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**Published in:**

Administration and Society

**Publication status and date:**

Published: 01/03/2022

**DOI (link to publisher):**

[10.1177/00953997211014476](https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997211014476)

**Document Version**

Peer reviewed version

**Citation for the published version (APA):**

Migchelbrink, K., & Van de Walle, S. (2022). Serving multiple masters? Public managers' role perceptions in participatory budgeting. *Administration and Society*, 54(3), 339-365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997211014476>

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This paper is accepted for publication as: Migchelbrink, K., & Van de Walle, S. (2021). Serving multiple masters? Public managers' role perceptions in participatory budgeting. *Administration & Society*, 00(00): 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997211014476>.

## Serving multiple masters? Public managers' role perceptions in participatory budgeting

[Pre-print, May 10, 2021]

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Participatory budgeting is fast becoming a popular form of public participation. Public managers play an important role in organizing and implementing participatory budgeting. Their role perceptions affect whether they use their discretion to limit or increase residents' say in participatory processes. However, we know little about public managers' role perceptions in participatory budgeting. In this study, we develop a typology of public managers' role perceptions in participatory budgeting using a Q-methodological analysis of public managers in 7 municipal participatory budgeting projects in Belgium. We find evidence for four distinct perspectives: a managerial, citizen-centered, technocratic, and skeptical perspective.

*Keywords: Participatory budgeting; public managers; role perceptions; typology; Q-methodology.*

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## **Introduction**

Participatory budgeting is fast becoming a popular form of public participation in administrative decision-making (Miller, Hildreth, & Stewart, 2019; Sintomer, Herzberg, & Röcke, 2008; Wampler, 2012). Participatory budgeting refers to “the participation of non-elected citizens in the conception and/or allocation of public finances” (Sintomer et al., 2008, p. 168). Public managers play an important role in shaping participatory decision-making projects (Liao & Zhang, 2012; Marlowe & Portillo, 2006). They design the mechanisms through which participation takes place, decide who is eligible to participate, which proposals are admissible, and support and manage the implementation of these proposals. Public managers not only “shape the tone of citizen participation” (Liao & Zhang, 2012, p. 21), but can also “discount or even discourage” (Marlowe & Portillo, 2006, p. 180) the participation they do not believe in.

Whether public managers use their professional discretion to limit or increase residents’ influence in participatory budgeting projects is in part dependent on their attitudes and role perceptions in participatory budgeting in relation to residents and local politicians (Liao & Schachter, 2018; Migchelbrink & Van de Walle, 2021). Participatory budgeting projects are characterized by the interplay between local politics, administrative norms of expertise and professionalism, and residents’ policy preferences and spending proposals. In these processes, managers are expected to simultaneously realize local politicians’ policy programs, implement residents’ spending proposals, and enforce administrative norms of professionalism and expertise. It is the task of public managers to implement participatory budgeting practices in a way that satisfies the interest of all participants involved in the process (Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2019; Frenkiel & Lama-Rewal, 2019; Zhang & Liao, 2011). In short, in participatory budgeting public managers serve multiple masters.

Whose input public managers prefer, can affect the efficacy of participatory budgeting. In balancing the competing needs and preferences of local politicians, bureaucratic norms and values, and residents' budget proposals, whose inputs do public managers prefer and whose do they discount? When spending proposals are at odds, do public managers prefer to side with local politicians, will they try to shape policies in accordance with their own professional norms and values, or do they prefer to defer to residents? In order to understand public managers' input preferences in participatory budgeting, we explore their role perceptions in participatory budgeting vis-a-vis residents and local politicians.

Because of the importance of public managers to the success of participatory processes, research on the determinants of public managers' attitudes toward public participation, including participatory budgeting, is on the rise (Liao & Ma, 2019; Liao & Schachter, 2018; Migchelbrink & Van de Walle, 2021). At the same time, the role of public managers in participatory budgeting has received relatively little attention (but see: Marlowe & Portillo, 2006; Zhang & Liao, 2011). Instead, previous research on participatory budgeting focused on the design of participatory budgeting mechanisms (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006; Franklin & Ebdon, 2005; Miller et al., 2019; Rowe, 2013; Sintomer et al., 2008), factors that affect the success of participatory budgeting (Barbera et al., 2016; Guo & Neshkova, 2013; Kim & Schachter, 2013), and the institutional logics on which participatory budgeting is based (Bartocci et al., 2019). At the same time, these studies offer little insight into the attitudes and role perceptions of public managers that can affect their behaviors and decisions in participatory budgeting practices.

In this study, we build on these studies to develop a typology of public managers' role perceptions in participatory budgeting. We move beyond the testing of discrete attitudinal determinants and examine how managers make sense of competing needs in participatory

budgeting. Are public managers more inclined to follow the preferences and interests of residents, of local politicians, or of their colleagues and their own professional norms and expertise? Furthermore, do these role perceptions differ across public officials? We study these questions holistically by constructing a typology of managers' subjective understanding of their role in participatory budgeting vis-à-vis local politicians and residents (Brown, 1980, 2019). We formulate the following research question:

*How do public managers view their role in participatory budgeting in relation to residents and local politicians?*

We construct our typology using a Q-methodological analysis. Q-methodology is a research method specifically developed to systematically explore respondents' subjective understanding of, in our case, their role in participatory budgeting. In a Q-methodological analysis, a selective group of respondents is typically asked to rank-order a predetermined set of statements, which are factor-analyzed in order to discover shared clusters in the sorted statements. Because these clusters represent shared subjective understanding among respondents, they are interpreted as common perspectives (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012). Our data is derived from 22 Q-sorting exercises among public managers tasked with organizing, implementing, and managing participatory budgeting projects in seven Belgian municipalities in the Flanders and Brussels Capital regions.

