

American Journal of Social and Humanitarian Research

Vol. 7 Issue 10 | **pp.** 38-45 | **ISSN:** 2690-9626
Available online @ https://globalresearchnetwork.us/index.php/ajshr

Article

Participatory Budgeting as an Accountability Channel for Results-Based Budgeting: Evidence from Uzbekistan's Open Budget Initiative, 2021–2025

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Abstract: Results-based budgeting strengthens accountability of spending units to the finance ministry and the legislature, but it rarely gives citizens a direct role in defining and monitoring results. This article examines whether participatory budgeting can fill this gap, using Uzbekistan's Open Budget initiative, a large-scale and digitally organised participatory budgeting programme, as a case. Season-level data for 2021–2025 published by the Ministry of Economy and Finance, official announcements and population statistics are used to construct indicators of proposal supply, participation intensity, competition and fiscal weight. The number of proposals peaked at 69,700 in the first season of 2022 and declined to 22,263 in the second season of 2025, while votes rose from 1.1 million in 2021 to 18.1 million in the second season of 2023 and fell by 35.2 per cent after the introduction of identity-verified one-citizen-one-vote rules in 2024. Votes per proposal increased from 28 to 500, and the average winning project grew from 332 million to 1,351 million sums. Funding rose from 50.4 million US dollars in 2021 to 500.3 million in 2024, equivalent to about 1.0–1.2 per cent of consolidated budget expenditure in 2023–2024; school repairs and internal roads accounted for 65 per cent of winning projects in the first season of 2023. The article argues that the initiative already functions as a channel for revealing local demand and mobilising public scrutiny, but is not yet connected to the performance frameworks of budget programmes, and proposes a framework for integrating the two.

Keywords: Participatory budgeting; results-based budgeting; social accountability; local public finance; budget transparency.

Citation: Baltayevich A. A. Participatory Budgeting as an Accountability Channel for Results-Based Budgeting: Evidence from Uzbekistan's Open Budget Initiative, 2021–2025. American Journal of Social and Humanitarian Research 2026, 7(10), 38-45

Received: 09th Jul 2026
Revised: 10th Aug 2026
Accepted: 20th Sep 2026
Published: 10th Oct 2026

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1. Introduction

Results-based budgeting is usually designed as a vertical accountability system. Ministries commit to targets in exchange for appropriations, report results to the finance ministry and the legislature, and are audited on that basis. Citizens appear in this system mainly as the beneficiaries of services whose quality is measured by indicators chosen by officials [1]. Participatory budgeting reverses the direction of the relationship: residents propose and select spending projects and can observe whether they are delivered [2], [3]. The two approaches have developed largely in separate literatures, even though both aim to make public spending more responsive to results.

Uzbekistan offers an unusual opportunity to study their relationship. The legal basis for citizen participation in the budget process was laid by Presidential Resolution PP-3917 of 22 August 2018, and the Open Budget initiative, under which residents propose local

projects and vote for them through an online portal and mobile channels, has operated since 2021, with two seasons a year from 2022 [4]–[6]. Within five years it has grown into a nationwide programme that receives tens of thousands of proposals and millions of votes per season and finances projects worth trillions of sums from district and city budgets. At the same time, Uzbekistan is introducing programme-based budgeting, with programme budgets piloted in 2025 and full implementation of results-based budgeting planned by 2030 [6].

This article addresses three questions. How have participation and competition in the initiative evolved between 2021 and 2025? How large is its fiscal weight and what kinds of projects does it finance? How could it be connected to the performance frameworks of budget programmes so that citizen participation strengthens, rather than runs parallel to, results-based budgeting?

Participatory budgeting originated in Porto Alegre in 1989 and spread across Brazil and later to Europe, Africa and Asia. Wampler's study of Brazilian municipalities showed that its effects depend on the commitment of the executive, the strength of civil society and the share of resources at stake, and that the programme can produce contestation and accountability as well as cooperation [2]. Sintomer, Herzberg and Röcke documented the diffusion of the model to Europe and distinguished several variants, from consultative procedures close to traditional public consultation to models with real decision-making power over a budget envelope [7].

Quantitative studies have linked participatory budgeting to changes in spending and outcomes. Gonçalves found that Brazilian municipalities that adopted it allocated a larger share of their budgets to sanitation and health services and that this reallocation was associated with a reduction in infant mortality [8]. Touchton and Wampler reported that participatory budgeting was associated with higher health spending, a larger number of civil society organisations and lower infant mortality, with effects that strengthened over time [9]. These findings suggest that participation can improve the match between spending and local needs, which is also an objective of results-based budgeting.

