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CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

The participative model of decision making has many motives, takes many forms, and involves many different community stakeholders. Collaborative governance arrangements call upon public administrators to engage in and sometimes share authority with intergovernmental organizations in order to successfully tackle problems that often do not respect jurisdictional boundaries. In addition to other governments, those who typically have a vested interest, or *stake*, in the work of a city or county include employees and clientele of the governmental agency as well as representatives of nonprofit and community organizations, the private for-profit sector, volunteers, and faith-based groups.

The largest group of stakeholders is the citizens who are the owners of government in their roles as voters and taxpayers. Today, engaging citizens in the work of governance is not only mandated by many federal and state programs, it is also recognized by practitioners and scholars as an effective approach for improving decision making and execution. “The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: No one is against it in principle because it is good for you” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). Yet, managers and elected officials sometimes complain that participating citizens are not representative of the broader community, that the participatory process does not add significant value to the outcomes, and that too much staff time is required to get citizens more engaged in governmental affairs. A former city manager reported,

Overwhelmingly, managers consistently describe the public with negative adjectives about 80 percent of the time, and elected officials describe the public with

negative adjectives 70 percent of the time. Some of the common negative adjectives I hear about the public are: uninformed, not interested, entitled, rude, NIMBY (Not-In-My-Back-Yard) driven, and blames others. (Everett, 2015, p. 22)

At the same time, citizens often complain that their views are not being heard or acted upon and that local officials manipulate the engagement process to achieve predetermined outcomes. This chapter reviews the rationale for and record of citizen engagement, the types of tools that are available, and how these tools can be used to add value to local policy-making and implementation processes.

WHY ENGAGE CITIZENS?

Citizen participation in government is neither new nor unique. The term has evolved since the 1930s without much agreement on who the “citizens” are, how they should be engaged, which approaches are most effective, and what outcomes should be expected. Participating citizens have included middle- and upper-income white suburbanites as well as low-income minority inner-city residents. The form of involvement has ranged from merely being informed of decisions or actions to providing information and feedback (such as in public hearings) to advising on planned programs to influencing or controlling implementation.

The literature indicates a subtle but significant change in the terminology over this time period from citizen *involvement* to citizen *participation* to the current reference of citizen *engagement*. According to Ben Berger (2009), “Engagement connotes activity and attention, an investment of energy and a consciousness of purpose” (p. 340).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the term *citizen control* was often used with respect to programs impacting central cities, minority neighborhoods, and poor citizens, reflecting the community power movement at that time. In 1969, Sherry Arnstein observed,

Citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. . . . It is the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society. (p. 216)

However, as will be seen, “control” was more rhetoric than reality. By contrast, 37 years later, the citizen engagement process was defined as the “ability and incentive for ordinary people to come together, deliberate, and take action on problems or issues that they themselves have defined as ‘important’” (Gibson, 2006, p. 2).

There are two general rationales for including those affected by a program in the planning, priority-setting, decision-making, and implementation stages. First, normatively, as stated by Janet and Robert Denhardt, engagement is key to building citizenship:

We should facilitate citizen engagement because it is the right thing to do according to democratic ideals and our desire to build a sense of community identity and responsibility. Rather than being a means to an end, engagement *is* the end. (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, p. 172)

Second, pragmatically, engagement produces better outcomes in terms of identifying and responding to needs of the targeted populations or areas and achieves more buy-in from both funding agencies and affected citizens. As the Denhardts put it,

From an instrumental or “smart” perspective, we should work to increase citizen involvement because government cannot solve public problems alone. Effective governance increasingly requires active and ongoing citizen participation in planning, policymaking, implementation, and service delivery. The complexity of the problems facing government demands citizen involvement and acceptance, if not active cooperation. (2011, p. 172)

However, empirical evidence of the value added to both public agencies and citizens resulting from engagement is sparse.

HISTORY OF U.S. CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Early in the history of the United States, citizen involvement in government was limited to voting. Given the legal restrictions that determined who was eligible to vote at the time, this meant that a large proportion of the public was not engaged in government at all. Although Progressivists began arguing for a greater role for citizens and more government transparency to facilitate citizen oversight in the early 1900s, it was not until many years later that citizen participation was widely considered a necessary part of the governing process.