The results of our analysis support a typology of four distinct perspectives, accounting for about 66% of the variation in the data. First, public managers with a managerial perspective (the most common perspective) are process oriented and support participation on instrumental grounds. Second, managers with a citizen-centered perspective express normative support for participatory budgeting, prioritize citizens' preferences and interests,

and see themselves as instrumental in helping residents develop good quality spending proposals. Third, managers with a technocratic perspective stress administrative norms and expertise, are skeptical about the involvement of local politicians, and support participatory budgeting on instrumental grounds. Finally, public managers with a skeptical perspective doubt the practical value of participatory budgeting and question whether local politicians and public managers are willing and/or able to hand over decision-making authority to citizens. None of these perspectives displays opposition against participatory budgeting and all perspectives share the belief that most of the important decisions are made by local politicians and public managers without the involvement of the public.

In the next section, we examine the literature on public managers' views on the roles of residents and local politicians in participatory budgeting. We then turn to the participant selection and data collection procedures, and the implementation of the Q-methodological analysis. In the third section, we present the four perspectives obtained from the data. In section four, we conclude with a discussion of the results and our conclusions.

## **Theory**

Roles prescribe characteristic behavioral patterns (Biddle, 1986). A role can be defined as “a set of expected behavior patterns attributed to someone occupying a given position in a social unit” (Robbins & Judge, 2018, p. 185). In part, professional roles are socially constructed and dependent on interactions with colleagues, neighboring administrations, and institutional arrangements. Like attitudes, roles are related to actual behavior. How public managers view their role in participatory budgeting, as well as the roles of their fellow public managers, can depend in part on their attitudes of residents and local politicians.

According to Bartocci, Grossi, & Mauro (2019), the adoption of participatory budgeting can be explained through competing institutional logics. They distinguish between three logics that prescribe socially desirable behaviors for public managers. From a political logic, participatory budgeting can be seen as a way to invigorate local democracy. According to this view, participatory budgeting has the potential to increase the representation and engagement of citizens, while also strengthening the public profile of individual local politicians. From a managerial logic, participatory budgeting can promote and strengthen organizational performance and goal attainment. According to this logic, participatory budgeting is instrumental to obtaining organizational objectives. Finally, from a community-building logic, participatory budgeting serves to bring individuals closer together, and to combat residents' feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation (Bartocci et al., 2019). These logics describe competing roles for public managers. Whereas the political logic underscores the political and electoral objectives of participatory budgeting, the community-building logic prescribes social and democratic motives for participatory budgeting. Finally, according to the administrative logic, participatory budgeting should adhere to administrative norms of expertise and professionalism.

In addition to these institutional logics that facilitate the adoption of participatory budgeting, previous studies also examined public managers' roles in participatory budgeting. Zhang and Yang (2009), studying local public managers' attitudes toward public participation in budgeting in Florida, defined three role perceptions for public managers in participatory budgeting: citizen leadership, technocratic expert, and bureaucratic indifference. In the citizen leadership role, public managers act as modernizers and policy entrepreneurs, stressing participation as a new professional norm (e.g., Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Nalbandian, 1999), and emphasizing citizens' preferences over administrative norms. In the technocratic expert role, officials see themselves as professional policy experts whose

attitudes toward public participation are characterized by caution and concerns for administrative effectiveness and quality. In the bureaucratic indifference role, public managers' attitudes and behaviors are characterized by their inability and unwillingness to take independent action because of close hierarchical supervision, strict rules, and job requirements (e.g., Alkadry, 2003; Hummel, 1994). Such bureaucratic experiences cause public managers to become indifferent to the voices of citizens, thereby stifling participatory initiatives (Zhang & Yang, 2009).

### ***Public managers, residents, and public participation***

From a citizen-centered perspective on participatory budgeting, the role of public managers is subordinate to that of residents and their legal representatives: local politicians. According to this perspective, public managers act as delegates, faithfully executing residents' budgeting proposals and ensuring that their initiatives get implemented (Liao, 2018a; Roberts, 2004; Stivers, 1994). Such a role perception prescribes to "put considerations of the widest possible interpretation of the public interest ahead of all other considerations, including efficiency, professionalism, or practical politics" (Stivers, 2001, p. 595). However, the implementation of residents' input is contingent on local politicians' mandates and public managers' norms of expertise and professionalism (Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2019; Moynihan, 2003; Thomas, 2013).

Empirical evidence suggests that public managers are willing to implement participatory budgeting from a normative standpoint, but have instrumental reservations (Liao & Schachter, 2018; Yang, 2005). Some officials see it as their task to manage the participatory process in order to obtain optimal administrative outcomes (Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2019). In this context, public managers could fear that participating residents do not constitute a true cross-section of the population (Bryer, 2009; Migchelbrink & Van de Walle, 2020; Yang & Pandey, 2011), that participatory budgeting is costly and requires more



time and effort than non-participatory decision-making practices (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Thomas, 2013), or that residents' technical and deliberative skills are insufficient (Yang & Callahan, 2007; Yang & Pandey, 2011). In sum, although officials appear willing to implement citizen participation projects, they do not necessarily find it useful (Yang, 2005).