The value of participation depends on its design. Shah's guide for developing countries stressed that participatory budgeting works best when combined with transparency of budget information, clear rules for the selection of projects and monitoring of implementation [3]. In Uzbekistan, budget openness has been promoted through the Open Budget portal, the publication of a citizens' budget and a rating of the transparency of budget information of state bodies, while the relationship between participatory and performance-based budgeting in the country has not yet been analysed. This article addresses that gap.

2. Materials and methods

The analysis uses four types of data. Season-level numbers of proposals and votes for 2021–2025 and annual allocations in US dollars for 2021–2024 are taken from a presentation of the Ministry of Economy and Finance [6]; the season values were cross-checked against official announcements where these were available, for example 1.1 million votes and 41,100 proposals in 2021, 16.1 million votes in the first season of 2023, more than 27,000 proposals in the second season of 2024 and 10.45 million votes in the first season of 2025 [5], [10], [11]. Numbers of winning projects, allocated funds and the sectoral composition of projects are taken from official announcements for individual seasons [5], [10]–[13]. Population data come from the World Development Indicators [14], and consolidated budget expenditure and nominal GDP from the IMF [15].

Five indicators were calculated. Proposal supply is the number of proposals per 100,000 residents, participation intensity the number of votes per 100 residents, competitive intensity the number of votes per proposal, project size the average funding per winning project, and fiscal weight the funds allocated to winning projects in a year as a share of consolidated budget expenditure. For 2023 and 2024 the latter was calculated

from the sum of the allocations announced for the two seasons of each year, UZS 3.90 trillion and UZS 5.16 trillion, and consolidated expenditure of 30.2 and 28.1 per cent of nominal GDP [15].

Several caveats apply. Before 2024 a vote did not necessarily correspond to a unique citizen, so votes per 100 residents measure activity rather than the share of the population participating. Data from different releases may differ in coverage; the annual dollar allocations, for example, may include additional allocations beyond those announced for the winners of individual seasons. The analysis is therefore descriptive, and its purpose is to identify patterns relevant to the design of the initiative rather than to estimate causal effects.

3. Results

Institutional design

Each season of the initiative follows the same stages: submission of proposals by residents, preliminary selection by working groups, a short promotion stage, public voting and announcement of winners, after which projects are financed from district and city budgets. In the second season of 2023, for example, 49,464 proposals were received from 9,426 neighbourhoods, of which 33,631 were put to the vote, and more than UZS 1.02 trillion was allocated [12]. In the second season of 2024 more than 27,000 proposals were submitted and more than 23,000 passed the preliminary selection [10].

The rules have been adjusted repeatedly. From the first season of 2024 each citizen may cast only one vote, and a verification system links each vote to an identified person in order to prevent the mass purchase of SIM cards for voting [13]. In the first season of 2025 the results for one district were announced separately because of an investigation into forced vote collection [11]. These adjustments show that the integrity of voting has become the main design concern.

Participation and competition

Table 1 and Figure 1 present the participation indicators. The supply of proposals peaked in the first season of 2022 at 69,700, or 199.5 per 100,000 residents, and has declined in every season since, except for a small increase in the first season of 2025, to 22,263 in the second season of 2025, which is 68.1 per cent below the peak. Votes followed a different path: they rose from 1.1 million in 2021 to 16.1 and 18.1 million in the two seasons of 2023, equivalent to 45.2 and 50.8 votes per 100 residents.

Table 1. Participation indicators of the Open Budget initiative by season, 2021–2025

Season	Proposals	Votes	Proposals per 100,000 residents	Votes per 100 residents	Votes per proposal
2021	41,125	1,149,499	120.1	3.4	28
2022 season 1	69,700	6,718,133	199.5	19.2	96
2022 season 2	61,566	7,824,637	176.2	22.4	127
2023 season 1	55,970	16,130,000	157.0	45.2	288
2023 season 2	49,464	18,115,000	138.7	50.8	366
2024 season 1	35,575	11,735,749	97.8	32.3	330
2024 season 2	27,274	9,081,610	75.0	25.0	333
2025 season 1	28,399	10,450,400	76.6	28.2	368
2025 season 2	22,263	11,136,750	60.1	30.1	500

Note: from the first season of 2024 each citizen may cast one identity-verified vote. Source: proposals and votes from [6]; population from [14]; indicators calculated by the author.