The Federal Government and Citizen Engagement

The federal government has been a leader in the citizen participation movement. Many different agencies have been involved. Early examples include the role of tribal organizations in dealings with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Division of the Public Health Service, use of advisory committees of private citizens in the decision-making process for research grant awards by the National Science Foundation, farmers serving on county-based committees established by the Department of Agriculture, and the activities of tenant associations in low-income public housing projects and “blue ribbon” nonresident citizens serving on urban renewal project advisory committees funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Major changes in the types of engaged citizens and goals for involvement accompanied the establishment in the 1960s of Community Action Agencies under the Economic Opportunity Act and City Demonstration Agencies under the Model Cities Act. The former was the cornerstone of the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty, while the latter spearheaded the administration’s efforts to revitalize urban neighborhoods. “Citizens” were predominantly poor minority group members, not affluent whites, who were more neighborhood- than citywide-oriented. Federal legislation called for their maximum feasible or widespread involvement. In some programs, the forms of engagement were not specified; others required that the majority of members of advisory committees be residents of affected areas. Some citizens were elected in community forums, others were appointed by the mayor or city council, and still others were self-designated. In some cities, residents were hired and paid for with grant funds, leading to charges of manipulation and co-optation by the powerful elites (Arnstein, 1969). Nevertheless, the overall goal was a partnership between the local agency and neighborhood organizations and their representatives to alleviate poverty and rebuild communities. Citizen representatives were involved to varying degrees in policy making, funding priority setting, and hiring staff (Stenberg, 1972, pp. 191–192).

Although some of the pioneering citizen engagement programs are no longer in existence, the federal government’s leadership role has continued and has spurred efforts at the local level. The chief vehicle for the spread of citizen participation has been the grant-in-aid program. A study by the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) found that as of December 1978, requirements for various types of citizen participation were attached to 155 federal grant programs, at that time about one third of the total number of programs and accounting for 80% of the grant funds. Most of these programs had been established since 1970, and about half were found in the health, education, and welfare areas. The ACIR identified 31

different forms of participation, ranging from speaking at public hearings to serving on a committee that has some control over decisions. The most common forms of engagement were advisory committees and public hearings (ACIR, 1979, pp. 4–5).

State and Local Government Citizen Engagement

Citizen participation requirements are not confined to federal grant-in-aid programs. At the state and local levels, for example, public hearings in advance of budget approval are mandated by state statute or local ordinance. City and county governing bodies allocate public comment time on their meeting agendas. States have sought to promote greater transparency and access by enacting open-meeting and open-record laws and providing for citizen comments in agency rulemaking under administrative procedure acts. Local voters must often approve proposed bond issuances or other policy changes through referenda. And across the country, there are thousands of citizen advisory boards and local planning committees.

Citizens also participate as coproducers with government agencies in neighborhood watch programs, Adopt a Highway programs, Friends of the Library, recycling, and Crime Stoppers programs as well as serve as volunteers in libraries, recreation program coaching, park maintenance crews, and museums. They provide feedback on local government performance via citizen surveys, citizen academies, and social media. Homeowners associations and other neighborhood organizations provide services in many localities and serve as vehicles for self-governance. Perhaps the best example of the coproducer role is the venerable volunteer fire departments that are found in many small and medium-sized communities across the country. According to the National Fire Protection Association, 31% of the 1,134,400 firefighters in 2014 were careerists, while 69% were volunteers. Ninety-five percent of the volunteers served jurisdictions under 25,000 in population.

As noted in Chapter 2, the Progressive movement introduced the initiative and referendum to some states and localities. These instruments of direct democracy, which bypass representative democracy and the legislative process, are found in 27 states and enable citizens to place policy proposals on the general election ballot or vote to confirm legislative actions and make public policy. Typically, such state ballot measures include proposals for tax increases, such as on general sales and cigarettes, and for bond issuances for transportation and other infrastructure purposes. In addition to fiscal matters, voters in several states were asked recently to decide on medical and recreational marijuana, the death penalty, minimum wage, and campaign finance reforms (Underhill, 2016, p. 13). Eighteen states also permit citizens to recall a public official by direct vote before his or her term of office expires.

This overview of the wide range of governmental programs and activities in which citizen engagement is encouraged or mandated leads us to return to the question: Why engage citizens? Similar to the participatory instruments, the motives, expectations, and results have varied. What are some of the challenges associated with engagement?

OBJECTIVES OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

This chapter began by asking why we should engage citizens. Combining normative and pragmatic arguments, the rationale underlying citizen engagement rests on several anticipated positive outcomes. Involving citizens in the governmental process involves costs—staff time, expense, opening the government up to criticism—but today, the benefits of citizen engagement are considered well worth the costs.

