

Title: Citizen Involvement in Public Policy: Does It Matter How Much Is at Stake?

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Citizen Involvement in Public Policy: Does It Matter How Much Is at Stake?

Abstract (English)

Public administrations increasingly try to find new ways to involve citizens in policy-making. However, many democratic innovations draw in only a fraction of the public. Why? I hypothesize that we observe such low participation rates because there is often not enough at stake for citizens. I test this with a pre-registered survey experiment on citizens' intentions to participate in participatory budgets in the Netherlands. I fielded the experiment among a sample of citizens that had just experienced a participatory budget ($N = 225$) and among a population-based sample ($N = 1,369$). I operationalized the stakes as the amount of public money about which citizens can decide. The results show that more money generally does not increase citizens' intention to participate. Supplementary analyses confirm the experimental findings and provide reasons how and why the stakes involved (do not) matter for citizens' involvement.

Abstract (Dutch)

Overheden proberen steeds vaker nieuwe manieren te vinden om burgers bij beleidsvorming te betrekken. Desalniettemin nemen doorgaans maar weinig burgers deel aan deze innovatieve manieren van participatie. Waarom? Ik veronderstel dat participatie veelal uitblijft omdat er voor burgers niet genoeg op het spel staat. Ik test dit met een vooraf geregistreerd survey-experiment over de intentie van burgers om deel te nemen aan wijkbudgetten in Nederland. Het experiment vond plaats onder burgers die net een wijkbudget hadden ervaren ($N = 225$) en onder een steekproef van de Nederlandse bevolking ($N = 1.369$). 'Wat er op het spel staat' operationaliseerde ik als de hoeveelheid publiek geld waarover burgers kunnen beslissen. De

resultaten tonen aan dat meer geld in het algemeen de intentie om te participeren niet verhoogt. Aanvullende analyses bevestigen dit en geven aan hoe en waarom wat er op het spel staat voor burgers (niet) van belang is voor hun betrokkenheid.

Keywords: citizen involvement; democratic innovations; participatory budgeting; participatory governance; public money

1. INTRODUCTION

In response to growing democratic discontent among citizens, the past decades have witnessed a strong push for public administrations in Western democracies to find new ways to involve citizens in policy-making (Geissel & Newton, 2012; Hendriks, 2021). By now, governments have experimented extensively with a variety of innovations to involve more citizens more deeply in public policy development, ranging from citizens' assemblies to citizens' juries and participatory budgets (Fung, 2006; Smith, 2009). However, democratic innovations (DIs) do not always succeed in broadening participation in policy-making. In fact, many such innovations draw in only a fraction of the public (e.g. Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2018; Coleman & Cardoso Sampaio, 2017; van der Does & Bos, 2021). Why?

Prior research has focused mostly on the procedural design features of DIs, ranging from the type of recruitment strategy to the chosen duration of the event and, for example, the way in which decisions are reached (Fung, 2006; Neblo, Esterling, Kennedy, Lazer, & Sokhey, 2010; Ryfe, 2002). Yet, studies show that even innovations that use very similar designs can display markedly different participation rates (Mitozo & Marques, 2019). In this paper, I therefore examine an alternative explanation for low participation rates: it is because there is often not enough at stake for citizens. While some DIs deal with what one might consider high-stake policy issues, such as constitutional change or electoral reform (Farrell, Suiter, & Harris, 2019; Fournier, Van der Kolk, Carty, Blais, & Rose, 2011), most either deal with minor policy issues or lack the authority to translate citizens' input directly into policy output (e.g. Font, Smith, Galais, & Alarcon, 2018; Grönlund, Bächtiger, & Setälä, 2014; Schneider & Busse, 2019). Some have suggested in this respect that if public authorities were to raise the stakes, "participants [would] invest more of their psychic energy and resources into the process" (Fung, 2007, p. 165). Similarly, I hypothesize that higher stakes will lead to higher participation rates.

Theoretically, this follows a rational choice logic: under equal costs of participation, higher potential benefits should convince more people to participate. Empirically, it resonates with evidence on voter turnout: when the stakes in an election are higher (lower), turnout tends to be higher (lower) too (e.g. Andersen, Fiva, & Natvik, 2014; Lefevere & Van Aelst, 2014). For DIs, we still lack systematic empirical evidence to verify the relationship between the stakes involved and citizens' propensity to participate. Whereas prior research shows that instrumental motivations matter for citizens' considerations to participate in DIs or not (Aitamurto, Landemore, & Saldivar Galli, 2017; Gustafson & Hertting, 2017; Jacquet, 2019; Mazeaud & Talpin, 2010), we do not know to what degree such considerations are contingent upon what is at stake (cf. Font, Pasadas, & Fernández-Martínez, 2021, p. 236).

I seek to address this gap in the literature by means of an empirical study of participatory budgeting. Participatory budgeting is one of the most widely implemented DIs (Ryan, 2021). It refers to a subclass of innovations that allows “citizens [to] participate in deciding the allocation of public expenditure” (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 26). The ‘stakes’ in participatory budgeting, then, revolve for a large part around money, that is, the amount of money made available for the execution of projects selected or prioritized by citizens (e.g. Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014). This is why I expect that participatory budgets that allow citizens to decide about more (less) public money will lead to more (less) participation.

The existing evidence of the effect of money on participation in participatory budgeting remains mixed, pertains almost exclusively to voting, and is largely anecdotal (e.g. Allegretti, 2013, p. 220; Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014, p. 45; Gilman & Wampler, 2019, pp. 20-21; Goldfrank & Schneider, 2006, pp. 3-4). I address these limitations by means of a pre-registered survey experiment on Dutch citizens' intentions to participate in multiple ways in online participatory budgets (ePBs). I fielded the experiment in two different samples: a sample of citizens ($N = 225$)

who had just experienced an ePB in a neighborhood of The Hague, the Netherlands, and a population-based sample of Dutch citizens ($N = 1,369$). I verify the validity of the experimental results by means of voting data on 19 Dutch ePBs and evidence from 28 semi-structured interviews that allowed citizens to express their views on ePB budgets in their own words.

