

Cytowanie

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**Participatory Budget as a Method of E-democracy
Development or Merely a Voting Tool?**

Keywords: social participation, public policy, political system, e-democracy, administration participatory budget

Słowa kluczowe: partycypacja społeczna, polityka publiczna, system polityczny, e-demokracja, administracja, budżet obywatelski

Abstract

The last decades have been a time of dynamic changes in the scope of public management tools, as well as a gradual increase in the participation of citizens at every stage of public decision-making. That is why application of ICT tools in practice of public policy implementation is currently a popular direction of public administration development. The aim of the

article is to analyse how this postulate is implemented on the example of Polish participatory budgets. On the basis of quantitative research the authors have analysed participatory budgets that function in towns with powiat rights. In the conclusions it is stated that ICT are applied only partially within the public policy environment and are used to popularise participatory budgets and to facilitate the process of voting for the submitted propositions.

Streszczenie

Budżet obywatelski jako sposób na rozwój e-demokracji czy jedynie narzędzie do głosowania?

Ostatnie dekady to czas dynamicznych zmian w zakresie narzędzi zarządzania publicznego, jak również stopniowego zwiększania udziału obywateli na każdym etapie decydowania publicznego. Dlatego też wykorzystanie narzędzi ICT w praktyce realizacji polityk publicznych jest obecnie często wskazywanym kierunkiem rozwoju administracji publicznej. Celem artykułu jest zbadanie na ile ten postulat jest realizowany na przykładzie funkcjonujących w Polsce budżetów obywatelskich. Autorzy, na podstawie empirycznych badań ilościowych, zbadali budżety obywatelskie, działające w miastach na prawa powiatu. W konkluzji stwierdzono, że narzędzia ICT znajdują jedynie częściowe zastosowanie w kole polityki publicznej i służą celom popularyzacji b. o. i wprowadzenia ułatwień w procesie wyboru zgłoszonych wniosków.

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I. Introduction

The last decades have been a time of dynamic changes in the scope of public management tools, as well as a gradual increase in the participation of citizens at every stage of public decision-making¹. Traditional forms of communication are fundamentally transforming. Traditional elections or public consultations are becoming an insufficient tool for legitimizing public decisions. The main reason for changes is the dynamic development of the Internet, which transforms the relationship between the citizen and public administration bodies.

¹ L. Torres, V. Pina, B. Acerete, *E-government developments on delivering public services among EU cities*, "Government Information Quarterly" 2005, vol. 22, iss. 2.

On the basis of the indicated changes and new social expectations, a discussion about the necessity to change traditional democracy into a form of e-democracy was started. As Alina M. Chircu noted: “The speed of communication and its low cost (both organizational and financial) will irreversibly change traditionally understood democracy”². E-democracy is one of the solutions to the crisis of trust in public institutions, manifested by the lack of involvement in public activities. Works such as *Democracy 2.0*, *WikiGovernment*³, *Government 2.0*⁴ are just a few of the most popular publications on the subject. The prefix “e” is understood in this case as electronic or internet democracy. Universal access to the agora is to be ensured by a new form of practising democracy in a virtually unlimited way. Thus, the concept of e-democracy comprises two important areas. The first is the technological component concerning the possibility of using information and communication technologies (ICT), and the second is the socio-political component, including public decision-making.

One such example, which has been used for many years to increase social involvement, is the participatory budget (hereinafter – p.b.), understood as a democratized mechanism of dividing public funds, which assumes that decisions are made directly by citizens in a cyclical manner, usually annually⁵. Its popularity at the international level is evidenced by the fact that it is promoted by organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations. Starting with Porto Alegre, where p.b. was first introduced⁶, it served as a tool to increase public involvement. It has already been analysed from many research perspectives. For example, the issue of democratization of the decision-making process⁷, the

² M. Chircu, *E-government evaluation: towards a multidimensional framework*, “Electronic Government, An International Journal” 2008, vol. 5, no. 4, p. 348.

³ B.S. Noveck, *WikiGovernment. How technology can make government better, democracy stronger, and citizens more powerful*, Washington 2009.

⁴ W.G. Eggers, *Government 2.0: Using technology to improve education, cut red tape, reduce gridlock, and enhance democracy*, Lanham 2004.

⁵ Z. Osmólska, *Budżet partycypacyjny po polsku [in:] Demokracja w Polsce po 2007 r.*, ed. D. Plecka, Katowice 2014.

