

Beyond Theory: e-Participatory Budgeting and its Promises for eParticipation

This paper concerns the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as a strategy for reinforcing democratic processes - broadly defined as "electronic democracy" practices - and focuses on the use of ICTs in participatory democracy initiatives. By considering the experience of the e-Participatory Budgeting (ePB) in the city of Belo Horizonte (Brazil), the aim is to understand some of the possible prospects and limitations offered by ICTs in participatory processes at the local level. Given that citizen participation in the process of allocation of budgetary resources is becoming increasingly common in Europe and elsewhere, the Belo Horizonte case should be of particular interest to practitioners and academics working in the domain of eParticipation.

Considering the fact that the e-Participatory Budgeting took place in a city with 1.7 million electors and attained a level of participation of nearly 10%, the e-Participatory Budgeting of Belo Horizonte is, by any standards, one of the most significant initiatives in the world in the domain of eDemocracy and eParticipation to have been implemented so far.

Among other findings, this paper argues that even though the use of ICTs was essential to the success of the initiative, other factors were also crucial in accomplishing such a level of participation, notably: i) the scope of the public works at stake; ii) the salience of the initiative and iii) citizens' perception of their actual impact in the decision-making process.

It is expected that the outcomes of this incipient research will contribute to the literature on electronic and participatory democracy, as well as provide a policy evaluation of the use of ICTs at the local level in a large-scale participatory initiative.



Tiago Peixoto
European
University
Institute (EUI)

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So what are challenges practitioners are facing when trying to improve the user experience by lowering administrative burden and increasing user satisfaction?



1 eDemocracy and Participatory Budgeting¹

Since the 1990s, the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in democratic processes has been broadly defined as “electronic democracy”, or “eDemocracy”. Historically, the idea of communication technologies as a means to enhance political processes is a phenomenon that has always succeeded technical innovation: the “saintsimoniens” of the 19th century saw the telegraph as a way of establishing a universal communion between the Occident and the Orient (Vedel, 2003). In a context of perceived crisis of representative democracy (Trechsel, 2004), as the Internet became popular and accessible in the 1990s, new expectations were raised. Since ICTs are beginning to offer a reliable means of communication, decentralized warehousing capacities and lowered costs, the most optimistic scholars will argue that democratic processes and government efficacy can be altered in a revolutionary way. (Levy, 1997; Castells, 2003).

From this perspective, the local level is considered as a privileged arena. As a political *locus* where citizens are more affected by decisions - and by consequence, more inclined to participate in the decision-making processes (Pailliarth, 2000) - the use of ICTs at the local level in order to foster democracy is envisioned as remarkably promising (Borja & Castels, 1999; Wolton, 2000). In this sense, the Internet and other ICTs systems potentially allow entities, institutions, city administrations and individuals to share the same virtual location as in a revived *agora*, consequently optimizing a city’s capacity to face challenges (Levy, 1995), with innovation becoming a vital means for a renewed participation in the urban domain, the *urbes*. In a more pragmatic approach, it is also expected that eDemocracy pioneering practices will tend to take place at the local level due to matters of general costs, since it presents a more controllable political and social environment, where achieving innovations requires fewer resources and where the costs of failure tend to be lower (Pratchett, 2006).

In its turn, participatory budgeting (PB) - where citizens participate in the decision-making process of budget allocation - has been considered as one of the main innovations that aim to reinforce accountability at the local and regional levels. In this respect, it is clear that the two concepts – PB and eDemocracy – have converging expectations for, if not a renewal of democracy, a reinforcement of democratic practices, with the local level as a privileged arena.

