

11 Information on running a PB voting process

It is usual at the Deliberate and Decide stage of a participatory budgeting process to hold a voting process. There will be a number of things to consider. These might include whether the vote happens face to face or online, over an extended period or at a specific event. These should all be considered by the co-design team and shared with those making proposals, and of course those voting.

One of the hardest decisions is how many votes, and of what value should each participant be given. This is discussed further on the next page. Adopting the right voting system can aid deliberation and fairness.

There is no right answer, but experience shows there are various design considerations between which you might choose. Which is chosen should be based on your own situation and agreed and ideally tested before the day to avoid mistakes.

Some Voting Design Recommendations:

Compare projects against each other before voting. Voters might be encouraged to score each project as they are heard, but preferably they are asked to hear from a few projects before starting to choose, to improve their judgement, and so not advantage or disadvantage the first few projects that present their idea. Or even better to hear or consider all the proposals and then make their choice. Longlists of projects can be difficult to compare, in which case they can be broken down, with voting in stages.

Publish criteria or prompts to help people make wise choices. It can be helpful to ask people a few reflective questions of each project, such as 'is this project really meeting a need?' or 'can everyone get involved?'. If the overall process has specific goals (such as improving the school environment, public safety, or building connections between communities) then remind voters what these are.

Deliberate in small groups before voting. It is helpful, if time allows, to encourage voters to sit with a few other people and discuss the merits of each idea. Whilst this may be impractical for larger processes the more deliberation you can encourage the better the quality of the votes that will be cast.

Multiple voting can better reflect real preferences. In PB, unlike some forms of electoral voting (such as ‘first past the post’ widely used in the UK), it is normal to have to make more than one choice. This will help encourage people to vote for more than their friends, only things that they will benefit from or ideas they are already familiar with. It is recommended to make sure voters can vote for at least three, and preferably more, projects.

Anonymous voting prevents bias, influencing and group think. Nobody wants to be seen to challenge a group identity or appear unpopular. Therefore wherever possible run a secret or anonymous vote. This enables a more democratic culture, and allows people to feel free to vote for projects on a more rational basis.

Below are common voting systems and a few potential benefits and risks for each method.

1 Score each proposal

Sometimes called rating or scoring, in this method each and every idea is given a score, out of (for example) five points, with 5 being high and 1 being low. Generally this is done on a voting sheet or by using an electronic voting machine. On the scoring sheet there may be a single box to write in a score, or a set of boxes from which you can select.

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Benefits

- **Everyone considers the merits** of every project.
- **Detailed results** based on deeper deliberation.
- **Can allow people to ‘score as they go’** or within scoring rounds.
- **Can include visual cues** such as smiley/sad faces to help people with their rating.
- **Allows people to reward projects** they think are well conceived or meet a definitive need

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Risks

- **Can be hard work** to rate multiple options.
- **Harder to change a vote** for a project later (e.g. if you hear better or worse projects later on).
- **Risk that people will give their own preferred project a high score** and unfairly low scores for everyone else.
- **Can be time-consuming** to count and announce results on the day.

2 Multiple equal votes

Sometimes called an approval ballot, in this method scorers have a number of equally weighted votes (each vote equals one point). Typically there might be three, five or ten voting cards, or tokens given to voters. They then distribute these between the various proposals. They can do this on a paper scoring sheet (where they are asked to tick or put a cross against their selected projects) or they could vote by counters or tokens placed into voting receptacles, or by sticky dots placed on a visual display.

+ Benefits

- **Simple and easy** to understand.
- **Easy to count.**
- **More effective** when a lot of people are voting.
- **Doesn't force people to consider the quality of projects**, just the ones they like.

! Risks

- **Risks of voting irregularities** (check all votes are cast and some not withheld).
- **Risks of multiple votes going to the same project** (when using voting receptacles).
- **When using receptacles to collect votes** or sticky dots if it's possible to see how others have voted it risks a 'group bias' emerging. People tend to vote for projects others are already backing.