Methodologically, this study contributes to the literature on citizen involvement in public policy by moving beyond ethnographic case studies to understand the drivers of participation (cf. Ryan, 2021). More specifically, I show how survey experiments on citizens' intentions combined with behavioral and interview data can provide robust evidence on the antecedents of citizen involvement in a DI such as participatory budgeting. Empirically, the findings challenge the hypothesis that a higher budget increases citizens' propensity to engage in participatory budgeting. The experimental results suggest that, on average, the size of the budget does not significantly affect citizens' propensity to participate. The one significant effect that I do find goes against the hypothesis: in one of the samples, the intention to participate *discursively* was highest when the amount of money was either low (€3,000) or high (€300,000) as opposed to moderate (€30,000). The supplementary analyses tend to confirm the main findings, with the interviews providing several reasons why higher budgets may not act as an incentive for citizens to become more involved in ePBs. The implications of the results are that practitioners seeking to involve citizens in policy-making need to (a) consider carefully what citizens think is at stake when setting up DIs and (b) take into account that raising the stakes may have different implications for different forms of participation.

2. STAKES, MONEY, AND CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

The Stakes in Democratic Innovations

The literature on democratic innovations (DIs) tends to define the ‘stakes involved’ as the degree to which an innovation’s (prospective) outcomes matter to citizens (Ryfe, 2005, p. 63), how important citizens deem the issue it deals with (Nabatchi, 2012, p. 701; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 246), and, for example, whether the respective issue “affects [citizens’] welfare or deeply held beliefs” (Fung, 2003, p. 345). I here define the *stakes involved* as *the degree to which a democratic innovation allows citizens to “influence outcomes that [they] care about”* (Andersen et al., 2014, p. 157). Put differently, the stakes in this context deal with the question to what extent administrations empower citizens via DIs to shape public policy outcomes that they consider important (cf. Fung & Wright, 2001). Variation in the stakes involved across DIs, then, results from a combination of *what* outcomes citizens are able to influence and, in turn, *to what degree* they can shape those same outcomes (Smith, 2009). Both aspects can lower or raise the stakes involved: far-reaching power to shape policy outcomes might matter little to citizens when a DI does not deal with policy issues they care about, while little influence on public policy might make it irrelevant that a DI deals with a salient issue (cf. Font et al., 2021, p. 236).

The literature often suggests that when administrations give citizens the chance to participate in policy-making but little is at stake, low participation rates are likely to result (e.g. Fung, 2003, 2015; Thompson, 2008, p. 503). As Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) maintain, for example, “If the issue has low stakes, then very few people turn out” (p. 247). Such statements reflect a conception of citizens as rational actors in the sense that “[t]heir political involvement increases with the potential stakes of policy decisions for their personal utility” (Hoppe, 2010, p. 201). This constitutes a potential explanation as to why similarly designed DIs produce varying

rates of participation (Mitozo & Marques, 2019): those DIs might simply vary in terms of how much they allow citizens to influence outcomes they care about.

However, this presumes that citizens indeed approach DIs as utility maximizers. If such an assumption does not hold and citizens generally care little about the outcomes of DIs, then we would not expect the stakes involved to feature commonly in their ‘calculations’ of deciding to participate or not (Goldfrank, 2011). As with voting and other forms of political participation (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), prior empirical research shows that citizens’ motivations to participate in DIs are not merely instrumental, that is, citizens are not just geared towards getting the policies they want. In fact, across a wide variety of DIs, including advisory councils (Font et al., 2021), participatory urban renewal programs (Gustafson & Hertting, 2017), crowdsourced policy-making (Aitamurto et al., 2017), participatory budgets (Goldfrank, 2011), and, for instance, deliberative mini-publics (Jacquet, 2019), studies suggest that citizens’ decisions to participate in DIs rely on a mix of instrumental and so-called ‘intrinsic’ or ‘internal’ motivations, that is, “gratifications relating to [participation]” in the DI rather than to its outcomes (Jacquet, 2019, p. 646).

Yet, importantly, these studies tend to list instrumental motivations often on a par with intrinsic ones (e.g. Font et al., 2021; Gustafson & Hertting, 2017) or even find that “the pursuit of objective results stands out as the primary motivation” (Goldfrank, 2011, p. 207). This suggests that the envisioned outcomes of DIs tend to matter for citizens’ decisions to (not) participate, making it plausible that citizens, on average, will become more inclined to participate when their chances to influence policy outcomes that they care about increase. In the following, I focus on the role the stakes involved play in explaining participation in one of the most popular DIs worldwide: participatory budgets.

The Role of Money in Participatory Budgets

In line with the theoretical discussion above, prior research suggests that the stakes in participatory budgets (PBs) are about *which* policies citizens can affect and *to what extent* they can do so. Higher stakes in both respects are commonly thought to raise participation rates. Case study evidence on the PB in Porto Alegre, Brazil, illustrates this. On the one hand, the high rates of participation in the PB among poor citizens early on have generally been attributed to the envisioned prospects of improvements in basic infrastructure. By contrast, participation among middle-class citizens tends to be explained by the later shift towards other, more thematic issues that these citizens arguably cared more about (Goldfrank & Schneider, 2006). On the other hand, research suggests that as the public funds that citizens could decide about in the PB increased, citizens gained more control over urban policy and participation rates increased too (Goldfrank, 2011).

While I recognize, then, that the question *what* PBs deal with is important for understanding the effect of the stakes involved on participation, in this paper I focus specifically on the *degree* to which citizens can shape policy outcomes they care about by looking at the potential effect of the amount of money made available to fund PB projects. I do so because it speaks to the financial character that sets PBs apart from many other DIs (Sintomer, Herzberg, & Röcke, 2008, p. 168) and because the relevant money-related hypothesis continues to receive much attention in the literature, as I describe below.

