

# EXAMINING VOTER TURNOUT: A LOOK AT PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ROMANIA\*

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\* **Acknowledgements:** This work was financed with the support of projects 'DEMOTEC – Democratising Territorial Cohesion: Experimenting with deliberative citizen engagement and participatory budgeting in European regional and urban policies', H2020-SC6 GOVERNANCE-2020 GA 962553, and Premiere 'DEMOTEC – Democratising Territorial Cohesion: Experimenting with deliberative citizen engagement and participatory budgeting in European regional and urban policies', PN-III-P3-3.6-H2020-2020-0168.

## Abstract

The gap between elected authorities and citizens is widening in many democracies due to declining political engagement. This article examines whether participatory budgeting (PB) is linked to voter turnout in Romania. As a widely used deliberative mechanism in public administration, PB's potential impact on voter behavior remains debated. This study contributes empirical evidence from Romania, addressing a gap in the international literature where previous findings on PB's effect on voter turnout are mixed. Focusing on the 2024 local elections, the analysis employs regression techniques to assess the relationship between PB presence and voter turnout, with previous election turnout and population changes as control variables. The results show a positive but statistically insignificant relationship between PB and turnout, which may be attributed to the limited impact of PB projects in Romania, marked by low local authority involvement, weak public engagement, and minimal project outcomes.

**Keywords:** participatory budgeting, voter re-engagement, political participation, deliberative democracy.

## 1. Introduction

The gap between elected authorities and citizens in Romania appears to be at its widest. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, only 31.84% of eligible voters participated, a 7.58% drop from 2016, marking the lowest turnout since the 1989 revolution. This decline is even more striking when compared to 2012, when 41.76% of the electorate cast their vote. At the local level, participation has been slightly higher, with turnout reaching 50% in the 2024 local elections—an increase from 46.6% in the previous cycle, though still below the 56% turnout in 2012 (AEP, 2024).

This downward trend reflects growing political disengagement among Romanian citizens, which undermines the legitimacy of elected authorities. In light of this, there is a pressing need for solutions to enhance political representation. Forms of deliberative democracy, such as Participatory Budgeting (PB), have gained global attention for their potential to boost local representation (Fung and Wright, 2001; Wampler, McNulty and Touchton, 2021) and support democratic development in emerging democracies (de Sousa Santos, 1998). This raises important questions: Could PB serve as a bridge between citizens and local authorities? And can deliberative democracy mechanisms help reinvigorate political engagement among both citizens and politicians?

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and understand the relationship between participatory budgeting (PB) on voter turnout in Romania. This paper should serve as an exploratory study with contributions to the literature gap, acting as a building block for further research. Deliberative democracy mechanisms can act as democratic development tools, this is why discoveries in this area of study can also contribute to designing policies that encourage political engagement. This could improve the quality of democratic systems at local and national levels.

To this end, this paper aims to answer the following question: What is the relationship between the presence of Participatory Budgeting and voter turnout in Romania? The PB experience in Romania would suggest that these mechanisms do not have a significant impact on the communities. This might reduce the potential to energize them politically. Yet, even if sometimes low, the initial response to PB in some cities was visible, this could create enough space for the analysis to bring significant results.

In the following section, this paper will cover the contributions of this analysis. The second section will briefly cover the history of PB at an international level and the Romanian experience. The third section will present the methodological framework of the analysis and the fourth will be dedicated to the analysis and results. It will go over the short-term and the long-term relationship between PB and election turnout. The final section will discuss the results, limitations and recommendations for further research.

This study makes several key contributions. No potential relationship between PB and voter turnout in Romania has been explored since its inception in 2017. This is the first analysis in this sense in the Romanian literature. Literature at the international level is also limited in this sense, and the results of this article can contribute greatly to reducing this gap. The results of the analysis further strengthen the assumed reduced significance that

PB plays in voter turnout (Minárik, 2020; Kukučková and Bakoš, 2019). The evidence of this study can act as a building block for expanding the analysis at an international level. While this study only covers a specific side of deliberative democracy, other mechanisms and variations can be studied and implemented as grassroots democracy-building exercises at local, regional, or international levels.

