity. More money would amplify PB’s impact and buy goodwill among participants.
- **Alignment with other city initiatives:** Boston is concurrently pursuing related equity initiatives, such as a Reparations task force and various ARPA-funded projects for pandemic recovery. There’s an opportunity to link PB with these efforts. For instance, Boston could use PB to allocate a portion of ARPA funds toward community-led recovery projects, or integrate PB with the forthcoming Reparations program to empower Black residents in funding decisions. Such alignment could give PB a boost (additional resources, attention) and demonstrate its flexibility in advancing equity across domains.
- **Growing public interest in civic engagement:** Post-2020, Boston (like many cities) has seen a surge in activism and engagement, particularly around racial justice and climate justice. There’s high public energy, especially among youth and communities of color, to participate in change-making. PB can harness this momentum; it’s an opportunity to channel activism into concrete projects. If marketed and managed well, PB could become a key platform for this engaged citizenry to collaborate with the city government. The more people see PB as a way to address the issues they care about (e.g., transit, housing, environment), the more it can grow and embed itself.

Threats:

- **Political turnover or waning support:** Boston's PB currently enjoys support from Mayor Michelle Wu and the City Council, but political will can change. A future administration might not prioritize PB or could shift focus to other initiatives. If early cycles don't show clear successes, officials might question the value of PB. Loss of a PB champion in City Hall is a real threat; participatory programs often depend on key leaders. Maintaining broad political and public support (through demonstrated wins and constituencies that back PB) will be crucial to weather any changes in leadership.
- **Legal challenges to equity measures:** Boston operates in a wider context where explicit race- or ethnicity-based policies are legally vulnerable (as seen in court rulings against certain affirmative action measures). If Boston's PB tried something like reserving funds for a specific racial group or neighborhood, it could face legal scrutiny or even lawsuits. Even without such moves, general anti-"critical race theory" or anti-equity sentiment in some state/federal arenas could indirectly threaten funding or authority for PB programs that emphasize racial justice. The city's cautious approach so far indicates they are aware of this risk.
- **Economic downturns/budget cuts:** As with any publicly funded program, an economic recession or budget crisis could put PB on the chopping block. Boston already saw a cut from \$5M to \$2M due to pandemic-era budget tightening. Future downturns or competing spending priorities (schools, safety, etc.) could reduce PB funding or pause the program. This would not only limit impact but could break the trust of participants who invested time in it. Ensuring PB is seen as essential (by tying it to critical community needs) is one way to defend against cuts.

- **Dominance by privileged groups:** A paradoxical threat, if PB is not carefully managed, more privileged or organized groups could co-opt the process. For example, wealthier neighborhoods might mobilize to submit lots of ideas or turn out big numbers in voting for projects they favor, outcompeting projects from marginalized communities. There's a risk that without equity guardrails, PB results could skew toward those with more social capital (time, education, networks). This would undermine the very purpose of PB. Both cities face this, but Boston's larger scale might invite organized lobbying (imagine interest groups campaigning for PB funds for certain projects). The city will need to be vigilant, through rules or targeted outreach, to prevent PB from becoming just another venue for the loudest voices to win.

Boston's SWOT analysis reflects a program with immense promise and strong initial support, yet one that is navigating a delicate infancy with many external pressures and high expectations.

Boston PB SWOT Reflection: Boston's PB benefits from a clear equity mandate, dedicated resources, and an engaged community coalition, significant strengths that give it a head-start in centering equity. Early successes from the youth PB (like Wi-Fi and Youth Pass) have created a narrative of what's possible, energizing supporters and providing examples to point to. However, Boston must proactively address its weaknesses to fulfill its equity mission. The misalignment between equity rhetoric and implementation (e.g., lack of an equity filter in project selection, community voices feeling sidelined) could, if left unaddressed, lead to cynicism or disillusionment among the very communities PB is meant to empower. The good news is that these weaknesses (like improving voting access and data collection) are fixable in the short term, indeed, plans are already underway to add multiple voting sites and partner with evaluators for better metrics in the next cycle.

