

The seesaw experience of participatory budgeting: the role of the institutional entrepreneur

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Abstract

Purpose – Participatory budgeting (PB) offers public administrations a promising avenue to rebuild the relationship with citizens by actively involving them in public decision-making processes. However, the path to successful PB institutionalisation involves several challenges. This article examines how key internal actors shape PB across its operative phases.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employed a single-case study approach, integrating document analysis, focus groups and semi-structured interviews to examine the PB experience in Rome and the key internal actors' influence in driving institutional change. Data collection consists of five phases, including document analysis, media reviews, focus groups, interviews with key stakeholders and a follow-up meeting to validate and triangulate the findings.

Findings – A key finding highlights the pivotal role of politicians as institutional entrepreneurs (IEs), leveraging their social and discursive skills to drive institutional change. However, the study also underscores the potential challenges: when political leadership is disrupted by contextual instability, institutional transformation may fail to achieve its intended outcomes.

Originality/value – This research highlights the IEs' role in advancing PB in large urban contexts characterised by political and administrative instability. Their effectiveness relies not only on politicians but also on effective collaboration with public managers, enabling partial institutional change and fostering public value creation.

Keywords Institutional entrepreneurship, Citizens' engagement, Collaborative governance, Participatory budgeting, Local governments

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

In recent decades, public administrations have increasingly adopted collaborative governance models to generate public value through inclusive decision-making (Osborne, 2006). Among these innovations, Participatory Budgeting (PB) has gained international attention for rebuilding trust between citizens and public institutions (Kurkela *et al.*, 2023; Sinervo *et al.*, 2024). Although the concept and objectives of PB are well-established, its implementation

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results vary significantly regarding citizen engagement and institutionalization (Ebdon *et al.*, 2016; Jacquet *et al.*, 2024).

Research indicates that the success of PB initiatives hinges on design choices, contextual factors, and the decisions of internal actors in public administration, such as elected representatives and public managers (Pulkkinen *et al.*, 2024). These include political figures (elected representatives) and public managers who influence the process from both strategic and operational standpoints. In particular, organisational capabilities – such as leadership, professionalism, and the quality of interactions between managers and politicians – have been shown to significantly affect the PB success (Ewens and Van der Voet, 2019; Liao, 2018). For example, politicians are responsible for making key strategic decisions and championing PB; simultaneously, public managers oversee its execution, adjusting activities as needed to align with contextual demands (Manes-Rossi *et al.*, 2023). However, despite growing interest in the governance of participatory processes, few studies have systematically examined how internal dynamics – particularly the roles of political and managerial actors – contribute to the PB institutionalisation by engaging with its actual operational phases (Bartocci *et al.*, 2022; Pulkkinen *et al.*, 2024). In this study, institutionalisation is understood not as a static and formal achievement, but as a process shaped through the concrete enactment of PB's key stages, widely recognised in the literature (Mattei *et al.*, 2022).

Therefore, to address the cited gap, the study focuses on the role of key internal actors across these operative stages, providing an analytical lens through which to examine how internal actors shaped the PB trajectory within the city. This operational focus responds to calls in the literature to move beyond formal frameworks and attend to how PB is enacted in practice, as its institutionalisation hinges not only on legal provisions but also on the capacity to monitor and interpret its concrete variations (Allegretti *et al.*, 2021). The analysis draws on the theoretical framework of institutional entrepreneurship, which identifies characteristics that enable actors to drive institutional change (Battilana, 2006; Battilana *et al.*, 2009).

Using a descriptive and explanatory single-case study with a qualitative approach (Yin, 1984), the research focuses on Rome's 2019 PB experience, highlighting the role of an institutional entrepreneur (IE) who navigated the process within a complex political and administrative context. Data were collected through interviews, focus groups, meeting transcripts, and official documents, focusing on political leaders and public managers who played a central role in steering the process.

The findings emphasize the crucial role of politicians as IEs, who utilize their skills to drive institutional change. However, the study also points out potential challenges: if political leadership is disrupted by contextual instability, the resulting institutional change may not achieve the intended outcomes.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the existing literature on PB and outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on the institutional entrepreneurship perspective. Section 3 details the research methodology employed in the study. Section 4 introduces the Roman case study, followed by an analysis of internal actors in Section 5. Section 6 presents a discussion of the findings, and Section 7 concludes with the study's research contributions and practical implications.

2. Literature review

2.1 Participatory budgeting as a citizens' engagement tool

In recent decades, literature has focused on the role of public administration in creating public value, initially evoked by Moore (1995). Meynhardt (2009) suggests that this creation involves more than just public administration; other actors, including citizens, play a crucial role. Consequently, management approaches like new public governance (Osborne, 2006) emerged, recognising citizens as key participants rather than mere end-users (Almqvist *et al.*, 2013).

PB promotes citizen involvement and strengthens ties between communities and public institutions, fostering inclusiveness and equitable deliberation (Bartocci *et al.*, 2019; Aleksandrov and Mauro, 2023; Sinervo *et al.*, 2024). This process is essential for governments with significant

autonomy and should incorporate financial aspects (Sintomer *et al.*, 2012). Engaging people in various stages is vital, as public deliberation allows ideas to emerge, ultimately leading to constructive debate and their fulfilment. Sintomer *et al.* (2008) identify six PB models:

- (1) *Participatory Democracy* empowers citizens with decision-making authority, promoting social justice thanks to political support.
- (2) *Proximity Democracy* encourages local involvement while elected representatives retain decision-making power, often leading to merely consultative outcomes.
- (3) *Participatory Modernization* enhances public administration efficiency, focusing on legitimacy and involving mainly middle-class participants.
- (4) *Multi-stakeholder Participation* includes various actors in budget discussions, although power imbalances can limit citizen influence.
- (5) *Neo-corporatism* involves organised groups representing societal interests, but often fails to promote real civic independence.
- (6) *Community Development* prioritises local communities in executing projects, fostering autonomy and collaboration.