### ***Public managers, local politicians, and public participation***

The traditional point of departure in discussions on politico-administrative relations underscores local politicians' control over public managers, and public managers' responsibility for the neutral implementation of public policies (Svara, 1999; Waldo, 1948). Following a principal-agent approach, residents elect and instruct local politicians, local politicians instruct and control public managers, and public managers implement public services (Page, 2012). However, contrary to this view, local politicians and public managers actively interact, influence, and depend on each other in the delivery of public services (Aberbach et al., 1981; Svara, 1999; Van Dorp & 't Hart, 2019). In participatory budgeting, local politicians initiate the participatory process, interact with public managers about the shape and operational parameters of the participatory process, and authorize the implementation of residents' proposals after the completion of the process. Meanwhile, public managers are delegated the responsibility to design, organize, and implement the participatory process (Liao, 2018a, 2018b), as well as actively and passively assessing which proposals are put into practice and which are not (Marlowe & Portillo, 2006). Therefore, trust and cooperation between local politicians and local public managers are crucial in promoting effective and impactful public participation (Abram & Cowell, 2004).

The behavioral role prescriptions in representative democracies establish that public managers' behavior and decisions should be in line with the directives of their political superiors (De Graaf, 2011; Liao, 2018a; Rourke, 1996). These prescriptions are reflected in

research indicating that public managers are loyal to their local politicians and follow their mandates and orders (De Graaf, 2011; Schooley, 2012). However, participatory budgeting assigns local residents the responsibility to make their own budgeting decisions (Ebdon & Franklin, 2004, 2006). It is unclear whether public managers are equally devoted to their elected superiors when residents have been assigned decision-making authority or whether public managers would defend citizens' budget proposals when these are in conflict with local politicians' mandates and policy objectives.

Previous studies indicated that local politicians' support has a positive impact on public managers' support for participatory decision-making and the adoption of participatory budgeting (Liao, 2018b; Yang & Pandey, 2011; Zhang & Liao, 2011). According to Liao (2018b), local politicians' trust allows public managers to deal with citizens in a more flexible way, search for solutions, and make it easier to use limited resources. At the same time, directives from local politicians can constrain public managers' options to deliberate with local residents (Dudley et al., 2018), while continued political involvement could signal a lack of political support for participation and undermine the legitimacy of the participatory budgeting process (Abelson et al., 2002).

### ***Public managers and participatory budgeting***

From an administrator-centered perspective, the preferences of residents and local politicians are largely subservient to the norms of expertise and professionalism of public managers. According to this perspective, decision-making practices should be determined by instrumental concerns for costs, effectiveness, and efficiency. Although prior research implies that instrumental concerns dominate public managers' thinking about participatory decision-making (Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2019; Liao, 2018a; Moynihan, 2003),

“administrative systems that are based upon expertise and professionalism leave little room for participatory processes” (King et al., 1998, p. 317).

Research indicates that managers’ reliance and confidence on their own expertise, knowledge, and competence is negatively related to their attitudes toward participatory decision-making (Alkadry, 2003; Faehnle et al., 2014; Liao, 2018b; Liao & Schachter, 2018). According to Liao and Ma (2019), public managers who rely on their own competences and expertise are less likely to perceive citizens’ input as valuable. Similarly, Eckerd and Heidelberg (2019) find that though managers recognize the value of public participation as an informational input, they do not let it overrule their own technical expertise. They state that public managers viewed “their roles not as representatives who implement the will of the public, but rather as administrators who balance competing needs to create the best possible outcomes” (Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2019, p. 144).

Public managers also look to their colleagues to identify desirable and appropriate behavior in participatory practices (Liao, 2018a; Liao & Schachter, 2018; March & Olsen, 2011). Knowledge of successful participatory practices and experiences with participatory decision-making practices increases public managers’ willingness to engage with the public. Furthermore, the knowledge of successful participatory practices helps mediate the negative effects of a technocratic orientation (Liao & Ma, 2019).

Alternatively, public managers can also be primarily concerned with implementing the task of public participation, without too much interest for its democratic and instrumental costs or benefits (Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2019). According to such a managerial perspective, participatory projects are just one administrative task among many.

## Data and method

### *Participatory budgeting in Belgian municipalities*

For this study, empirical data was collected from public managers in municipal participatory budgeting projects in Belgium. Despite organizational differences (Miller et al., 2019), participatory budgeting commonly aims to engage local residents in local spending policies by allowing them to formulate budget proposals and indicate spending priorities (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006; Sintomer et al., 2016). Typically, residents are invited to deliberate about, and assign (a share of) the local budget. Most of these spending priorities involve decisions about spatial planning, parks and recreation, or public and social services. In general, residents have a relatively high degree of autonomy in defining their spending priorities within the politically and financially defined parameters of the participatory budgeting process (Rossmann & Shanahan, 2012; Sintomer et al., 2016).