Looking externally, Boston has major opportunities to solidify and expand PB. The advocacy community remains mobilized (“Free the Funds” is still a rallying cry), which the city can harness to potentially increase the funding pool or pilot novel approaches (such as a “reparative budgeting” process focused on Black and brown communities). Boston’s general environment, a city with a reputation for progressive policy innovation, means a well-implemented PB could attract positive attention and maybe external funding (e.g. foundation grants) to further its goals.

On the flip side, Boston faces threats mostly from the political and social environment: leadership changes, budget pressures, and the possibility of equity backlash. To guard against these, Boston’s PB will need to demonstrate value early and often. If the next few cycles can show clear wins, say, a project that visibly improves a low-income neighborhood, or consistently high participation from youth of color, it will build a constituency that can help shield the program. Conversely, a high-profile failure or controversy could give opponents ammunition. Thus, the next cycle or two are critical: they must show that Boston’s PB can translate its strong inputs (money, language, partnerships) into on-the-ground equity impacts.

In conclusion, Boston’s PB is at a formative stage where it can leverage its strengths and seize opportunities to become a national exemplar of equity-centered participatory budgeting. The foundation is there, but the follow-through will determine success. If Boston proactively addresses its internal weaknesses (aligning practice with promise, broadening participation mechanisms) and prepares for external threats (through building broad coalitions and keeping equity at the forefront), it stands to achieve the transformative potential that motivated its creation. The upcoming recommendations chapter will detail specific steps for Boston (and Cambridge) to ensure these participatory budgeting programs truly redistribute power and resources in line with their equity aspirations.

CHAPTER 6: EQUITY CENTERED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BOSTON AND CAMBRIDGE PB

Drawing on the interview insights and relevant literature on equitable budgeting, this section outlines recommendations for both cities. These recommendations aim to address identified gaps, from program frameworks to outreach practices, compensation, data, and evaluation. While some recommendations apply to both Boston and Cambridge, they are presented separately to account for each city's context.

Recommendations for the City of Boston's PB Program

1. Clarify and Strengthen the Equity Framework in the Ordinance and Rulebook:

Boston should leverage the upcoming PB Ordinance rewrite to explicitly define *who* the program is intended to benefit and *how* equity will be operationalized. Currently, the language is broad; adding specificity can guide implementation. For example, include a statement of intent to prioritize communities with indicators of historic disinvestment (low-income neighborhoods, BIPOC populations, etc.), and outline mechanisms to do so. This aligns with interviewees' advice that the ordinance needs *"a line or two that focuses on impact and equity, clearly defined, who benefits and is prioritized"*. A clearer framework will also help shield the equity focus from political shifts, making it a stable foundation of the program. McShea et al. (2022) suggest that a lack of a conceptual framework can hamper equity efforts.

2. Implement Equity Criteria in Proposal Screening and Selection:

To ensure resources go toward closing gaps, Boston should introduce a formal equity impact assessment during proposal evaluation. This could mean creating an "equity score" for each idea (e.g. does the project benefit a high-need community or population?) and using that as a factor in which projects advance to the ballot. Alternatively, Boston could require that the final ballot include at least some projects that directly address the needs of marginalized groups (for

instance, a minimum number of projects that serve environmental justice communities, public housing residents, etc.). This addresses the current absence of any equity-based ranking, which was noted as a concern. By instituting such criteria, Boston would move from *equity in process* to equity in outcomes, making the selection less about popularity alone and more about need. Other cities' PB processes or racial equity budgeting tools could be models here, as literature advocates for assessing budget decisions with a racial/equity lens (Ho, 2019).