Although Sintomer *et al.*'s (2008) taxonomy remains influential in PB research, it fails to capture the hybrid, digital nature of newer models that blend traditional approaches with e-participation tools. This highlights the need for a broader framework, as suggested in recent e-PB literature (Mattei *et al.*, 2024; Santolamazza *et al.*, 2024).

Although PB can be institutionalized in various ways, it is possible to identify key stages that structure the process (Mattei *et al.*, 2022):

- (1) **Initiation and Information Dissemination:** This phase focuses on launching the process, defining key topics, and sharing information.
- (2) **Proposals Presentation:** Citizens submit suggestions either individually or through co-design with the administration, fostering open discussion.
- (3) **Evaluation of the proposals:** Proposals are assessed for technical and economic feasibility, often involving technical committees and, in some cases, citizen participation.
- (4) **Voting:** Citizens or the public administration express their preferences on which projects should be implemented.
- (5) **Implementation and Monitoring:** This phase ensures accountability by tracking project progress and addressing any emerging issues in the project's implementation.

Despite PB's global recognition, it often favours symbolic over real empowerment, leaving citizens feeling excluded (Mattei *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the success of PB is not guaranteed and can vary based on cultural, environmental, and individual factors (Murray Svidroňová *et al.*, 2024).

2.2 The role of internal actors in participatory budgeting

Among the factors that affect PB's success, the behaviour and motivations of key internal actors, particularly politicians and public managers – who can influence policy decisions, institutional reforms, and the practical implementation of innovative processes (Manes-Rossi *et al.*, 2023) – play a significant role.

Sharing governance with citizens initially depends on the willingness of politicians (Sønderskov, 2019; Murray Svidroňová *et al.*, 2024), as they are often responsible for framing policy agendas, building political coalitions, and legitimising change (Kingdon, 2002). However, how this process unfolds can vary significantly depending on individual political actors and their strategic orientations.

Politicians' openness and commitment strongly influence citizen engagement (Ebdon and Franklin, 2006), while personalism can undermine PB's democratic goals (Aleksandrov *et al.*, 2018). In some cases, personal agendas lead to symbolic or manipulative participation, thereby reinforcing power imbalances rather than promoting inclusive governance (Kuruppu *et al.*, 2016).

Public managers also play a crucial role in the institutionalisation of PB, translating strategic visions into procedures that ensure legal compliance, technical feasibility, and continuity beyond political cycles (Manes-Rossi *et al.*, 2023).

Effective collaboration between public managers and political actors is essential to the success of participatory initiatives; however, their professional interests and incentives may not always align, potentially affecting the implementation of PB in practice.

In contexts lacking established participatory practices, strong political leadership may be viewed as patronage or interference (Lopes and Vieira, 2023; Staronova *et al.*, 2025). However, politicians often rely on public managers for technical expertise and navigating governance systems (Broccardo *et al.*, 2019), emphasizing the need for coordination and trust. This interdependence relates to organisational capabilities – such as leadership style and political-managerial collaboration – critical for successful participatory budgeting (Ewens and Van der Voet, 2019; Liao, 2018). Effective collaboration ensures that political vision aligns with managerial feasibility; poor alignment can lead to superficial or ineffective outcomes.

Despite growing recognition, little research has examined how internal actors initiate, shape, and sustain PB (Bartocci *et al.*, 2022). Their strategic roles, interdependencies, and agency remain underexplored, a gap this study seeks to address.

2.3 *The institutional entrepreneurship lens in fostering citizens' engagement in participatory budgeting*

As noted in Section 2.2, understanding the institutionalisation of governance-sharing practices, such as PB, requires close attention to internal actors, even in contexts shaped by similar societal values (DiMaggio, 1988). Local reforms have often been explained through individual agencies at the micro level (Xing *et al.*, 2018), especially when external pressures are vague and standardization is lacking (Barrutia and Echebarria, 2012). In such cases, internal actors respond in diverse ways, often introducing innovation (Jensen and Fersch, 2019; Hyvönen *et al.*, 2012). While agency in institutional change has been studied (DiMaggio, 1988), few works connect strategic intent with actual implementation (Bakir *et al.*, 2021).

To address this gap, institutional entrepreneurship provides a valuable lens for understanding how internal actors drive PB. IEs are change agents who create or reshape institutions and build shared rationales (DiMaggio, 1988; Battilana, 2006; Bakir *et al.*, 2021). Their traits are key to overcoming challenges and seizing opportunities in PB processes:

- (1) IEs use their social position to influence other actors, shaping perceptions and mobilising support for change (Maguire *et al.*, 2004; Hardy and Maguire, 2008; Vakulenko, 2022).
- (2) IEs possess strong social skills, enabling them to motivate cooperation and create a shared understanding of the problems and the necessity of change through continuous discursive interactions (Fligstein, 1997; Hardy and Maguire, 2017; Argento *et al.*, 2018).
- (3) They manage to create supportive relationships, calling the right people to action or constructing new relationships to expand their support network (Barrutia and Echebarria, 2012; Albu *et al.*, 2014; Vakulenko, 2022). These actors can strategically motivate others to perform the necessary changes (Qureshi *et al.*, 2016).
- (4) IEs possess a strong sense of reflexivity and personal preferences involving internal dialogue and critical self-awareness. They evaluate existing norms and envision changes that challenge entrenched institutional frameworks (Battilana, 2006; Mutch, 2007; Albu *et al.*, 2014; Vakulenko, 2022).