In Belgium, participatory budgeting is primarily a local level democratic innovation. The best-known participatory budget project in Belgium is the Citizen Budget in the city-district of Antwerp, in which residents and non-residents decide how to spend 10% of the district's budget (e.g., €1.4 million). Additional participatory budgeting experiments were conducted in other municipalities and with different participatory budgeting arrangements, including neighborhood budgets and budget games (De Wakkere Burger, 2019). In fact, more municipalities have expressed interest in organizing participatory budgets and the Flemish regional government has been exploring the possibility of introducing a participatory budget at the regional level as well (Sintomer et al., 2016; Wolf et al., 2018).

### *Case selection*

Our target audience consisted of public managers responsible for the design, implementation, and management of municipal participatory budgeting projects in Belgium, focusing on the Flemish and Brussels Capital regions. In order to obtain a diverse set of respondents, we chose to include the full variety of participatory budgeting arrangements (citizen budgets, neighborhood budgets, budget games). Using web-searches, contacts with civil society organizations (De Wakkere Burger, 2019), and snow-ball sampling, we identified ten participatory budgeting practices. All ten projects were organized at the municipal or sub-municipal (city-district or neighborhood) level.

We contacted these municipalities in late 2019 and early 2020. Seven municipalities agreed to participate in this study. These municipalities showed divergence in terms of financial resources, government level, and the number of residents to which these projects applied (see Table 1). The budgets ranged from € 8,000 to € 3,000,000, with the number of inhabitants related to these projects ranging from roughly 1,000 to roughly 257,000.

Table 1. Included cases of participatory budgeting in Belgium

<b>Project name</b>	<b>Local Authority</b>	<b>Budget size</b>	<b>Inhabitants</b>
Budget games	Kortrijk (Heule)	€ 3,000,000	~ 14,000
Citizen budget	District of Antwerp (Antwerp)	€ 1,400,000	~ 195,000
Citizen budget	Ghent	€ 1,350,000	~ 257,000
Neighborhood builders	Wortegem-Petegem	€ 100,000	~ 6,300
Citizen budget Citoyen	Neder-Over-Heembeek	€ 35,000	~ 17,600
Neighborhood budget	Balen (Olmen)	€ 8,000	~ 3,000
Neighborhood budget	Arendonk	€ 8,000	~ 1,000

## ***Q-Methodology***

We conducted a Q-methodological analysis to explore a typology of public managers' perspectives on their roles in participatory budgeting vis-à-vis residents and local politicians.

Q-methodology is a qualitative-quantitative small-sample research method specifically designed to systematically explore respondents' subjective understanding of an issue of interest in terms of thoughts, opinions, attitudes, perspectives, and preferences (Brown, 1980; De Graaf, 2011; Stephenson, 1953; Watts & Stenner, 2012) and is particularly useful to explore typologies in small-n environments.

A Q-methodological analysis typically proceeds by inviting a purposefully selected sample of respondents (P-set) to rank-order a diverse and representative set of pre-selected statements (Q-set) based on their agreement or disagreement with those statements (Q-sorts). These Q-sorts are then correlated and factor analyzed to produce clusters of respondents who ordered the Q-set in a similar way (McKeown & Thomas, 2013; Watts & Stenner, 2012). Importantly, Q-methodology does not produce a clustering of researcher-formulated variables, but of respondents with similar perspectives based on their ordering of the Q-set statements.

Q-methodology has been used to study citizens' (Barbera et al., 2016; Van Eijk & Steen, 2014) and public managers' (Canal, 2017; Nederhand et al., 2019; Webler et al., 2003) understanding of public participation before, but never to study public managers' subjectivity about participatory budgeting in relation to residents and local politicians. We conducted our analysis in four steps: selecting the relevant statements (Q-set), selecting the relevant respondents (P-set), conducting the Q-sorting (Q-sorts), and conducting the analysis and interpretation (Q-analysis).

### ***Q-set: selecting the relevant statements***

The Q-set is a subsample of all possible expressions, opinions, communications, points of view, etc., about a topic of interest (the concourse). There are a number of sources from which concourse statements can be derived. We based our concourse on the academic literature cited above, the results of a systematic literature review (Migchelbrink & Van de Walle, 2021), and semi-structured interviews with seven practitioners. The interviews had the added benefit of ensuring that our concourse statement related to practitioners' experiences in the field. Our concourse comprised of  $n = 124$  statements.

The Q-set is a miniaturized version of the concourse (Brown, 1980; De Graaf, 2011). A good Q-set is both broadly representative of the concourse and sufficiently diverse to capture the full range of perspectives. At the same time, the Q-set has to be sufficiently compact to be reasonably sortable by the respondents, usually consisting of 40 to 80 statements (McKeown & Thomas, 2013; Watts & Stenner, 2012). We obtained our Q-set through an iterative selection process and discussions between the authors. First, we removed all overlapping statements with broadly similar content. Secondly, we employed a selection grid to select those statements that best reflected the importance of a.) residents, b.) local politicians, or c). (fellow) public managers in the participatory budgeting process. This resulted in a final Q-set containing  $n = 39$  statements.

