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Participatory budgeting as an administrative myth: a critique of citizen participation processes

El presupuesto participativo como mito administrativo: crítica a los procesos de participación ciudadana

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide an analytical critique of citizen participation processes and their link to participatory budgeting in municipal governments in the province of Santa Elena, Ecuador, in order to identify gaps between the legal regulations governing participation and their practice in local public management. In addition, a qualitative documentary review will be carried out, chosen for convenience, which will allow for the exploration of constitutional provisions, regulations, and specific experiences related to the implementation of participation mechanisms. The results indicate that, although the mechanisms are expressly provided for in the Constitution of the Republic and in relevant laws, their application in practice falls short of the appropriate objectives of participatory democracy. Open councils or citizen assemblies are not systematically mentioned, nor are tools such as technological mechanisms or the empty chair, which help citizen interaction with the public administration, contemplated. It is concluded that participatory budgets, by failing to establish themselves as a benchmark for administration and democracy, become an administrative myth. Their function is limited to presenting figures that satisfy the government in power, without guaranteeing true citizen co-responsibility in decision-making about public resources.

Keywords: citizen participation, budgets, participatory democracies

Resumen

El desarrollo del presente artículo tiene como objetivo realizar una crítica analítica a los procesos de participación ciudadana y su vinculación con los presupuestos participativos en los gobiernos municipales de la provincia de Santa Elena, Ecuador, con el fin de identificar trayectos entre las normativas legales que rigen la participación y su práctica en la gestión pública local. Además, se desarrollará a cabo una revisión documental de carácter cualitativo, elegida por conveniencia, lo que permitirá explorar disposiciones constitucionales, normativas y experiencias específicas relacionadas con la ejecución de mecanismos de participación. Los resultados indican que, a pesar de que los mecanismos son expresamente contemplados en la Constitución de la República y en sus leyes pertinentes, su aplicación en la práctica se aleja de los objetivos adecuados de la democracia participativa. No se citan de manera sistemática cabildos abiertos o asambleas ciudadanas, ni se contemplan herramientas como los mecanismos tecnológicos o la silla vacía, que ayuden a la interacción ciudadana con la administración pública. Se concluye que los presupuestos participativos, al no consolidarse como un referente de la administración y de la democracia, se transforman en un mito administrativo. Su función se limita a la presentación de cifras adecuadas a la satisfacción de la gobernación de turno, sin garantizar la verdadera corresponsabilidad ciudadana en la toma de decisiones acerca de los recursos públicos.

Palabras clave: participación ciudadana, presupuestos, democracias participativas

Introduction

The significance of this study lies in highlighting the gap between what is established in legislation and the institutional practices observed in the territory, characterized by structural inequalities and unmet social demands. This underscores the need to reformulate the model of participatory budgeting. The absence of effective

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mechanisms to consult and incorporate citizen decisions not only limits efficiency in public management but also undermines its democratic legitimacy.

Córdova (2024) states that achieving a fully realized vision of a social rule-of-law state requires citizen participation. Individuals must be understood not merely as passive recipients of state decisions but as active protagonists in political life. This refers specifically to the capacity of residents to engage directly in the formulation, oversight, and evaluation of public policies.

García et al. (2022), when discussing taxation and participatory budgeting, note that this represents an instrument or procedure through which citizens intervene in defining the use of a portion of the public budget. It embodies an innovative decision-making modality that promotes direct population participation in determining state spending priorities. International organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations recommend it, with the latter designating it as one of the "best practices" in urban planning.

The Uruguayan application cited by Suárez (2024) concerning online participation as technological support is commendable, as the participatory model can be complemented by digital tools that serve as an additional channel for expression, without constituting the main axis of the process. Conversely, in the "connective" model, technology occupies a central role, organizing and shaping participation.

From the Spanish experience, López and Gil-Jaurena (2024) explain that incorporating digital means into Public Administration communication facilitates the use of flexible and often economical tools that promote social interaction and provide citizens with participatory spaces where their opinions are considered and valued. Martínez (2023) notes that numerous studies have proposed ideal models to understand the specificities and criteria of participatory budgeting, as well as to anticipate the potential impacts of citizen participation in this process. In this approach, participation is designed based on available technological capacities, aiming to achieve broad citizen engagement that generates valuable information for decision-makers.