Benefits of Citizen Engagement

The first set of benefits are related to the quality of the public policy solution or decisions that result from involving citizens:

- Both citizens and staff will have a better understanding of problems and needs, options, and priorities.
- Decisions will be improved in terms of their administrative feasibility and political acceptance.

The second set of potential goals from engaging the public relates to the outcomes from the resulting policies or decisions:

- There will be greater buy-in of outcomes by both affected citizens and agency representatives.
- Citizen representatives will facilitate getting the word out to the community as to what action the local government is taking and why.

Finally, welcoming the public to be active participants in the governance process helps to make better citizens and better communities:

- Community representation in decision making will promote community building and reduce antigovernment sentiments.

- Citizen engagement efforts serve as an introduction to the ways citizens can get involved and may lead to more extensive types of government participation.
- Decision making will be open and more transparent, which will help build citizen trust in government.

When Is Citizen Engagement Appropriate?

Although the engagement model rests on these important assumptions about benefits, as a practical matter, citizens do not always want to be engaged nor are they always able to do so. They might not desire to collaborate with local officials or to have control over decentralized local service operations. And public administrators may not welcome their voice or vote. The following observation by George Frederickson (2005) in an assessment of the state of social equity in America is relevant to citizen engagement: “Like it or not, senior public administrators and those of us who study public administration are part of the elite, the privileged. In much of the literature and ideology there is a distinctly patronizing tone” (p. 36).

Citizen engagement is not appropriate across the board. In fact, most local issues may not call for engagement, as they involve the routine performance of basic functions. Types of situations where engagement can add value are where (1) strong, conflicting values or emotions are involved; (2) a controversial or gridlock situation exists and community support is needed for taking action; (3) citizens recognize that a situation has moved from a condition to an issue or problem and will turn into a crisis if actions are not taken; (4) there is more than one right answer or approach; (5) the subject matter does not require citizens to quickly master complex technical information or data; and (6) hostility to government action and distrust of local officials are high (Everett, 2015, p. 24; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004, p. 62). So, citizen engagement is especially useful for diffusing highly emotional policy deliberation and for finding the most satisfactory policy solution for a community when there is disagreement about the direction.

ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGES

Proponents of engagement confront challenges on both the citizen and public official fronts. Consider a hypothetical case in this chapter: While city leaders had good intentions about creating a citizens’ committee to help with the budget formulation, there were a number of potential concerns that were not discussed or addressed prior to moving forward with the creation of the committee.

CHAPTER CASE

BACKGROUND

It is February and the local budget process is about to get underway in the city of Harmony. Located in the Midwest, Harmony has just over 40,000 residents. The population is diverse and most of the residents are middle income. The mayor and members of council in Harmony have decided to reach out to citizens to get a fresh look at the city's finances and identify ways to save money to avoid tax and fee increases while maintaining current service levels. They have voted to establish a citizen's advisory committee on government economy and efficiency. The city manager supports this decision and, at the council's direction, submits the names of prospective appointees, most of whom are graduates of the city-sponsored Citizen's Leadership Academy. The mayor, with council concurrence, appoints the committee members and chair and gives them their charge with a deadline for submitting their report and recommendations one month before the close of the fiscal year on June 30. But the budget director and senior staff members are ambivalent. There are several reasons why all parties might have reservations about participating.

POTENTIAL CITIZEN CONCERNS

- Some citizens may not trust "privileged" public administrators and feel that they are being manipulated to produce outcomes incorporating the values and policies the government wants, not what the community wants. This is especially the case in cities similar to Harmony, where the demographics of the local bureaucracy do not reflect the diversity of the community.
- Citizens might suspect that they are being provided with incomplete or biased information by the staff.
- Citizens might believe that the main reason they have been asked to participate is to give their stamp of approval to otherwise unpopular decisions, such as increasing property tax rates, raising utility or parking fees, installing traffic calming sites, laying off personnel, or closing some branch libraries or fire stations.
- Citizens may be concerned that staff and elected officials will use the commission to buffer criticism from the community or to blame them for recommending tough budget-balancing steps.
- If the results of previous citizen-led advisory committee efforts in identifying areas for cost savings were not seriously considered by the Harmony city government, citizens may view time spent advising on the current budget as time wasted.