⁶ R. Mieñkowska-Norkienne, *Demokracja partycypacyjna na poziomie lokalnym jako jeden z aspektów realizacji zasady subsydiarności na przykładzie aglomeracji warszawskiej*, “e-Politikon” 2015, no. 13, pp. 163–194.

⁷ C.B. Weyh, D.R. Streck, *Participatory budget in Southern Brazil: A collective and democratic experience*, “Concepts and Transformation” 2003, vol. 8 (1), pp. 25–42; M. Popławski,

impact of the civic budget on increasing social participation⁸, trust in the public sector⁹, also using the civic budget as an element of democratic innovation¹⁰. In this respect p.b. is also taken under consideration from legal perspective due to the fact that it allows to exercise such constitutional values as transparency of public administration¹¹, decentralization¹², common good¹³ and last but not least subsidiary principle.

The objective of this article is to check, based on the experience of Polish cities with *powiat* rights, to what extent it is possible to combine these two perspectives of public administration reform, i.e. the use of ICT and p.b. as a decision making tool. The research perspective adopted for the analysis of the indicated issue is the public policy circle.

II. E-democracy and Public Policy

Combining ICT tools with participatory activities, which include the p.b., is a way to strengthen the low social interest in politics. The indicated issues have already been the subject of extensive research, but usually separately. In case of the participatory e-budget, the analysis covered such issues as the functioning costs of Internet tools, saving time in the implementation of the entire process¹⁴, the use of IT tools to increase the popularity of the p.b., or

Between Legitimization and Deliberation. Participatory Budget in Dąbrowa Górnicza, "Przeгляд Prawa Konstytucyjnego" 2018, no. 6 (46), pp. 407–423.

⁸ K. Johnston Miller, D. McTavish, *Making and Managing Public Policy*, New York 2014.

⁹ P. Sztompka, *Zaufanie. Fundament społeczeństwa*, Kraków 2007.

¹⁰ S. Gherghina, J. Ekman, O. Podolian, *Democratic Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe*, London 2019.

¹¹ P. Romaniuk, *Wybrane prawnoadministracyjne aspekty realizacji zasady jawności w sferze funkcjonowania administracji publicznej*, "Studia Iuridica Toruniensia" 2021, t. XXIX.

¹² D. Tykwińska-Rutkowska, P. Glejt, *Prawna regulacja budżetu obywatelskiego a jego praktyczna realizacja – czyli o uspołecznieniu wykonywania zadań publicznych na przykładzie rozwiązań przyjętych w trójmieście*, "Gdańskie Studia Prawnicze" 2015, t. XXXIV.

¹³ U. Zawadzka-Pąk, *Ochrona Dobra wspólnego poprzez budżet partycypacyjny (obywatelski). Studium aksjologiczno-prawne*, Białystok 2019.

¹⁴ R. Luehrs, J. Heaven, *The Future of Participatory Budgeting: Political Participation and Practicable Policy* [in:] *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, ed. A. Delwiche, J.J. Henderson, London & New York 2013.

greater transparency of the entire process. However, it is worth paying attention to studies which emphasized the negative effects of using IT tools in the case of p.b., due to the limitation of the most important element of its implementation, i.e. public discussion. Apart from a better allocation of resources for the implementation of own tasks, there are also socio-political factors: trust in public administration, experience of cooperation and the need to build support for one's own ideas are the most important assets of the implementation of the p.b. The use of Internet tools makes it difficult to achieve this effect, as the possibility of conducting discussions via an Internet forum, self-voting, or conducting promotional activities without the need for direct contact and conversation, can "individualize" the p.b. For this reason, it is important to ensure that both forms are complementary in practice¹⁵.

The subject of this article is the use of online tools within the framework of the p.b. This issue has been analysed from the perspective of public policy. The tasks performed by public administration bodies are the subject of scientific reflection in terms of the public policy circle, by means of which it is possible to organize and distinguish individual stages of intervention understood as successive stages of public decision-making¹⁶. In the literature on the subject, one can find classifications including 4 to as much as 7 stages of such activities¹⁷.

For the purposes of this article, the classification proposed by J.R. Adorno and Ch. Blake¹⁸, who drew attention to such stages of action as: identification of the problem, indication of possible alternatives to its solution, selection of one of the options, implementation of the adopted solution, and finally evaluation. At the first stage, therefore, there is the discovery of an issue that con-

¹⁵ J. Vaz, *Using the Internet for Collaborative Local Governance: the Digital Participatory Budget in Brazil* [in:] *III Minnowbrook Conference in Public Administration*. Lake Placid, New York 2008.