## 2. Literature review

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a deliberative mechanism through which the citizens can directly influence and choose how a part of the local budget is spent (Shah, 2007). PB mechanisms are usually adopted by local governments but can also be initiated or encouraged by central governments, NGOs, or even international organizations (Boc and Lazăr, 2022; Goldfrank, 2012; Maćzka *et al.*, 2021). The number of adopted PB mechanisms has increased globally over the past 30 years and has taken various shapes and forms, sparking a serious debate on what makes this approach succeed or fail (Wampler, McNulty and Touchton, 2021). The debate has naturally been felt in the international development area as well (Connell, 1997; Saguin, 2018). The use of deliberative methods, including PB, in developing countries is very common, yet the impact of such projects is criticized (Dearden and Rizvi, 2008; Goldfrank, 2012; Mohan and Stokke, 2000; Wampler and Touchton, 2022; Kyamusugulwa, 2013).

The potential for participatory budgeting (PB) to deepen democracy has been recognized by scholars since its inception. De Sousa Santos (1998) highlighted PB's significant role in strengthening democratic attitudes following the end of military dictatorship, as it introduced citizens to democratic tools they had rarely encountered before. PB provided training in the use of these tools, fostering a deeper understanding of democratic processes. Lerner and Schugurensky (2007) and Talpin (2007), in their analysis of PB in Rosario, Argentina, concluded that PB serves as an effective training and informational tool for citizens, engaging them democratically and encouraging them to care more about community needs and the efforts required to address them. Cabannes and Lipietz (2015) also emphasized PB's role in civic education, particularly when designed with an actor-oriented approach, which helps citizens better understand local administration and budget mechanisms. In contrast, PB programs focused on delivering tangible, politically visible projects, without emphasizing civic education, tend to have less impact on citizens' democratic attitudes.

Lerner (2010) noted that PB's impact on voter turnout can be difficult to quantify. When implemented effectively, PB can significantly improve democratic attitudes – not only among citizens but also among politicians and public administrators. Through direct interaction in PB, these stakeholders gain a better understanding of community needs. The benefits of PB extend beyond the process itself, as participants become more engaged in monitoring local government plans and projects to ensure proper implementation. However, despite these positive effects, PB struggles to address all aspects of democracy,

with inclusion being one of the most challenging issues. As Bassoli (2012) and Lerner (2010) pointed out, PB can become exclusionary, as certain individuals or groups within the community may gain disproportionate influence, limiting the participation of others – even in a system designed to be inclusive.

In the next sections, we will look at the history of PB as well as the perceived effects at a national and global level, and finally, we will analyze the literature on the connection between PB and voter turnout.

### ***2.1. Brief history of PB and the Romanian experience***

De Sousa Santos (1998) is the first author to offer a snapshot of the beginnings of PB in Brazil in 1989. Amid a military authoritarian regime that lasted for more than 21 years, the revolution created the space for more democratic approaches. The new party elected after the revolution created the pretext to design the first form of PB. The success that this new form of deliberative democracy had on the development of the city of Porto Alegre by the end of the 1990s has caused a spread in the entire country. Naturally, neighboring countries have created similar projects. Soon enough, PB became one of the fastest-spreading deliberative mechanisms in the world (Wampler, McNulty and Touchton, 2021). It is estimated that before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were more than 10,000 BP projects in the entire world, the number dropping to 4,000 by 2021 (Dias *et al.*, 2021). The PB mechanisms adopted in the last 30 years have taken various shapes and forms, creating interesting results over time (Bartocci *et al.*, 2023; Franco and Assis, 2019).

Europe represented an epicenter of PB. Before the pandemic, in more than 25 countries, the estimated number of projects on the entire continent was 5,113, this number dropped to 2,209 after the pandemic (Dias *et al.*, 2021) Considering that more cities in Romania adopted PB after 2022, we could assume the number of projects in Europe to have grown since. One of the most positive examples is the one of Lisbon, one of the first cities in Europe to adopt PB. Lisbon transformed PB into a mechanism of green and sustainable development, bringing significant results in this area (Falanga, Verheij and Bina, 2021; Falanga, 2024). Another example of significant variation in PB is the one of Poland, the first country to adopt PB in Eastern Europe. The initial results of PB have motivated the national government to mandate a law that makes PB mandatory for all cities. Yet, the initial impact could not be replicated (Mączka *et al.*, 2021).