In this sense, it is not a coincidence that the use of ICTs is increasingly incorporated into PB practices, and Europe is no exception to this. In the UK, where the government expects to have PBs implemented at all administrations at the local level by 2012, for instance, local authorities from Barnet, Northamptonshire and Maidstone have used an online budget simulator to consult citizens on their preferences with regards to the allocation of the budget. In Germany, after a successful pilot that took place in Berlin-Lichtenberg in 2005 where the local council received budget proposals from citizens online, the city has ever since repeated the operation². Since then innovative initiatives have been conducted in the cities of Bergheim, Cologne, Hamburg, Freiburg and Leipzig³. To illustrate the richness of these initiatives both in terms of technological solutions and participatory design, in 2008 the city of Freiburg combined the use of a budget planner with an online moderated deliberation where the results were aggregated in wikis and edited by the participants. Also, following the latest trends in gender mainstreaming on PB initiatives, gender-specific issues related to the city’s budget were addressed in the initiative. In a creative combination of online and offline methods, in 2006 the city of Modena in Italy set an experimental exercise in which during PB face-to-face assemblies, citizens who were not present at the assembly could send suggestions by e-mail to be discussed by the assembly as they watched live video streaming of the meeting. In addition, citizens could follow up the process of PB via SMS sent by the municipality. The use of SMS as a means to reach a broader and younger audience has also been deployed in other Italian PB processes, such as those of Rome, Bergamo and Reggio Emilia. Finally, online voting in Italian PB exercises can be illustrated by the cases of Vimercate and Parma. In the Parmesan website dedicated to the PB, citizens have access to the information about the PB process and to all of the proposals for the allocation of budget. An online map spatializes the information allowing citizens to visualize the location of the proposed projects and to access further information about them (e.g. purpose, scope). Votes can be cast online by providing ID number and date of birth, which allows the system to identify the eligible voters, i.e. Parma residents. In Spain, a more intensive use of ICTs – other than simple information provision – concerning

1 To embrace a wide variety of initiatives that are of interest in this research, we define participatory budgeting as *the participation of citizens in the decision-making process of budget allocation and monitoring public spending. Participation may take various forms, from effective decision-making power in the allocation of resources to more modest initiatives that confer voice during the development and / or allocation of the budget.*

2 See Caddy, Peixoto & McNeal, 2008.

3 The author thanks Rolf Luehrs (TuTech GmbH) for providing an updated list of German cases.

citizens' participation in the process of budget allocation have been identified in the cities of Albacete, Cordoba, Getafe, Jun, Petrer and Jerez⁴. For instance, in the city of Getafe in 2008, in one of the districts of the city, citizens were allowed to watch live video streaming of the PB meeting and to cast their vote online. In the municipal council of Jun, the sessions dedicated to voting on the budget are streamed online while citizens are consulted on their priorities with regards to the allocation of the budget.

Even though the different cases cited above vary enormously among themselves in terms of objectives, impacts, prospects and limits, they are illustrative of the richness of initiatives that are currently taking place in Europe where ICTs are used to support citizens' participation in the process of budget allocation. Investigating the possible effects of the use of ICTs in PB does not imply a normative agenda where ICTs are considered a panacea to participatory practices. Rather, it consists of observing and analyzing practices that are beginning to take place, albeit in embryonic stages of development.

This paper, part of a broader research agenda, looking at the paradigmatic case of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, is an initial effort to understand the possible prospects and limitations of the use of ICTs in participatory processes at the local level, bridging the gap in the literature between eParticipation and PB, as well as providing eParticipation policy-makers with empirically grounded policy lessons in the domain.

2 The e-Participatory Budgeting (ePB) of Belo Horizonte

The city of Belo Horizonte (Brazil) is the capital of the state of Minas Gerais, with a population of 2,350,564 inhabitants and 1,732,606 electors. Since 1993 the city has implemented its PB, which can be roughly described as a process that consists of a series of assemblies that are held enabling citizens to allocate budgetary resources and scrutinize public expenditures. For didactical purposes, the traditional (offline) PB of Belo Horizonte can be synthesized in three main phases:

- 41 district assemblies opened to every citizen of 16 years and over pre-select a maximum of 25 public works for each district. In these assemblies citizens are also elected as district delegates (neighbourhood representatives).
- Tours are organized during which the district delegates visit together the sites of the 25 pre-selected works. These visits aim to give the delegates a better understanding of the demands that are made across the whole district.
- District delegates deliberate and choose a maximum of 14 works per district to be executed by the city administration. A smaller number of delegates are then elected to ensure the follow up and oversight of the execution of the budget and the public works.

In 2006, along with the beginning of the regular PB as explained above, the city administration of Belo Horizonte launched the *Digital Participatory Budgeting* (e-PB). Independent of the budget of US\$43 million allocated for the traditional PB, a fund of US\$11 million was allocated to the new initiative. The e-PB consists of a scheme where citizens registered as electors in Belo Horizonte, independent of their place of residency in the city, vote exclusively online for 1 out of 4 public works for each of the nine districts of the city. According to the administration, the launching of the initiative had three main drivers: i) to modernize its PB through the use of ICTs; ii) to increase citizens' participation in the PB process and iii) to broaden the scope of public works that are submitted to voting.

