

# CIVIC EDUCATION THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL LISTENING AND THE PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG RESIDENTS AS KRAKÓW'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPITAL

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim:** The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of civic education classes as a tool supporting the development of local civic participation among primary and secondary school students in Kraków. The work aims to understand why young people show low interest in participating in local participatory mechanisms and to assess the effectiveness of civics education in shaping pro-social attitudes and social engagement. **Methods:** The research analysis is based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted among students from Kraków schools. Observations of civics classes, group interviews, and case studies on youth participation in participatory budgeting and public consultations were used. A literature review on civic education and youth participation was also conducted. **Results:** Research has shown that, despite the growing availability and diversity of participation forms, youth interest in participating in local mechanisms remains low. Civics classes have a positive impact on students' civic awareness, but they do not always translate into genuine engagement in local community life. Factors that demotivate young people include a lack of information, a sense of ineffectiveness, and limited opportunities to actually influence decisions. **Conclusions:** Civic education in the form of civic classes is an important element in shaping pro-social attitudes and developing civic awareness among young people. However, to effectively increase their participation in local initiatives, it is essential to simultaneously create authentic and accessible spaces for action and strengthen their sense of influence on the surrounding reality. Further research and innovative teaching approaches are necessary to combine theory with practice and motivate young citizens.

**Key words:** urban participation, civic budgeting, public consultations, civic education classes, Kraków

**JEL codes:** R21, R31, R38

## INTRODUCTION

In the face of dynamic social and political changes, contemporary societies face a significant challenge: raising informed, responsible, and engaged citizens [Rahnema 2020]. Education

focused on developing civic competences plays a key role in this process, enabling young people not only to understand the principles of state functioning but also to actively participate in public life and influence the reality around them. A special role in this context is played by school youth, who will

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eventually become decision-makers and leaders in social, political, and civic life.

Civic education is therefore a crucial element in shaping participatory attitudes, especially at the local level, where individuals have a direct influence on decisions affecting their community [Hamant 2021]. In the case of Kraków, a city with a strongly established historical identity, rich cultural heritage, and vibrant social life, civic education takes on particular importance. Civic classes conducted in primary and secondary schools, which integrate both theoretical and practical components, provide a tool that enables young people not only to acquire knowledge of law, the democratic system, and the functioning of local government, but also to become truly involved in local affairs. Thus, they support the development of competencies necessary for active participation in civic life from an early stage of education.

The contemporary realities of democracy reveal a significant neglect in implementing the principles of decentralization of power and supporting active citizen participation in local decision-making processes. Democracy should not be reduced solely to the act of voting or formally influencing public policy, but should also encompass the everyday, conscious participation of citizens in shaping the reality around them. Unfortunately, local social participation in Poland remains marginal, and citizens' awareness of the available participation mechanisms remains low.

Among the available participatory tools, such as the participatory budget and public consultations, only the former enjoys wider public recognition [Kazimierczak 2011]. The popularity of the participatory budget stems from its widespread promotion and relatively simple operating principles, which make it easier for citizens to understand its essence and mechanisms. The ability to directly decide on the allocation of public funds and influence specific changes in urban space is a particularly valuable incentive to convince residents to become involved [Falanga et al. 2021]. In this context, conducting reliable statistical analyses of the number of participants in specific forms of participation is especially important, making it possible to better assess the effectiveness and social impact of these tools.

Young people's decisions on the allocation of funds, for example, within the participatory budget, can have a significant impact on how local resources are distributed. The participation of young people in such processes gives voice to needs and priorities that often differ from the perspective of older residents. Young people typically focus on projects related to education, culture, sports, or ecology, such as recreational areas, meeting spaces, bike paths, or pro-environmental initiatives. This focus can shift a portion of local budgets from traditional infrastructure investments, such as road and sidewalk construction, to projects that improve the quality of social life [Pyżalski 2017]. Involving young residents in the decision-making process also encourages innovative solutions, especially in the area of new technologies. Projects related to the digitization of public services, the creation of city apps, and the development of infrastructure for electric mobility are examples of modernizing local resource management. Thus, the decisions made by young citizens not only respond to their current needs but also guide the future development of municipalities and cities.