The introduction of identity verification in 2024 marks a clear break. Votes fell by 35.2 per cent between the second season of 2023 and the first season of 2024, and stabilised at 25–32 votes per 100 residents in 2024–2025. Because proposals continued to decline, competitive intensity rose sharply: the number of votes per proposal increased from 28 in 2021 to 288–366 in 2023 and to 500 in the second season of 2025.

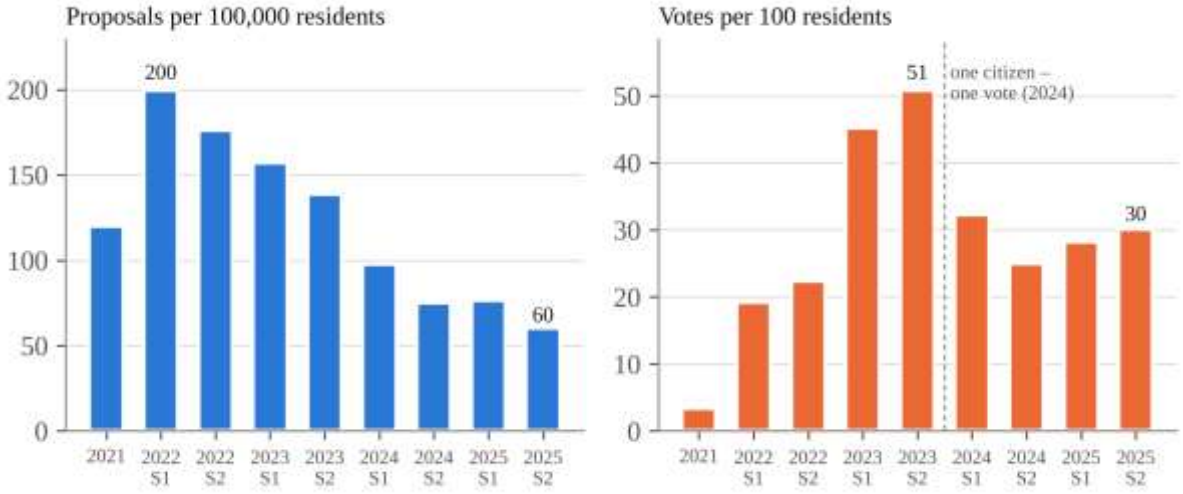


Figure 1. Proposal supply and voting intensity in the Open Budget initiative, 2021–2025

Note: the dashed line marks the introduction of identity-verified one-citizen-one-vote rules in 2024. Source: calculated by the author on the basis of [6] and [14].

The size of the break gives an indication of how much earlier voting activity was not tied to unique, verified participants. Average participation intensity fell from 48.0 votes per 100 residents in the two seasons of 2023 to 28.9 votes in the four seasons of 2024–2025, a decline of 39.8 per cent. Not all of this decline can be attributed to the rule change, since interest in a new instrument may also have waned, but the timing suggests that the verification of identity removed a large volume of duplicated or purchased votes, which was the stated purpose of the reform [13]. Indicators of participation before 2024 should therefore be interpreted with caution in any evaluation of the initiative.

Fiscal weight and project profile

Funding has grown rapidly. According to the Ministry of Economy and Finance, allocations rose from 50.4 million US dollars in 2021 to 237.5 million in 2022, 381.3 million in 2023 and 500.3 million in 2024 [6], an average annual growth rate of 114.9 per cent over 2021–2024 and of 45.1 per cent over 2022–2024. The funds announced for the winners of the two seasons amounted to UZS 3.90 trillion in 2023 and UZS 5.16 trillion in 2024, equivalent to 1.02 and 1.20 per cent of consolidated budget expenditure. Because the projects are financed from district and city budgets, their weight in those budgets is considerably higher.

Table 2. Funding and selectivity of the Open Budget initiative in selected seasons

Season	Winning projects	Funds allocated, billion sums	Average per project, million sums	Winning share of proposals, %	Funds per vote, thousand sums	Source
2021	1,599	530.5	332	3.9	462	[5]
2023, season 1	2,997	2,882	962	5.4	179	[5]
2024, season 2	1,772	2,139	1,207	6.5	236	[10]
2025, season 1	2,369	3,200	1,351	8.3	306	[11]

Note: funds for season 1 of 2023 are reported as "more than" UZS 2,882 billion. Average project size, winning share and funds per vote calculated by the author; proposals and votes from [6].