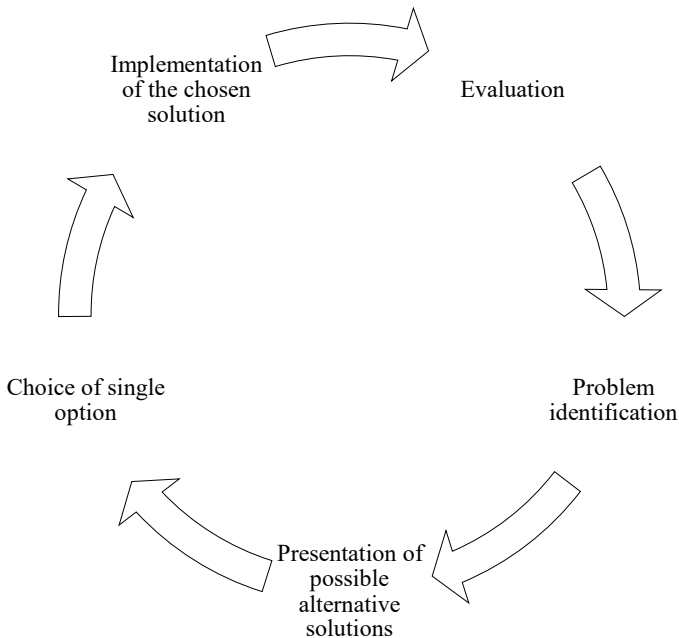
¹⁶ Policy cycle was firstly proposed in the literature by B.W. Hogwood and L.A. Gunn, *Policy Analysis for a Real World*, Oxford 1984.

¹⁷ T.A. Birkland, *An introduction to the policy process. Theories, concepts, and models of public policy making*, Routledge, New York 2020; D. Weimer, D. Leo, A.R. Vining, *Policy Analysis: Concepts and practice*, New York 2017; P. Knoepfel, C. Larrue, F. Varone, M. Hill, *Public Policy Analysis*, Bristol 2011.

¹⁸ J.R. Adorno, Ch. Blake, *Comparing Public Policies. Issues and choices in six industrialized countries*, New York 2001.

stitutes a significant social problem, and as a result it finds its way onto the political agenda. In the second stage, a public debate is carried out, the aim of which is to learn about possible solutions. Its consequence is the choice of one of them on the basis of the collected substantive or political arguments. The last two stages are the implementation of the adopted solution and the assessment of the actions taken. Most often they are not so clearly visible and analysed in the public debate, but they are an integral part of the public policy. Moreover, it can be said that it is the implementation that is an important, if not the most important, part of the public policy circle, as it proves the effectiveness of the state and public administration in undertaking organized activities.

Figure 1. The public policy circle according to J.R. Adorno and Ch. Blake



Source: own elaboration.

III. Methodology, research methods and techniques

The purpose of applying the above perspective is to check at which stage of the public policy circle ICT tools are used in the implementation of the p.b. As part of the research process, the following issues were analysed: (1) problem identification – whether online tools allow for a discussion on the problems and needs of the inhabitants of a neighbourhood or a city (2) identifying possible alternatives for action, understood as submitting projects via ICT tools and then getting information about them (3) selecting one of the possible options – whether e-voting is provided, or is the choice made in the traditional form (4) evaluation of implemented projects – whether residents have the opportunity to evaluate the actions taken using online tools, and whether this stage of the public policy circle is socialized or left only to the assessment of officials. Thanks to the research results obtained, it is possible to assess to what extent the combination of ICT tools and p.b. is a comprehensive element of building e-democracy, and the extent to which it is used on a point-by-point basis to improve the participation process. According to the authors, it is interesting to check whether, thanks to ICT tools, we are able to learn something new about the public policy circle. Does direct and quick access to recipients and participants of public services change the dominant, often hierarchical, process of implementing public interventions, internal logic and structure of public administration¹⁹? Thus, using the example of ICT tools in the process of implementing p.b., the authors discuss what potential change for public policy is possible thanks to such solutions, assuming this as a research problem. The adopted research hypothesis was the supposition that selected cities use ICT at every stage of p.b. management. The research field is p.b. in Polish cities with *powiat* status.