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- (5) IEs often bring extensive professional and educational experience and expertise in their field, equipping them with the knowledge needed to challenge institutional structures and propose viable alternatives (Mutch, 2007; Argento *et al.*, 2018).

In the context of PB, the role of IEs can often be attributed to politicians and public managers, who leverage their unique skills to drive the process.

Thus, these insights enable the development of a framework analysing how IE characteristics impact PB phases, as shown in Table 1.

The framework emphasises how IE characteristics, such as social position, interpersonal skills, professional experience, and educational background, can affect the successful institutionalisation of PB. Each PB stage is shaped by IEs' abilities to mobilise resources, build support networks, and foster active citizen involvement.

However, IEs may also fail, mainly due to internal resistance from politicians and managers (Major *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, IE dominance can overshadow other participants, leading to symbolic changes that focus on the IE's interests (e.g. Khan *et al.*, 2007).

3. Research design

This study employs a single case study approach, a valuable tool for examining contemporary phenomena in their real-life context (Yin, 1984). This method, previously utilised in studies exploring the drivers behind policy implementation from an institutional entrepreneurship perspective (Argento *et al.*, 2018; Jensen and Fersch, 2019; Ferry *et al.*, 2019), offers both descriptive and explanatory analyses (Scapens, 2004). This case aims for analytical generalisation by applying and refining theoretical propositions on institutional entrepreneurship within a real-life governance context rather than statistical generalisation to a population (Yin, 1984). Specifically, the authors detail the PB process and aim to elucidate the role of internal actors in promoting institutional change.

The authors chose to investigate the PB institutionalisation in Rome not only due to the complexity of its governmental and administrative organization – marked by a multilayered structure and the challenges typical of a large metropolitan city – but also because it represents a particularly illustrative case of the tensions and opportunities involved in institutionalising participatory governance in major urban centres.

Moreover, the period under analysis is especially relevant, as it coincides with the rise of a political movement that gained traction not only in Rome but in several other cities in recent years. This movement promoted new forms of citizen involvement, with a particular emphasis on digital tools and platforms designed to enhance transparency, accountability, and civic participation.

Rome's case, therefore, provides a valuable lens through which to examine how political leadership, administrative capacity, and technological innovation intersect within a fragmented institutional context. These dynamics are not unique to Rome but resonate with broader patterns observed in metropolitan governance worldwide, making the case both locally grounded and globally relevant.

The data collection followed these five phases:

- (1) Document analysis to provide an overview of the PB process;
- (2) Supplementary data collection from newspapers and social media to understand the broader context;
- (3) First focus group to explore the Roman PB experiences and understand the roles and interactions of internal actors;
- (4) Semi-structured interviews with key individuals;
- (5) Second focus group (follow-up meeting) to validate the findings and gain additional perspectives.

Table 1. Theoretical framework regarding IEs characteristics' impact on PB phase

	Initiation and Information Dissemination (Aleksandrov <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Santolamazza <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	Proposals Presentation (Sintomer <i>et al.</i> , 2012; Mattei <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Mattei <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	Evaluation of the proposals (Aleksandrov <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Santolamazza <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	Voting (Sintomer <i>et al.</i> , 2012; Ebdon <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Mattei <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	Monitoring and Implementation (Sintomer <i>et al.</i> , 2012; Aleksandrov <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Mattei <i>et al.</i> , 2022)
Social Position (Maguire <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Hardy and Maguire, 2008; Vakulenko, 2022)	Leverages their influence to initiate and shape PB processes by mobilising key stakeholders and aligning them with the project's goals	Uses authority to encourage active proposal submissions and creates a collaborative environment	Ensures transparency by engaging trusted experts or citizens in evaluation and aligning evaluations with strategic goals	Influences decision-makers to promote transparency in voting processes and build trust in outcomes	Monitors project execution by leveraging positional authority to ensure accountability and timely updates
High Social Skills (Fligstein, 1997; Hardy and Maguire, 2017; Argento <i>et al.</i> , 2018)	Engages citizens and administration in open dialogue to build trust and understanding of PB's goals	Facilitates brainstorming and discussions, fostering innovation and participation through interactive sessions	Creates consensus among evaluators, resolving conflicts and ensuring participatory involvement	Encourages transparent communication of voting results, fostering acceptance of outcomes among citizens	Engages citizens and administration in periodic reviews, maintaining transparency and demonstrating commitment to agreed projects
Relationships (Barrutia and Echebarria, 2012; Albu <i>et al.</i> , 2014; Qureshi <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Vakulenko, 2022)	Builds networks with diverse stakeholders to foster collective ownership and enthusiasm for PB initiatives	Collaborates with both citizens and administration to ensure effective proposal development	Coordinates relationships between technical committees and citizens to ensure balanced evaluations	Fosters inclusivity by involving various groups in the voting process, strengthening legitimacy	Strengthens relationships by involving key stakeholders in regular project updates, promoting sustained trust and collaboration
Reflexivity and personal preferences (Battilana, 2006; Mutch, 2007; Albu <i>et al.</i> , 2014; Vakulenko, 2022)	Tailors PB's structure to reflect inclusive decision-making preferences, setting the stage for citizen engagement	Advocates for participatory co-design processes that align with their values of inclusivity and transparency	Prioritises evaluation processes that are consistent with their preference for equity and shared decision-making	Supports voting mechanisms that resonate with participatory governance, ensuring alignment with citizens' values	Implements feedback loops that reflect preferences for accountability and citizen empowerment