3. **Broaden Voting Accessibility and Inclusion:** Boston should take steps to make voting in PB as accessible and representative as possible. In practice, this means offering multiple voting modes and locations: not just online and City Hall, but mobile voting stations in neighborhoods (e.g., at community centers, transit hubs, schools) and paper ballot options at events. The City could partner with libraries (as idea collection sites) to also serve as voting sites, and engage community organizations to host voting drives. Learning from YLC, which set up polls at train stations and youth centers, the adult PB should similarly *meet people where they are*. Additionally, providing ballots in Boston's major languages and doing targeted Get-Out-The-Vote in immigrant communities can improve equitable turnout. While Boston did translate the ballot, it can go further by tracking participation by location and demographics (through voluntary surveys) to identify gaps. The goal is to avoid the digital divide or other barriers skewing who votes. As one interviewee recommended, "*prioritize voting by neighborhood*", ensuring all areas, especially low-income ones, have strong voting opportunities (Boston organizer). This might involve setting neighborhood PB vote targets or friendly competitions to boost inclusion across the city.
4. **Enhance Community Decision-Making Power and Oversight:** To build trust and equity, Boston should increase community control in the PB process. Concretely, this means

revisiting the composition and selection of the Oversight Board and considering more participatory approaches for certain decisions. The City could allocate a certain number of Oversight Board seats to be directly elected or selected by community assemblies (rather than mayoral appointment) to ensure representation of grassroots voices, especially from communities of color, youth, and other equity-deserving groups. Even if the Board remains appointed, adding more members with lived experience of marginalization (as the ordinance suggests) and fewer City Hall insiders would align with best practices of power-sharing (Gilman, 2016). Another idea is to create community evaluation panels or a participatory “audit” team drawn from residents to review each cycle’s outcomes and recommend improvements. This would echo the desire of interviewees for more community say; one advocate recalled how only one community nominee made it onto the Board and felt others should have been included. By empowering community stakeholders in oversight and evaluation, Boston can ensure the program stays accountable to its equity mission.

5. **Provide Compensation for Community Participation Roles:** Boston should introduce stipends or other compensation for significant participant roles to lower barriers to involvement. For example, members of working groups or committees (should Boston form volunteer budget delegate committees in future cycles) and members of the Oversight Board should be paid for their time. Currently, the Oversight Board positions are unpaid (confirmed in interviews), which may limit who can afford to serve. Providing a stipend per meeting or a yearly honorarium would acknowledge the labor and attract more diverse participants, including those from lower-income backgrounds. This is in line with an equity principle of “compensating lived expertise”. Boston already paid community organizations via grants; it can similarly invest in individual residents who contribute significant time. Cambridge’s practice of paying youth delegates offers a precedent that paying participants is

feasible and beneficial. Ultimately, fair compensation can help avoid the dynamic where only the privileged can participate deeply (as noted by interviewees in both cities).

6. **Strengthen Data Collection and Evaluation with an Equity Lens:** As Boston works with consultants to evaluate PB, it should build in robust equity metrics. This could involve collecting voluntary demographic data at key points (idea submission, voting) to identify which groups are underrepresented. The city should track metrics like the geographic distribution of winning projects, the share of projects benefiting high-poverty areas, and participant demographics relative to city demographics. Over time, PB should be able to report, for instance, what proportion of funds went to majority-minority neighborhoods or how youth participation changed. Importantly, pair quantitative data with qualitative feedback from target communities (through focus groups or interviews) to see if they feel PB is addressing their needs. One interview question to residents might be: *Do you feel the projects funded through PB are benefiting your community?* Boston should publish these evaluations to maintain transparency. If certain communities are not benefiting or participating, the City can adjust outreach or rules to correct that. This continuous improvement cycle is essential for institutionalizing equity. As a caution, data collection must be handled sensitively to not deter participation, ensuring anonymity and explaining why data helps equity can assist with that (McShea et al., 2022). Boston might look to frameworks like Generally Accepted Performance Principles (GAPP) for racial equity budgeting, which emphasize setting equity targets and measuring outcomes.
7. **Integrate PB with Broader Equity Initiatives:** Boston has other ongoing equity efforts, such as the Mayor's Reparations Task Force, examining remedies for historical injustices. PB should be connected to these, where possible. For example, the City could pilot a portion of PB specifically for projects that align with reparative justice (as one interviewee suggested,