Similar to some ideas presented later in this chapter, some authors point out that PB comes with the risk of elite influence or at least influence groups outside the ones formed by the general public (Rumbul, Parsons and Bramley, 2018). This brings us to one of the biggest criticisms of PB, which is its poor and restrictive use by the public authorities. This has been very visible in Poland, where most local administrations would adopt PB in a very ineffective form, with reduced budgets and awareness campaigns (Mączka *et al.*, 2021). Criticism for PB grew as fast, if not faster than the enthusiasm in its initial stages, that is, if the enthusiasm was there in the first place, as Goldfrank (2012) points out. Even in Brazil, the ‘birthplace’ of PB, the system has reached a point where the effects are not as

visible anymore (de Paiva Bezerra and de Oliveira Junqueira, 2022; Sintomer, Röcke and Herzberg, 2016; Wampler and Goldfrank, 2022). The literature suggests that PB seems to have generally not performed as it was expected to (Bartocci *et al.*, 2023; Ryan, 2021).

The presence of authentical left-leaning parties for PB to work properly is underlined repeatedly (de Azevedo *et al.*, 2022; de Paiva Bezerra and de Oliveira Junqueira, 2022). This is one of the reasons why authors like Melgar (2014) or Wampler and Goldfrank (2022) say that PB, present in the forms we have right now in the world, has lost its initial effect. Goldfrank (2012) even goes on to argue that from an originally leftist and hopeful approach, PB has later been adopted in a neo-liberal manner.

The types of BP projects today differ greatly from the original idea in Porto Alegre (Bartocci *et al.*, 2023). With the era of digitalization, PB in many countries is presented as exclusively online mechanisms, arguably creating a detachment that reduces PB to a weak democratic exercise (Derbeneva and Starodubets, 2021). This is the case especially when there is not enough funding in the first place (Mærøe *et al.*, 2021). The digital form of deliberation was perceived as a positive aspect that could increase inclusiveness and access to PB, especially during the pandemic (Bardovič and Gašparík, 2021; Maciel, Costa and Catapan, 2022), yet the engagement could be observed to decrease over time (Miori and Russo, 2011). The original idea of PB was created around public deliberation and debates, bringing together members of the community as well as public authorities (de Sousa Santos, 1998). With increasing digitalization and with COVID-19 pushing this phenomenon even more, PB transformed into a very different online tool that usually does not allow for such meetings, and even if they do, they are limited and impersonal (Ganuza and Francés, 2012).

By the time PB reached Romania, in 2017, the PB trend was already very popular, but its effectiveness was greatly debated (Wampler, McNulty and Touchton, 2021). The effect of the pandemic, even if the project in some cases was exclusively online, had a big impact on what were already not so performative mechanisms (Bardovič and Gašparík, 2021). PB is not treated with much seriousness in Romania. Inspired by the city of Cluj-Napoca, the processes adopted in the rest of the country were also exclusively online. People would propose and vote on the projects based on the digital platform, having no public deliberation involved in the process (Ivan and Constantinescu, 2022). Even if Boc and Lazăr (2022), the mayor of Cluj-Napoca, have called it a success, there is no empirical proof to back this claim. It is estimated that at least 14 county seat municipalities in Romania have adopted PB at least once, many of them abandoning the project after one or two years due to low interest (Damian and Ile, 2022). Interest was often not raised by the local authorities in the first place, as there were no major campaigns to make the mechanism known to the citizens, as Damian and Ile (2023) argue. There is low participation from the citizens and the interest decreases with every new phase. Even the projects that end up being voted on are usually not as impactful or, in some cases, not even finished by the local authorities (Dohotaru, 2022). It has also been observed that, in some cases, the winning projects serve specific interest groups. The example of Cluj-Napoca shows how in the full existence

period of PB, the most voted projects were projects that benefited schools. There is a clear power relationship that the educational institutions have with the public. Teachers can convince parents or students to show support for certain projects, showing levels of influence that other members of the community do not have (Ivan and Constantinescu, 2022).