Table 2 shows that the average size of winning projects has increased about fourfold, from UZS 332 million in 2021 to UZS 1,351 million in the first season of 2025. Selectivity has fallen at the same time: the share of proposals that won funding rose from 3.9 per cent in 2021 to 8.3 per cent in the first season of 2025, because funding grew while the number of proposals declined. The resources allocated per vote cast, a rough measure of the fiscal leverage of participation, fell from UZS 462 thousand in 2021 to UZS 179 thousand in the first season of 2023, when voting peaked, and recovered to UZS 306 thousand in the first season of 2025. The composition of projects is concentrated. Of the 2,997 projects selected in the first season of 2023, 1,335 (44.5 per cent) concerned the repair of secondary schools, 629 (20.9 per cent) internal roads, 370 (12.3 per cent) medical institutions and 176 (5.8 per cent) preschool institutions [5]. The repair of internal roads also dominated the projects with the most and the fewest votes in the second season of 2024 [10].

Discussion

The results show that the Open Budget initiative has become a significant fiscal and social institution. Its funding exceeds one per cent of consolidated budget expenditure, it receives tens of thousands of proposals per season, and even after the introduction of identity verification it attracts 25–30 votes per 100 residents per season. By the standards of the literature it is a decision-making rather than a consultative model [7], since the results of the vote determine which projects are financed.

Three patterns, however, deserve attention from the perspective of results-based budgeting. The first is the combination of declining proposals and rising votes per proposal. It may reflect learning, as residents concentrate on projects with a realistic chance of success, but it also raises the risk that success depends on the capacity to mobilise votes rather than on the relative importance of needs. The integrity problems addressed by the rule changes of 2024 and 2025 are consistent with this risk. The second is the concentration of projects in the repair of schools, roads and health facilities. These are maintenance and rehabilitation needs that would normally be financed from the programmes of the education, health and transport sectors. The initiative is therefore revealing gaps in sector programmes, and this information has value for programme budgeting. The third is the growth in project size, which increases the importance of cost control and of verifying that projects are completed to the specified standard.

Experience elsewhere shows how these risks can be contained. In Porto Alegre, investment was distributed among districts according to explicit criteria that combined residents' priorities with population and the existing deficit of infrastructure, so that mobilisation alone could not determine the allocation [2]. The design literature also stresses that participation has the greatest effect when it occurs early in the budget cycle and is combined with transparent rules for selection and with monitoring of implementation [3], [7]. In Uzbekistan, the preliminary selection by working groups already filters proposals, but the criteria are not reflected in the final ranking, which depends on votes alone. A ranking that weights votes by the population of the neighbourhood and by an indicator of need, for example the physical condition of the school or the road, would reduce the premium on mobilisation and align the initiative with the needs-based logic of programme budgeting.

These patterns suggest that the initiative already performs two functions that results-based budgeting needs, the revelation of demand and public scrutiny of delivery, but that these functions are not yet connected to the performance frameworks of budget programmes. Figure 2 proposes a framework for this connection.

The framework rests on four links. At the proposal stage, each project should be tagged with the budget programme and functional classification to which it belongs, so

that demand revealed by citizens can be compared with the targets of sector programmes; persistent demand for school repairs in particular districts, for example, should inform the maintenance norms of the education programme in the medium-term budget. At the allocation stage, projects should be costed using standard unit costs, which would also make the comparison of project size over time meaningful. At the delivery stage, each project should report a small set of outputs, such as the floor area of renovated classrooms or the length of repaired roads, together with its completion date and final cost. At the monitoring stage, completion reports and citizen satisfaction ratings should be published on the portal and fed into the performance reports of the corresponding programmes. Audit with citizen participation, which has already been launched in Uzbekistan [16], could be used to verify these reports.