Traditionally, the level of public participation in PB processes is very low, composed in general of citizens of an advanced age and of lower socio-economic background. According to data provided by the city of Belo Horizonte, in years precedent to the launch of the e-PB, an average of 1.5% of the city's electors have participated in the PB assemblies. Hence, one of the objectives of the e-PB was to increase participation in general and to simultaneously integrate a new profile of participants, particularly those from middle class backgrounds and younger citizens. In this sense, the Internet was seen as a means to increase participation by reducing the costs incurred by citizens (e.g. time, transport) as a result of participating in the PB. In other words, if in the traditional PB citizens must attend meetings at a certain time and place, with the ePB citizens were free to vote online within a period of 42 days.

As it is known, the desire to innovate may be in itself a driver for the use of ICTs in public governance (Caddy, Peixoto & McNeil, 2007). This aspiration for novelty and originality, which became clear in interviews with

4 The author thanks Jesus Rios (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos) for the provision of complementary information on the Spanish cases.

members of the administration, was also reflected in the communication campaign and in official discourses concerning the e-PB, where mentions of the pioneering character of the initiative were commonplace.

Another driver behind the e-PB was the creation of a participatory process where citizens could vote for public works considered to be of interest to a wider public. For this reason, in the e-PB a citizen could vote not only for his/her district but also for the other districts. Furthermore, in the traditional PB, the larger number of public works that can be selected per districts (14 max.) leads to further fragmentation of the available budget. Such a fact renders difficult the election of public works of greater scope and cost.

Nevertheless, citizens frequently demand such works on occasions outside of the process of the PB. In the e-PB citizens could select only one public work per district with a budget of US\$1.2 million allocated to each district¹⁵, in order to address demands of greater scope. As an example, in the district of Barreiro, the following four choices were offered to voters: to build a new public sports complex; to build a new library; to renew one of the area's main streets; or to regenerate the district's commercial centre.

3 The e-Participatory Budgeting Platform

Following an intensive promotion of the initiative in the city, citizens over 16 years old registered on the Belo Horizonte electoral roll could vote on the Internet by accessing the e-voting platform through the city's official website and by providing the number of their voters' ID used in Brazilian elections. The rich provision of information on the different works proposed and the descriptive effort employed by the city administration - where the website would present text, pictures and videos - was intended to provide a proper representation of the works, by presenting citizens with images and concepts consistent with the reality of the proposals. Also, for citizens wanting to make further enquiries about the process of the PB, a contact email address for the administration was provided. In order to ensure that citizens would get a timely response to the e-mails sent to the e-PB staff, one person was specifically designated to respond to such messages. This initiative guaranteed an optimal level of responsiveness, where the majority of e-mails received a timely and personalized response.

Furthermore, an online forum was available. Participation in the forum was open to all citizens, where 9 different threads referred to each of the districts. Users could post anonymously simply by clicking on their chosen topic. However, moderation was considered necessary by the administration in order to avoid misuse and to keep the focus of the discussions on subjects related to the e-PB. In this next section, we shall analyze the use of the online forum, before passing to a more in-depth presentation and analysis of the results of the PB.

4 Online deliberation

Even though active participation in the forum was low (a total of 1210 posts), all posts could be seen without logging in by all of those who accessed the link to the forums, where the number of readers was significantly higher than the number of posts. In this respect, active participants in the forums were aware that their comments were likely to be read by many other potential voters that were not actively participating in the forums. Thus, links posted by supporters would lead readers to other web addresses (e.g. websites, blogs, youtube videos) voluntarily created by supporters, where arguments were presented in a more structured format and supported by different resources, such as pictures and videos. In addition, apart from overcoming technical constraints inherent to the forums, such a strategy allowed supporters to redirect potential voters to a sphere where their arguments were less likely to be publicly disputed and where the information provided was not controlled by a moderator considered to be impartial.

Another strategy employed by active users of the forum - those who write a post - consisted of bypassing the moderation in order to make other comments that did not directly concern the e-PB. Consequently, these users, after having a few comments refused, developed the strategy of making combined comments - that is, sending a post where they would make a comment directly related to the process of the e-PB and in the same post make other demands that, if were made separately, would have been refused by the moderator. These 'combined comments' however, did not have any substantial effect on biasing the main focus of the forums, as the majority of the discussions concerned the public works of the e-PB. Strategic practices such as the "combined comments" and using the forum to redirect users to other links cannot be seen as jeopardizing the online debate provided by the e-voting platform: it simply illustrates the unexpected dynamics that such a process may engender, and they are rather proof of the vitality of the process.