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

	Initiation and Information Dissemination (Aleksandrov <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Santolamazza <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	Proposals Presentation (Sintomer <i>et al.</i> , 2012; Mattei <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Mattei <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	Evaluation of the proposals (Aleksandrov <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Santolamazza <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	Voting (Sintomer <i>et al.</i> , 2012; Ebdon <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Mattei <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	Monitoring and Implementation (Sintomer <i>et al.</i> , 2012; Aleksandrov <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Mattei <i>et al.</i> , 2022)
Work Experience (Mutch, 2007; Argento <i>et al.</i> , 2018)	Applies prior expertise to design and initiate PB processes effectively, addressing known challenges	Provides guidance on proposal structures based on insights from similar projects	Uses technical knowledge to refine evaluation methodologies, ensuring feasibility and practicality	Leverages experience in governance to navigate challenges in final decision-making processes	Applies operational expertise to address implementation challenges, ensuring projects meet expectations
Educational Background (Mutch, 2007; Argento <i>et al.</i> , 2018)	Utilises academic insights to develop PB's framework, drawing from best practices and theoretical foundations	Shares knowledge to educate participants on proposal design, increasing submission quality	Informs evaluators with frameworks that enhance the validity and reliability of proposal assessments	Educates stakeholders on the implications of voting outcomes, fostering informed decisions	Brings academic rigor to monitoring frameworks, ensuring evaluations are methodical and insightful

Source(s): Created by the authors

A document analysis of PB-related materials, including city council judgements and other documents accessible online from the official Rome website, was initially performed to provide an overview of the PB process, which was needed to define the context within which to conduct the research (Bowen, 2009). The analysis helped define the formal structure and key stages of Rome's PB experience, as outlined in paragraph 2.1. (Bowen, 2009).

Additionally, the analysis of supplementary sources – including articles from major Italian newspapers (e.g. La Repubblica) and public social media posts – proved instrumental in understanding the political context during the final phase of the PB process, particularly concerning proposal implementation. These materials were identified through targeted keyword searches on prominent Italian news outlets and open social media platforms, focusing on verifiable episodes of political tension among the institutional actors involved in the initiative. This helped reveal internal political instability that could affect PB continuity (Du *et al.*, 2025).

The reviewed documents are summarised in Table 2.

Subsequently, a focus group was held with members of the Participation, Communication, and Equal Opportunities (PCEO) Department, which is responsible for promoting citizen engagement in line with political directives. The session explored internal roles and interactions, covering early steps like statutory reform and the digital agenda, as well as key stages of the PB process. Semi-structured interviews (Runeson and Höst, 2009) followed, targeting individuals identified as key actors, who were:

- (1) The Head of the PCEO Department, who played a dual role, serving as both the head of the Participation Department and the head of the Technological Innovation Department, and was a crucial actor in the implementation of PB in Rome. The PCEO Department was responsible for fostering citizen engagement, coordinating

Table 2. Summary of documents

Documents	Topic	Date of observation
Regulation of the Participatory Budget of Roma Capitale – Deliberation of the City Council 31/2019	General PB rules	2024–07–15
Rules for the 2019 Participatory Budget of Roma Capitale – Deliberation of the City Council 103/2019	Specific rules for 2019 PB	2024–07–15
Documento della partecipazione	Report on the participatory budgeting experience	2024–07–17
Programmatic Guidelines 2016–2021 for the Government of Roma Capitale	Mayor Programmatic Guidelines	2024–07–18
Digital Agenda of Roma Capitale 2017–2021	Programmatic Guidelines about Digitalisation in Rome	2024–07–18
Roma Capitale Statute	Art. 8-bis regarding participatory budgeting	2024–07–18
Agenda No. 168 of 16th December 2019 – attached to proposed resolution No. 152/2019	Agenda report of the City Council – Implementation of the websites for the monitoring	2024–07–17
Roma “Partecipa’ platform	The monitoring platform	2024–07–17
Multi-year Budget 2020–2022	Budget for the 2020–2022 period	2024–07–15
Guidelines of the participatory process related to the “Plan of Urban planning and redevelopment of the areas of “Piazza dei Navigatori and Viale Giustiniano Imperatore’ – Deliberation of the City Council 12/2018	Deliberation about the PB “training experience’ in 2018	2024–07–16
Rome, 4 non-agreeing councillors break with M5S. The Mayor without majority. A councillor: “She cares more about Facebook likes”	Newspaper article on disagreements in the M5S	2024–07–16

Source(s): Created by the authors

participatory initiatives, and ensuring the integration of these processes within the city’s broader governance framework.

- (2) The Chairman of the Political Commission, comprising city councillors, who was responsible for proposing statutory reforms. The Commission’s primary role was to draft and advocate for legislative changes that aligned with the principles of participatory governance.

Individuals were selected for interviews based on their key roles in the PB process, as identified by the initial focus group. Conducted in 2020, after the voting phase and at the beginning of implementation, the interviews, guided by IE characteristics (Table 1), explored participants’ roles, experiences, networks, and affiliations (Horton *et al.*, 2004). Internal political disagreements emerged during data analysis and were noted for their potential impact on PB implementation. Following the November 3, 2021, municipal election, a shift in political leadership led to the creation of a new “Decentralisation, Territorial Services” department within the “Participation” directorate.

To gain further insight into the final PB phase, a public follow-up meeting organised by the new city administration was held in July 2022. Two authors attended as non-participant observers to gather contextual data on how the 2019 PB outcomes were presented and discussed. Representatives from the restructured PCEO (“Participation” Directorate) reported on project progress, and institutional actors engaged in dialogue with citizens. The session also

allowed for validation of research findings through triangulation with new stakeholder perspectives, including previously unconsulted external actors.

A comprehensive overview of the first focus group, the semi-structured interviews, and the follow-up meeting can be found in [Table 3](#).