PB could be “*a reparative process*” in designated “repair zones”). If the reparations process identifies certain neighborhoods or sectors for investment, PB funds could be steered accordingly, giving community members a say in how reparations funds are spent. Similarly, if Boston receives federal or state funds earmarked for equity or climate justice, it could channel some through PB to let impacted communities decide. This not only amplifies the impact of PB but also grounds it in larger equity strategies. It can elevate PB’s profile as a tool for equitable budgeting beyond its current scope. Coordination with such initiatives will require high-level support (Mayor and City Council), but Boston’s leadership under Mayor Wu has shown openness to participatory approaches. In fact, ensuring PB contributes to tangible equity outcomes will reinforce the City’s stance if federal policies become hostile (Mayor Wu has even preemptively testified about potential non-compliance with regressive federal guidelines. Tying PB to broader equity goals creates a narrative of PB as a solution, not a sideline project.

In summary, for Boston, the recommendations focus on making equity concrete through clearer rules, intentional project selection, inclusive voting, shared power, fair compensation, and rigorous tracking of outcomes. Implementing these would address many shortcomings identified in the first cycle and position Boston’s PB as a national model for equity-centered participatory budgeting (which aligns with the thesis goal of helping Boston become a model). These recommendations echo many interview insights and align with public budgeting scholarship that calls for embedding equity in each stage of the budget process (Wilson, 2020; McShea et al., 2022).

Recommendations for the City of Cambridge's PB Program

1. **Develop and Embed a Formal Equity Framework in PB Guidelines:** After 10+ years of PB, Cambridge should update its program handbook or guidelines to include an explicit definition of equity and goals for the PB process. This could start with the stated aim to *“prioritize the underserved and underheard”* but go further by defining what that means (e.g., increasing participation from specific marginalized groups, directing funds to historically neglected needs). By articulating equity objectives, Cambridge can make equity a guiding principle in decision-making, rather than an implicit intention. For example, the City might state: *“Equity Goal: Ensure that PB benefits those most in need, such as low-income residents, immigrants, people of color, youth, seniors, and people with disabilities - by proactively addressing barriers to their participation and favoring projects that serve these groups.”* This echoes interviewees' reflections that a clear definition was missing and would help focus the process. Formalizing equity in writing would also educate volunteers and participants about the purpose of PB beyond general civic engagement, aligning everyone with a shared vision of equitable outcomes.
2. **Introduce Equity Criteria or Set-Asides in Project Development:** Cambridge should incorporate an equity lens when volunteers and staff winnow down ideas and select final projects. One approach is to require that a certain portion of the PB budget be allocated to “social equity” projects (those directly benefiting marginalized groups or neighborhoods). Cambridge's own analysis shows it has categories like “Social Equity” for some projects, but these have not been systematically prioritized. Instituting a set-aside (for instance, 30% of PB funds reserved for projects that primarily benefit low-income, minority, or otherwise disadvantaged communities) would ensure these needs are met each cycle. Alternatively, Cambridge can score proposals on equity impact (perhaps using a rubric that considers

factors like the income level of the target neighborhood, whether the project addresses an accessibility gap, etc.) and make that a key criterion alongside feasibility and cost. Volunteers could be trained to apply this equity rubric. The lack of any ranking for equity was noted as a weakness, so adding this tool would fill a gap. This recommendation aligns with the idea of “*equity budgeting*” in public finance, which suggests using data on community needs to inform budget allocations (e.g., distribute funds not just evenly, but in relation to need) (McShea et al., 2022). By doing so, Cambridge’s PB would more systematically fund projects that advance equity (be it installing amenities in underserved areas or providing services to vulnerable groups) rather than leaving it to chance.