### ***P-set: selecting the relevant participants***

Participants were selected based on their unique personal insights and experience with participatory budgeting (Watts & Stenner, 2012). After having contacted the seven municipalities selected for this study, we conducted interviews with the principal organizing manger. We asked him/her to indicate how many officials played a serious role in organizing

and administering participatory budgeting in their organization (e.g., project leaders). Through this process we established a target audience of  $n = 45$  public managers across the seven municipalities. Due to privacy restrictions, we were not allowed to contact these managers directly, but relied on our points of contact to distribute access to the Q-study among the relevant public managers instead. We have sent up to three reminder-emails to our points of contact, reminding them to share access to the Q-methodological survey and to stimulate target audience responsiveness. In all,  $n = 22$  public managers from all seven selected municipalities participated in the study and completed a full Q-sort, which amounts to a response rate of 49%.

### ***Q-sort: conducting the Q-sorting***

Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, we administered the sorting of statements online using the Q-sorting tool Q Method Software (Lutfallah & Buchanan, 2019). Participation was possible only after participants provided their informed consent to participate in the study. In order to reduce respondents' cognitive burdens in completing the Q-sorting tasks, we recorded an instruction video and provided user instructions during the sorting task. We pretested the content of the study, as well as its implementation, among 11 public administration graduate students, where no major issues were flagged. The Q-sorts were fielded and completed in May and June 2020.

Sorting was conducted in two stages. First, respondents were asked to sort the statements in three piles based on the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with their content (disagree, neutral, agree). The pre-sorting of statements reduces response burdens when completing the actual Q-sorting exercise in the second stage (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Second, respondents were invited to sort the pre-sorted statements in order of their agreement



(Most disagree (-5) to most agree (+5)) on a fixed bell-shaped sorting-grid. The bell-shaped form of the sorting-grid is based on the assumption that fewer statements generate more extreme responses (Brown, 1980) and that preferences tend to coagulate at the center (neither disagree nor agree). In addition, the fixed format of the sorting grid (Figure 8) required respondents to evaluate statements in relation to one another and to decide which statements he/she (dis)agreed with more, making the sorting more engaging and realistic.

At the end of the second stage, respondents were asked to re-evaluate their final sorting and were offered the opportunity to make changes. The Q-sort was completed with a short demographic survey in which respondents were offered the opportunity to make final comments about the study and the sorting exercise.

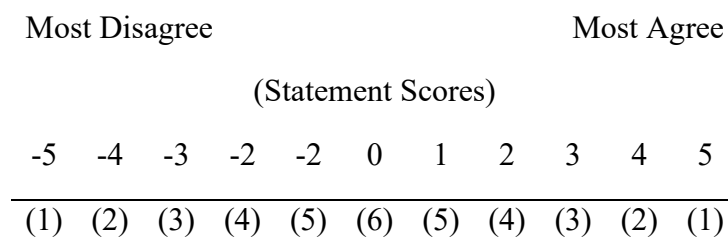


Figure 1. Fixed distribution for the Q-set

***Q-analysis: conducting the analysis***

The final step of the Q-methodological analysis was the examination of the communality in the Q-sorts (Brown, 1980; Brown et al., 2008). We conducted a factor analysis using principal components analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation in the package Qmethod (Zabala, 2014) in the statistical software environment R (R Core Team, 2017).

We ran the factor analysis several times, extracting between 2 and 5 factors. We assessed the explained variance, eigenvalues, number of sorters loading significantly on each factor, the number of sorters not loading on any of the factors, and the statistical and

substantive correlation between the factors in order to determine how many factors to retain. Based on these characteristics, a four-factor solution provided the best representation of the communality in the data. Although there are no fixed rules about how many factors should be extracted, the current four-factor solution satisfied all standard requirements: eigenvalues above one and more than two significant loadings per factor (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012). 20 out of 22 respondents loaded significantly on one of the four factors ( $p < .05$ ). The four factors combined explain 65.6% of the study's variance. Table 2 summarizes the main statistical details of the four factors.

Table 2. Four-factor extraction results

<b>Factor</b>	<b>n loading</b>	<b>Eigenvalue</b>	<b>Explained variance</b>	<b>Composite Reliability</b>	<b>SE factor scores</b>	<b>Average reliability coefficient</b>
Factor 1	8	5.3	24.2%	.97	.17	.80
Factor 2	6	4.8	22%	.96	.20	.80
Factor 3	3	2.5	11.5%	.92	.28	.80
Factor 4	3	1.7	7.9%	.93	.28	.80
Total	20		65.6%			

## Results

The four extracted factors are interpreted as a typology of perspectives and presented in the form of a factor label and its characteristic and distinguishing statements (Brown et al., 2008; Exel & Graaf, 2005; Watts & Stenner, 2012). The idealized Q-sorts, representing what public managers would score if their views would align completely to the extracted perspectives (e.g., factor arrays), are presented in the online appendix.

### ***The managerial perspective***

The first perspective can be labelled as managerial. Public managers with a managerial perspective toward participatory budgeting are process oriented, have no pronounced preferences for residents over local politicians or public managers, and their support for participatory budgeting is qualified. The factor underlying this perspective has an eigenvalue of 5.3 and accounts for 24.2% of the study's variance. Eight respondents are significantly associated with this factor ( $p < .05$ ).