Table 3. Details of the Focus Group and Semi-Structured Interviews (February–April 2020) and of the follow-up meeting (July 2022)

Data collection method	Participants	Duration	Topics/Question
Focus group	Department of Participation, Communication and Equal Opportunities members	1 h 30 m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PB path: From the beginning to the final implementation • Digital Agenda: how PB has been integrated into digitalisation • Key actors of PB implementation
Semi-structured interviews	Head of the Department PCEO	1 h 02 m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewee's role and responsibilities • Interviewee's role during the PB design and implementation • Task and responsibilities during the process • Personal interests • Personal preferences in participatory budgeting • Educational background • Previous work experience • Personal network • Opinion on PB design and implementation (Pro, cons, main challenges for the future)
	Chairman of the Commission	56 m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewee's role and responsibilities • Interviewee's role during the PB design and implementation • Task and responsibilities during the process • Personal interests and preferences in participatory practices • Educational background • Previous work experience
	Chairman of the Commission	42 m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal network • Relationship between the interviewee and other actors involved in PB • Opinion on PB design and implementation (Pro, cons, main challenges for the future)
Public Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two members of the previous PCEO, now transformed into the Participation Directorate • New political party delegates, among whom the Deputy Mayor for Participation, opened dialogue and discussion with citizens • Citizens involved in the PB in 2019 	1 h 45 m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability for the status of the projects (3 years after approval) • Citizens' feedback, comments and reactions to the process's output • Politicians' answers and promises for the realisation of missing works • Viewpoints of new politicians about how PB should be developed in the future

Source(s): Created by the authors

Recordings and transcripts from focus groups and interviews were thematically analysed using IE characteristics from [Table 1](#) to ensure comprehensive data triangulation ([Flick, 2004](#)). The analysis examined how the experiences, roles, networks, and affiliations of key actors influenced the initiation, development, and support of institutional change. This framework helped map individual agency and strategy across PB phases, assessing each actor's impact on institutionalisation.

Ethical standards were upheld, with participants informed of the study's purpose and data anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

4. Case study context and PB experience

Rome's governance comprises a city council for policymaking and an executive body led by the mayor for implementation (Articles 15–25 of the Roman Statute). The city is divided into 15 autonomous districts (Article 26). The Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) party, which champions citizen participation and E-governance, won the 2016 local elections. Their programmatic guidelines (2016–2021) focused on enhancing citizen satisfaction and improving administrative efficiency. To foster participation, the “Partecipa Area” was introduced on Rome's website. Efforts from 2017 to 2018 aimed to expedite digitalization and engage citizens in public life, culminating in the launch of the Roma Capitale website. This platform was seen as “*a precondition for citizens' participation and active collaboration*” ([Digital Agenda, 2017](#)).

Efforts to enhance civic engagement led to legislative reforms that incorporated digital tools and technologies. The Commission refined these reforms, starting with a new statute that included PB, supported by digital mediums, “*to ensure the broadest popular involvement and the highest level of direct democracy and transparency*” (Roman Statute, art. 8-bis). Subsequently, the PB regulation was introduced on April 4, 2019 (Resolution 31/2019). This regulation was previously tested in a 2018 trial in Rome's VIII District (Deliberation of the City Council 12/2018). The PB regulation detailed the steps to enhance citizen engagement, particularly in the project proposal and voting stages.

The first official PB edition in Rome took place in 2019. The right to present ideas and proposals was given to residents, city users, and district committees, hence, the main target groups. EUR 20 million was allocated, with a focus on “urban décor”, a theme selected by the city council (Rules of the 2019 PB). This was the largest allocation for PB in Italy, representing 0.3% of the Roma Capitale budget, amounting to 6,550,913,812 euros in 2020 (Multi-year Budget, 2020–2022).

The process employed a combination of online and in-person methods: information was shared digitally and via city-wide stands. Citizens submitted proposals either online or through co-design sessions in district focus groups, while the evaluation process was carried out solely by technicians. Voting took place online, with in-person assistance available, and citizens could monitor project progress via the website, although they did not have direct involvement in the monitoring phase.

Details of each PB step are included in [Table 4](#) ([Santolamazza et al., 2024](#)).

Of the 1,521 submitted proposals, only 111 reached the final voting phase after consolidating similar projects and assessing their feasibility in the evaluation phase. In total, 46,204 people participated in at least one phase, such as online proposal submission or voting, while 16,993 participants took part in the final voting round. Ultimately, 65 projects were selected for the 2020–2022 budget (Documento della Partecipazione – Final report). Citizens could track each project's progress through continuous updates on the platform, with dedicated pages for “*progressive monitoring by citizens of the execution of works and interventions to be carried out.*” (Agenda No. 168 of December 16, 2019 – attached to proposed resolution No. 152/2019). However, upon reviewing the PB regulation, it became clear that the monitoring phase lacked proper structure. This deficiency resulted in a systemic absence of citizen engagement and the necessary technological tools, as Article 14 did not explicitly address active citizen participation.

