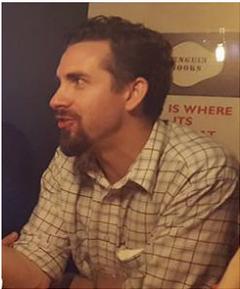


## Student Spotlight

**Tyler Olsen**, a second-year M.A. student in Political Theory, was awarded a Fulbright Research Grant to study participatory budgeting in Brazil this year.

By Saira Rafiee



**Saira Rafiee:** *Congratulations on your Fulbright award! Tell us more about participatory budgeting and how you got interested in this topic.*

**Tyler Olsen:** Thanks! When I lived in Phoenix I was involved in community organizing for several years (against the SB1070 law of 2010). My efforts were principally focused on building political power at the municipal level as a necessary step to building power at larger geographical scales. After transferring to the university from the community college, I learned of participatory budgeting by chance in an article that I found while doing research for a term paper. I was immediately attracted to the process because it was an example of a municipal political institution that was constructed by residents and that went a long way towards building people-power locally. When I learned that the process of participatory budgeting was subsequently scaled up to the state-level in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, I decided to find a way to get to Brazil and study the process of that transformation. After two failed attempts to obtain Fulbright funding, I finally was accepted, and am now beginning my research.

**SR:** *How has getting the fellowship affected your ability to do research? Why is Brazil a good place to do research on participatory budgeting?*

**TO:** The Fulbright program has provided a ten month research visa and enough funding for me to focus solely on my research for my entire stay. Brazil is a good place to study participatory budgeting because the process was first developed there. Also, I don't believe that there have been many attempts to scale up the process beyond the municipal level elsewhere. So, in respect to the question of scale, Rio Grande do Sul is the place to be. My advisor on this project is Dr. Danilo Streck of UNISINOS, a university just north of Porto Alegre. He is helping orient me, and he has already put me in touch with various people who will be vital to this project's success. He also houses a large archive of material related to recent rounds of state-level participatory budgeting processes, which will be extremely helpful in my research.

**SR:** *How do you think your research on participatory budgeting would relate to the issues we are facing at the GC, especially since there have been demands on the part of the students for participatory budgeting?*

**TO:** I hope that my work helps people consider strategies for democratizing government budgets at the state level. Of course, a participatory budgeting process at the state-level is not possible without strong processes at the municipal level in cities across a given state. More importantly, none of this is possible without a consciousness among the population that government should be controlled by residents rather than politicians. But this logic applies not only to government, but to any positions of authority, including the president's office at the GC. Building power at the local level — whether in a city, a neighborhood, a call-center, a high-school, or a university — is a necessary precondition for building power at a larger geographical scale. So, to answer your question, the efforts to democratize the budget at the GC are related to my research with state-level processes because local efforts such as these could create the conditions for the possibility of participatory processes at larger scales. I believe that the most important work is to be done at the local level, and the students at the GC working towards budget transparency and democratization are doing that hard work.