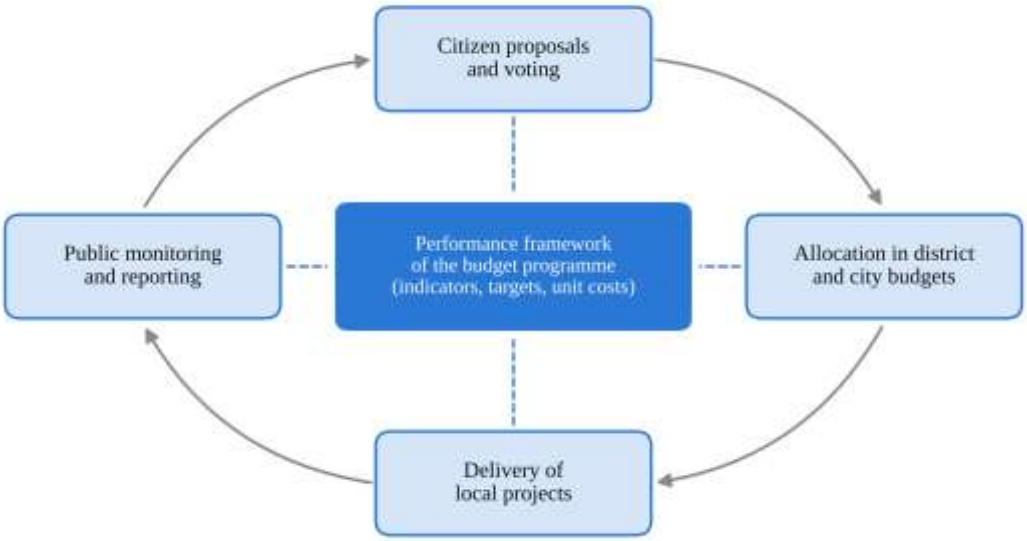


Figure 2. Framework for integrating participatory budgeting into programme performance management

Note: grey arrows show the participatory budgeting cycle; dashed lines show the proposed links to the performance framework of budget programmes. Source: developed by the author.

Integration of this kind would benefit both reforms. For programme budgeting it would provide an independent source of information on local needs and on the quality of delivery, which the PEFA assessment identified as the weakest area of performance information [16]. For the initiative it would introduce selection criteria and reporting standards that reduce the incentive to compete through vote mobilisation. Consistent with the findings of Gonçalves and of Touchton and Wampler [8], [9], the benefits of participation are likely to be greatest where participation is linked to the allocation of resources to basic services and where its results are visible to citizens.

Transparency of sector budgets is a related condition. In the 2023 rating of the transparency of budget information compiled by the Ministry of Economy and Finance, the Ministry of Preschool and School Education obtained the maximum score, whereas the Ministry of Construction and Housing and Communal Economy obtained 33 per cent, the Ministry of Health 25 per cent and the Ministry of Transport 8 per cent [17]. Medical institutions and local roads are among the most frequent objects of participatory projects, yet the budgets of the sectors responsible for them are among the least transparent. Citizens who vote for the repair of a clinic or a road can hardly judge whether the project duplicates or fills a gap in the sector programme if the programme's own budget information is not published. Integration of the initiative with programme budgeting

therefore also requires that the programmes concerned meet minimum standards of disclosure.

The financing of the initiative raises a further issue. Winning projects are funded from district and city budgets, whose resources depend to a considerable extent on transfers from higher-level budgets; in 2023 such transfers accounted for about 30 per cent of the budgets of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the regions and the city of Tashkent, and the PEFA assessment found that the system for allocating them was not transparent or rule-based [16]. If the resources available for the initiative in each district depend on discretionary transfers, citizens cannot know in advance how much is at stake, and the comparison of projects across districts loses meaning. A predictable, formula-based envelope for participatory projects in each district, announced before proposals are submitted, would strengthen both the credibility of the initiative and the medium-term planning of local budgets.

The study has limitations. The season data come from different releases, vote counts before 2024 do not correspond to unique participants, and the sectoral composition is available only for one season. The analysis does not evaluate the quality or the outcomes of the financed projects. Future research could use project-level data from the portal to examine the determinants of winning, the geographical distribution of funds and the relationship between projects and local service indicators.

4. Conclusion

Between 2021 and 2025 Uzbekistan's Open Budget initiative grew from a pilot into a nationwide programme that allocates more than one per cent of consolidated budget expenditure on the basis of citizen proposals and votes. Participation peaked in 2023 and stabilised after the introduction of identity-verified voting, the supply of proposals declined while competition intensified, and funding was concentrated in the repair of schools, roads and health facilities.

The initiative demonstrates that citizens can be given a direct role in defining spending priorities and in monitoring delivery. Its potential contribution to results-based budgeting is still largely unused. Tagging projects by budget programme, costing them with standard unit costs, reporting their outputs and publishing completion reports would turn the initiative into a source of performance information and a channel of downward accountability that complements the vertical accountability of programme budgeting.

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