Table 4. PB phases in Rome

PB phases	Description	Timeline
Initiation and information dissemination	The process was initiated through political sponsorship, as evidenced by the guidelines and strategic plans. The regulation was the result of collaboration between politicians and managers and was piloted in one of Rome's districts Information is primarily disseminated through online channels, including the PB official websites, social networks, mass media, and personalised emails Additionally, in-person methods such as city-wide information stands are used. The intervention area, which refers to the PB topic, is determined by the administration	2017–2019 (internal information) From 3 June 2019: Information to citizens
Proposals Presentation	The presentation of the proposals can be analysed by separating the digital and in-person processes Digital process: Citizens can submit their proposals and express support for other projects through a 'like' mechanism. They are not permitted to provide suggestions on existing proposals In-person process: Citizens have the opportunity to join focus groups, organised by the districts, to design the projects to be proposed collaboratively	From 10 June to 21 July 2019
Proposal Evaluation	Technicians evaluate proposals through offline meetings, and the outcomes are published on the website. Citizens do not participate in this evaluation process	7 August to 4 October 2019
Final Voting	Voting is conducted entirely online via the website, but support is available at in-person assistance points Eligible voters include residents and city users aged sixteen and above, where anonymity is guaranteed The projects are selected using the 'rank and select' method	12 October to 21 October 2019
Monitoring and implementation	Citizens can monitor the progress of the projects step by step via the website. The results are announced online and accompanied by a summary document During this phase, citizens do not have an active role, as they are not given the opportunity to comment, discuss, or request additional information	Beginning 2020–still in process

Source(s): Created by the authors

Meanwhile, Rome's political scene was marked by instability, with the M5S-led administration facing internal conflicts and shifting alliances that led to the collapse of its majority shortly before the 2021 elections. This unpredictability hindered policy continuity and the full implementation of participatory reforms, such as PB. Consequently, a left-wing party won the 2021 elections and aimed to refine the original strategies, focusing primarily on addressing gaps in the previous PB regulation.

5. Findings on the key actors' role in the PB institutionalisation

The interviews revealed the key roles of major actors throughout the PB process, with significant efforts focused on Initiation, Information Dissemination, Proposal Presentation, Evaluation of the proposals, and Voting to ensure administrative prioritisation and fairness. Implementing PB was complex, requiring collaboration, with Rome's mayor and M5S playing a vital role in launching the initiative and promoting citizen engagement. As the Head of the

PCEO Department stated, “*With the new mayor, E-governance and Participatory Governance have become fundamental pillars. It was not just a political process but a team effort that made all the instruments for citizen participation effective.*”

A key figure identified by the staff was the Chairman of the Commission, who was responsible for statutory reform. The Chairman’s role was pivotal in leading the PB initiatives, transforming political strategies, defined by M5S, into concrete proposals and decisions, as emphasised by the administrative staff during the first focus group. A member of the PCEO Department noted: “*The political party’s will was the impetus for this path (i.e. the PB introduction). In particular, the Chairman of the Commission embraced this initiative as a personal conviction. His determination and straightforwardness enabled the process’s implementation despite tight deadlines. Together with him, we formed a real ‘team’ aimed at achieving the goal.*”

The Chairman was seen as actively steering each of the PB’s initial phases, working to build consensus around his vision, aligning with Kingdon’s (2002) theory on agenda-setting. During the initiation phase, the Chairman’s ability to frame PB as a priority for the administration helped ensure strategic alignment and mobilisation. His background and ideological alignment with the M5S made him a suitable candidate for this role. In addition, his expertise in digital platforms – especially crowdsourced law-making – enabled him to lead reforms and integrate digital participation tools into the statute. As he remarked, “*my personal convictions have played an essential role in my dedication to implementing this process. These have driven me to independently study participatory budgeting in other cities, such as Milan, Paris, and Barcelona*”. This in-depth knowledge shaped the approach to soliciting and managing proposals, ensuring that digital tools played a central role in both the proposal submission and feedback processes. Additionally, several best practices were derived from these prior experiences.

His previous experience in drafting legal norms equipped him to rewrite the statute and the PB regulation. The inclusion of this process in the statute marked an innovation in Rome’s governance, introducing PB into the traditionally top-down governance structure of local governments. The capacity to draft the regulation influenced all phases of the process except the final one, which lacked detailed operational planning.

The administrative staff consistently recognised their vital role throughout the PB stages. Beyond his institutional responsibilities, described by a PCEO Department member as “*translating the emerging participatory process into legislation*”, the Chairman was also able to engage all department members. Public managers also played a crucial role in PB implementation, making regulations effective and establishing the necessary digital infrastructure. The Chairman’s coordination with the PCEO Head, responsible for the Digital Agenda, was vital for spreading the initiative early and throughout the process. They ensured the dissemination of wide-ranging information via digital platforms, social media, and in-person channels, thereby building a strong foundation for citizen engagement. Digital tools also supported Evaluation and Voting. Following M5S’s communication style, civil servants promoted broad awareness through official websites, district ads, and social media.

The Chairman’s strong networking skills set him apart from the typical M5S reluctance to engage with other political forces. He fostered collaboration by involving experts and inviting diverse political factions to Commission meetings, promoting openness and objectivity. His communication skills and expertise were crucial in building consensus during the Initiation and Information Dissemination phases.

As confirmed by interviewees, interactions between administrative staff and politicians were frequent, particularly initially, fostering collaborative decision-making. The Chairman’s leadership was crucial in aligning staff with his vision. Efforts to encourage districts to engage more actively through co-designed proposals faced challenges due to tight submission timelines. His experience and educational background were key in advocating for reform and citizen engagement in PB. Despite achieving significant outcomes in a challenging context, his focus on PB lessened as internal political disagreements within the M5S arose (paraphrase from his May 11, 2021, Facebook post).

The public meeting revealed that this shift impacted the process's success, as the administration no longer prioritised full PB implementation. This lack of focus also affected citizen engagement, as highlighted by a citizen during the meeting: "*I found out today (ed: during the public meeting two years since the vote) that the project I proposed, which won, has been heavily defunded*".

This internal political dynamic led to reduced citizen empowerment, with many people feeling abandoned in the latter stages of the process, a common issue noted in other experiences (Santolamazza *et al.*, 2024).