The size of the budget that citizens can decide about constitutes a key indicator of *the degree* to which citizens can affect policy outcomes (and, hence, of the stakes involved). All else equal, the more public money administrations make available to fund projects selected or prioritized by citizens via a PB, the higher the probability becomes that citizens will be able to

affect public policies they care about (cf. Gilman & Wampler, 2019, p. 15). Depending on the exact design of a PB, this is likely to happen because (a) it allows the money to be distributed among more projects, raising the chance for individual citizens to see projects implemented that they care about and/or (b) it allows larger projects to be implemented via the PB, making it more likely that citizens can leave a discernable impact on public policy (Wampler, McNulty, & Touchton, 2021, p. 68).

The money available for project funding in PBs is commonly linked to the stakes involved, with the lowering of available funds being associated with “confining citizens’ participation to marginal decisions” (Sintomer, Röcke, & Talpin, 2013, p. 254). The hypothesis that reserving more money for a PB will lead to more participation also features frequently in the literature (e.g. Gilman & Wampler, 2019, p. 21). For example, as Shah (2007) remarks, “where larger sums of money are at stake (...) it may convince (...) citizens that participatory budgeting is (...) perhaps worth trying” (p. 6). The existing empirical literature tends to confirm this hypothesis. Whereas most of these studies rely on a comparison between participation rates and available budgets for a handful of PBs (e.g. Goldfrank & Schneider, 2006, pp. 3-4; Songmin, 2013, p. 44), several studies offer confirmatory evidence based on assessments of the same PB over multiple years (Goldfrank, 2011) or across a large sample of PBs (Hagelskamp, Rinehart, Silliman, & Schleifer, 2016). However, in this last line of research, contradictory evidence is also reported (Allegretti, 2013, p. 220). More importantly, all of the existing evidence remains correlational in nature, which makes it difficult to isolate the potential effect of the size of the budget on participation.

In this paper, I seek to address this limitation by means of survey experiments on participation in online participatory budgets (ePBs) in the Netherlands. The empirical strategy is to focus specifically on the degree to which the amount of money available for projects affects

citizens' propensity to participate while keeping other factors constant (such as procedural design features and what is on the PB's agenda).

3. SURVEY EXPERIMENTS ON MONEY AND PARTICIPATION

To test the hypothesis that a higher (lower) budget will motivate more (less) citizens to participate in participatory budgets, I rely on a pre-registered online survey experiment fielded among Dutch citizens.¹ I included the experiment in two surveys in the Netherlands. I ran one of the surveys in collaboration with the Municipality of The Hague in May 2021 among a sample of citizens that had just experienced an ePB in their neighborhood (Benoordenhout). The municipality distributed the survey to 1,041 citizens that had registered on the ePB website for updates, out of which 225 completed the experiment. During the same month, Dynata fielded the other survey experiment among a representative sample of 1,369 Dutch citizens.² The Benoordenhout survey sought to underpin the internal validity of the results by fielding the experiment among citizens with a recent ePB experience. It thereby offers a sample of citizens that are likely to understand how ePBs generally function and what their potential outcomes can look like (cf. Bedock & Pilet, 2020, p. 7). The Dutch population survey sought to address the sampling bias associated with targeting those that have already experienced an ePB and registered for updates.

The vignette in the experiment describes a specific form of online participatory budgeting recently implemented in various Dutch cities (for details, see van der Does & Bos, 2021). These processes are most similar to “participatory grant-making” initiatives that have occurred in other European countries too (Ryan, 2021, pp. 82-83). They reflect several common features of participatory budgeting: they deal with the “allocation of public finances” (Sintomer et al., 2008,

p. 168); reflect a focus on public works at the local level (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 26; Sintomer, Herzberg, Allegretti, Röcke, & Alves, 2013; Wampler, 2007, p. 36); and fit in a wider trend of PBs increasingly taking place online (Schneider & Busse, 2019; Sintomer, Herzberg, et al., 2013).³ In both experiments, I asked respondents to imagine that next year an ePB will take place in their neighborhood. The vignette then described the process' characteristics, mimicking the design features of recent ePBs in the Netherlands.⁴ The manipulation (displayed in bold) pertained only to the budget available for the execution of selected projects (€3,000; €30,000; €300,000). The vignette in the Benoordenhout survey read:⁵

Participatory budgets can be organized in various ways. Imagine that next year the municipality organizes a participatory budget in **your neighborhood** in the following way:

Residents can submit plans online for projects to improve the quality of life in their neighborhood. There is a total of [€3,000; €30,000; €300,000] available for the execution of one or more plans. The submitted plans appear on a website of the municipality. Residents can then 'like' the plans online and post arguments in favor of and against the plans. Plans that gain 25 or more likes move on to a feasibility check carried out by the municipality. The plans that are feasible according to the municipality move on to the last round. In this last round, neighborhood residents determine which of these plans will be executed by online allocating the money to their favorite plans.

The amounts are based on the observation that many ePBs in the Netherlands, and in The Hague in particular, reserve around €30,000 for the winning projects (see Supporting Information (SI), Table S1). The other two amounts, then, represent a factor of ten higher (€300,000) and lower (€3,000) than the reference amount of €30,000.⁶ I considered such large discrepancies appropriate for a first experimental test of the amount of money on citizens' intentions to participate; after all,

if there is no discernable effect here, then it is very probable that it will also be absent when differences in budgets are smaller. Still, the two extremes are not unrealistic: the lowest amount (€3,000) matches amounts common in neighborhood-level subsidy schemes in Dutch municipalities,⁷ and the highest (€300,000) features in local-level ePBs in larger districts (SI, Table S1).

I assigned respondents randomly to one of the three conditions. Underneath the vignette, respondents were then asked the following question: “How likely is it that you would participate in this participatory budget in the following ways? Please indicate this on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means ‘very unlikely’ and 7 means ‘very likely’” (cf. Langella, Anessi-Pessina, Botica Redmayne, & Sicilia, 2021). Respondents then answered the question for four types of participation common in Dutch ePBs: “Submit a plan to improve the quality of life in the neighborhood” (*Submit*); “Post arguments in response to plans on the website” (*Argue*); “Like plans on the website” (*Like*); and “Allocate the money to my favorite plans in the last round” (*Vote*). Following the pre-registration form, I test the hypothesis by means of an ANOVA for each of the four dependent variables, with planned contrasts for (a) the €3,000 vis-à-vis the €30,000 and €300,000 conditions and (b) the €30,000 vis-à-vis the €300,000 condition. Following the pre-registration, I also performed a series of robustness checks (reported in section 2.2 of the SI). These alternative specifications generally lead to qualitatively similar results.