- 3. Increase Language Accessibility and Cultural Inclusion in PB Activities:** While Cambridge does well translating ballots and online content, it should expand language access to the volunteer and idea development process. This can be done by offering interpretation at key committee meetings or having bilingual facilitators so that residents who are not fluent in English can serve as PB Delegates. Additionally, outreach materials and events should be conducted in multiple languages more frequently (partnering with community liaisons who speak Spanish, Haitian Creole, Mandarin, etc.). One practical step is to schedule a few multilingual idea discussion sessions or workshops where interpretation is provided, to encourage non-English speakers to engage beyond just submitting an idea. Cambridge’s Community Engagement Team could collaborate on this, given their multilingual capacities. Culturally, Cambridge might also consider holding PB events in partnership with minority-led organizations or in spaces like mosques, churches, ethnic grocery stores, or cultural centers to reach diverse communities. The current practice of English-only volunteer sessions was explicitly identified as a limitation, so addressing that is critical. The City could pilot a bilingual volunteer committee (e.g., a Spanish-language committee focusing on ideas

from Spanish-speaking residents) as a start. By making the process more inclusive linguistically and culturally, Cambridge will live up to its mantra of serving the “underheard.”

4. **Provide Support and Incentives for Volunteer Participation from Underrepresented**

Groups: To tackle the economic barrier of volunteerism, Cambridge should provide stipends or other supports for PB Delegates, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds. For example, offer a modest stipend or gift card for completion of service as a PB Delegate (this could be needs-tested or offered to all to avoid stigma). At minimum, Cambridge can offer non-monetary support: free meals during meetings, childcare services for volunteers with children, and transit passes to attend meetings. These measures reduce the cost of participation. They could significantly broaden accessibility for volunteers, attracting more low-income residents, single parents, immigrants, etc., who otherwise couldn’t spare the time. Cambridge already recognizes the value of paying youth; extending some compensation to adults follows the same logic of valuing community input. This idea finds support in equity literature, which often recommends compensating community members for their engagement labor to ensure diversity (Farooqi, 2020). Additionally, the City could adjust meeting times or formats (e.g. offer some virtual meetings) to accommodate those who work multiple jobs or have mobility issues. By lowering barriers to volunteer involvement, Cambridge will get a more representative group of delegates, which in turn will lead to project proposals that reflect the needs of all communities.

5. **Strategic Outreach to Underserved Populations and Neighborhoods:** Cambridge should refine its outreach strategy to be not only broad but *targeted where gaps are known*. Even without collecting demographic data, the City likely knows anecdotally or from other sources which communities have lower engagement (for instance, maybe certain immigrant communities or public housing residents have low turnout). The City could utilize available

data, such as neighborhood-level PB voting rates or proxy indicators like language of ballots, to identify under-participating groups. Then design outreach specifically for them. For example, if few elders are participating, work with senior centers to host PB info sessions; if immigrant participation is low, collaborate with the Cambridge Community Learning Center (ESOL programs) or faith communities serving immigrants. Cambridge has done some of this (e.g., reaching out via the Housing Authority and after-school programs), but it could be more systematic. Adopting a practice from Boston, Cambridge might consider issuing small grants to community organizations to do PB outreach in communities of color, low-income areas, or among persons with disabilities. As interviews in Boston revealed, funding trusted CBOs to lead outreach can significantly boost diverse involvement. This would also strengthen community ownership of the process. In essence, the recommendation is to move from a “if you build it, they will come” approach to a more targeted mobilization approach, ensuring those traditionally left out are actively brought in.

6. Collect Voluntary Data for Improvement (While Maintaining Low Barriers):

Cambridge’s aversion to data collection is well-intentioned, but there are ways to gather feedback without harming participation. The City could implement an anonymous post-process survey for all participants (voters and volunteers) with a few key questions: demographic questions (optional) and questions about their experience. Because it’s after voting, it wouldn’t deter one from voting, especially if made very short and clearly separate from the ballot. Alternatively, Cambridge could use indirect indicators: for example, ask each PB Delegate in exit interviews what communities they felt were missing in the discussions, or have observers at voting events gauge the diversity of participants. Still, having some hard data is valuable. Cambridge might start small: perhaps in one cycle, ask voters to optionally check a box for age group and whether it’s their first time voting in PB. This could yield

insights into whether youth or new immigrants are engaging. If participation indeed drops when such questions are asked, they can recalibrate. However, evidence from other cities suggests short optional surveys can get decent responses and help identify outreach needs (e.g., some PB processes have found via surveys that homeowners were overrepresented among voters, leading them to adjust outreach to renters). The recommendation is to find a middle ground on data: maintain the welcoming, privacy-respecting ethos, but gather enough information to guide equity improvements. Over time, Cambridge can build a picture of PB's reach and make it an iterative learning process.