Participatory budgeting in this context can be analyzed from the perspective of both economic efficiency and equality. In terms of efficiency, this mechanism allows public spending to be better aligned with the actual needs of the community, as residents themselves indicate which projects are most valuable to them. In terms of equality, participatory budgeting provides an opportunity to include groups that have traditionally been marginalized in decision-making processes, including young people. As a result, it becomes possible not only to distribute funds more fairly but also to strengthen social capital and citizens' sense of agency, which in the long term promotes the sustainable development of local communities.

## AIM AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of civics classes as a tool supporting the development of local civic participation among primary and secondary school students in Kraków. The work aims to understand why young people show low interest in participating in local participatory mechanisms and to assess the effectiveness of civics education

in shaping pro-social attitudes and social engagement. The research methods employed were quantitative and based on face-to-face interviews with students. This enabled the collection of data on both the level of knowledge and interests of young people regarding local participation. The research was conducted as part of a civic education project, which encompassed 57 Kraków schools – both primary and secondary – from 11 February to the end of June 2025. During the project, the author conducted classes on civic participation, which involved over 5,000 students and teachers. During the research, a significant legal barrier was encountered, related to the requirements of the so-called “Ustawa Kamilka” [Ustawa z dnia 13 maja 2016 r.]. These regulations require individuals conducting classes with children and young people to have a certificate of no criminal record, which is intended to reduce the risk of violence and abuse against minors. The introduction of this requirement has been met with ambivalence among teachers – on the one hand, it is perceived as a positive mechanism for improving student safety, but on the other, it is sometimes criticized due to the lengthy formal and legal procedures that can hinder the efficient organization of educational activities and civic initiatives implemented in schools.

## WHAT IS PARTICIPATION

Civic dialogue and various forms of social participation are crucial elements in the functioning of contemporary societies, permeating all spheres of collective life. According to Długosz and Wygański [2005], the concept of participation can be understood in three basic dimensions:

- The first dimension is horizontal participation, also known as community participation, which is based on the active participation of citizens in activities undertaken within local communities, including through civic groups and associations.
- The second dimension is public (vertical) participation, which refers to the relationship between citizens and public institutions. In this case, individuals engage in co-decision processes through participation in administrative structures, consultations, and formal democratic procedures.

- The third aspect is individual participation, which focuses on an individual’s personal involvement in social life – for example, by initiating activities, expressing opinions, or participating in local debates.

Each of these levels plays a crucial role in shaping civil society and can serve as a foundation for civic education, particularly in the context of youth work.

Civic participation refers to the active involvement of citizens in legislative and public decision-making processes. Its essence is social dialogue, in which institutions, organizations, and civic groups express their needs and demands, thus seeking to gain real influence on the actions of public authorities. As Kaźmierczak [2011] points out, participation and social dialogue shape various forms of residents’ involvement in social life, contributing to the development of a civil society. Among the most important forms of civic participation, the author distinguishes four categories:

- Public activity, understood as the initiation of grassroots activities by citizens in the spirit of community development, brings benefits to both local communities and public administration.
- Electoral participation is a form of expressing political will through participation in elections, which is a basic manifestation of democratic involvement.
- Another type is mandatory participation, which refers to forced actions of citizens, such as paying taxes, which, despite not being voluntary, constitute an element of social activity.
- The last category is citizen engagement, i.e., forms of participation supervised and coordinated by public institutions, aimed at increasing the effectiveness of decision-making by involving citizens in the consultation process.

Each of the above-mentioned forms plays a different role in a democratic system, and knowing about and understanding them should be a key component of civic education, especially among young people entering the world of socio-political activity.

In the public sector economics literature, participatory budgeting can be analyzed primarily in light of the functions of the state identified by Musgrave and Peacock [1958], namely allocation, redistribution, and stabilization. The participation of young people in decision-making processes directly strengthens

the allocation function, as it allows for a better alignment of public spending with actual social preferences and reveals previously overlooked needs. Oates's theory of fiscal federalism [1993] indicates that decentralization of decision-making increases efficiency, as local entities are able to identify local needs more accurately than the central government. In this context, participatory budgeting – especially with the active participation of young people – serves as a practical example of the implementation of Oates's postulate, as it transfers the decision-making process to the community level, where the community knows its own priorities best. This makes it possible to simultaneously increase the economic efficiency of public spending and improve equality in access to funds by including groups that have been underrepresented in traditional budgetary procedures.