Figure 1 summarizes the main results. It displays the distribution of scores for respondents’ expressed intentions to participate in the ePB across experimental conditions for both the Benoordenhout sample and the Dutch population sample. In the former sample, the most popular form of participation was voting ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 1.48$), followed by liking proposals ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 2.01$), posting an argument ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.86$), and submitting a proposal ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.94$). Contrary to my expectations, the mean expressed likelihood of ePB

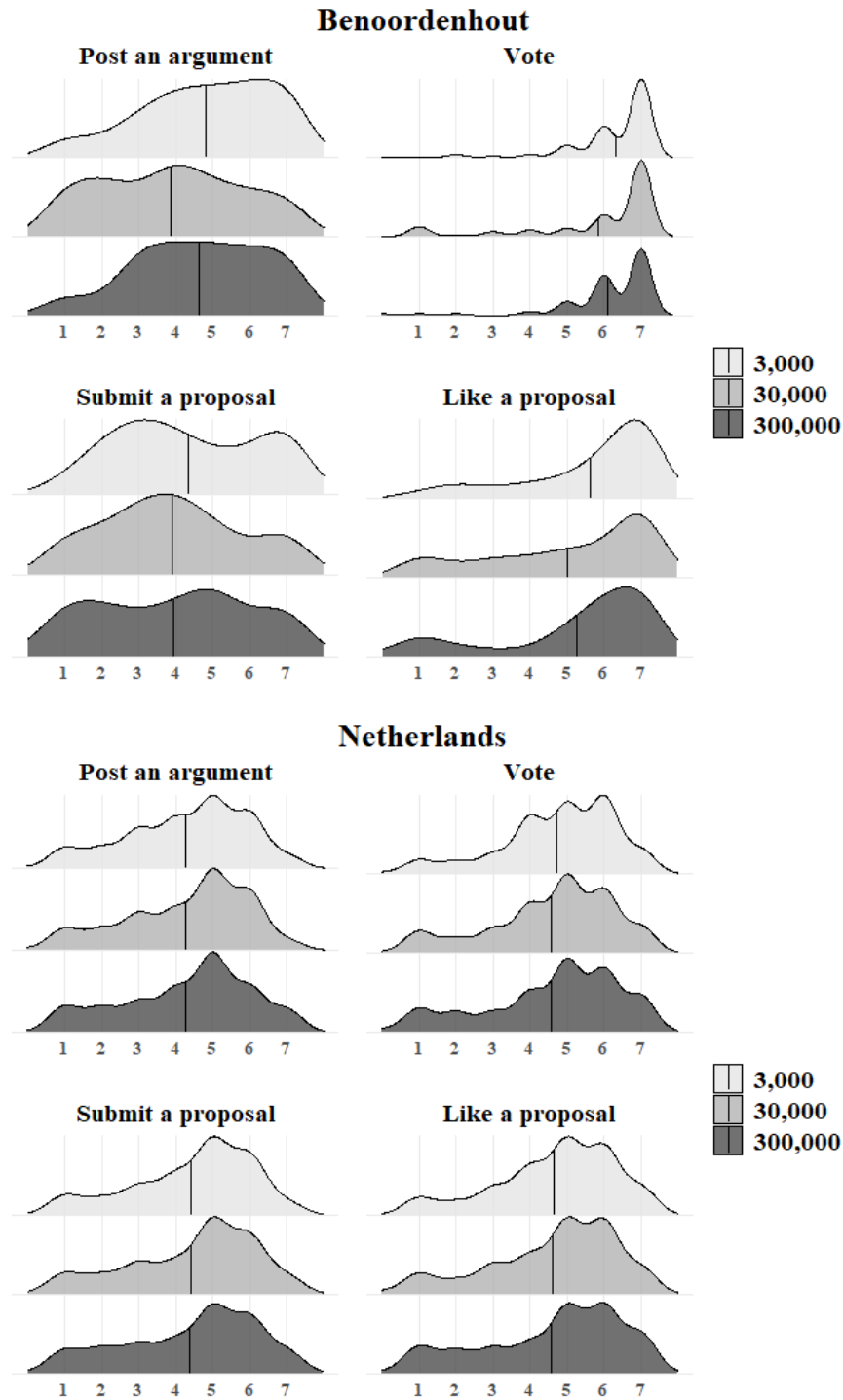


FIGURE 1 Expressed likelihood of participating in ePB. Shows the density of scores on the four dependent variables for each experimental condition on the seven-point scale. ($N = 225$ [Benoordenhout]; $N = 1,369$ [Netherlands]). Vertical lines represent the means.

participation did not differ significantly across conditions for submitting a proposal ($F(2, 222) = 1.158, p = 0.316$), liking proposals ($F(2, 222) = 1.837, p = 0.162$), or voting ($F(2, 222) = 2.026, p = 0.134$).

I do find a significant difference in respondents' intentions to post an argument on the online platform across experimental conditions ($F(2, 222) = 6.022, p = 0.003$). Planned contrasts show that the mean likelihood of posting an argument was significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) in the €3,000 condition ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.77$) compared to the €30,000 and €300,000 conditions ($M = 4.14, SD = 1.86$). In turn, the expressed likelihood of posting an argument, on average, was significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) in the €300,000 condition ($M = 4.65, SD = 1.74$) than in the €30,000 condition ($M = 3.87, SD = 1.93$).

I do not find a similar significant effect in the Dutch population sample. In general, respondents in the population sample were most inclined to vote ($M = 4.62, SD = 1.70$), followed by liking proposals ($M = 4.61, SD = 1.75$), submitting a proposal ($M = 4.40, SD = 1.72$), and posting an argument ($M = 4.27, SD = 1.68$). As already suggested by the near-identical distributions in Figure 1, for none of these forms of ePB participation I observe significant mean differences across the experimental conditions (SI, Table S4). This suggests that for the general population the amount of money available for the execution of winning ePB projects matters little for their inclination to participate in these various ways.