7. **Enhance Evaluation and Feedback Loops Focused on Equity:** In line with data collection, Cambridge should institute a regular evaluation of PB through an equity lens. After each cycle, the Budget Office (or an independent evaluator) should analyze which types of projects are winning and who they benefit. Are there important community needs not being addressed by PB projects? Are certain neighborhoods consistently not seeing winning projects? For example, if analysis showed that wealthier neighborhoods' projects tend to win more often (due to higher voter turnout), the City could respond by weighting votes or providing extra assistance to proposals from underserved areas in future cycles. Cambridge could also convene focus groups from marginalized communities to review the PB results and get their perspective on whether the outcomes seem fair and beneficial. The evaluation should be public, perhaps in an annual PB report, to maintain transparency. This also ties to the City's broader commitment to equity, showing that it does not treat PB as merely a civic engagement exercise but as a tool for equitable resource distribution, which it is monitoring and refining. Given Cambridge's innovative spirit, it could partner with local researchers (e.g., at Harvard or MIT) to design these evaluations, as was done in some academic studies of Cambridge PB (Guo, 2017). The key recommendation is to

institutionalize learning and accountability: use evidence to identify equity gaps in PB and make adjustments, rather than running the same model each year without adaptation.

By implementing these recommendations, Cambridge can evolve its PB from an engagement success to an equity success. The city has a strong foundation of participation and trust in the process; now it can steer that process more deliberately toward closing equity gaps. These changes, a formal equity lens, targeted outreach, volunteer support, and better evaluation, are modest in cost but significant in impact. They will help ensure that Cambridge's PB truly lives up to the ideal of empowering those "*underheard*" voices in the budgeting process, and they will set an example for other long-running PB programs on how to refresh and reorient for equity.

Both Boston and Cambridge stand to gain from these recommendations. In implementing them, each city should consider the others' experiences: Boston can learn from Cambridge's sustained community engagement and iterate its process with more participation in proposal development; Cambridge can learn from Boston's intentional equity framing and targeted outreach efforts. Ultimately, both cities are learning laboratories for equitable PB.

Summary Policy Recommendations for Municipal Leadership

The following summary distills key takeaways from the equity-centered recommendations into concise policy actions for city officials, budget officers, and elected leaders. These recommendations are intended to support the long-term institutionalization of equitable participatory budgeting (PB) in Boston, Cambridge, and beyond.

- **Invest in Inclusive Outreach and Access**

Allocate dedicated funding for multilingual outreach, digital and civic literacy efforts, and culturally responsive engagement strategies. Prioritize outreach that centers youth, non-English speakers, public housing residents, and other historically excluded communities.

- **Increase Transparency and Create Feedback Loops**

Establish clear communication channels that keep residents informed at every stage of the PB process, from proposal screening to project implementation. Public dashboards, regular updates, and community-friendly evaluation summaries can build trust and strengthen accountability.

- **Create Paid Resident Leadership Roles**

Formalize community leadership through stipended advisory boards or paid delegate roles that reflect the demographic and geographic diversity of the city. Compensating lived experience helps remove barriers to participation and enhances representation.

- **Standardize Equity Metrics and Evaluation**

Embed equity metrics into all stages of PB. Collect voluntary demographic data on participation (race, age, geography, income) and conduct post-cycle equity audits. Use findings to make iterative improvements and ensure funds reach those most in need.

- **Ensure Institutional Support and Longevity**

Sustain PB programs through stable staffing, recurring budget allocations, and integration

with broader city planning, climate justice, or reparative justice efforts. Moving from one-off initiatives to embedded democratic infrastructure is key to long-term impact.