## **PARTICIPATORY TOOLS**

The literature emphasizes that the decision-making process within civic dialogue not only brings social benefits but can also contribute to more effective public finance management, generating savings in time and resources [Jurek 2023]. Implementing participatory mechanisms proves profitable not only from a social perspective but also from an economic one, making them an important tool in local politics. However, the scope and intensity of citizens' engagement in public life depend on several contextual factors:

- Firstly, the size of a local government unit influences the method of organizing participation – the possibilities and needs of larger municipalities differ significantly from those observed in smaller towns.
  - Another important aspect is the geographical conditions, including the location of the commune, which influences access to resources and the logistical possibilities of engaging the local community.
  - Equally important are indicators of socio-economic development – units with a higher level of development usually have better organizational resources and greater institutional potential to conduct participatory activities.
  - Civic attitudes are also influenced by local history and social traditions, which may strengthen or limit residents' willingness to participate in public life.
- Sometimes, existing social conflicts act as a barrier to cooperation, although they can also mobilize the community to be active in certain situations.
  - The level of participation is also influenced by the socio-demographic structure, including factors such as age, education level, social status, and ethnic diversity.
  - The last, but extremely important element is the style of local governance – the openness of local government authorities to dialogue, their willingness to cooperate, and the ability to build social trust largely determine the degree of actual involvement of citizens in decision-making processes.

Both in terms of the number of participants and the quality of activities, social participation is most effective in smaller towns and cities. In such communities, residents demonstrate a greater willingness to actively participate in decision-making processes and support initiatives undertaken by local authorities [Hajduk 2021]. The key goal of a well-planned participatory process is to develop a common position on issues related to social and administrative changes, while engaging citizens in dialogue with the authorities.

Kraków, as the second-largest city in Poland, stands out nationally for its extensive use of participatory mechanisms, the most common of which are participatory budgeting and public consultations. The latter is a form of direct democracy whose primary goal is to gather residents' opinions on planned administrative actions. Through consultations, local government bodies gain insight into the needs and expectations of the local community, allowing them to make decisions that better reflect the true interests of the citizens [Mikołajczyk and Leśniewska-Napierała 2022]. The consultation process is preceded by an appropriate information campaign, ensuring widespread access to information about planned activities. This also allows those less knowledgeable about the topic to familiarize themselves with its details and prepare to express their opinions during meetings. Such activities provide citizens with the opportunity to exercise initial public control over local government decisions. It is worth emphasizing that public consultations are dialogical and bilateral in nature, similar to the mediation process. The goal is to reach a consensus through

negotiations and compromises, in which each party has the opportunity to present its own position [Lengerer et al. 2022]. Participants play an active role in this process, sharing their suggestions and proposing specific solutions, making consultations an effective tool for strengthening civic participation.

Public consultations can take various forms, and in Kraków, in accordance with Resolution No. CXI/2904/18 of the Kraków City Council of 26 September 2018, the following can be distinguished [Uchwała nr CXI/2904/18 Rady Miasta Krakowa]:

- workshop activities,
- collecting written comments,
- paper and online surveys,
- deliberative surveys,
- expert consultations, including academics,
- quantitative and qualitative research,
- citizen panels.

The entire process of conducting public consultations is complex and takes at least 21 days. They can be organized at the initiative of the Mayor or the Kraków City Council, or based on an application from [Uchwała nr CXI/2904/18 Rady Miasta Krakowa]:

- a group of at least 300 residents,
- the Kraków District Council,
- a group of at least eight non-governmental organizations (NGOs),
- the Kraków Council for Public Benefit Activities (KRDPP),
- the Kraków Seniors' Council,
- a Kraków Council task force or committee,
- the Kraków Youth Council,
- the Civic Dialogue Commission,
- the District Social Council for Persons with Disabilities.