3. FROM INTENTIONS TO BEHAVIOR AND EXPERIENCES

How do these findings on citizens' intentions to participate match up with what we observe in actual Dutch ePBs? To assess this, I compare the experimental results to observational data on 19 ePBs that took place in the Netherlands between 2019 and 2021 for which I was able to collect

the relevant voting rates (SI, Table S1). All ePBs followed a near-identical format and used the same online infrastructure, with the size of the available budget varying between €20,000 and €400,000.⁸ Figure 2 summarizes the results. The left panel shows the available budget against the observed voter turnout. It suggests a moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.32$, $p = 0.18$) between the amount of money available and voter turnout. As illustrated in the right panel of Figure 2, this negative relationship remains when we consider the number of euros available per member of the ePB electorate ($r = -0.35$, $p = 0.14$), accounting for differences in electorate size across ePBs. While far from conclusive given the small number of cases,⁹ the observed patterns in Figure 2 do again contradict the hypothesized positive relationship between the size of the budget and ePB participation.

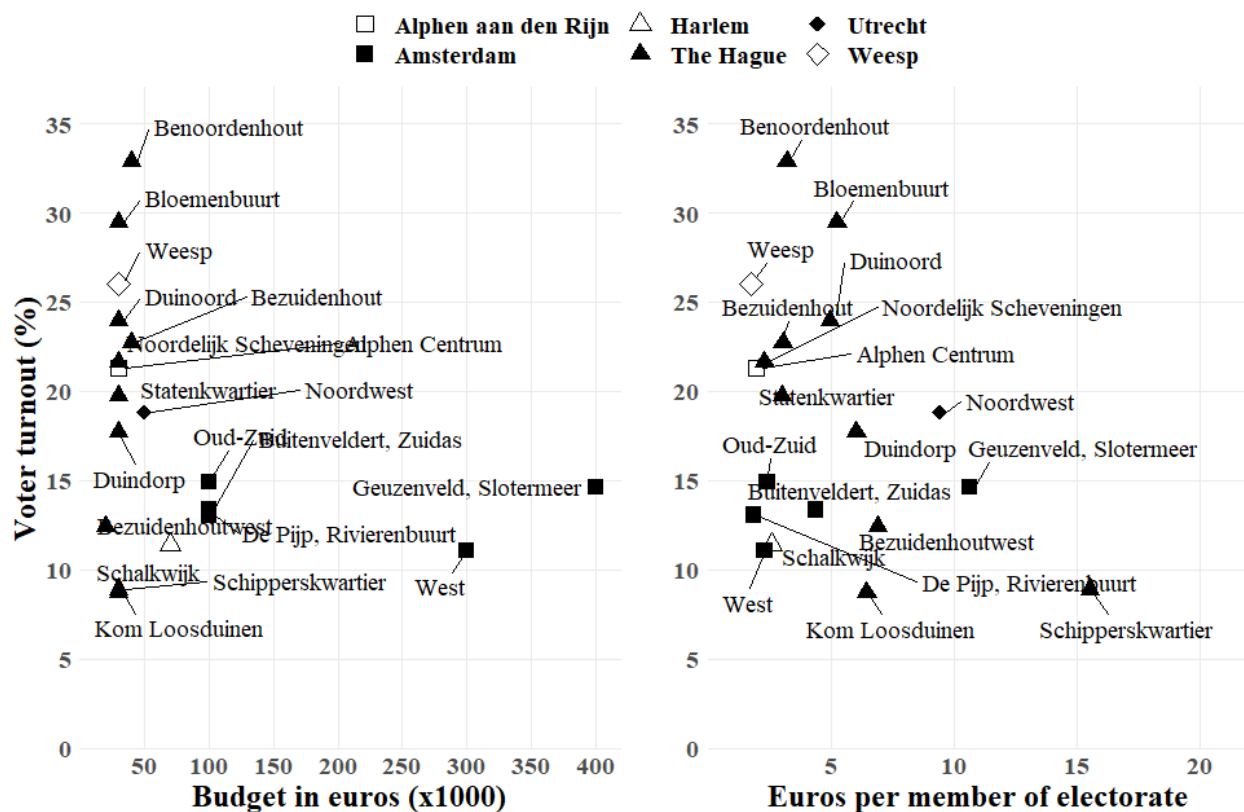


FIGURE 2 Voter turnout by budget for selected ePBs in the Netherlands. Shows the voter turnout percentage ($M = 18.04$, $SD = 6.91$) by the available budget for the winning projects in thousands of euros ($M = 78,421.05$, $SD = 100,623.79$) (left panel) and by the amount of euros available per member of the ePB electorate ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 3.63$) (right panel).

In line with the experimental findings, these results suggest that more money does not necessarily result in higher participation rates. Why? To make sense of this finding, I draw on the analysis of 28 semi-structured interviews conducted in February 2021 with citizens that in varying ways had participated in an ePB in one of three neighborhoods of The Hague (Duindorp, Kom Loosduinen, Noordelijk Scheveningen).¹⁰ The selection of these three neighborhoods sought to ensure a diverse sample of interviewees (see SI Part 3 for details on selection and recruitment). Table 1 describes the characteristics of the interviewees. Most interviewees lived in Noordelijk Scheveningen, were 45 years or older, male, and held a higher vocational or university degree. Nevertheless, the sample still shows considerable variation on the latter three background characteristics that should, in theory, matter for political participation (Neblo et al., 2010; Verba et al., 1995). The sample of interviewees therefore captures the relevant theoretical variation (Mason, 2013, pp. 124-125). The sample equally captures the various forms of ePB participation studied in the experiments, with the exception of submitting a proposal. The interviews were conducted online or via phone and lasted between 21 and 47 minutes ($M = 32.46$, $SD = 7.36$).¹¹