In order to verify the formulated research questions, a decision was made to conduct quantitative research using a questionnaire consisting of fourteen questions. The first three were of a control nature and the next eleven were substantive. Among the latter, all were closed, two were single-choice and nine were multiple-choice. The structure of the survey reflected the struc-

¹⁹ J. Höchtl, P. Parycek, R. Schöllhammer, *Big data in the policy cycle: Policy decision making in the digital era*, "Journal of Organizational Computing and Electronic Commerce" 2016, vol. 26, no. 1–2.

ture of the research questions. In the first part – the substantive part, questions were asked about the functioning of the places created for the inhabitants' discussion about the needs of their city. The second part included questions on submission of applications via the Internet and access to them after submission. The following questions concerned the available ways of participating in voting, and finally about the stage of evaluation and the possible use of ICT in it.

The study was conducted at the turn of October and November 2019. All 66 Polish cities with *powiat* rights were invited to participate. The authors concluded that as the p.b. develops the fastest in this group, trends that will appear in other communes in the future should be searched for there. Moreover, in accordance with the amendments to the act of 8 March 1990 on municipal self-government, these are the only units of local self-government that are required to organize a cyclical, annual p.b. Questionnaires return rate was 65%.

IV. Results

Of the cities with *powiat* status that took part in the study, all of them implemented the p.b. procedure in 2019. Each of them also declared that their mechanism met basic preconditions. Only about one-third of the surveyed units independently ran a web site where residents could freely talk about the city's problems as part of the p.b. procedure. The lack of independent management of such a web site did not mean that it was outsourced – 86% local government units admitted they did not entrust such an activity to other institution. If ICT is used to organize the discussion, in 13 cases it is a social network profile, in 2 cases it is a discussion forum and in 3 cases a different form is used.

The widespread use of online tools looks completely different when it comes to the way of submitting applications. First, not all of them accepted paper applications submitted in person. As many as 14% of the surveyed no longer uses this form. Moreover, over 72% allow their submission on-line, via the form available on the website, and nearly 26% by e-mail. Interestingly, in the commune of Sopot you can do it over the phone. One of the elements that the legislator requires to be included in the petition for p.b. is the list of support for the proposal. The results showed that a paper form is required by slight-

ly more than 9% of all respondents. Almost 70% of the respondents present all the proposals that they receive on the Internet, and another 18.6% publish only those applications that are submitted to a vote. Municipalities were also asked about all the voting methods that were used. Interestingly, the Internet form was by far the most popular, with as much as 93% of responses. Traditional paper cards, thrown into the ballot box, were less popular – 79%. Only two of the surveyed communes allow voting by email.

The following questions concerned the participation of citizens in the evaluation of the civic budget. It turns out that in over 60% of the examined cases, only the public administration carries out formal evaluation. Only in 16% of municipalities all residents can participate in the formal evaluation. If they already have such a possibility, it comes down to the option of sending their comments by traditional mail or e-mail. Such variants were marked by 32.5% of the respondents. Slightly less – almost 26% gave the answer that residents can evaluate using the online form. Among other responses, there was also information about the possibility of discussion on internet forums or social networks (18%), discussions at dedicated evaluation meetings (16%) and using paper questionnaires (16%).

Similar results were obtained in relation to the substantive evaluation. In even more cases of local government units – 65% – substantive evaluation is performed only by the public administration. Slightly more allow substantive evaluation by all residents – nearly 21% of respondents. About 11% entrust this to a special expert body. Similarly to the formal evaluation, if residents can participate in the substantive part, it will most likely take the form of sending comments by traditional mail (42%) or by e-mail (40%). Much less often internet forums or websites on internet portals (18%) or internet forms (12%) are used. In such an evaluation, a dedicated representation of the inhabitants is used only sporadically (4%).