The literature on the subject emphasizes the multidimensional nature of public consultations, which not only constitute a form of civic dialogue but also fulfill a number of important functions in the public management system. These functions were characterized particularly clearly by Zychowicz [2014], who points out that the most important aspects of consultations are several functions:

- The diagnostic function refers to the recognition and analysis of socio-economic phenomena,

which enables better adjustment of public policies to the real needs of residents.

- Public consultations also serve an educational purpose, raising citizens' awareness of the local government's planned actions. Increasing residents' awareness of decision-making mechanisms contributes to their increased civic competences and willingness to actively participate.
- Another important component of the consultation process is the articulation function, which allows residents to express their own positions, expectations, and demands. This, in turn, is linked to the participatory function, ensuring citizens have real influence on the decisions being made.
- Another important function of consultation is legitimization or giving political and administrative decisions greater legitimacy through prior consultation with citizens. Public participation in the decision-making process increases residents' sense of agency and strengthens trust in local authorities.
- The control function remains equally important, as it allows the local community to monitor the actions taken by decision-makers, thus increasing the level of transparency of public life.
- The last function indicated by Zychowicz is the activation function – effectively conducted social consultations contribute to increasing citizens' willingness to participate in subsequent initiatives, thus strengthening the durability and quality of local social capital.

Participatory budgeting is a form of participatory democracy in which residents of a given territorial unit – a city, district, or rural commune – gain real influence on decisions regarding the allocation of public funds. This mechanism allows local communities to directly engage in the budget planning process, thus activating citizens and strengthening trust in public institutions. The origins of the modern participatory budget date back to 1989, in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, where this innovative model of local community co-decision-making on public spending was first implemented. This was a groundbreaking event that later inspired other countries to implement similar solutions. In Europe, the idea emerged in the early 21st century, gaining popularity in countries such as Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, and Switzerland.



Participatory budgeting has also been used in some African countries, such as Cameroon, demonstrating the universal potential of this form of social participation.

As noted, the concept of participatory budgeting does not have a single, universally accepted definition [Błaszczak 2023]. In the Polish context, it is considered an innovative tool for managing public finances, which serves not only to increase the efficiency of spending but also to build a civil society by supporting dialogue and cooperation between residents and public administration [Jurek 2025].

One of the key tools supporting local participation remains the participatory budget, whose effectiveness depends on ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the solutions implemented within it. This makes it possible not only to monitor the quality and effectiveness of the process but also to identify potential barriers and best practices in public engagement.

Resident involvement in participatory budgeting is seen as a significant element supporting the activities of local authorities, and a manifestation of the community's civic maturity. This tool not only strengthens participation but also fosters social integration and a sense of shared responsibility for the common good. A crucial aspect of this process is the opportunity for residents to actively engage – both by submitting their own projects and by voting on their implementation.

The participatory budget creates space for grassroots initiatives and provides institutional support for social activists and local leaders. Submitted projects undergo verification and formal assessment, and are then submitted to a public vote, where the local community decides whether to accept or reject them. Implementation of approved proposals takes place within the established budget limit. It is important to emphasize that the organizational framework of the process – including the schedule, project submission rules, and voting procedures – is determined on a case-by-case basis by local government authorities, based on previous experience and the local socio-organizational context.

In Poland, participatory budgeting was launched in Sopot in 2011, and in Kraków, the first edition

took place in 2013. In 2023, Kraków celebrated the tenth anniversary of the system, which provides a good opportunity to review each edition and the amount of funds invested, both for the entire city and for individual districts. Throughout its existence, participatory budgeting has enjoyed considerable popularity. One reason is that residents want to influence what happens in their neighborhoods and decisions regarding investments financed from public funds [Sobol 2017]:

- politicians' fears of losing control over budget allocation,
- the need for greater involvement of politicians and officials,
- the need to prepare a budget plan in advance.

## RESULTS

The classes conducted as part of the civic education project were carefully tailored to the age and developmental level of the participants, ensuring the appropriateness of the educational content delivered. The instructor utilized a variety of teaching methods, integrating traditional lectures with workshop elements and open dialogue with students. The interactive format of the classes fostered participant engagement and enabled a direct assessment of their level of knowledge, civic awareness, and interest in the topic of social participation.