These practices also demonstrate the active users' awareness that - despite the relatively low number of active users - the forum was read by a much broader audience and that such a space could be an important resource to win votes and gain support. As to the recurrent argument that forums that allow anonymous participation are

not bound by the normal conventions of reciprocity, blocking offensive posts was rarely necessary and was a minor part of the moderator's work. Needless to say, potential offenders that could jeopardize the debate might have been discouraged either by knowing beforehand that the forums were moderated or by having their posts blocked at their first attempt.

In the light of the arguments above, evidence suggests that the online forum was, overall, an environment of rational, argumentative and reflective debates where active participants would persuade and be persuaded of the importance of one public work over another and where readers - in larger numbers - could be informed on concurrent perspectives.

5 Unprecedented levels of participation

The total number of votes was 503,266 with a total number of 172,938 voters. Such a difference between the number of voters and number of votes is understood by the fact that voters were allowed to vote up to nine times (9 districts) as long as they voted for only one work per district. These numbers therefore correspond to a participation level of 9.98% of electors from the city and 7 times more participants than in the traditional (offline) PB of the same year (1.46%) in Belo Horizonte.

Total of registered voters	172,938
Total of e-votes	503,266

However, what else can be inferred from the available data regarding the votes? Considering that electors were allowed to cast nine votes each (one for each of the 9 districts), there was a clear variance concerning the amount of votes cast by each voter. More than half of the voters (52.1%) chose to vote for only one district, 15.26% chose to vote for two districts and 6.57% for three districts, with a total of nearly two thirds of voters (73.61%) choosing to vote for between one and three districts only.

Also, between those who chose to vote for one district and those who chose to vote for eight districts, there is a decreasing trend, with this pattern being altered only by those who voted for all nine districts. Despite the fact that the available data does not permit an in-depth explanation of these numbers with regard to voters' motivations, the fact that most voters chose to vote for a few districts suggests that citizens were not sufficiently concerned with voting for public works that were not related to their immediate reality.

Number of votes cast	Number of voters	%
1	92590	52.1 %
2	27123	15.26 %
3	11678	6.57 %
4	6459	3.63 %
5	3251	1.83 %
6	1790	1.01 %
7	687	0.39 %
8	484	0.27 %
9	28876	16.25 %

In other words, despite the fact that one of the criteria for choosing public works was that they were considered to be of interest to a wider public, *the majority of voters decided to vote "locally"*. In this respect, to a great extent, the number of districts voted for per voter was inversely proportional to the costs of informing the votes. It was also inversely proportional to the time spent on voting, although to a lesser extent. Qualitative data seem to confirm this hypothesis, where citizens interviewed claim that they did not vote for works in other districts because they were not concerned about them and/or did not have "time to form an opinion on distant" district matters, or simply because they were "in a hurry".

As to the socio-economic factors, if one considers the average number of votes per capita received by each district and its average income per capita, no correlation is found⁵. In other words, at the aggregate level there

5 R²=0.036

is no relationship concerning the average district income level and the amount of votes received. Thus, considering the available data, there is no evidence, for instance, that districts of higher economic status were overrepresented in the e-PB, given that Internet access is strongly determined by, among other factors, income. Two hypotheses may be drawn for results such as these: 1) those with access to the Internet in the districts of lower income are the main voters; 2) the efforts of the administration and of engaged citizens to provide Internet access alleviated possible effects of the digital divide in the voting process.

Regretfully, the lack of data at the individual level does not permit the confirmation or refutation of either of these hypotheses. According to data provided by the city administration, there was a total of 192,229 visits to the e-PB website. If compared to the number of votes (172,938) one can state that no more than 19,291 voters may have accessed the website more than once. Hence, the highest possible percentage of voters who may have accessed the website more than once - to access information, to finish casting their votes¹⁹, or to use the other tools offered (e.g. forum) - is no more than 11.6%.

Concerning the geographical location of those who accessed the website, 119,903 hits were made from the city of Belo Horizonte, with the remaining hits originating from other cities, states and countries. In this respect, it can be stated that a minimum of 30.7% of votes were cast from outside the city. In other words, nearly one third of votes – at least - were cast by people who would not have been able to vote if it had not been for the possibility of remote voting provided by the use of ICTs.