## ***2.2. Participatory budgeting and voter turnout***

The literature on the connection between PB and political participation is limited. A more direct analysis that assumes a positive relation between the two has shown unclear results, where the effects of PB are ambiguous, as Kukučková and Bakoš (2019) point out in the case of the Czech Republic. Furthermore, he theorizes that if PB is to have any effect on turnout, it will be stronger for the local elections compared to national ones. This can be because PB is a local policy, more associated with the incumbent local authorities rather than the national government. A connection between this theory and the localization theory of Mohan and Stokke (2000) can be made. Another study in the Czech Republic that examines a potential relationship is similar to the results in the previous year (Minárik, 2020). A more detailed study in New York, on the other hand, shows a positive statistically significant impact of PB on voter turnout (Johnson, Carlson and Reynolds, 2023). And even if the results can serve as a counterexample, the context differs greatly from the Romanian or Czech ones, both in the type of PB implemented and the methodology. Johnson, Carlson and Reynolds (2023) analyzed the impact of PB on individuals in New York, a variable that is almost impossible in the Romanian context, given the size and information offered by the local authorities on the official PB sites. Yet, this study plays an important role in understating the potential connection between the two variables. While the examples in the literature are limited, the analyses done on the PB experience in the Czech Republic serve as crucial building blocks in our paper on the Romanian experience.

The negative impact that participatory mechanisms can have serves as an important realization. It can seem that, most of the time, the bad outweighs the good, the risks of implementing such a program seem too large to even try. Could the emphasis on ‘localization’ negatively affect political engagement? Using participatory mechanisms, while it seems counterintuitive, can do more harm than good if the programs do not have a deep understanding of the communities. Communities in Romania present underlying and complex social connections, and this is to be expected when PB is directly applied in a top-down fashion by the local authorities. The difference remains in how the local authorities act. Are they unaware of these relationships that can lead to a disproportionate use of PB? Do they encourage them? In some cases, it seems so. If PB is expected to increase voter turnout, it would also be expected to increase the turnout for the incumbent mayor. In the opposite case, could the community be disappointed in the system if it is not applied as expected, and vote for the opposition or not at all? Furthermore, building from the ideas of PB in the digital age, PB might as well not have any impact on political participation as the detachment caused by the digital space is not at all something that feels political.

### 3. Methodological framework

The purpose of our analysis is to shed light on any possible connection between PB and voter turnout in Romania. It is fitting to adopt a quantitative methodology to answer the research question. Given our theoretical framework on the potentials and limitations of PB, using an empirical approach can offer more grounded results to test theories. This can greatly contribute to future studies and analyses in this area (Blais, 2006). While a qualitative approach can be very useful, especially if we were to understand the personal opinions and drive of people who participate in PB (Matsusaka and Palda, 1999), this approach allows for a more precise analysis in which factors related to PB and turnout can be measured systematically. It will take into account all the administrative units that have experienced PB as well as all the administrative units that have the population size in between those with PB from the lowest population size and the one with the highest population size. The total number of observations is 71 (N=71).

The analyses will test the following hypothesis: (H) The presence of Participatory Budgeting tends to have a positive effect on the voter turnout in local elections.

#### 3.1. Variables

Voter turnout during the 2024 local elections (Turnout 2024), measured as the ratio between the number of voters and the number of eligible voters, which is the most common measure of turnout (Geys, 2006), is the dependent variable.

The independent variables (IV) assess the presence/absence of PB in a city. The variable PB1 refers to the PBs between 2020 and 2024, and the variable PB2 refers to the PBs between 2016 and 2024.

The first control variable is the turnout in the 2016 local elections (Turnout 2016), measured as the ratio between the number of voters and the number of eligible voters<sup>1</sup>. The second and third control variables are the size of the population as measured by the 2021 census (Census 2021) and the ratio of the size of the population at the 2021 census and 2011 census (Census ratio). The summary statistics of these variables are represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.
Turnout in 2024 local elections	0.43	0.05	0.17	0.57
Turnout in 2016 local elections	0.40	0.06	0.24	0.56
Ratio population 2021/2011 census	0.96	0.28	0.79	2.6
Population 2021 census	80,990	68,557	26,284	286,598
Population 2011 census	89,097	78,491	15,329	324,576

Source: Compiled by the authors

1 Turnout in 2020 was not included as a control variable because 11 localities in our dataset had PB events before 2020. These events could have started affecting turnout during the 2020 local elections, which would make it harder to isolate their impact on the 2024 elections.