In the case of Mexico, Alvarado (2024) explains that trust and active citizen participation are fundamental elements for the effective performance of a responsible government, influencing both the implementation and adherence to laws and the proper delivery of public services.

In Peru, Calderón (2023), discussing results-based budgeting, reinforces the notion that such budgets represent a fundamental strategy within public management, linking administrative procedures with the attainment of concrete products whose outcomes must be measurable for the benefit of the community. For its implementation, it is essential to clearly define the objectives to be achieved and to commit to the necessary efforts to attain them.

In Ecuador, compliance with participatory budgeting has been regulated since 2010 under the Organic Code of Planning and Public Finance, as well as the Organic Code of Territorial Ordering, Autonomy, and Decentralization (COOTAD). The regulation explicitly states that participation instruments are mandatory, granting special characteristics to planning councils at various levels of government. This body, composed of public officials and citizens, must issue a "favorable resolution" regarding the budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

The law also requires this council to conduct follow-ups on quadrennial investments to verify whether the approved budget corresponds to what has been executed or invested, as well as the results of such proposals and their social utility for the community receiving them. Under these premises, little has been substantiated, as, despite the existence of regulatory norms, there are no penalties for non-compliance or substantial sanctions for public administrators. What is evident from the exercise is a notable dissatisfaction among the public with their local leaders, which could even lead to determining serious criminal responsibilities for the offender.

In practice, this regulation has been distorted both in its compliance and in the manner of its integration. Very little is known about the planning council and even less about its members: how they were convened to join it and what their resolutions have been regarding the budget study that prompted that favorable report.

All of this becomes a mystery, exacerbated by the lack of intention to allow citizens access to historical records, session minutes, and any other documentation that would verify whether the established formalities in the legal regulation were fully adhered to, such as the "coherence" between local improvement plans and their alignment with the national development plan that the central government must execute. This is confirmed by Guerrero and Ortega (2025), who, in discussing quality of life in Ecuador's decentralized autonomous governments (G.A.D.), argue that promoting territorial development through effective local government management should be a priority in all state policies.

In this context, Toala et al. (2024) indicate that, when analyzing the proposal from the canton of Portoviejo, Ecuador, citizen participation is recognized as a fundamental principle of public administration and simultaneously as a citizen's right to intervene in the formulation, execution, evaluation, and oversight of public policies. This arises as a response to the crisis of representativeness and the limited capacity of governments to address

collective challenges, but above all, it consolidates as an essential component within the cycle of public policies aimed at local development.

The local government does not incentivize full citizen participation, and the entire scenario is reduced to superficial actions. Participation is ensured to the extent that it does not go beyond what is strictly necessary: a mere call to intervene, often without providing the citizen with sufficient information or granting the importance and social weight that should be accorded. It is frequently perceived as a merely "political" action benefiting the image of local leaders.

The Case of Santa Elena

The province of Santa Elena is composed of three cantons or municipalities: Salinas, La Libertad, and Santa Elena. It also has a provincial government or prefecture, which, while including municipal delegates in its council, possesses its own powers and responsibilities established by law. In other words, these levels of government seek to fulfill their respective competencies independently, yet integrated within a coordinated planning framework. Therefore, it is essential that the territories incorporate fully accessible procedures to ensure that public works are executed prioritizing correctness and transparency.

However, informational sessions are held with low attendance, lacking timely dissemination, and sometimes a budget is presented that has already been decided, leaving no room for modification. Accountability reports are limited to technical presentations, without effective interaction or citizen evaluation. This situation reveals a fracture between the normative discourse and administrative reality.

The conditions of the municipalities of Salinas, La Libertad, and Santa Elena are similar: there is limited citizen participation, confined to the times when this activity is mandated, between August and December, to be ratified by the corresponding level of government so that the fiscal exercise can commence from January 15 of the following year.