6 Leveraging Salience: the Communication Campaign and Social Mobilization

One element that was considered important for the success of the e-PB was the city's communication campaign, which focused on the initiative and its novelty factor. In this sense, as mentioned before, the pioneering character of the initiative was underlined in most communications made by the city. Local radio, TV and newspapers extensively publicized the initiative, before and during the period of voting. Furthermore, flyers describing the initiative were distributed in the city and to community leaders, and posters were displayed on buses, public service buildings and areas of generally greater public circulation. This communication tended to explain the initiative, the public works to be voted on and the places where citizens could vote in case they had no access to the Internet.

In addition to this institutional campaign led by the city administration, an independent and vigorous movement of social mobilization took place. In this respect, several initiatives can be identified which represent independent campaigns led by neighbourhood associations, religious organizations, small local businesses, and civil society in general.

Stakeholders affirm that, in Belo Horizonte, this mobilization of civil society was impressive by any standards, with interviewees unanimously judging this canvassing campaign as a determining factor in voter turnout. In this respect, despite the difficulty of making any accurate statement about the effects of such mobilization on the e-PB, evidence offers some promising paths for identifying factors that increase public participation in initiatives similar to the e-PB.

7 The traditional PB and the ePB: comparing apples and pears?

As mentioned above, the level of participation in the e-PB was seven times higher if compared to the traditional PB. Such a level of participation becomes particularly striking if one considers the amount of resources allocated to each of the initiatives, where a much smaller budget leads to a level of participation almost 7 times higher.

	Budget	Participation
Traditional PB	US\$ 43 MILLION	1.46%
ePB	US\$ 11 MILLION	9.98%

There is no doubt that the Internet dramatically reduced the costs of participation, considering that citizens could vote from virtually anywhere and during a 42 day period, and this should be considered as one of the decisive factors in the differing levels of participation between the e-PB and the traditional PB. But, is this comparison properly addressed? Are the new technologies the only factors responsible for such an outstanding increase in participation? The similarity of the two terms employed must not mislead observers, where the e-PB may be considered as the traditional PB with the addition of an "e": differences go far beyond the deployment of Internet voting. Worthwhile comparison can only be made if we consider both initiatives in terms of channels of citizen participation in the decision-making process of budget allocation.

In terms of participatory design, the differences between the two processes are numerous. To begin with, let us consider the scope of the public works involved in each process. One of the criteria for the selection of public works in the e-PB was that they were of larger scope and value than those in the traditional PB. In this sense, even if it is not possible to assess the relevance of the public works proposed by the e-PB compared to the works of the traditional PB, there is no doubt that the e-PB public works enjoyed much more visibility.

Secondly, let us consider the differences in the processes of agenda-setting - that is, the process of choosing public works that are to be submitted to a final vote. Whereas in the traditional PB a bottom-up movement characterizes the process, where citizens directly preselect the works during assemblies, in the e-PB the choice of works was made in a top-down manner, with the participation of the administration and the district delegates aiming to identify more general demands. Conversely, it is in the e-PB that the final and definitive vote is made directly by citizens, whereas in the traditional PB the delegates make the final and binding vote. As a result, in the e-PB there was a decrease in the costs of participation alongside an increase in decision-making power at the individual level.

As to the existence of structured instances of deliberation, in the traditional PB, a deliberative process always takes place before a vote, with the entitled voters participating – either actively or passively – in the deliberative sessions (e.g. assembly, visits to the sites), whereas in the e-PB participation in the online forum – the only deliberative instance - was not a requisite for voting. Last, but not least, if in the traditional PB citizens have autonomy in the allocation of budget according to their own criteria (i.e. allocating different values to different public works) in the e-PB the budgets gave a fixed and equal value to every public work. In this respect, unlike the traditional PB, the e-PB did not function as an exercise resulting in an initial budget demystification/literacy.

Considering all of the above, it is clear that the differences between the two processes go well beyond the simple use of ICTs, where structural changes seem to have had an impact on the turnout level. As one citizen suggested, the e-PB - if compared to the traditional model – is “more participation and less participatory”. What are the implications of this, and how should this lack of a participatory dimension be addressed?