I draw on interviewees' answers to two main questions. The first focused on citizens' perceptions of the size of the budget: "There was €30,000 euros available for the winning proposals. What did you think about that?" (Follow-up: "Did you think that was a lot or rather very little?"). The second question was about their involvement in relation to the size of the ePB budget: "If there would have been a lot more money available, would that have made you more involved or would that not have mattered?" (Follow-ups: "Would it have mattered for *the ways in which* you would have been involved?" and "You said that the money did not really matter for your involvement. Could you try to explain what you think got you involved then?").¹² I analyzed the interview questions in an inductive manner through a process of "condensation" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), summarizing how interviewees made sense of the ePB budget and linked it to

TABLE 1 Background characteristics of interviewees (numbers and percentages)

Variable	N	(%)
<i>Neighborhood (abbreviation)</i>		
Duindorp (DD)	4	(14%)
Kom Loosduinen (KL)	3	(11%)
Noordelijk Scheveningen (NS)	21	(75%)
<i>Age</i>		
15 - 25	0	(0%)
25 - 45	3	(11%)
45 - 65	11	(39%)
> 65	12	(43%)
Missing	2	(7%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	19	(68%)
Female	9	(32%)
<i>Education</i>		
Higher vocational or university	22	(79%)
Other	4	(14%)
Missing	2	(7%)
<i>Participation in ePB[†]</i>		
Voted	27	(100%)
Submitted a proposal	0	(0%)
Posted a comment	6	(21%)
Liked a proposal	13	(50%)

Notes: All data based on survey responses. ‘Participation in ePB’ also based on what participants reported in the interviews. † = Missing data and ‘don’t know’ not used in calculation of percentages.

their own involvement. To underpin the transparency of the study, I provide anonymized versions of the original answers to the questions online on the journal’s dataverse archive. I link in-text references to the interview transcripts by means of neighborhood abbreviations (Duindorp = DD; Kom Loosduinen = KL; Noordelijk Scheveningen = NS) combined with interviewee IDs (numbered 1-21).

The interview materials confirm that also when I asked citizens directly, very few said that they would become more involved if the budget were higher. Only four out of the 28 interviewees unambiguously stated that more money would trigger them to become more

involved. The main reason they gave was that a higher amount would allow one to address more “serious” issues in the neighborhood (NS7) and accomplish something more substantial (KL3, NS12, NS21). As one interviewee put it:

Well, of course, when the municipality says ‘we have ten million and something needs to be done with that in Loosduinen’ (...), yes, then it is... then it becomes worth it, with that you can do something. With 30 thousand euros, you can do very little of course. (KL3, male, 76 years old)

Most interviewees, however, did not view a higher budget as a potential reason to become more involved. They gave three kinds of answers. First, *some did not care about the stakes involved* in relation to their engagement in the ePB. As one interviewee in Duindorp said, for example: “I think that for involvement it [i.e. the amount of money] doesn’t matter, because such things [i.e. the ePB] interest you or they don’t” (DD1, female, 38 years old; see also NS4). Besides such general reasons as that “it was a fun initiative” (KL1, male, 70 years old) or “a noble objective” (NS3, female, 71 years old), interviewees also gave alternative reasons for being engaged, *regardless of the stakes involved*. These ranged from the opportunity to have a voice in policy-making (KL2, NS5, NS11) to doing something to improve the quality of life in the neighborhood (DD4), supporting local initiatives (NS6, NS9), or taking an interest in others involved in the ePB (NS11). Furthermore, personal resources sometimes formed a barrier to any further involvement, making the stakes involved largely irrelevant. For example, one interviewee underlined she simply did not have the time to become more involved (NS14) and another that she had already invested so much time and energy in civic activities in the past that she now was not interested in any further political involvement (NS15). Finally, some answers to the interview questions implied that citizens may not have cared so much about the stakes because it was the first time an ePB had taken place in their neighborhood. Some thought, in fact, that the initiative should start

small (KL1) and considered starting with a higher budget irresponsible (NS16). Another interviewee was satisfied with the amount of money in part because of the fact that other municipalities were not organizing ePBs *at all*, concluding that “beggars can’t be choosers” (DD3, male, 44 years old).

Second, citizens sometimes did not seem to care about the amount of money because they felt *it did not reflect the stakes involved*. Several interviewees thought that more money would not raise the stakes. Instead, the kind of issues on the agenda determined the stakes and, in turn, their involvement (NS8 and to some extent NS20). One interviewee explained how raising the amount of money within the same framework would not affect the outcomes:

No, no. I think the amount of money doesn’t matter that much. Say you can have a little garden for five thousand euros, well, that’s then a fair little garden. And you can do it for 50 thousand, yes, then there are a lot of expensive plants in it, but yeah, whether that is such a better garden -I don’t think so. (DD3, male, 44 years old)

He also provided another reason why the available money did not reflect the stakes involved: the size of the budget also did not matter much because the outcomes really depend on “being creative with your resources.” Another interviewee similarly drew on his own financial experiences to justify why he was satisfied with the €30,000:

Such a budget can lead to all sorts of new things, right. Yeah, look, you are going to make something look better with paint, then you already get -at least that’s my experience- then you can easily get a painting company that wants to sponsor you. So it’s a nice amount and often that then leads to all sorts of other things, you know. (NS2, male, 45 years old)

Third, it seems that some interviewees did not care about the money because *they could not translate it into the stakes involved*. When asked whether he would become more involved if €200,000 were available for the winning projects, one interviewee said:

No, like I said, I'm not a policy-maker, I am not so much involved in that, so I don't know whether 200 thousand is a lot or whether 30 thousand is a lot for a neighborhood. Maybe 200 thousand is a fraction of the total budget. (NS16, male, 30-40 years old [estimate])

Others that had a hard time determining the significance of the budget generally also indicated that the amount of money did not matter for their involvement (e.g. DD1, KL2, NS3, NS5, NS8) or remained ambiguous about the link between the budget and their involvement (NS13).