STAFF CONCERNS

- The committee was given only a four-month timetable for its work. Even in smaller localities, budgets are lengthy and complex documents. Budgets encompass the entire scope of local operating and capital programs and human capital commitments and are used to articulate strategic priorities. This comprehensive picture takes time to understand.
- The budget process is also driven by the financial history of the jurisdiction as well as by fiscal projections involving a combination of revenue estimates, such as from local property tax collections, state aid, and federal grants. It will likely take several meetings for the committee members to begin to absorb the detailed information on city operations and work through the budget document, so four months is an ambitious deadline if the council is serious about achieving economy and efficiency savings.

BUDGET STAFF CONCERNS

- As well-informed, trained, and experienced professionals, the staff knows best about the city's financial condition, budget history, priorities, and fiscal projections.
- The resources required to help ensure successful engagement could drain the staff's capacity to address other, more important needs.
- Citizen activists could use the advisory committee as a bully pulpit and be disruptive if they do not get their way, attracting bad publicity to the city, which elected officials will not appreciate.
- Too much staff time would be required to bring the citizens up to speed on the budget and service delivery responsibilities so they can give informed advice.
- Administrators could lose control of the budget process timelines, and delays could jeopardize completion and adoption by the end of the fiscal year.
- Media stories about fraud, waste, and abuse and citizen distrust and dissatisfaction with government could bias or skew the objectivity of the committee and its receptivity to staff input.
- High and unrealistic expectations could be established about the levels of economy and efficiency that are to be attained through the advisory committee's work, and elected officials will likely blame the staff for any shortfalls.

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LOGISTICAL CONCERNS

- Citizens may not have the time to attend committee meetings, especially if they are held during regular working hours.
- There may be other barriers to attending meetings. For example, if the participants have to pay for child care and parking expenses while engaged with the committee, this could be a disincentive to participation.
- These barriers may alter the makeup of the citizen committee in a way that alters the outcome. Because citizens are not paid to participate and may have costs to attend, many of these committees are dominated by more affluent participants (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).
- There is no assurance that members of the committee are representative of and respected by the community, especially since they were selected by city officials from a pool of Citizen Academy graduates.

DISCONNECT BETWEEN CITIZENS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

- Although a priority for elected officials and staff, the search for economy and efficiency in governmental operations might not be as urgent, compelling, or critical to the community as it is to public officials. After all, citizens care most about the level, quality, and timeliness of services and not as much about what these cost or who provides them. If the citizen advisory committee is charged generally with identifying ways to save public money and increase efficiency, their attention might not be as focused or sustained as it would with assessing a list of options involving services they consider critical to the community.
- Unlike staff and management who are faced on a daily basis with considering the tough value trade-offs among liberty, community, prosperity, and equality that often arise in decision making (Boyle, 2001), citizens may not be aware of these tensions. Elected officials are experienced in making these judgments, while citizen volunteers might not recognize the underlying values or might be uncomfortable balancing them. For example, initiatives to increase service efficiency and productivity, such as reductions in trash collection and neighborhood policing patrols, could have negative impacts on equity. Economic development plans to create jobs and bolster tax revenues by focusing on recruiting technology companies would likely not benefit low-skilled workers formerly employed in manufacturing.
- Staff are able to take a community-wide perspective, while community members may be more concerned about their own neighborhood.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

If you were the city manager, what steps could you take to try to preempt these concerns?

Engaging citizens in ways that are more meaningful than a traditional public hearing is complicated and involves a great deal of planning and foresight. As the case above points out, the perspective of citizens can be very different from that of those working inside of government. Those differing perspectives can influence the attitudes of potential participants and staff, thereby affecting the overall process and outcomes of the engagement effort.

Despite these mutual concerns and reservations, the citizen participation literature cautions that failure to engage citizens creates more serious problems. There could be a mismatch between the assessment of needs and priorities by citizens and by public administrators. For example, let us say that the new Harmony police chief is a champion of community-oriented policing while residents of poorer and minority neighborhoods are skeptical of the intentions underlying the increased police presence and are uncomfortable having armed personnel in uniform patrolling their streets. As this example demonstrates, local staff may be considered out of touch with community sentiments and concerns. Top-down, us-versus-them staff attitudes fuel alienation, not collaboration. And distrust of government could grow, not diminish. Janet and Robert Denhardt (2011) observe,

What appears to be most important from a citizen's perspective and from the standpoint of attaining ongoing engagement is not the strategy employed, but the government's response when citizens voice their preferences. For citizens, two questions are paramount: Did the government listen and take action based on what it heard? Was the response worth the citizen's time and effort? (p. 181)