In this respect, the e-PB in the city of Belo Horizonte must not be considered as an initiative that competes with the traditional PB, and the existence of its own independent budget is proof of this. Rather, it is part of a global conception of citizen participation in the city, along with other initiatives such as the traditional PB. Thus, the e-PB should be seen as a complementary channel for citizen participation and not as a replacement of the existing practices. In fact, the e-PB and the PB are complementary initiatives where the relative flaws of the e-PB (e.g. less deliberative) could be easily addressed through the adoption of existing structures from the traditional PB. For instance, if the pre-selection of public works in the e-PB was made using a top-down approach, a stage such as the assemblies of the traditional PB could be included in future e-PBs in order to ensure a more deliberative, bottom-up selection process. Finally, the use of participative web tools⁶ along with traditional forms of interaction could reduce the transactional costs of making the selection process more collaborative. Thus, citizens, civil society organizations and city administrations could work collectively on the pre-selection of public works to be voted for and on the dynamics of the e- PB itself.

8 Final considerations

Despite the lack of individual level data concerning voters and the motivation of those who participated in the e-PB, some preliminary analyses may be carried out in order to understand the reasons behind such an elevated level of participation. In this way, one can suggest possible explanations for the increase in public participation in the e-PB, which simultaneously offer some leads to those interested in implementing successful eParticipation initiatives:

Increasing the “window of time” for voting reduces the cost of participation for citizens. By extending the voting time frame, citizens are able to vote at their convenience. In the case of Belo Horizonte, citizens had the opportunity to vote over a period of 42 days, where some were even able to vote at any time of the day or night.

Widespread access to voting points also reduces participation costs, provoking an increase in the number of voters. In addition to the traditional points of Internet access (e.g. home, work), the 187 voting points strategically placed in the town, a mobile voting unit targeting relevant regions, and the computers made available by supporters may be considered as factors that helped to alleviate the effects of the digital divide and, at the same time, prompted citizens to cast their vote.

6 See *Participative Web and User-Created Content*. OECD, 2007

The scope and relevance of the benefits: The budget of US\$1.2 million for a single work was unprecedented and the scope of the proposed works much larger than before, where many of the works proposed corresponded to recurrent demands from citizens. In this sense, one might hypothesize that such relevance had an effect on citizens' participation, where the assessment of the relative importance and benefit of the proposed public works would influence the decision to participate or not, and, if so, to what extent: either by simply casting a vote or actively supporting a particular public work by engaging in canvassing campaigns.

The salience of the initiative: The intense communication deployed by the city administration before and during the voting period, and the canvassing campaign organized by supporters, is considered by the unanimity of the stakeholders as one of the main explanations of the high turnout of voters. The novelty and curiosity that voting through the Internet may have provoked amongst citizens are also suggested as possible factors that influenced the number of identified voters. However, despite the effects of the novelty of voting through the Internet, it is important to underline that Brazilian elections have been fully electronic (though not through the Internet) since 2000, which could attenuate this novelty effect.

The binding vote: experience shows that citizens are quite sensitive to the measure of their impact on decision-making processes (Caddy, Peixoto & McNeil, 2007). In this respect, citizens are concerned by the extent to which their participation is significant: in other words, whether they are simply being consulted or if their participation will be really be taken into account. Thus, considering that the e-PB was to generate binding effects, with the results of the voting being the only and decisive factor, citizens may have perceived it as a unique opportunity to participate directly in a budgetary decision of large scope, considering that, even in the traditional PB, the final vote is made indirectly by the sub-district delegates.

Despite having explored above the factors that one could pertinently hypothesize as contributing to the high turnout level, due to the absence of specific data, it is not possible to evaluate the extent of the influence of each factor, or to identify which are more important. The absence of a specific evaluation during the e-PB of the profile of voters rules out a specification of the determinants behind the decision to participate or how these determinants operate.

However, one can safely hypothesize that the ease with which participants could vote – with the Internet as an enabler – and the salience of the initiative along with the citizens' view of their own participation as decisive in the process, were definitive factors in the attainment of such a high level of participation. Despite its novelty and relative flaws, the e-PB is a unique experience and an initiative that cannot be ignored by academics and practitioners in Europe and elsewhere interested in the use of ICTs as a means to enhance participation. Its future developments should be followed closely.

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Author

Tiago Peixoto

PhD Researcher

European University Institute (EUI)

Tiago.Peixoto@eui.eu

<http://www.epractice.eu/people/peixoto>

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Web: www.epracticejournal.eu

Email: editorial@epractice.eu

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