

- Urban
- Democracy
- Lab
-  NYU | GALLATIN

Working Paper

February 2026

Towards a “PB+”: Leveraging Participatory Budgeting to Amplify Impact and Mass Governance

Celina Su

urbandemos.nyu.edu

Towards a “PB+”

Leveraging Participatory Budgeting to Amplify Impact and Mass Governance

Feb 2026

Celina Su

City University of New York

The authors welcome feedback on this working paper. Please send all inquiries to: celinasu@gmail.com

We wish to acknowledge the support of the Public Humanities program and the Initiative for Community Power at NYU. We wish to also individually name the support of Andrew Friedman, Daniela Tagtachian, and Racquel Forrester in making this effort possible, and Mahin Rahman Tawrat for data assistance for the whole series. In addition, we wish to acknowledge students in the Public Humanities seminar and in the Law and Organizing Lab course who volunteered time, effort, and opinions on these topics in the Fall of 2025. While not everyone contributed an individual working paper, all contributed to the debate and we are appreciative. Finally, we need to acknowledge the important contributions of a number of individuals whose professional commitments prevent them from being named.

Urban Democracy Lab Working Papers are circulated for discussion and comment. They reflect ongoing research and analysis and may be revised. These papers emerge from discussion with community partners but have not gone through a process of community review as is our practice. This paper is part of a series that responds to a rare political opening: the chance to rebuild city governance around affordability, dignity, and democratic control. The papers are designed as practical tools for transition and early governing, with companion briefs for rapid circulation and working-paper versions that provide full rationale, evidence, and implementation detail. They reflect our Real Utopian orientation: feasible design of transformative institutions and policies that are egalitarian, durable, and sustainable..

Suggested Citation: Su, Celina. 2026. “Towards a PB+: Leveraging Participatory Budgeting to Amplify Impact and Mass Governance”, NYU Urban Democracy Lab Working Paper. URL

Executive Summary:

This memo argues that the Mamdani administration should transform New York City's participatory budgeting from a scattered, small-dollar exercise into "PB+": a core tool for mass governance and campaigning from government. Existing PB has already shown real democratic potential, expanding the electorate and boosting later voter turnout, but it has been undermined by limited resources, weak mayoral backing after the 2018 Charter revision, and a project menu that trains people to "think small." PB+ would explicitly link PB cycles to the larger city budget and core policy fights, using projects to surface under-recognized pressure points (like school infrastructure), channel anger about unmet basic needs into coordinated campaigns, and broaden the popular imagination toward climate, equity, and solidarity projects. To make this work, the Office of Civic Engagement and Civic Engagement Commission must be strengthened to set citywide standards, coordinate agencies, and replace gate-keeping with shared decision-making, backed by serious evaluation and nimble rules on project eligibility and outreach.

Introduction

As the Mamdani team has rightly noted, existing participatory budgeting (PB) in NYC has “good structures” but “limited resources.”

Like the Mamdani campaign’s field operations, PB has helped to remake the electorate. Nearly one-quarter of participants in PBNYC reported not being eligible for regular elections, and participants were then 8.4 percent more likely to vote than those who had not participated.

Partly because of such reach, New Yorkers voted for a 2018 Charter revision and binding allocations to mayor-led PB. Yet, the process has not been implemented with rigor. OMB has repeatedly stated that “it’s up to the Mayor” to prioritize the process, and Adams opted to not do so. So it’s not surprising that the process has failed to uplift residents’ ear-to-the-ground knowledge and mobilize them in larger campaigns.

As a result, PB in NYC has a mixed reputation at best. Residents repeatedly complain that PB trained them to “think small.” (See also Transition Team member Ben Kabak’s quip that through PB, NYC is “nickel-and-diming itself out of a bunch of cheap infrastructure upgrades it should be doing as a matter of course.”)

Given limited resources, the Mamdani administration should prioritize PB as an opportunity to help residents dream big and “campaign from government”—aligning projects to larger campaigns aligned with policy priorities. The administration should:

I. Replace standalone PB processes with “PB +” connected to the larger city budget.

Any process that focuses on small funded projects as the main impacts will feel demoralizing. Because of its limited scope, PBNYC’s greatest impacts have involved so-called spillover or ripple effects. The Mamdani administration should build upon existing precedents and use PB to:

1. Identify under-recognized touch points for mobilization.

- Through PB, so many New Yorkers became indignant about the state of elementary school bathrooms, that the DOE quietly doubled its school bathrooms allocation from \$70 to \$140 million in 2014-2015. Imagine if such campaigns were coordinated. For example, school A/Cs are another perennial PB ballot item. A campaign like PB + Green, Healthy Schools would quickly activate K-12 schools and CUNY community colleges for climate justice campaigns.

2. Harness and re-direct popular anger over basic needs and equity.

- PB can help residents to demand that the government finishes an equity project they start. In D39, a ballot item clearly stated that paltry PB funds alone could not possibly pay for \$15 million renovations necessary to make a subway station accessible; the \$250,000 “down payment” rather intended to “put pressure” on the public transit authority to provide the remainder of funds needed to create the first accessible station in the council district. It succeeded.

3. Broaden the popular imagination.

- PB can be a way to introduce new programs and policies to city agencies. When supported well, PB has helped residents to make new connections and collaborate on joint projects rather than fight for crumbs of the pie, and to get state resources for crucial solidarity projects like diaper mutual aid networks, all-gender middle school bathrooms, housing policy labs for high schoolers, and new community agreements and contact campaigns for domestic workers.

II. Strengthen the Office of Civic Engagement to help *other* city agencies to better serve NYC, by listening to and working with New Yorkers.

In order to achieve these goals, the Office of Civic Engagement must guide other city agencies to shift from technocratic administration to mass governance. Otherwise, other city agencies can work at cross-purposes, and inadvertently undo the Office of Civic Engagement's work. Sometimes, city agencies have even weaponized PB processes to make up for budget cuts, or have resisted implementation of PB-funded projects/ policies. The OCE must help agencies to replace gate-keeping and stonewalling with meaningful dialogue and decision-making.

1. The OCE and CEC should provide formal coordination and a government-wide vision for mass governance: **best practices and accountability across all agencies**. This relies on political will (messaging from the mayor), inter-agency coordination, and training civil servants.
2. The Mamdani administration should ensure that the new "people's pie" process includes **adequate resources for evaluation**. Neither the mayor-run People's Money nor the City Council-run PBNYC has adequate evaluations in place— the processes therefore lack rigor, and it's hard to fully know what's really working.
3. Re-evaluate and **make specific institutional design decisions as nimble as possible**. For example, whereas PBNYC focuses largely on capital projects, the People's Money focuses on expense projects. Based on the data we have, we suggest that project eligibility criteria be adjusted to fit the policy issues and relevant city agencies at hand, and that outreach focus on volunteer participation, rather than sortition (currently used in the People's Money).