Valerie Lemmie, former city manager of Petersburg, Virginia, and Dayton and Cincinnati, Ohio, provides a community safety example of working together:

In one neighborhood, drug dealers congregated on a dimly lit pedestrian bridge, making it unsafe for neighborhood residents and [providing] a quick, undetected "in and out" for those buying drugs. For the police, this was a minor concern given other, more flagrant violations in the neighborhood and

they agreed only to add temporary patrols. It was citizens who came up with the best solution to “take back” convenient access to their neighborhood. With the city’s endorsement, they glued plastic eggs to the railings, making it an uncomfortable place to sit. That was the end of drug dealing. Better lighting, more police patrols, and improved landscaping helped ensure that the dealers did not return. (Lemmie, 2008, p. 37)

Engagement is challenging because citizen participation in local government has historically been low, both at the ballot box or in other venues. According to Kevin Desouza (2015), “In 2014, the National Research Center conducted a survey on resident activity and found that only 19 percent of Americans contacted their local elected officials over a 12-month period, and about 25 percent attended a public meeting” (p. 14). Noting that many previous citizen participation attempts have not produced fruitful results despite investments of time and resources, he concluded:

The strong temptation to engage people more because it’s popular can be detrimental to a local government. While I would never go as far as to say stop seeking citizen engagement, I would implore that you find the right balance of engagement. (p. 16)

At the same time, it is noteworthy that public opinion polls since the early 1970s have shown that citizens have more positive views of local government compared with state and federal governments, which could facilitate engagement. A 2009 survey conducted by John Kincaid and Richard Cole found that 62% of the respondents believed that local governments were trustworthy, compared to 55% for states and 50% for the federal government. Thirty-one percent reported that localities delivered the “most for the money,” compared to 29% for the federal government and 26% for states (Kincaid & Cole, 2011). While these percentages were lower than the 2002 figures, the trend did not change. Nevertheless, “the comparisons provide little solace because none of the trust levels is very high” and, therefore, local officials may be concerned about a lack of “legitimacy for action” on problems or issues confronting their community (Barnes, 2016, p. 3).

Citizen engagement advocates take some credit for these survey results, pointing out that the amount of openness of local governments and availability of officials are important factors. Even though functional responsibilities have become highly intergovernmentalized, citizens see their cities and counties as being on the front lines in providing basic services such as schools, water and sewer services, police and fire protection, parks and recreation, road maintenance, trash



Citizens participate in a public hearing for rent control proposals in Portland, Oregon.

collection, and libraries. Many communities televise meetings of their governing bodies, have websites, and use blogs and social media to communicate information to citizens. Citizens can also participate in local affairs via public hearings and service on advisory boards. And they can meet with elected officials and public administrators in the city hall or county courthouse as well as at the grocery store, church, or athletic field. While these are positive features, elected officials and public administrators sometimes complain that being so close to the citizens has a price tag: They live in a fishbowl-like environment and find it difficult to have privacy.

To sum up, even though engagement may be both the right and smart thing to do, administrators should be aware that there are both advantages and disadvantages for the citizens and for local governments. These are summarized by Renee Irvin and John Stansbury in Table 8.1. The next section reviews different types of participation and considers the expectations associated with engagement.

FROM PARTICIPATION TO POWER

As indicated previously, the 1960s witnessed an upsurge of federally mandated or promoted citizen participation initiatives, mostly as crosscutting requirements

TABLE 8.1 ■ Advantages and Disadvantages of Citizen Participation in Governmental Decision Making

		Advantages of Citizen Participation		Disadvantages of Citizen Participation	
		Advantages to citizens	Advantages to government	Disadvantages to citizens	Disadvantages to government
Decision Process		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education (learn from and inform government representatives) • Persuade and enlighten government • Gain skills for activist citizenship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educating (learn from and inform citizens) • Persuade citizens • Build trust and allay anxiety or hostility • Build strategic alliances • Gain legitimacy of decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time consuming (even dull) • Pointless if decision is ignored 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time consuming • Costly • May backfire, creating more hostility toward government
Outcomes		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break gridlock • Achieve outcomes • Gain some control over policy process • Better policy and implementation decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break gridlock • Achieve outcomes • Avoid litigation costs • Better policy and implementation decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worse policy decision may be selected if heavily influenced by opposing interest groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of decision-making control • Possibility of bad decision that is politically impossible to ignore • Lower budget for implementation of actual projects

Source: Irvin & Stansbury, 2004.

accompanying grant-in-aid programs. These initiatives were greeted with controversy in some communities, as sometimes there was a mismatch between the expectations of federal and local officials and engaged citizens regarding the outcomes of engagement. One of the most influential examinations of the range and results of participation at that time was conducted by Sherry Arnstein.