### 3.2. Data

In order to determine the cities that have experienced PB, used an updated version of a database created in 2022 that contained details on all the PB experiences in Romania (Ivan and Constantinescu, 2022). The database has been updated to contain all the cities that have adopted PB after 2022. Some cities already in the database have deleted the websites they have used for previous projects, adopting new ones where the older data is not present. Some cities have PB sites, but they do not present any history or results of their projects, these have not been taken into account in the analysis as we cannot determine if PB took place or not. The total number of cities that experienced PB is 18, as seen in Table 1. Cluj-Napoca is the city with the most experience with PB, having started in 2017, totaling 5 projects until 2022, when the mechanism was scrapped. The most consistent and also the smallest city is Făgăraș, where there were 5 projects in 6 years. There are 11 cities that experienced PB in the 2016–2024 time frame.

Data from the 2020 elections has been excluded from the analysis for two reasons. The COVID-19 pandemic has led some cities to postpone, change, or drop PB altogether. This could not only affect the perception of PB. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic could have affected voter turnout in elections generally, and measuring this effect could prove difficult. It has been observed that COVID-19 influenced voter turnout internationally, with a possible reduction in the number of people that went out and voted (Constantino, Cooperman and Moreira, 2021; Picchio and Santolini, 2022; Santana, Rama and Bértoa, 2020). We considered that excluding the 2020 elections will reduce the effects of the pandemic.

**Table 2:** Cities that have experience with PB based on their population, years with PB, and the number of PB projects finalized

Administrative unit	Population 2021	Yr. 1st project	Yr. latest project	Total PB projects	2016–2020	2020–2024
Cluj-Napoca	286,598	2017	2022	5	3	2
Constanța	271,692	2022	2023	2	0	2
Brașov	237,589	2021	2024	2	0	2
Oradea	183,105	2017	2023	4	2	2
Arad	145,078	2018	2018	1	1	0
Pitești	141,275	2022	2023	1	0	1
Bacău	136,087	2023	2023	1	0	1
Sibiu	134,309	2018	2024	3	2	1
Târgu Mureș	116,033	2022	2023	2	0	2
Râmnicu Vâlcea	93,151	2020	2021	2	1	1
Satu Mare	91,520	2023	2023	1	0	1
Suceava	84,322	2019	2019	1	1	0
Târgoviște	66,965	2019	2019	1	1	0
Vaslui	63,035	2021	2022	1	0	1
Deva	53,113	2019	2020	2	2	0
Zalău	52,359	2019	2019	1	1	0
Turda	43,319	2019	2019	1	1	0
Făgăraș	26,284	2019	2023	5	2	3

Source: Compiled by the authors



The data regarding the election results has been gathered directly from the sites of the Permanent Electoral Authority (Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă—AEP). More specifically, the sites used are ‘prezenta.roaep.ro’ for the 2024 elections, and ‘alegeri.roaep.ro’ for the 2016 elections<sup>2</sup>. The data taken from these sites is: total voters on electorate lists (permanent, complementary, and supplementary), total votes expressed on all lists, and the percentage turnout, which also includes all lists. The number of candidates, as well as the elected mayor in the elections, are available on the same websites.

The data regarding the population has been gathered from the National Institute of Statistics. Both the 2011 census and the 2021 census have been chosen in order to determine the difference in population over time, as this can play an important role in our analysis. The city with the lowest population size is Făgăraș (26,284), and the highest is Cluj-Napoca (286,598). There is a total of 71 cities between these two, 18 of which have experienced at least one PB project, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 3:** Number of cities based on their population size and number of finalized PB projects

Population	Cities		
	Total	No PB	PB
> 100.000	17	8	9
100.000 – 50.000	23	16	7
< 50.000	31	29	2

Source: Compiled by the authors

Table 3 shows the distribution of the cities based on population size. Most of them are relatively small towns, with under 50,000 citizens. These are also the cities with the least PB experience, as only two of them have at least one PB, Făgăraș and Turda. There are 7 cities with a population between 50,000 and 100,000, and 8 cities with a population of 100,000 and more that have implemented PB.