Despite the existence of an ordinance approved by the La Libertad Cantonal Council in 2011, which regulates citizen participation and social oversight, and which constitutes the main normative strength for residents, this legislative exercise has yielded very few results. This ordinance was issued to comply with the law, as the COOTAD requires evidence of actions taken by the municipal entity regarding collective participation, but also to ensure that citizens have an open door to exercise their right: direct participation, without ambiguity or prior conditions.

In the case of the municipalities of Santa Elena and Salinas, similar regulations exist, but with unencouraging results. The institutional policy of "open doors" that the community expects has not been implemented, preventing citizens from carrying out their procedures freely. There is also no free access to information beyond what is strictly necessary and often unappealing to the community, which primarily seeks to understand public contracts, the companies favored in bidding processes, and the amounts agreed upon with local authorities. Ultimately, only what the authority decides to disclose is available. This attitude undermines the law's effectiveness by not enabling the necessary channels for rights to be exercised and gradually erodes citizens' trust in the current authority and institution.

Methodology

The methodological application of this study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive method, maintaining a documentary review for convenience, justified by the intentional collection of information, prioritizing sources that provided direct and relevant data regarding the implementation of participatory budgets in the province of Santa Elena, as well as comparative experiences both nationally and internationally. The collected information was organized into:

- Primary sources: regulations, laws, codes, minutes from municipal council sessions, ordinances, citizen planning councils, and official documents from Decentralized Autonomous Governments (GAD).
- Secondary sources: academic studies, reports, journal publications, and specialized bibliographies.

Exhaustive inquiry protocols or strict criteria for exclusion or inclusion were not applied; neither was the entire existing literature covered. The selection focused on relevant documents that evidenced the gap between legislation and the institutional practices observed in the province of Santa Elena. This allowed for the identification of structural inequalities and unmet demands, as well as the proposal to reformulate the participatory budget model to examine and incorporate citizen arbitration. This, in turn, limits efficiency in public management and weakens its democratic legitimacy.

This content analysis is useful for identifying necessary comparisons between different municipalities, both national and external, that have incorporated adequate standards in their procedures for community direct participation in the review and approval of participatory budgets. However, these processes must be generated

from the logical priorities and needs of citizens, rather than exclusively from the authority's perspective, which, while having elected representation in the territory, is legally, morally, and strategically obliged to share these responsibilities with the citizenry. Consequently, although there is a common law and a generalized procedure for all, in some cases it is fully complied with, while in others there is little impetus for its realization.

This comparison considered contextual indications, communal dynamics, the achievements and deficiencies of municipal bodies, as well as factors arising in councils that influence collective participation and social security. The bibliographic review was supported by the compilation of recognized academic databases, such as Scopus and SciELO, among others.

Thus, a qualitative methodology and a documentary review for convenience were applied, allowing for a detailed evaluation of the participatory budget scenario in Santa Elena, demonstrating the gap between regulations, institutional practices, and citizen expectations.

Table 1
Heuristic framework for bibliographic review

Author(s) Year	Country/Context	Study Title	Main Contribution	Research Relevance
Córdova (2024)	Ecuador	Analysis of Constitutional Citizen Participation	States that participation is a pillar of the social rule-of-law state and should be continuous, not limited to voting.	Supports the need to strengthen participatory budgets as a mechanism of democratic legitimacy.
García et al. (2022)	International	Participatory Budgeting and Taxation	Proposes it as an innovative modality for defining public expenditure priorities.	Reinforces the idea that citizens should directly intervene in budget allocation.
Suárez (2024)	Uruguay	Online Participation and Participatory Budgeting	Analyzes the use of digital tools as a complement to the participatory process.	Serves as a comparative experience to analyze the applicability of digital platforms in Ecuador.
López & Gil-Jaurena (2024)	Spain	Digital Means and Citizen Participation in Public Management	Highlights the usefulness of cost-effective and flexible digital tools to foster interaction.	Contributes to the analysis of technological innovation in municipal participatory processes.
Martínez (2023)	Spain	Ideal Models of Participatory Budgeting	Proposes models that allow for anticipating impacts of participation in budgets.	Provides a framework for evaluating potential outcomes of reforms in Ecuador.
Alvarado (2024)	Mexico	Citizen Trust and Government Effectiveness	Emphasizes trust as a central element of participation and legitimacy.	Supports the hypothesis that a lack of trust limits participation in Santa Elena.
Calderón (2023)	Peru	Results-Based Budgeting and Public Management	Links administrative procedures with measurable product outcomes.	Guides the need to connect participatory budgeting with tangible results.

