

# A large-scale field experiment on participatory decision-making in China

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## Key Points

- ▶ Participatory budgeting in China enhances government responsiveness and strengthens regime legitimacy by allowing citizens to directly engage in decision-making, signaling that their input is valued and reinforcing trust in the centralized governance system.
- ▶ Residents express greater demands for government improvement without experiencing decreased satisfaction, demonstrating that participatory processes encourage accountability-seeking behavior while maintaining positive perceptions of overall governance.
- ▶ Participation fosters civic pride and more positive perceptions of local economic conditions, as residents involved in decision-making develop a stronger sense of belonging and optimism about the development of their communities.
- ▶ Institutionalizing participatory mechanisms tailored to local contexts can empower citizens and improve governance legitimacy and adaptive capacity by embedding engagement within existing political structures in ways that build public trust and enhance the responsiveness and resilience of centralized governance frameworks.



## Policy Focus

The rapid expansion of participatory governance initiatives in centralized regimes has sparked debate over their capacity to enhance civic engagement and government accountability. This study investigates the effects of participatory decision-making within participatory budgeting in China with centralized regimes with participatory governance approaches. Drawing on one of the world's largest participatory budgeting interventions, reaching over 20 million residents, the research examines

whether localized democratic practices can cultivate responsive citizenship or, conversely, reinforce authoritarian resilience.

By assessing behavioural and attitudinal changes six months after the intervention, the study provides causal evidence on how community-level participation influences broader civic engagement, perceptions of governmental performance, and accountability-seeking behaviour. The findings suggest that participatory budgeting

can generate measurable increases in non-budget-related civic actions and demands for improvement from the central government, while simultaneously boosting satisfaction with national policies and local economic conditions.

These results hold important implications for policymakers, development practitioners, and governance reform advocates. They highlight both the opportunities and risks of integrating democratic practices into centralized governance structures, and underscore the need for careful design of participatory institutions to ensure they foster genuine civic empowerment rather than symbolic engagement.

## Study Methodology

This study employed a large-scale field experiment in Chengdu, a megacity in China with over 20 million residents, to evaluate the impact of participatory decision-making in community budgeting. Communities were randomly assigned to either a treatment group, where residents were invited to deliberate and vote on the allocation of local resources, or a control group with no such intervention during the study period. The participatory budgeting process was fully integrated into existing political and administrative structures, implemented without external funding or international aid, ensuring its local regime and political relevance.

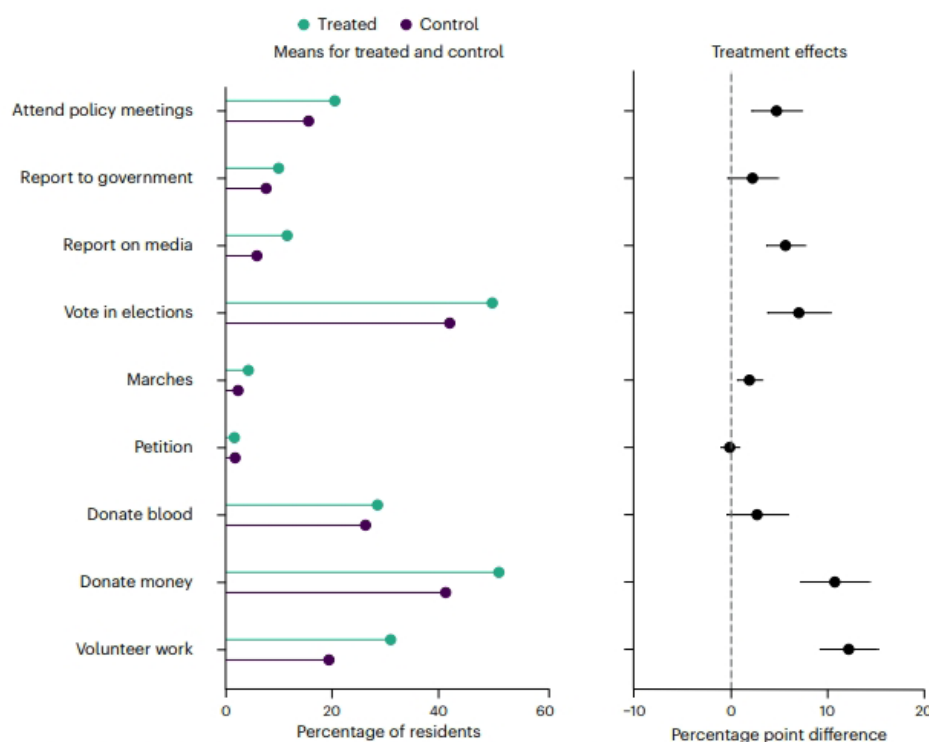
A representative sample of 7,851 residents was surveyed both before and six months after the intervention to capture changes in civic engagement behaviours and attitudes toward government. The analysis applied fixed-effects regression models, controlling for demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and income, to isolate the causal effects of the intervention. This rigorous experimental design enabled a robust assessment of how locally embedded participatory practices influence broader patterns of civic participation and perceptions of governmental accountability.