V. Discussion

Internet tools (ICT) have found widespread use in the implementation of p.b. among the examined cities. Such a conclusion is not surprising and was expected by the authors. The widespread use of the Internet in everyday com-

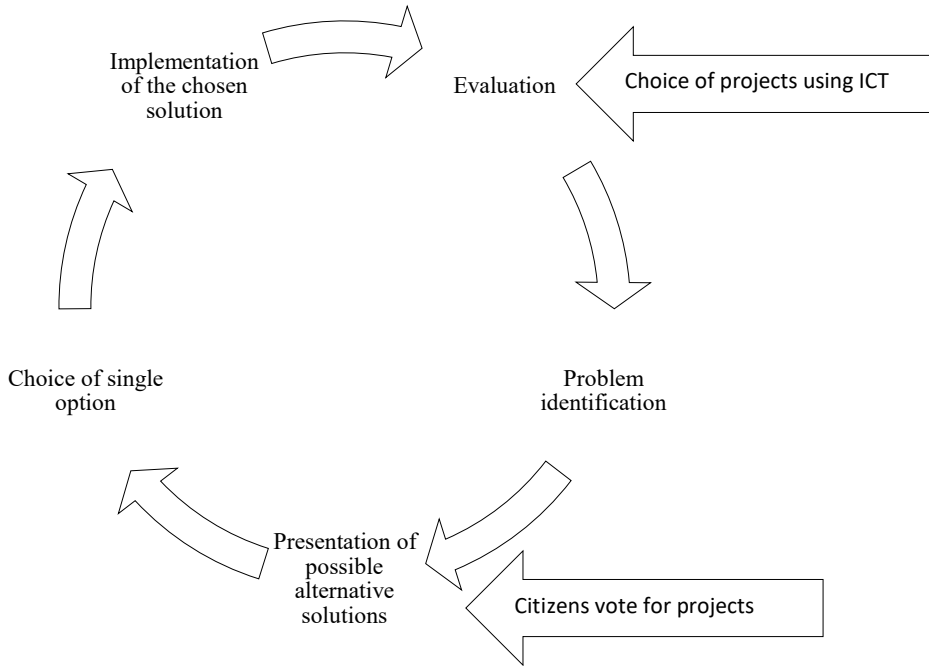
munication was the basis for such an assumption. Taking the public policy circle as the category of assessing the use of ICT tools in p.b. it should be noted that they were used only at certain stage. Most often, ICT tools are used as part of the project selection, so the moment of p.b. procedure when residents can submit their ideas as the basis for evaluation and the following public decision-making. The purpose of implementing ICT tools is to make it easier for applicants to submit an idea. It is therefore of purely technical importance and does not in any way change the logic behind the functioning of the public policy circle. Following the previously adopted classification of J.R. Adorno and Ch. Blake, we are only talking about a kind of facilitation at the problem identification stage. Although it should be remembered that this facilitation has some limitations resulting from the need to have some digital skills. In the case of residents who are not able to use ICT tools or lack access to them, the traditional way of submitting their ideas is possible.

ICT tools are also widely used in the next phase of the public policy circle, i.e. identifying possible alternatives to solve the problem. In the case of p.b. this role will be played by publishing all projects submitted by residents. Based on the research results obtained in all cities, regardless of the form in which the projects are submitted, they are finally posted on the Internet. In this situation, ICT tools serve the transparency of public administration operations and at the same time use it as a potential control tool. All persons who submitted their projects, and the projects were assessed as applications submitted in accordance with the previously adopted regulations, can check whether their projects were included as proposals for selection.

The following stage in the implementation of the public policy circle – selecting one of the options – is also carried out with the use of ICT tools. They facilitate the voting process and encourage residents to express their preferences. Such a solution certainly helps to increase attendance.

The use of ICT in p.b. procedure ends after the first three stages of the public policy circle. Both at the implementation stage of the adopted solution, as well as the stage of evaluation in order to assess the assumptions made at the beginning, these tools are not used at all. Based on the research results obtained, it can be concluded that they are carried out in a manner typical for public administration, and therefore they remain in the so-called “black box” that is invisible to the public.

Figure 2. Changes in the public policy wheel made by ICT tools



Source: own elaboration.

VI. Conclusions

Based on the results of the conducted research, it can be concluded that ICT tools are selectively used in the public policy circle analysed on the example of p.b. in Polish cities. They are used mainly for information and popularization purposes in the implementation of the p.b., and to a limited degree for control at the initial stages of the participation process. Therefore, ICT tools have not led to significant changes in the implementation of the public policy circle. However, in terms of the legal perspective, ICT tools might be seen as useful to increase transparency of public administration due to the fact that evaluation is the most common way to use those.

Moreover, additional value for implementing ICT tools, in the context of p.b., is attracting citizens to take part in voting process. In this respect it is fair to say that ICT extend democratic citizens' right to cast a vote not only

during the elections process but also in decision making process – for instance in the context of spending public money. In this way democratic right to participate in politics might be extend to new areas associated with the public policy processes.

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