#### 4. Analysis and results

The relationship between turnout in 2024, turnout in 2016, and the presence of PB shows that localities with PBs are more likely to fall above the regression line between these two variables (with Turnout 2024 as the dependent variable) (Figure 1). Cluj-Napoca and Brașov show the highest increase in turnout (9% each) among cities that implemented PB. The analysis also reveals that Vaslui is an outlier, with one of the lowest voter turnouts in Romania and an unusually large drop in turnout between 2016 and 2024 (7%). In 2016, its turnout was 24.2%, dropping to 16.9% in 2024. Significant discrepancies were observed in Vaslui regarding its census population and electoral lists. The 2021 Census shows 63,035

2 Both the web pages for the 2016 elections and the 2024 elections are no longer available on the AEP archive. They were last accessed on June 20, 2024.

residents, while the 2024 electoral lists report 131,818 voters—more than double the population. This discrepancy may be linked to the high number of Moldovan citizens who register their legal residence in Vaslui to obtain Romanian citizenship without actually living or voting there (Gîndu, 2024). Due to its atypical voter turnout change, Vaslui has been excluded from the empirical analysis.

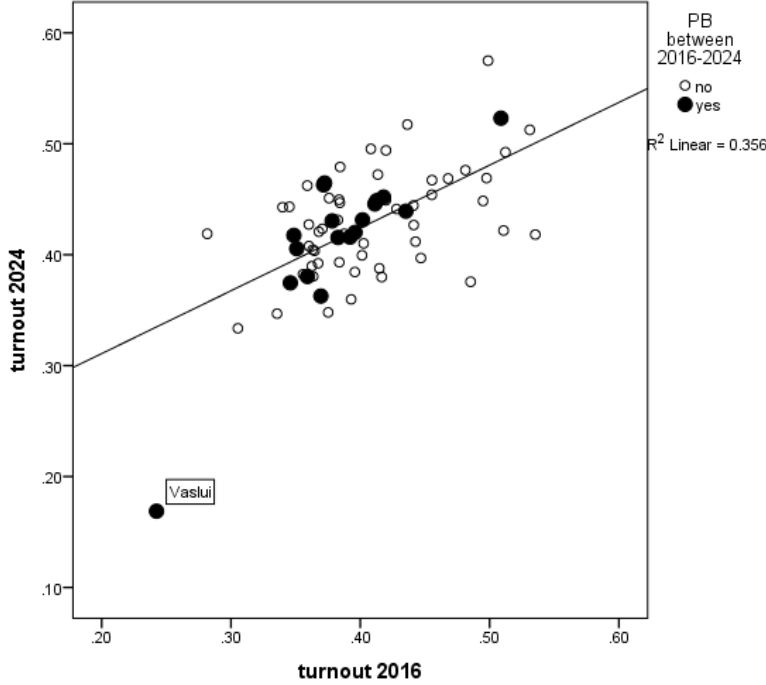


Figure 1: The relationship between turnout in the 2016 local elections and turnout in the 2024 elections

Source: Compiled by the authors

The results of two multivariate regression models assessing the effects of the PB events on the turnout of the 2024 local elections are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Determinants of the turnout of the 2024 local elections

	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	Beta	p	B	Beta	p
(Constant)	25.02		.000	25.39		.000
PB 2016-2024	0.96	0.09	.342			
PB 2020-2024				1.26	0.10	.423
Turnout 2016	0.38	0.46	.000	0.38	0.45	.001
Population 2011	0.00	-0.03	.818	0.00	-0.05	.730
Population 2021/2011	2.58	0.16	.153	2.52	0.16	.163
Adjusted R Square	0.27			0.26		

Source: Compiled by the authors

The empirical results for the effects of PB on election turnout, shown in Table 4, show a small positive effect of PB on election turnout. The presence of PB between 2020 and 2024 has a positive effect on voter turnout, with a 1.26 increase in the turnout ratio and a p-value > 0.05. The effect of PB between 2016 and 2024 is slightly smaller than for 2020–2024, which suggests that the effect of the PBs may decline over time.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

This study sought to answer whether a relationship between PB and voter turnout in the Romanian local elections exists. The results of the analysis are inconclusive. While positive, there is no statistically significant relationship between voter turnout and the presence of PB events. The study examines voter turnout in the 2024 local elections across 71 Romanian cities, 18 of which have implemented PB at least once. It includes turnout from the 2016 local elections and changes in the census population between 2011 and 2021 as control variables.