Public managers with a managerial point of view most strongly believe that *participatory budgeting requires the cooperation of all municipal services, not just of the department that organizes the participatory budget* (#31). More than in any other perspective, these managers believe that *in participatory budgeting, it is important that [they] as a public manager know how to play the game of politics well enough to align the interests of residents, local politicians, and [their fellow] public managers* (#34). They see it as their task to facilitate the implementation of residents' budget proposals, not to actively help write them: *As a public manager, I do not interfere with the content of residents' proposals, I just facilitate their implementation* (#32). At the same time, they believe that *it is the task of the public manager to ensure that residents' proposals are of sufficient quality to be carried out practically* (#33).

Managers with a managerial perspective are less concerned about where input comes from than about its consequences for the decision-making process. They have no pronounced preference for input by residents (#7), local politicians (#4), or their fellow public managers (#9). Instead, managers with a managerial perspective focus on the implementation process. Although they believe that *public managers know the interests of residents better than local*

*politicians do* (#10), they do not think they are *experienced enough to know the needs of residents without consulting them* (#11). Furthermore, they do not believe they should *push through [their] own opinions in order to overcome the resistance of colleagues and local politicians* (#38).

Finally, support for participatory budgeting by managers with a managerial perspective is qualified. On the one hand, these managers support participatory budgeting in the abstract. They believe that *participatory budgeting increases the democratic legitimacy of local government* (#22), that *letting residents propose and decide on neighborhood spending policies is of value irrespective of its outcome* (#27), and that *participatory budgeting is [...]* *compatible with how administrative decisions should be made* (#12). Furthermore, they completely disagree that *public participation is o.k., but we shouldn't let residents decide how public money is spend* (#3). On the other hand, these managers also believe that *the benefits of participatory budgeting do not outweigh its costs* (#16), and that *it is always the same, already known, residents who participate* (#29).

### ***The citizen-centered perspective***

Public managers with a citizen-centered perspective support the normative value of participatory budgeting, prioritize residents' input over that of their fellow public managers and local politicians, and see themselves as instrumental in helping residents' write good quality budget proposals. The factor underlying this perspective has an eigenvalue of 4.8 and explains 22% of the study's variance. Six respondents are significantly associated with this perspective ( $p < .05$ ).

Public managers with this perspective support the normative value of participatory budgeting. They most strongly believe that in *participatory budgeting, I should listen to what*

*residents want instead of to what local politicians want (#5) and that residents should have the final say about how public money is spent in their neighborhood (#1). To them, participatory budgeting increases the democratic legitimacy of the local governments (#22). Furthermore, these managers believe that residents should decide how public money is spent (#3) and that letting residents propose and decide on neighborhood spending policies is of value irrespective of its outcome (#27). Furthermore, they most strongly disagree that to be honest, I don't see why we should include residents in neighborhood spending decisions (#23) and that participatory budgeting requires more effort than it is worth (#17). Instead, they believe that participatory budgeting outweigh[s] its costs (#16) and that residents want to participate in addition to having well-functioning public services (# 28).*

Managers with a citizen-centered perspective prioritize residents' input (#7) over the input of their fellow public managers (#9) and local politicians (#4). They are especially critical about the role of local politicians. More than in any other perspective, these managers believe that local politicians should not block residents' proposals they disagree with even though they have the formal authority to do so (#36) and that *to many local politicians participatory budgeting sounds nice, but when it comes to it they find it difficult to hand over power (#37)*. To them, it is possible that *local politicians distrust participatory budgeting because they fear losing power (#39)*. At the same time, they believe that public managers should stay out of residents' decision making process and not *use their administrative influence to get the budget proposals they don't believe in rejected (#20)*, and that for many of their colleagues *it is difficult to let go of the reins and let residents decide for themselves (#35)*.

Instead, these managers see their own role as instrumental in getting residents' budget proposals adopted. They believe that *it is the task of the public manager to ensure that residents' proposals are of sufficient quality to be carried out practically (#33) and that*

*participatory budgeting requires the cooperation of all municipal services, not just of the department that organizes the participatory budget (#31).*

### ***The technocratic perspective***

Public managers with a technocratic perspective prioritize administrative norms over the interests of residents and local politicians. They are suspicious about the role of local politicians and stress the need to involve residents only when their involvement improves decision-making quality. The factor underlying this perspective has an eigenvalue of 2.5 and explains 11.5% of the study variance. Three managers are significantly associated with this perspective ( $p < .05$ ).

Public managers with a technocratic perspective prioritize the advice of their fellow managers over that of residents and local politicians: *If I had to choose between what residents, local politicians, or my fellow public managers think is best in participatory budgeting, I would follow the advice of my fellow public managers (#9)*. More than any other perspective, these managers believe that *public managers know the interests of residents better than local politicians do (#10)*, and that they assess themselves *experienced enough to know the needs of residents without consulting them (#11)*.

Managers with a technocratic perspective are skeptical about the role of local politicians and the political process. More than in the other perspectives, these managers believe that *for most local politicians, participatory budgeting is primarily an opportunity to increase their public exposure for electoral gain (#26)*. They are least likely to *follow the directives of local politicians (#4)* in participatory budgeting. Furthermore, least of all perspectives, managers with a technocratic perspective believe it important to *know how to play the game of politics well enough to align the interests of residents, local politicians, and*

*[their] colleagues (#34), but don't think that local politicians and public managers discuss beforehand which proposals should get adopted and which should get rejected (#30).*

Finally, these public managers stress the instrumental use of participatory budgeting. More than any other perspective, these managers believe that *we should only ask residents to participate when participation will improve the quality of spending policies (#19)*. They are most skeptical about residents' normative right to decide *how public money is spent in their neighborhood (#1)* and are least convinced of including *residents in neighborhood spending decisions (#23)*. Instead, they see it as their task to help draft residents' proposals (#32) and to make sure that *proposals are of sufficient quality to be carried out practically (#33)*.