3 Ordering projects by preference

Sometimes called ranked or preference voting, in this method voters are asked to rank some or all of the projects in order of preference. For example, giving five points to the best project, four to the next, and so on down to one point. Ideally voters should be able to make at least three choices.

+ Benefits

- **Easier** than scoring every project.
- **Allows people to reward projects** they think are well conceived or meet a need or criteria.
- **Voting system experts** tend to think this method gives the most accurate results of true preference.

! Risks

- **Easy to make a mistake** (such as missing out scores or duplicating a score) leading to spoilt voting papers.
- **Some projects could score zero points.** Disappointment needs to be managed.

4 Ranking, but with an added negative vote

As a variation to ordering projects by preference, or the multiple equal votes method, there is an option to have positive and negative votes. In this method voters can approve projects, but are also given the option of a negative vote for projects to which they particularly object. An alternative way of thinking of this option is ‘traffic light’ voting: Green for ‘yes’, amber for ‘maybe’ and red for ‘no’. This type of method has been promoted by the D21 organisation, and used in a number of PB processes.

+ Benefits

- **Easy to count** and score fewer options.
- **Identifies contentious projects**, potentially allowing for further deliberation on why it is contentious.
- **May be useful at an earlier stage** in the process to verify or check projects for quality.

! Risks

- **Unfamiliar** to offer negative votes.
- **May bring fears unpopular causes** or marginalised groups may be unfairly highlighted.
- **Need to carefully explain** how to vote and when to cast a negative vote to avoid confusion.

Considerations when running online voting.

Online voting platforms for participatory budgeting processes have become increasingly common. They range from simple online surveys (that are easy to create and share), poll-making apps (that allow you to run a voting process through a smartphone), to detailed and well designed voting platforms (that may have many tools for verifying who is voting, encouraging deliberation and reporting on results.) Don’t discount the option of SMS or text voting, which doesn’t require a login, but can still be a safe and verifiable voting tool. Or using existing school apps, registration and learning systems, which connect with pupils, and may include survey functions.

Remember that online tools can also be used at different stages of the PB process, such as ideation, project development and monitoring of project delivery.

It is beyond the scope of this toolkit to advise which system or tool is best for your situation. If you are considering using an online voting platform it is important to research what others are doing and the advantages and disadvantages of different platforms. The range of options is rapidly increasing, with many private companies promoting their own preferred solution. It may also be that a school or institution already has some form of classroom based interactive technology, such as voting handsets, which can be adapted for a PB vote.

There are many benefits of using digital voting, but also some risks.

+ Benefits

- **Can automate** a voting process to allow many votes to be quickly counted.
- **Allows people to vote remotely** (especially valuable in the times of social disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic or across large geographic areas).
- **Can be integrated** with videos, picture sharing sites, social media platforms and other online tools.
- **Young people may prefer to vote this way** as they are already familiar with engaging with content on social media and completing online polls.
- **Can easily produce reports** such as evaluations of voting patterns.

! Risks

- **Can be expensive** to set up and run, requiring new skills to be learnt.
- **Can create new barriers** (such as digital exclusion of poorer or marginalised communities).
- **Can limit active deliberation**, with a risk the voting becomes a more personal choice (without being forced to consider other options).
- **Reduces contact** between participants, so reduces the degree of cooperation and learning that might come from a face to face process.
- **Many require a login or profile**, which can be an additional barrier to participation and bring issues of personal data security.

Deciding what system to use is not easy. There are some guides that you can look at to help decide whether to use online voting, and if so, which system, and some examples in our case studies. Don't be tempted to buy an expensive platform that might only be used once or with many features you may not need.

Read more ↗ on using digital tools for PB from research and advice by the Democratic Society, which was created for use in Scotland (UK) (English only).

There are some **guides** ↗ that you can look at to help decide whether to use online voting, and if so, which system, or add these words to the existing text after the link to the democratic societies resource link:

Read more ↗: PeoplePoweredHub has recently released a free resource on digital PB platforms.