CHAPTER 7: CLOSING

Looking Forward

As cities face mounting pressure to govern more inclusively and equitably, participatory budgeting remains a valuable, though evolving, tool. Its success depends not only on process design, but on the political will to center community voice, particularly the voices of those historically excluded from budgeting decisions. Boston and Cambridge have laid important groundwork; the next step is to deepen their commitment, scale what works, and ensure that equity is not only aspirational but operationalized in every aspect of participatory governance.

Conclusion

Participatory budgeting in Boston, Cambridge, and beyond shows strong potential for advancing equity in public decision-making, particularly when programs are thoughtfully designed and supported by political leadership and community partnerships. In Boston, the creation of a citywide PB program with a racial justice mandate reflects a step toward embedding equity into municipal infrastructure. Meanwhile, Cambridge's long-standing, grassroots approach shows how consistent, inclusive outreach can build public trust and participation over time.

Comparative examples from New York City and Chicago underscore the importance of lowering participation barriers, structuring processes to promote inclusion, and ensuring follow-through on project implementation. These cities demonstrate that PB can reach those often excluded from civic processes, immigrants, youth, low-income residents, but that design choices and scope ultimately determine whether equity goals are realized.

This research suggests that equity in PB is not a given; it must be built in, from who can vote, to how projects are assessed, to what share of the budget is put on the table. Equity-centered PB

means not only reallocating dollars, but also building civic power and capacity in historically marginalized communities.

As more cities adopt PB, a key challenge will be scaling the model while preserving its equity focus. Future research should explore how PB can be integrated with broader efforts in budget justice and participatory governance, especially in areas such as housing, education, and public safety.

Ultimately, PB is not just a budgeting tool, but a democratic practice with the power to redistribute voice, visibility, and power. If we design it with equity at the center, it can help shape more just and responsive urban futures.

Ethical Considerations

All interview participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their consent before participating. Their names and identifying details have been kept confidential.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview Questions and Format (1-hour meetings):

Introduction:

1. Can you share a brief overview of your role and your involvement with participatory budgeting in [City of Boston/City of Cambridge]?
2. How long have you been engaged in participatory budgeting efforts, and what motivated you to work in this area?

Section 1: Program Design:

3. Does your program define "equity," and if so, is this definition integrated into its design and implementation?
4. Are there primary equity goals embedded in the initial design of the participatory budgeting program? If so, what are these?
5. Were historically underserved and marginalized communities prioritized during the planning phase?
6. Did you implement strategies to ensure that the program is inclusive and accessible (e.g., language accessibility, outreach to underrepresented groups)?

Follow-up: [if there are equity principles/goals] Were there any challenges in integrating equity principles during the program's design phase? If so, how were they addressed?

Section 2: Community Outreach and Engagement:

7. Do you have a definition for "meaningful community outreach" in your program?
8. What strategies, if any, have you found effective in engaging marginalized populations, such as environmental justice communities or undocumented immigrants?
9. How, if at all, were your community engagement efforts evaluated concerning equity?

Follow-up: Are there any specific examples of how outreach efforts have directly influenced participation from underrepresented groups?

Section 3: Decision-Making and Implementation:

10. Are community members involved in the evaluation and decision-making processes for proposed projects?
11. In your experience, does the voting process ensure equitable participation across diverse communities?
12. Are there measures in place to prevent dominant or better-resourced populations from diluting the voices of marginalized groups?

Follow-up: Have there been instances where equity goals conflicted with broader program priorities? If yes, how were these conflicts resolved?

Section 4: Program Outcomes and Evaluation:

13. Do you have mechanisms to assess whether funded projects address systemic inequities in the community?
14. Are there examples of projects that you believe have been particularly successful in advancing equity?
15. Are there metrics or feedback mechanisms used to evaluate the program's long-term impact on underserved populations?

Follow-up: Are there areas where the program could improve in terms of centering equity during evaluation or implementation?