During the classes, questions were used that not only assessed their knowledge of issues related to civic participation but also aimed to stimulate reflection and motivate the young people to actively participate in public life. Examples of questions used during the classes included:<sup>1</sup>

- Are you familiar with the term “participation” and do you know what it means?
- Can you name participatory tools?
- Do you know what public consultations are?
- Are you familiar with the concept of a local initiative?
- Do you know what a Participatory Budget is?
- Have you voted on projects under the Participatory Budget?

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<sup>1</sup> Own data taken from civic education classes.

- Have you submitted, or would you like to submit, your own project under the Participatory Budget in the future?
- What projects would you like to implement with Participatory Budget funds?
- Do you know of projects implemented in Kraków under the Participatory Budget?
- Do you know of examples of public consultations conducted in Kraków?
- Do you believe that participatory tools are necessary for the city's development and for local governments to meet the needs of their residents?

The questions asked during the classes were open-ended, which made it possible to obtain qualitative information on students' opinions and attitudes toward issues related to civic participation.

Of the over 5,000 students who participated in the civic education project, only 21 declared familiarity with the term "civic participation" or admitted to having previously encountered the concept. None of the workshop participants was able to identify specific participation tools. Only four participants declared knowledge of public consultations, while the concept of local initiative remained unfamiliar across all study groups.

In terms of familiarity with the participatory budget, a higher level of recognition was observed – over 700 students indicated that they knew what the participatory budget was, but none of the respondents were able to precisely define its goals or mechanisms. Furthermore, approximately 540 students admitted to voting on projects under the participatory budget at least once. The remaining participants expressed the belief that they could not vote due to being underage, indicating significant gaps in knowledge regarding the principles of participation, which is also available to younger social groups.

Despite their limited theoretical knowledge, the students demonstrated considerable creativity and commitment, presenting numerous project proposals that they believed could be implemented under the participatory budget. Among the most interesting and frequently repeated initiatives were:

- free vaccinations against human papilloma virus (HPV), free vaccinations against tick-borne encephalitis,

- development of an island in Zalew Nowohucki,
- creation of so-called pocket gardens,
- installation of photovoltaic panels at bus stops, enabling charging of mobile devices,
- revitalization of areas in Kraków's Nowa Huta and Kazimierz districts,
- purchase and installation of automated external defibrillators (AEDs) in public spaces,
- creation of a sports museum in the Kraków,
- launch of public water transport.

Knowledge of projects implemented under the participatory budget proved relatively limited – approximately 480 students were able to name at least one. At the same time, none of the participants were able to cite examples of public consultations conducted in Kraków, even the most media-promoted and controversial ones, such as the consultations regarding the introduction of the clean transport zone. However, this state of knowledge can be partially explained by the students' age and their limited exposure to topics related to urban policy.

The final question, regarding the importance of participatory tools, was met with a very positive response. Students considered the participatory budget to be the most effective and accessible tool supporting residents' participation in decision-making processes. At the same time, they expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of public consultations and local initiatives, pointing to their invisibility and incomprehensibility in the public sphere.

## CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the results of the civic education project indicates a relatively low level of youth interest in local participation. Of the over 5,000 participants, only a small group, approximately 1% (45–50 individuals), demonstrated a clear interest in the mechanisms of the participatory budget. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a manifestation of the young generation's limited civic awareness and a lack of motivation to actively participate in social and public life at the local level.

The low levels of engagement may also be a result of a number of environmental and cultural factors, including the evolving lifestyle of young

people, whose daily lives increasingly focus on digital activities. It can be assumed that widespread access to the Internet, including social media, instant messaging, and artificial intelligence-based tools (e.g., chatbots like ChatGPT), may foster the development of passive attitudes and limit the need to engage in real activities for the local community. Additionally, young people's significant involvement in computer games, despite their potential for developing logical and strategic competencies, may contribute to a decreased interest in civic and social activities. It should be emphasized, however, that the factors indicated are hypothetical in nature, requiring further interdisciplinary research to clearly determine their impact. Nevertheless, the observed limited participation of young people in participatory processes poses a significant challenge for educational and local government policies. This points to the need to implement innovative and attractive forms of activating young citizens that take into account their needs, the language of communication, and the specificity of the environment in which they operate. This can contribute to a more effective introduction to the first stages of active civic participation.