Guerrero & Ortega (2025)	Ecuador	Quality of Life and Municipal Management	Argue that territorial development depends on adequate local management.	Contextualizes the relevance of participatory budgeting in municipal quality of life.
Toala et al. (2024)	Ecuador (Portoviejo)	Proposal for Citizen Participation in Local Governments	Recognizes citizen participation as a fundamental principle and right.	An Ecuadorian case that reinforces the relevance of analysis in Santa Elena.

Results

Normative-institutional level

In the context of participatory exercises, it is expected to identify the fragility of the processes implemented to comply with legal norms. The limited administrative efficacy, institutionalized within municipal bodies but disconnected from citizen aspirations, complicates the articulation with local leaders, whose terms last four years. The evident lack of intention to allow the community to intervene in crucial decisions regarding their development processes, economic budgets, and allocations that may be managed at the municipal level fosters distrust among voters.

Another anticipated outcome regarding the legal functioning of participatory planning councils is their proper operation, the actions taken, and the minutes in which favorable or unfavorable resolutions regarding budgets or strategic collaboration between the community, authorities, and development plans should have been analyzed prior to issuing those resolutions.

Social-citizen level

At the collective level, a community disconnected from socialization processes and, even more so, from participation in budgeting through observations, incidents, requests for information, or acts of direct oversight of the municipal government is expected. This situation does not arise from a lack of citizen interest, but rather from the government level not facilitating the mechanisms or pathways that would allow citizens to feel involved in budgetary decisions. This not only weakens participatory democracy but also affects citizen trust in the administration. This is evidenced by limited participation and the local government's insufficient capacity to strengthen unity and shared responsibility.

Another expected outcome is the limited budget increase that the State allocates to municipal governments, as they have not demonstrated compliance with objectives according to the parameters established in the SIGAD, which is the means through which the State verifies the achievement of goals and objectives by the various levels of government, whose purposes must be linked and articulated with the National Development Plan and the local ordering plan. The lack of evidence prevents the Government from allocating more than the basics to each level of government. Therefore, a transparent administration with ongoing citizen participation constitutes a fundamental basis for the annual budget to increase progressively.

Discussion

The review confirms that various authors addressing this topic agree that administration must be transparent in its actions to generate citizen trust, especially regarding the verification of its financial accounts and the funds allocated for public works. Cortés (2022b) correctly notes that it is essential for governments and administrations to implement mechanisms that allow effective access to participatory spaces. However, these attempts are not executed uniformly or with equal intensity across all cities. Given the diversity and complexity of contexts related to citizen participation initiatives within smart cities, a deeper analysis of this issue is essential.

García et al. (2022) corroborate the assertion of Cortés (2022a) by indicating that it would be desirable for public expenditure to directly respond to citizens' needs, although this is not always possible. Therefore, it is crucial that citizens feel included in decisions about what is financed and how.

Treviño (2022) asserts that participatory processes are tools of public management aimed at fostering the active involvement of all community members, functioning as mechanisms for collective decision-making. These processes allow for the identification of needs, problems, and initiatives, ensuring equal opportunities among different social actors. Their central purpose is to generate consensus and promote constructive dialogues that

lead to effective solutions. This perspective differs from that presented by Montesinos and Carrasco (2022), who express that most municipalities implementing participatory budgeting are located in urban areas with medium or high development levels and possess the financial capacity to allocate funds and execute projects; however, their implementation has not generated a significant impact on the community.

Cerna (2023) maintains that citizen participation in participatory budgeting enables the community to directly intervene in decisions regarding the distribution of local public resources. This often results in an idealized and rhetorical conceptualization that is not always fully realized, particularly depending on the political-party conditions of the local government and its institutionalized public policy considerations. Cayatopa (2025) highlights the need to strengthen aspects such as responsiveness, information management, citizen participation, and knowledge management.