### ***The skeptical perspective***

The final perspective is that of the skeptic. Public managers with a skeptical perspective do not oppose participatory budgeting per se but doubt its practical value. Furthermore, these managers believe that local politicians and public managers are not willing and/or able to share power with residents, and that public managers should not interfere in the participatory process. The factor underlying the skeptical perspective has an eigenvalue of 1.7 and accounts for 7.9% of the study variance. Three respondents are significantly associated with this perspective ( $p < .05$ ).

Public managers with a skeptical perspective believe that participatory budgeting *is valuable irrespective of its outcome (#27)*, that *residents [should] decide how public money is spent (#3)*, and do not believe participatory budgeting *incompatible with how administrative decisions should be made (#12)*. Furthermore, they acknowledge the role of residents; *In participatory budgeting, I should listen to what residents want instead of to what local politicians want (#5)*. However, they are skeptical about the practical value of participatory

budgeting. Not only do they believe, more than those in any other perspective, that *most people don't want to participate, they just want public services to work properly* (#28), they also do not believe that *participatory budgeting increases the democratic legitimacy of the local government* (#22). In fact, these managers believe residents cannot *be trusted to know what is best for their neighborhood without the help of local politicians or public managers* (#2), and they are neutral about whether *residents should have the final say about how public money is spent in their neighborhood* (#1). Instead, managers with a skeptical perspective believe that *the benefits of participatory budgeting do not outweigh its costs* (#16) and that *participatory budgeting requires more effort than it is worth* (#17).

These managers doubt whether local politicians and their fellow public managers are willing and/or able to hand over administrative decision-making authority to residents. More than in any other perspective, these managers believe that their *colleagues often lack the time and/or appetite to participate in realizing residents' budget proposals* (#21) and that it is difficult for them *to let go of the reins and let residents decide for themselves* (#35). Furthermore, they believe that *local politicians do whatever they want irrespective of the results of the participatory budget* (#6), that *to many local politicians participatory budgeting sounds nice, but when it comes to it they find it difficult to hand over power* (#37) and for *most local politicians, participatory budgeting is primarily an opportunity to increase their public exposure for electoral gain* (#26).

Finally, public managers with a skeptical perspective believe they should stay out of the participatory budgeting process. Most of all, they do not believe that *public managers should use their administrative influence to get the budget proposals they don't believe in rejected* (#20). They are least likely to listen to their fellow public managers (#9) and believe that they do not *know the needs of residents without consulting them* (#11). Although they profess to be actively involved in drafting the content of residents' proposals (#32) managers



with a skeptical perspective are the only ones to argue that it is not their task to *ensure that residents' proposals are of sufficient quality to be carried out practically* (#33).

### ***Shared elements***

Despite their differences, there are also some aspects all four perspectives share. There is consensus among the perspectives that *despite participatory budgeting, most of the important neighborhood spending decisions are made at the municipal hall* (#13) and that participatory budgeting does not reduce their *influence as a public manager* (#25). There is also consensus that complete loyalty to the elected superior is not *one of the most important characteristics of a good public manager in a participatory process* (#8). Furthermore, the perspectives display a degree of consensus about the statements that *to many local politicians participatory budgeting sounds nice, but when it comes to it, they find it difficult to hand over power* (#37), and that *local politicians distrust participatory budgeting because they fear losing power* (#39).

## **Discussion**

In this study, we examined variation in public managers' role perception in participatory budgeting vis-à-vis residents and local politicians. How public managers perceive their role in participatory budgeting in relation to residents and local politicians can affect how they use their discretion in increasing or reducing residents' voice in spending decisions. The results provide evidence for a typology of four distinct perspectives: a managerial perspective, a citizen-centered perspective, a technocratic perspective, and a skeptical perspective. These findings indicate that public managers' role perceptions in participatory budgeting vary

depending on their attitudes toward residents and local politicians. Depending on these perception, public managers can prefer to follow input by local politicians, residents, or their own professional norms and expertise when inputs clash. As such, role perceptions affect the efficacy of participatory budgeting.

Our results provide partial support for findings from earlier research. Our citizen-centered and technocratic perspectives are closely related to Zhang and Yang's (2009) citizen leadership role and technocratic expert role. However, we find no support for a bureaucratic indifference role. None of our respondents displayed indifference toward residents' input or were unwilling to engage with them. Public managers with a citizen-centered perspective best embody the value that in participatory budgeting "considerations of the widest possible interpretation of the public interest [should be] ahead of all other considerations, including efficiency, professionalism, or practical politics" (Stivers, 2001, p. 595). According to this role perception, the task of the manager is to support residents in producing good suggestions and spending proposals. In order to do so, it is better not to have too many rules and procedures constraining public managers' decision-making discretion. According to the citizen-centered perspective, participatory budgeting is about returning power to residents. Managers with this role perception can be expected to prefer residents' inputs over those of local politicians and their own professional norms and expertise. In contrast, public managers with a technocratic perspective were more likely to prioritize administrative knowledge and expertise over residents' budget proposals and local politicians' preferences. These managers are skeptical about what they see as interference by local politicians. They saw it as their task to assess the admissibility of proposals, how these proposals could best be carried-out administratively, and whether they did not conflict with multi-annual investment plans, existing subsidies, administrative decision-making procedures, rules and regulations, and

whether proposals were feasible within the investment framework and duration of the legislature.