By involving residents – including young people – in the decision-making process, participatory budgeting contributes to strengthening the development potential of local communities through more precise alignment of investments with identified needs. Citizen activation enables more effective use of municipal funds, as the allocation of resources is based on the preferences of users of public goods and services. Participation also promotes greater transparency and accountability of local authorities, which translates into higher-quality management of public resources. At the same time, this process strengthens the socio-economic capital by fostering bonds of trust, cooperation, and a sense of shared responsibility for the common good. As a result, participatory budgeting is an instrument not only for a more equitable distribution of funds but also for long-term support for the endogenous development of local communities.

Involving young people in participatory budgeting can contribute to generating long-term economic benefits, as it promotes the development of entrepreneurial, innovative, and organizational skills. Participation in publicly funded projects teaches young people planning, resource management,

and performance evaluation, which may increase their activity and productivity in the labor market in the future. In addition, practical experience in co-decision-making shapes pro-social attitudes and responsibility for the common good, which are important elements of human and social capital. However, the costs associated with the institutionalization of civic education, including program development, teacher training, and the organization of workshops, must be taken into account. These costs can be treated as an investment, the return on which is manifested in the form of higher-quality human capital and increased efficiency in the allocation of public resources in the long term.

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## EDUKACJA OBYWATELSKA POPRZEZ SŁUCHANIE ORGANIZACYJNE I PARTYCYPACJĘ MŁODYCH MIESZKAŃCÓW JAKO KAPITAŁ SPOŁECZNO-EKONOMICZNY KRAKOWA

**Cel:** Celem niniejszego opracowania jest analiza roli lekcji obywatelskich jako narzędzia wspierającego rozwój lokalnej partycypacji obywatelskiej wśród uczniów szkół podstawowych i ponadpodstawowych na terenie Krakowa. Istotą podjętego tematu było zrozumienie przyczyn słabego zainteresowania młodych ludzi uczestnictwem w lokalnych mechanizmach partycypacyjnych oraz ocena skuteczności edukacji obywatelskiej w kształtowaniu postaw prospołecznych i zaangażowania społecznego. **Metody:** Analiza badawcza opiera się na badaniach jakościowych i ilościowych przeprowadzonych wśród uczniów krakowskich szkół. Wykorzystano obserwacje lekcji obywatelskich, wywiady grupowe oraz studia przypadku dotyczące uczestnictwa młodzieży w budżecie obywatelskim oraz konsultacjach społecznych. Dodatkowo przeprowadzono przegląd literatury przedmiotu dotyczącej edukacji obywatelskiej i partycypacji młodzieży. **Wyniki:** Badania wykazały, że pomimo rosnącej dostępności i różnorodności form partycypacji, zainteresowanie młodzieży udziałem w lokalnych mechanizmach jest nadal niskie. Lekcje obywatelskie pozytywnie wpływają na świadomość obywatelską uczniów, jednak nie zawsze przekładają się na realne zaangażowanie w życie lokalnej społeczności. Czynniki demotywuujące młodzież to m.in. brak informacji, poczucie nieskuteczności oraz ograniczone możliwości faktycznego wpływu na decyzje. **Wnioski:** Edukacja obywatelska w formie lekcji obywatelskich jest ważnym elementem kształtowania postaw prospołecznych

i rozwijania świadomości obywatelskiej wśród młodzieży. Aby skutecznie zwiększyć ich partycypację w lokalnych inicjatywach, niezbędne jest jednak równoczesne tworzenie autentycznych i dostępnych przestrzeni do działania oraz wzmacnianie poczucia wpływu na otaczającą rzeczywistość. Konieczne są dalsze badania i innowacyjne podejścia dydaktyczne, które połączą teorię z praktyką i motywacją młodych obywateli.

**Słowa kluczowe:** partycypacja miejska, budżet obywatelski, konsultacje społeczne, lekcje obywatelskie, Kraków