People view the PB experience as a significant institutional shift in an area that had previously been unsuccessful. The strength of PB lies in its flexible regulatory framework, described by the Chairman of the Commission as "*rigid in terms of the principles set out in the statute, semi-rigid in terms of its implementation regulations, and flexible in terms of the subjects that can be decided collectively, thus making it attractive to several political forces and detaching it from the logic of the proposing party*". The follow-up meeting highlighted some shortcomings, particularly in citizen involvement during the final stages of the process (Evaluation of the proposals and Monitoring and Implementation), where the lack of communication was perceived as a "*deafening silence*" (a citizen).

6. Discussion

Previous studies note that policy introduction does not guarantee effective implementation (Bakir *et al.*, 2021), a gap evident in Rome's PB case. While formally adopted, PB's impact varied and was heavily influenced by individual agencies – especially the Decentralisation Commission Chairman, who was central throughout all PB phases (see Table 5).

During *Initiation and Information Dissemination*, the Chairman's leadership was key to launching PB, supported by the city's digital transition and M5S's political commitment. His background in digital governance and belief in participatory democracy tailored the process to Rome. Utilising his legal expertise, he collaborated with staff to develop innovative and practical PB regulations. His networking skills engaged experts and fostered cross-party consensus (Albu *et al.*, 2014; Hardy and Maguire, 2017), establishing a structured, digitally supported approach to citizen participation (Rodriguez Müller *et al.*, 2025). His actions were also enabled by a favourable institutional climate: the city's broader digital transition agenda, promoted by the PCEO department, and the M5S's commitment to citizen participation.

Since the *Proposals Presentation*, the Chairman has clearly supported participatory principles through a dual approach: digital platforms for submitting ideas and in-person focus groups for collaboration. His leadership was key in creating user-friendly platforms, fostering inclusivity and transparency. However, the initiative faced challenges due to limited time and resources, underscoring the difficulties in implementing a participatory agenda in a complex governance environment.

In the *Evaluation of the proposals*, the Chairman's experience in drafting legal norms had a minor influence on creating clear and transparent evaluation criteria. This helped ensure that assessments of technical and economic feasibility were comprehensive. The administrative staff played a crucial role in applying these criteria; however, the limited citizens' involvement highlighted the need for more direct public engagement (Mattei *et al.*, 2022).

Considering the *Voting* phase, digital platforms for voting were central to the PB process, a choice that aligned with the Chairman's belief and background in e-governance as a tool for broadening citizen participation. He coordinated with public managers to ensure accessibility and transparency during this phase.

The *Monitoring and Implementation* phases revealed significant obstacles due to internal political disagreements within the M5S party, leading to diminished focus on PB. Although the regulatory framework offered a basic foundation, insufficient monitoring and transparency eroded trust and underscored the challenges of sustaining long-term commitment in complex governance (Bartocci *et al.*, 2022).

Table 5. Key Actor's Characteristics and their impact in the PB stages in the case of Rome

	Initiation and Information Dissemination	Proposals Presentation	Evaluation of the proposals	Voting	Monitoring and Implementation
Social Position	Leveraging his role as Chairman of the Commission devoted to statutory reform made him able to permanently modify the principles of Roman governance, aligning them with New public governance priorities	As one of the main writers of PB regulation, he helps to introduce the double way of making proposals (digital and in-person mechanisms) to enhance proposal submission and collaboration	As one of the main writers of the PB regulation, he helps to identify all the participants of the evaluation	As one of the main writers of the PB regulation, he promoted digital voting mechanisms as a tool to ensure broad participation and transparency in decision-making	As one of the main writers of the PB regulation, he defined a minimum level of accountability
High Social Skills	Built consensus within the administration, emphasising PB as a priority and creating a collaborative environment	Ensured communication between the PCEO department and districts to facilitate proposal submission	There is no direct impact on this phase	Coordinated efforts to make voting accessible and ensured the process aligned with citizens' expectations for transparency and fairness	There is no direct impact on this phase
Relationships	Worked closely with administrative staff and external experts to initiate PB, aligning it with broader governance goals	Fostered collaboration with district-level actors to promote co-designed proposals and active participation. However, this part has been neglected in practice	There is no direct impact on this phase	Maintained relationships with administrative staff to support citizens during the voting phase, ensuring clarity in online and in-person assistance	There is no direct impact on this phase
Reflexivity and personal preferences	Demonstrated a strong personal commitment to PB, aligning it with his ideological convictions in participatory governance	Belief in participatory governance and inclusivity drove efforts to make the proposal process accessible and equitable	There is no direct impact on this phase	Valued digital tools are crucial in expanding participation and ensuring equity in citizen engagement	There is no direct impact on this phase

(continued)

Table 5. Continued

	Initiation and Information Dissemination	Proposals Presentation	Evaluation of the proposals	Voting	Monitoring and Implementation
Work Experience	Experience in drafting norms enabled him to shape PB regulation and integrate it into the city's statutory framework	Leveraged expertise in co-design and administrative collaboration to operationalise the proposal phase effectively	There is no direct impact on this phase	Oversaw the alignment of voting procedures with administrative capacities, ensuring inclusivity and equity in decision-making	There is no direct impact on this phase
Educational Background	Extensive studies on digital governance and PB models in other cities helped frame the initiative effectively	He studied participatory frameworks and international PB practices to design innovative solutions for proposal submissions	Familiarity with governance frameworks helped codify evaluation standards into the PB process	Knowledge of digital participation models guided the integration of voting mechanisms into the PB framework	There is no direct impact on this phase

Source(s): Created by the authors

As Table 5 illustrates, the Chairman's leadership was crucial in the early stages of the PB process, turning abstract political commitment into a structured participatory initiative through consensus-building, stakeholder engagement, and administrative coordination. However, later challenges underscore a key insight: strong individual leadership alone is insufficient without sustained, coordinated political support throughout the policy cycle.