Furthermore, our study contributes to the existing literature by adding two additional perspectives that can help explain public managers' input preferences in participatory budgeting. Public managers with a managerial role perception focus on participatory budgeting as an administrative process, an administrative task. This perspective illustrates that not all public managers are intrinsically motivated in favor of or against participatory budgeting, but that they could perceive the planning, organization, and execution of participatory processes as an administrative task like all others. Public managers with a managerial role perception are more likely to follow administrative norms and values in participatory budgeting, especially when the interests of residents and local politicians clash. In addition, we found a skeptical role perception as well. Public managers with a skeptical role perception were not opposed to participatory budgeting per se but doubted whether local politicians were willing to delegate decision-making power to residents and public managers. Furthermore, because managers with a skeptical role perception believe public managers should not interfere in the political process, these managers are likely to follow a classical principal-agent approach and side with local politicians when interests clash (Page, 2012).

While this study provides insights into public managers' role perceptions in participatory budgeting, it also opens up new avenues for future research. First, the Q-methodology approach provides a representation of the perspectives existing among the public managers included in the study. We cannot exclude the possibility of other perspectives existing outside of our sample. In order to prevent the under-sampling of perspectives, we maximized the diversity of public managers' perspectives by incorporating the full range of participatory budgeting practices into our study (Brown, 2019; Watts & Stenner, 2012). Additionally, the results of our Q-methodological analysis do not lend

themselves to statistical generalizations beyond public managers engaged with participatory budgeting in the Flanders and Brussels Capital Regions. In order to increase insight into public managers' role perceptions in public participation in general, additional follow-up research on new and more diverse samples is needed.

Second, the results of this study are based on the sorting evidence of  $n = 22$  public managers engaged in local level participatory budgeting practices in the Flanders and Brussels Capital Regions. Despite Q-methodology being a low- $n$  method, the explorative nature of this study, and our effective sample representing over 50% of the relevant population, this relatively low number of respondents can affect the robustness of the results. Future research can improve the robustness of the findings by replicating this study among larger samples in Belgium and abroad.

Finally, due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, we conducted the Q-sorting exercises online. Although Q-sorts have been conducted online before, and although specialized software has been developed for this purpose, online Q-sorting has some disadvantages as well (Minkman & Molenveld, 2020; Watts & Stenner, 2012). Some of our respondents commented that they experienced the online Q-sorting as burdensome, time consuming, and counterintuitive. Instead, in-person Q-sorting offers the possibility of conducting post-sorting interviews and reduces response burden by allowing for direct instructions on how to perform the sorting of statements, increasing reliability and preventing excessive drop-out. We aimed to reduce the response burden by providing respondents with a prerecorded video instructions and an instruction cheat-sheet during the sorting of statements. Future methodological research could further explore the benefits and downsides of online versus in-person Q-sorting.

## **Conclusion**

Participatory budgeting is an increasingly popular form of public participation in administrative decision-making. Public managers play an important role in organizing and implementing these processes, yet little is known about how public managers perceive their role in participatory budgeting. This is an important oversight because how public managers perceive their role in participatory budgeting can affect whether they use their discretion to increase or reduce residents' say in spending decisions. In this study, we examined whether public managers prefer input by local politicians, residents, or input based on their own professional norms and expertise by exploring a typology of role perceptions in participatory budgeting vis-à-vis residents and local politicians. The study supports and contributes to existing research by providing evidence on four distinct role perceptions: a managerial, a citizen-centric, a technocratic, and a skeptical role perception. As such, the study shows that public managers' role perceptions in participatory budgeting can vary depending on their attitudes toward residents and elected officials.

The results of this study can help local governments and local public professionals increase the efficacy of participatory arrangements in general and participatory budgeting in particular. The results indicate that public managers with a citizen-centric role perception are most likely to prefer citizens' inputs over those of local politicians and over the professional norms and expertise of fellow public managers. Employing public managers with a citizen-centric role perception likely increases the efficacy of participatory budgeting. At the same time, the study also shows that public managers with a managerial perception are most likely to prefer professional norms and expertise. Public managers with this perspective can be especially useful in organizing participation when the interests of local politicians and

residents clash. People matter and selecting the right public managers to organize and implement participatory arrangements can prevent residents' distrust and disappointment in the local government (Lee & Schachter, 2019; Wang & Van Wart, 2007) and increase the utility of participatory budgeting. Professional and ad hoc training of public managers in the benefits of participatory practices can further strengthen managers' positive attitudes toward participatory budgeting. Furthermore, this study provides valuable insight into the role perceptions of public managers in participatory budgeting. Though public managers differ in their support for participatory practices, they see it as their task to ensure the competing needs of residents, local politicians, and administrative expertise and professionalism are taken into account in order to produce the best possible outcomes (see also: Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2019). How these role perceptions affect public managers' actual behavior in participatory budgeting is a suitable topic for future research.

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