In between those citizens that only become more involved when more money is available and those that do not care about the size of the budget, the interview material also suggests that some citizens think the amount should neither be too low nor too high. Interviewees indicated that if there were to be *too much* money available, the ePB would lose its "sympathetic" character (NS10). They imagined that the ePB would become too conflictual in such an instance for it to remain a pleasant activity:

If you make it too much, then it becomes, look, then you get the problem that you get activism. Then a group will form that wants to have the money and will mobilize the neighbors and the street. A little of that is okay but if it's about a lot of money, then it becomes a problem again. So there's also somewhere an upper limit to it to keep it fun. Because it has to remain fun, it shouldn't turn into a street fight. (NS17, male, 58 years old)

Others stated more generally that "you should view it as an extra" and not as a means to address more structural issues via a higher budget (KL1, male, 70 years old), or made clear that they did not want to decide about the whole budget of The Hague (NS19).

Overall, then, the interviews tend to confirm the main finding from the survey experiments that most citizens do not seem to care about the money, mostly because the size of

the budget in their view did not reflect the stakes involved or because they did not care about the stakes in the first place.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

By definition, democratic innovations seek to expand public involvement in policy-making (Smith, 2009, p. 1). However, new ways of involving citizens in public policy often fail to attract more than a fraction of the citizenry. Even those innovations purposefully designed to recruit only a sample of the public often struggle with finding the intended number of citizen participants (e.g. Jacquet, 2017, p. 644). In contrast to existing studies that have focused mostly on procedural design features, I here examined an alternative explanation for these low levels of citizen involvement: the stakes involved.

Based on a survey experiment on online participatory budgets (ePBs) in the Netherlands, I find that raising a key stake in ePBs, that is, the size of the budget that citizens can decide about, on average, does not increase citizens' intentions to participate. This main finding holds for both a sample of citizens that had just experienced an ePB in their neighborhood as well as for a population-based sample of Dutch citizens. I do identify a significant effect on discursive participation in the former sample, but this effect does not confirm the hypothesis that more money would incite more participation. Actual voting behavior in Dutch ePBs confirms the main finding: higher budgets do not seem to correlate with higher voter turnouts. These findings run against the rational choice logic that I derived from the literature on DIs (Fung, 2007; Ryfe, 2005) and challenge the common suggestion that increasing the amount of money will raise citizens' involvement in PBs and affect all forms of participation equally.

These disconfirming results beg the question, then, why more money in the context of ePBs does not seem to increase most citizens' involvement. In line with previous research that shows that not *only* instrumental motivations drive involvement in DIs (Aitamurto et al., 2017; Gustafson & Hertting, 2017; Jacquet, 2019; Mazeaud & Talpin, 2010), the interview evidence suggests, first, that citizens get involved for a variety of reasons unrelated to the stakes involved. Second, the interviews make clear that from citizens' own perspectives the size of the budget does not always reflect the stakes involved. In line with prior research, I find that some citizens find that *what* they can influence is more important than *to what degree* they can exercise such influence (Font et al., 2021). Third, the interviews also show how some citizens care about the available budget and feel that it reflects the stakes involved but do not want to get involved when the budget gets too large. After all, higher stakes may also signal a higher likelihood of conflict and therefore dissuade citizens from participating (Mutz, 2006; Neblo et al., 2010). Fourth, the qualitative evidence makes clear that some citizens simply find it hard to give meaning to the size of the budget and, in turn, to translate it into the stakes involved, making it largely irrelevant for their motivations to participate. It is likely that a combination of these four factors explains why I generally did not observe significant effects in the experiment.

This diversity of motivations to participate might also help to explain the remaining puzzle why in the Benoordenhout sample the expressed likelihood of posting an argument online was significantly higher in the €3,000 and €300,000 conditions than in the €30,000 condition. One potential explanation for this could be that citizens weigh the degree of anticipated conflict against the potential benefits to be obtained through participation. The findings could signal that citizens want to either (a) engage discursively in a low-stake process that is also likely to involve little conflict or (b) engage only in a more conflict-prone process when the stakes are truly high.

However, this remains speculative and I leave it to future studies to further disentangle the mechanisms behind the observed effect.¹³

Limitations

I acknowledge that the findings and the conclusions that follow from them are based on a study of Dutch ePBs and might not generalize to other DIs in other contexts. These ePBs fit a wider trend of DIs taking place increasingly online, especially in light of the recent pandemic (Chwalisz, 2021), and belong to one of the most popular classes of democratic innovation worldwide (Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Ryan, 2021). Nevertheless, they are very specific in the sense that they take place at the local level and deal with tangible policy issues. As suggested by some of the interviewees, the stakes might simply be too low to motivate participation because of *what* citizens can decide about in these ePBs, regardless of the amount of money involved (as a measure of the *degree* of control over final outcomes). Compared to other contexts such as Brazil, the United States, and Canada, where PB projects tend to improve basic infrastructure, schools, and public housing, Dutch ePBs deal with a constrained set of projects related to relatively small-scale neighborhood- and street-level projects (van der Does & Bos, 2021). This might explain why studies in other contexts where more funding means that more money can be spent on salient policy issues do find a positive relationship between money and participation rates (Goldfrank, 2011; Hagelskamp et al., 2016).

In addition, the design of the study also cannot account for potential indirect effects of the stakes involved on citizen involvement. For example, as Gilman and Wampler (2019) point out for participatory budgeting, a higher budget may lead to more publicity, which may, in turn, lead to more awareness among the public and thereby raise participation rates. While recent Dutch

ePBs do not seem to display an overall effect in that direction (Figure 2), it still seems important to test for potential indirect effects in future research. Furthermore, the setup of the experiment also does not allow one to monitor to what extent respondents in the population sample were able to imagine what an ePB would be like. Accompanying open questions after the experiment about respondents' understanding of the vignette and their rationales for (not) participating could help to examine this in future studies (cf. van der Does & Kantorowicz, 2021).