These findings could be explained by the fact that PB might have too little of an impact in the cities. The Romanian experience with PB reveals low engagement from local administrations, which likely contributes to low public participation in the process. The local authorities often show a lack of commitment and fail to improve or even continue using PB. The case of Cluj-Napoca stands out as one of the best examples, where the project has been abandoned despite the available resources and promising start. PB projects in Romania often fail to deliver substantial changes or visible results, which may explain why citizens' involvement in these initiatives has declined over time. Failures in public awareness campaigns, lack of transparency, and the delays (or incomplete) execution of projects play a major role in the perceived failure of PB. The broken promises of local authorities could even lead to a negative relationship between participatory methods and political engagement.

Additionally, underlying power structures within communities may have dominated the initiative, making it less accessible to others, and thus lowering expectations and involvement. This is one of the most common criticisms of PB. People or groups with more resources and influence already have an advantage. They can gather votes and support for their projects more easily and would only help a single group and not the entire community. This system allows certain institutions or groups to benefit disproportionately from PB, while other citizens are left out. Local authorities often overlook power imbalances within communities. For example, in Cluj-Napoca, schools have historically had the most successful PB projects, due to their greater ability to influence voting and secure project funding compared to ordinary citizens, who lack direct access to the public budget.

Another key issue is that all PB projects in Romania are conducted exclusively online, which may partly explain the lack of a stronger positive association between the presence of PB and political participation. The impersonal and detached nature of these interactions—quite different from PB's original concept—may limit its connection to traditional forms of political participation like voting.

Although the study focuses on Romania, its findings have significant relevance for international deliberative mechanisms and policy-building efforts. Future research on the relationship between PB and voter turnout should explore individuals' perceptions to determine whether PB experiences affect their political engagement. Furthermore, the influence of PB on cities should be examined, as more successful implementations may foster higher engagement compared to less impactful experiments.

The results call into question the idea that political disengagement in elections can be effectively addressed through deliberative methods such as participatory budgeting (PB). The connection between PB and democratic attitudes has been noticed and studied, but it is not guaranteed. More unconventional modes of political participation can benefit, people might become more informed and civically active because of PB, but no results show a clear relationship with the conventional type of participation, such as voting in our case. While it cannot be expected that the complexity of the issue of low voter turnout could be solved by PB, it is difficult to assess if PB can even play a small role.

By examining the voter turnout in local elections in Romanian cities in relation to their experience with participatory budgeting, our results show no statistically significant relationship between the two. Without individual-level data on PB outcomes, it is difficult to assess whether those who participate in PB are more likely to vote in local or national elections, or whether early PB participants disengage over time. These are limitations that future research should address, which are detailed in the next section. Furthermore, the political and social dynamics of each city, as well as the specific electoral context, are difficult to fully account for in the analysis. In the 2024 elections, for example, local elections coincided with European Parliament elections, and it is unclear what impact this had on turnout.

#### ***4.1. Limitations***

While this analysis attempts to control for factors that could influence the results, several significant limitations remain and should be considered for future research. First, there is a high likelihood that individuals who participated in PB projects were already politically active. The current analysis does not account for which voters may have been persuaded or energized by the presence of PB in their cities. To bridge this gap, a qualitative approach would be beneficial. Additionally, even if a positive relationship between PB and voter turnout is observed, it could simply reflect that local authorities were already more engaged and proactive, which may have led to the creation of PB initiatives in the first place. In such cases, citizens' political activity may be more a result of the involvement of local authorities than the PB process itself.

Another limitation is the relatively small number of cities with PB programs and their limited experience with the mechanism. Most cities in our analysis have only one or two finalized PB projects, with limited voter participation in the deliberation process. Moreover, some PB platforms are either no longer accessible or provide insufficient information to accurately assess the projects' real impact. Expanding the sample size to include more

PB-administering cities, along with evaluating the actual impact of the projects, would provide a more comprehensive analysis of the potential link between PB and voter turnout. If possible, future research should also consider factors such as the number of individual PB participants, the number of projects, budget size, and the tangible outcomes of the voted projects.

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