Toala et al. (2024) argue that citizen participation must be approached as a key tool for governance, governability, and local development. Poveda (2025) suggests that governance and participatory construction imply a joint decision-making process between the State and citizens, fostering transparency, inclusive participation, and mutual accountability. This concept reaffirms the guidelines proposed by Toala et al. (2024) but also idealizes the State-citizen relationship, often concluding in power struggles and resistance: on one side, the entity imposing criteria and sidelining citizen intervention, which finances the project or investment expenditure; on the other, the community demanding attention to social dissatisfaction and the lack of priorities regarding deficiencies that public administration is supposed to address.

Obeso (2023) adds that participatory budgeting constitutes a democratic management tool through which citizens can influence the distribution of public resources, promoting social development by fostering inclusion, equity, and shared responsibility in decision-making. Likewise, Quecaño and Domínguez (2024) assert that the results-based public management approach applied to participatory budgeting directs resource allocation toward specific objectives established with citizen intervention, thus enhancing efficiency and transparency. This stance aligns closely with Navarro (2022), who emphasizes that municipal management incorporating citizen participation strengthens community development by involving the population in the planning, implementation, and oversight of local public policies. Although both perspectives refer to applied regulations, the outcome is clear: without citizen participation, there is no democratic axis, and in many cases, it opens the door to impunity for wrongful acts or a lack of transparency in public administration. The reasoning is that governance, governability, and citizen participation are configured as essential foundations of a democratic public administration in which the State and society work together in decision-making and the development of the common good, as expressed by Palomino (2024).

In the research conducted by Linares (2022), reviewing the budget of the district of Lima, interesting data were found that often confirm the theory of the strained relationship between the State and the community. It was evidenced that 54% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the services provided by the entity, positively valuing dimensions related to quality of life. Additionally, it was verified that a quarter of the districts only executed 72% of the assigned budget. Although a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.05$) was confirmed, it is not direct but moderate between the level of expenditure executed and the services provided to the population. Despite the budget being utilized in percentages considered acceptable by the Ministry of Economy and Finance, citizens do not perceive a clear connection between that expenditure and the improvement of their quality of life in the city of Lima.

In this case, an additional piece of highly relevant information emerges, one that is almost always withheld: the fact that the total execution of the prepared budget is not fulfilled, regardless of whether the figures present a favorable instance. This raises a logical question about the fate of what was not executed and the resources allocated to the executable portion, or why pre-programmed needs were not addressed. All of this pertains to the quality and effectiveness of public administration and its officials.

Conclusions

Disconnection between norm and practice: Although participatory budgeting is mandated in the Constitution and in laws such as the COOTAD, its implementation in the municipalities of Santa Elena diverges from the principles of democratic participation, reducing it to mere formalism without real citizen substance.

Limited citizen participation: Participatory tools such as assemblies, open councils, or citizen councils are not activated effectively, and when they are, it is superficially, lacking real impact on the design or approval of budgets.

Institutional weakness: There is evident low operability of Planning Councils, a lack of awareness regarding their members, functions, and resolutions, which undermines the participatory processes mandated by law.

Lack of transparency: Access to public information is restricted to what authorities wish to show, fostering citizen distrust and fracturing institutional legitimacy.

Symbolic use of participatory budgeting: The mechanism has been reduced to a public relations strategy for the current government, failing to serve as an effective tool for democratizing public management or directing expenditure according to collective priorities.

Absence of sanctions: Despite legal mandates, there are no clear penalties for authorities who fail to implement participatory budgeting, which encourages its ineffectiveness or discretionary use.

Distortion of the budget cycle: Many budgets are already defined before being presented to citizens, turning participation into a formality that does not alter pre-determined decisions.

Citizen dissatisfaction and democratic disaffection: The real exclusion of citizens from the process generates frustration, distancing from public spaces and a loss of trust in local administration.

Weak impact on local development: By not effectively linking citizen participation with territorial planning and development plans, executed budgets do not reflect the real needs of communities.

Participatory budgeting as an administrative myth: Far from consolidating as a good governance practice, participatory budgeting in Santa Elena functions as an institutional myth: it is discussed and reported, but in practice, it does not transform public management or strengthen democracy.

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