Finally, the case selection may have partly driven the results. Regarding the experiment, the significant effect on discursive participation derives from an experiment in a single neighborhood (which seems to differ from other localities in terms of participation patterns, see Figure 2) and was not replicated in the Dutch population sample. Ideally, then, future replications in other localities could probe the robustness of this finding. With regard to the interviews, it remains difficult to ascertain the prevalence in the wider public of (a) the identified understandings of the stakes involved in ePBs and (b) the link of those different conceptions to citizens' varying inclinations to (not) participate. Future studies could expand the interviewee pool to citizens less involved in ePBs as well as use survey methods to assess on a large scale to what degree citizens generally subscribe to the understandings of the stakes involved in ePBs that the interviewees in this study put forward.

Implications for Research and Practice

The present study makes two main contributions to research on citizen involvement in DIs and public policy more generally -one methodological, the other substantive. Methodologically, it addresses the lack of controlled comparisons and experimental assessments of the drivers of citizen involvement. Most research on citizens' involvement in public policy through DIs remains

based on ethnographic case studies (Ryan, 2021, p. 16), making it difficult to assess the causal impact of features specific to the studied innovation for the observed rate of citizen involvement. Experimental research that does exist tends to focus on citizens' *support for* rather than *participation in* innovations such as PBs (e.g. van der Does & Kantorowicz, 2021).

The survey experiment sought to address these gaps by using two types of samples -one focused on citizens that are likely to understand the implications of the size of the ePB budget to maximize internal validity, and another focused on the general public to maximize external validity. The replication of the same experiment in these two samples thereby provided a robust assessment of the causal link between the size of the budget and citizens' intentions to participate in ePBs. Coupled with data on actual participation rates in ePBs and interview evidence on citizens' experiences, I intended to show how researchers of DIs can use mixed-methods designs to verify the validity of experimental results based on citizens' intentions. Such designs seem crucial if we want to conduct experimental assessments of the drivers of citizen involvement, as field experiments with DIs are often difficult to realize, given the practical and ethical issues involved in varying the amount of money available for ePBs across neighborhoods, for example.

Substantively, the study informs theory about how the stakes involved relate to citizens' involvement in DIs. The results challenge the idea that more money in participatory budgeting will go hand in hand with higher participation rates. The qualitative part of the study suggests that that is not because citizens do not care about the stakes or because they dislike higher stakes per se. In line with prior research (Font et al., 2021; Gustafson & Hertting, 2017; Jacquet, 2019), this study shows that motivations to participate are diverse: some citizens care about the stakes, others do not, and yet others care about the stakes but have different ideas about what those stakes entail. Practically, it makes clear that it is important for future research to manipulate the stakes involved in multiple ways. Most notably, it seems pertinent to (a) move beyond the money proxy

for the stakes involved and (b) not only vary *the degree* to which citizens can affect policy outcomes but also *which policies* they can influence via DI participation.

For practitioners seeking to involve citizens in policy-making the results points towards the need to consider carefully what citizens think is at stake when setting up DIs (cf. Hoppe, 2011, p. 176). In the context of Dutch ePBs, the findings in this respect indicate that simply raising the available budget is unlikely to increase participation rates. Furthermore, it is important to underline that raising the stakes may have different effects on different forms of participation, and sometimes higher stakes might deter citizens from participating in certain ways. It therefore seems crucial to explore ways in which such adverse effects may be prevented, such as procedural safety valves that prevent excessive conflict.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available via the journal's Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3MFCSF>.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Supporting information for this article is available with the online version of the article on the journal's website.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The pre-registrations included the respective hypothesis, the original surveys and experimental materials, and plans for data collection and analysis. They are publicly available via the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/7534d> and <https://osf.io/y2x5e>. The experiment received ethical approval from the ethical committee at the Institute of Political Science Louvain-Europe (ISPOLE), UCLouvain.

² The experiment was embedded in a larger survey dealing with climate and migration attitudes. Compared to the Dutch population, respondents in the sample were of a similar average age (-0.62 years) and more often female (+2%) and highly educated (+23%). Own calculations based on 2021 population data from <https://opendata.cbs.nl> (last consulted July 28, 2021). Note: the percentage difference for education is an overestimation as data were only available for the population segment aged 15 (rather than 18) years and older.

³ They differ from more elaborate versions of participatory budgeting, such as the famous example of Porto Alegre, in the sense that the relevant municipal authority determines the size of the budget, the processes are not always repeated, and they tend to take place at the neighborhood or district level (cf. Sintomer et al., 2008, p. 168).

⁴ For examples of such ePBs, see <https://www.amsterdam.nl/zuid-gebied/buurtbudget-zuid/> and <https://benoordenhoutbegroot.denhaag.nl/>

⁵ The very first sentence used in the vignette was slightly different in the Dutch population survey to provide more background information: “Over the last years municipalities in the Netherlands have experimented with **participatory budgets**. Participatory budgets give citizens a chance to decide how a part of the municipal budget should be spent.”

⁶ See SI Section 2.1 for a manipulation check.

⁷ See, for example, Veenendaal: <https://www.veenendaal.nl/aanvragen-en-regelen/bijdrage-buurtinitiatieven>.

⁸ The procedures followed in these ePBs closely match the one described in the experimental vignette. For the sake of comparison, I excluded ePBs that followed a markedly different procedure. *West Begroot* in 2019 and 2020, for instance, included a committee that pre-selected 30 feasible projects for the final voting round (see <https://westbegroot.amsterdam.nl/vorige-edities/>).

⁹ As one reviewer pointed out, reverse causality also remains a possibility, in the sense that administrations might seek to respond to low participation rates by raising the available budget in prospective ePBs.

¹⁰ The ePBs ended on the following dates (i.e. public announcement of winning projects): October 8, 2020 (Noordelijk Scheveningen), December 18, 2020 (Duindorp), and January 20, 2021 (Kom Loosduinen). All three ePBs had €30,000 available for the winning projects (see SI, Table S1).

¹¹ All interviewees provided written informed consent. Ethical approval was obtained from the ethical committee at the Institute of Political Science Louvain-Europe (ISPOLE), UCLouvain.

¹² The supporting information (Part 3) contains the original topic guide.

¹³ See SI Section 2.3 for another potential explanation.