Closing Questions:

16. Are there lessons you have learned about centering equity in participatory budgeting that could benefit other cities?
17. Looking ahead, what opportunities and threats do you see for advancing equity within participatory budgeting programs in your city?
18. Is there anything you'd like to add about your experience with participatory budgeting or its impact on equity?

Appendix B: Voices from the Field: Perspectives on Centering Equity

To capture the nuances of how equity is perceived and pursued in these PB programs, this section presents selected quotes from interviewees. The quotes are grouped by theme and illustrate the diverse perspectives, from city officials to community advocates to youth leaders. (To conserve anonymity, all interview quotes are cited as “*Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview.*”)

1. Program Design & Definition of Equity

- *“City of Boston PB defines equity... [but] not the definition we [advocates] wanted. We pushed for clearly articulated equity goals. It’s a step in the right direction, but not articulate enough.”* ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview
- *“When [Cambridge’s PB] began, there was no equity embedded. We didn’t get equity-specific; we just wanted to expand the representation period, prioritize the ‘underserved and underheard’ broadly.”* ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview

2. Outreach and Accessibility

- *“Idea collection sessions led by community organizations played a crucial role in bringing in voices we usually don’t hear. It made a huge difference in participation from communities of color.”* ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview
- *“Our approach is fully open. You don’t even have to be a Cambridge resident to submit an idea. That low barrier to entry is intentional; it’s about making it easy and welcoming.”* ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview
- *“Language access is crucial. Especially in East Boston, we needed interpreters at every meeting. The City did provide translation into the major languages, which was key to inclusion.”* ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview

3. Volunteer Engagement and Representation

- *“Volunteers play a critical role in Cambridge’s process. But they’re unpaid, which inherently is a barrier, not everyone can afford to give that time. That’s something we have to reckon with.”* ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview
- *“There’s a tension: do we want as many people involved as possible, or do we want to prioritize those most impacted? Often, the ones who can spend hours on PB are retired, white, better-off... We risk missing the equity mark if we rely only on those who show up.”* ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview
- *“On the plus side, we do pay our Youth Delegates. That’s been a great investment; it brings youth to the table and values their labor. It’s one small way we tried to walk the talk on equity.”* ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview

4. Decision-Making & Power Dynamics

- *“The External Oversight Board was supposed to shift power to the community. In reality, many appointees were former city staff. We (the coalition) only got one of our nominees on. It’s better than nothing, but not the shared power we envisioned.”* ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview
- *“Does the voting process ensure equitable participation? I don’t know. There’s an intentional lack of data. We basically assume we haven’t achieved it and keep trying new outreach. PB is not the only form of outreach. PB is fun, but it’s not the sole remedy.”* ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview
- *“Anyone from Boston can vote, no matter what, that’s the beauty of democracy. The biggest issue is accessibility, and we’ve been tackling that. We’re always looking for ways to improve, not to stay stagnant.”* ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview

5. Outcomes and Equity Impact

- *“The projects that got me excited were explicitly equity-focused: things like benches at bus stops in high-ridership routes (that help transit riders in EJ communities), or funding for youth jobs. Those came from the community and address real needs.” ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*
- *“Biggest lesson: young people have amazing ideas. The MBTA Youth Pass? That came from a youth! Wicked Free Wi-Fi? Youth idea. We need to include those voices; it’s not just feel-good, it leads to real changes.” ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*
- *“We’re not formally tracking long-term impact, and that’s a gap. How do we know if PB projects are reducing inequities? Right now, we don’t, and we should figure that out.” ~Community Stakeholder, 2025 Interview*

These voices underscore that equity in PB is a work in progress. There is pride in successes (e.g., engaging diverse youth, implementing community-suggested equity projects) and frustration with shortcomings (lack of data, power imbalances, insufficient definitions). Notably, even within one city, perspectives can diverge: officials tend to emphasize efforts to be inclusive, while advocates often point out where those efforts fall short. Together, these insights inform the following recommendations to strengthen equity in both Boston’s and Cambridge’s PB programs.