Our findings align with previous research (Sønderskov, 2019), which underscores the central role of political actors in shaping the PB initiatives' trajectory. With his leadership, he also introduced reforms such as digital innovation and fostered a collaborative administrative culture, creating a favourable environment for experimentation. However, this personalisation of the PB initiative exposed its structural fragility: the dependence on individual political leadership to drive institutional change.

In addition, Rome's experience underscores the significant dependence of institutional entrepreneurship on the political context (Du *et al.*, 2025). Administrative instability and shifting political alliances hindered the capacity to sustain participatory innovation, the process generated intangible capital in the form of participatory culture and institutional learning. Therefore, the Roman case offers insights for other large cities seeking to institutionalise PB, because this case shows that visionary leadership alone is necessary, but not sufficient. In fact, our case demonstrates that it is tough for a process, even if well designed, to be successful without a stable political alignment and sustained IE commitment. This serves as an example for other cities pursuing participatory innovation, highlighting the value of political actors who embody the characteristics of IEs. At the same time, it is essential to recognise that such political leadership must be supported by a combination of exogenous and endogenous enabling factors.

7. Conclusions

The increasing focus in the literature on developing processes that engage citizens in public management reflects the effort to rebuild relationships with them, facilitating shared and

sustainable change (Osborne, 2006). This engagement leads to more objective, critical, representative, and legitimate decision-making, ultimately creating public value (Meynhardt, 2009).

This study contributes to this growing body of literature by exploring how internal actors, viewed through the lens of institutional entrepreneurship, shape the PB institutionalisation in Rome.

Our findings confirm the key role of political leadership – especially the Chairman of the Decentralisation Commission – in guiding PB. His legal expertise, digital governance experience, and commitment to participatory democracy bridged political ambition and administrative action (Bakir *et al.*, 2021).

Nevertheless, significant challenges emerged during implementation and monitoring. Internal disagreements within the M5S majority led to a decline in political sponsorship, weakening the institutional focus on PB. These dynamics highlight the need for sustained political commitment and cross-actor alignment throughout the process. Democratic reform cannot rely solely on individual initiative – however influential – but requires a stable and supportive institutional environment, which has been lacking in Rome. Indeed, this case study demonstrates that for a radical change to occur, there must be a consensus among all involved actors (Broccardo *et al.*, 2019). The Roman case underscores that the IE's social skills and leadership were fundamental to achieving this consensus and advancing the process. At the same time, the institutional environment – characterised by managerial professionalism and early collaboration – provided enabling conditions for participatory practices to initially take root, even though they later faltered due to political disengagement. This case also suggests that IE, while at times resembling patterns of patronage, can nonetheless serve as a necessary catalyst for innovation in contexts where participatory practices are not yet fully institutionalised.

Despite the challenges, this experience marked the beginning of a new chapter in citizen participation in the city, which continues to thrive even under a new political leadership.

The main theoretical contribution lies in highlighting the internal actors' roles in PB, a topic often overlooked (Bartocci *et al.*, 2022). In doing so, it offers a new understanding of PB institutionalisation, suggesting a middle ground of fluctuating outcomes, unlike other studies focusing solely on IE success (Argento *et al.*, 2018) or failure (Major *et al.*, 2018). This variation depends on how much the IE focuses on driving change and maintaining ongoing citizen dialogue. In Rome, the IE's role evolved during PB's institutionalisation, resulting in partial success: while participatory institutions like PB have gained more recognition and are actively discussed and utilised, the process has also encountered shortcomings that are being addressed by the new political leadership.

Therefore, this study illustrates how reform outcomes can fluctuate due to contextual fragility and the uneven influence of internal actors. Rather than portraying PB as either a clear success (Argento *et al.*, 2018) or outright failure (Major *et al.*, 2018), the Roman case reflects a moderate change in which a radical institutional innovation was initiated but not fully consolidated. This “in-between” outcome resonates with Modell's (2022) view of institutional change as moderate, partial, contingent, and shaped by actor strategies and unstable environments. Even if IEs alone cannot ensure lasting transformation in politically fragile contexts, our findings show they can still trigger significant, though incomplete, reforms that influence future reforms. The Roman experience offers a valuable example for other large cities, demonstrating how even unfinished reforms can lay the groundwork for participatory governance.

From a practical perspective, these findings offer valuable insights for politicians, managers, and reformers. The IE's leadership played a key role in promoting participatory thinking, which, as Ebdon and Franklin (2006) note, has to have a lasting impact, driven by the IE's focus and strategy. However, without the IE's skill in channelling resources and maintaining momentum, participatory processes risk underperformance, potentially reverting to a top-down approach that marginalises citizens and silences their voices.

This study also highlights the crucial role of consensus-building among key actors in the successful PB institutionalisation, especially in participatory democracy models integrated with e-tools (Sintomer *et al.*, 2008; Santolamazza *et al.*, 2024). In this view, the IE played a key role in PB's digital dimension, shaping the agenda, designing the online platform, and spreading online information. However, in line with the broader trajectory of the PB initiative, the digital tool faced limitations in later phases (Santolamazza *et al.*, 2024).

The main limitation of this study pertains to its timing, as the investigation was undertaken after the voting phase. Future research could use action research to compare participants' early perceptions with post-implementation reflections. Additionally, limited citizen input – mainly from a public meeting – restricts insights; a broader, ongoing exploration of citizen views would be valuable. Finally, reflecting on Rome's PB experience, a longitudinal study could be illuminating to assess PB's enduring role as a conduit for citizen dialogue and its efficacy in addressing prevailing challenges.

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