## Findings and Analysis

### Civic-Engagement Behaviours

Residents in the treatment communities exhibited notable improvements in civic engagement behaviours six months after the intervention. Specifically, they were significantly more likely to attend policy-related meetings, express views through media, vote in neighbourhood committee elections, participate in government-approved marches, donate money or resources, and engage in volunteer work. Smaller but positive changes were also observed in blood donation, while no significant differences emerged for petitioning or directly expressing views to government officials:

These results indicate that the participatory budgeting



**Fig. 1 | The intervention consistently improved civic-engagement behaviours.** Left: covariate-adjusted mean outcomes for sampled residents ( $N = 7,851$ ) in treatment ( $N = 19$ ) and control ( $N = 20$ ) communities. Right: the difference between residents in treatment and control communities, with the dots indicating average treatment effects and error bars indicating 95% CIs.

process not only encouraged direct involvement in local governance but also generated broader civic engagement beyond the budgeting domain, particularly in low-risk, community-oriented activities.

*Need for Improvement from Central and Local Government*

The intervention also influenced citizens' perceptions of the need for governmental improvement. Residents in treatment communities reported a higher demand for improvement from the central government, averaging 1.80 on a 1–4 scale, compared to 1.61 in control communities. This reflects an increased expectation for accountability from higher levels of government. However, there was no significant change in the demand for improvement from local governments, suggesting that while local participatory practices may enhance accountability expectations at the central level, they do not necessarily translate into similar pressures on local authorities.

*General Satisfaction and Voice*

The increased demands for improvement did not correspond to decreased satisfaction. Residents in treatment communities reported significantly higher satisfaction with government policies, averaging 4.91 compared to 4.79 in control communities. They also expressed greater pride in their community, more positive views of local economic conditions, and a stronger belief that the government is responsive to their voices. This suggests that participatory budgeting can enhance citizens' perceptions of their role in governance, fostering a sense of agency and a stronger connection to public decision-making processes.

**Recommendations**

*Expand Participatory Budgeting Initiatives*

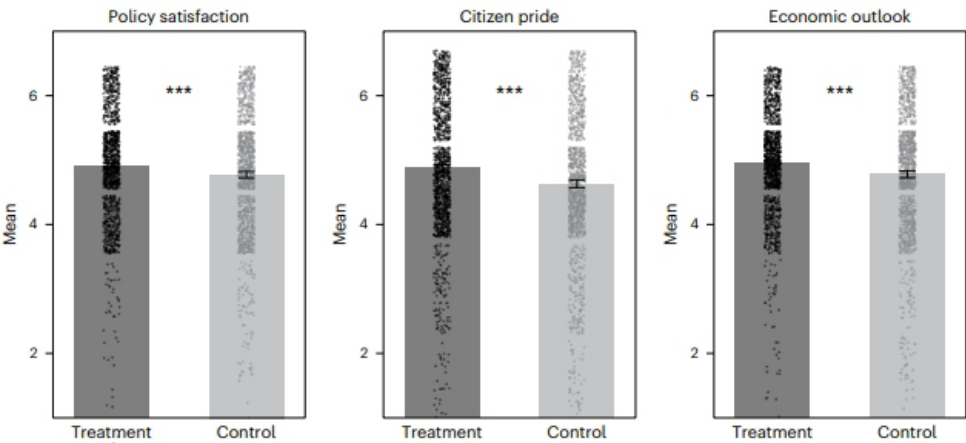
Scaling up participatory budgeting programs can be an effective strategy to strengthen civic engagement and enhance government accountability, particularly in centralized regimes contexts. By giving citizens a direct voice in how local resources are allocated, these initiatives can help narrow the gap between the government and the public, fostering a stronger sense of ownership, responsibility, and trust within communities.

*Tailor Implementation to Local Contexts*

Participatory budgeting should be designed with a nuanced understanding of the local political, social, and cultural environment. This includes engaging community leaders, addressing locally relevant issues, and adapting the process to reflect the unique characteristics of each community. Such customization increases the likelihood of genuine citizen participation and maximizes the program's overall impact.

*Promote Broader Civic Engagement*

Governments should encourage a diverse range of civic activities beyond participatory budgeting, such as volunteerism, community organizing, and open discussions on local policy issues. Providing multiple pathways for participation helps sustain citizen involvement over time, contributing to a more active, informed, and empowered public that is better equipped to advocate for its needs and interests.



**Fig. 3 | General satisfaction.** The charts show the condition means (on a Likert scale from 1 to 7), with 95% CIs, for residents' general satisfaction with the country's policies, pride for being a resident of the city and the perceived

economic condition of the city, comparing sampled residents ( $N = 7,851$ ) in treatment ( $N = 19$ ) and control ( $N = 20$ ) communities. Dots represent raw data and error bars represent 95% CI. \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ , by two-tailed statistical tests.

### Monitor Long-Term Effects

Ongoing research and evaluation are essential to understanding the sustained impacts of participatory decision-making on civic behaviours and attitudes. This requires tracking both short-term and long-term outcomes to assess how these initiatives influence civic culture and democratic engagement over time. Evidence from such evaluations can guide future policy refinements and highlight best practices for deepening citizen participation.

#### Main Reference

Wu, S.J., Mai, K.M., Zhuang, M. et al. A large-scale field experiment on participatory decision-making in China. *Nature Human Behaviour* 8, 2119–2126 (2024).

### Facilitate Open Dialogue

Establishing and maintaining open, accessible channels of communication between citizens and government officials is critical to reinforcing the benefits of participatory budgeting. Mechanisms such as town hall meetings, online forums, and structured feedback systems can ensure that citizens' voices are heard and valued. This not only enhances transparency and responsiveness but also strengthens citizens' satisfaction with governance and their sense of belonging to the community.



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