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation

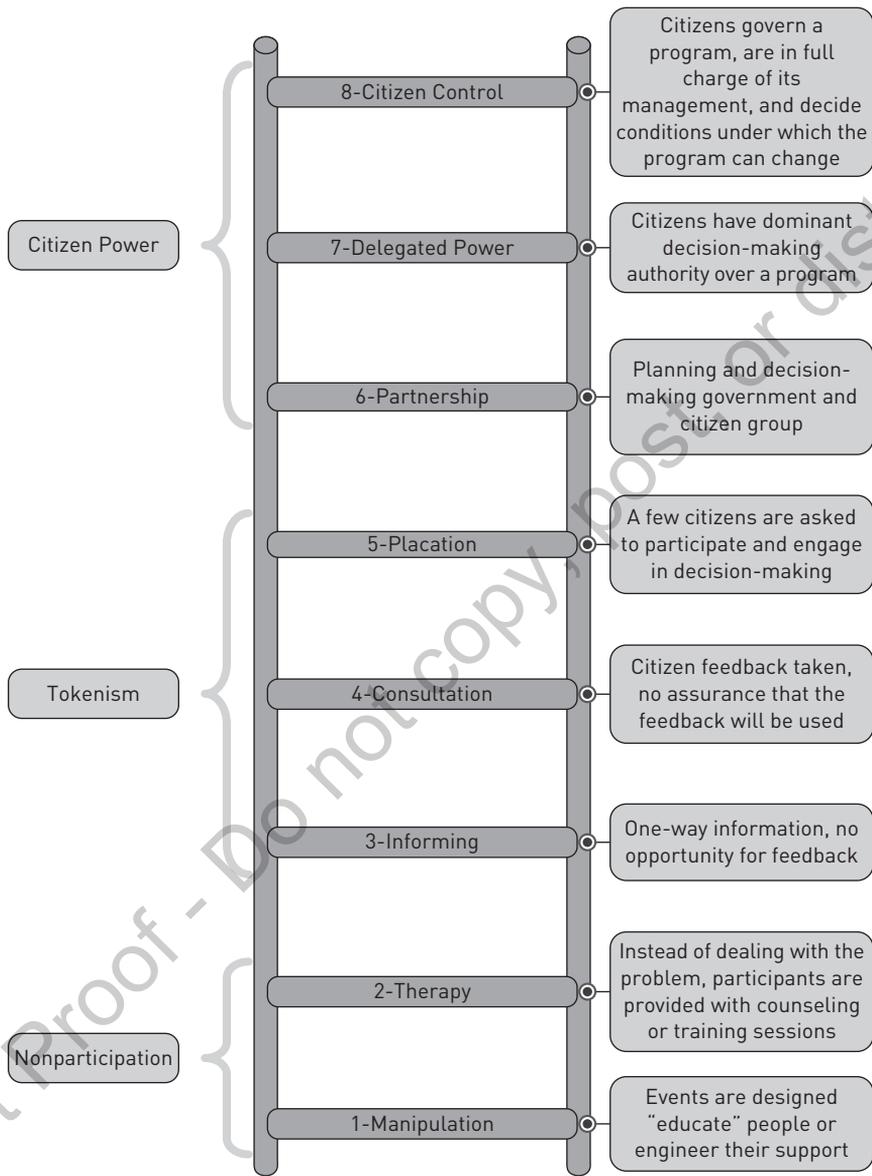
Drawing on examples from the federal urban renewal, antipoverty, and model cities programs, Arnstein developed a typology of participation depicting the interplay between the powerless and powerholders. Figure 8.1 shows her ladder of participation, with each of the eight rungs indicating the “extent of citizens’ power in determining the end product” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217).

At the lowest rungs, manipulation and therapy, the privileged dimension of public administrators and elected officials is apparent, as these officials (powerholders) seek to educate or remediate citizens through service on rubber stamp advisory committees or neighborhood councils. To Arnstein, these steps are nonparticipatory for the citizens and are chiefly public relations vehicles for the powerholders.

The next three steps—informing, consultation, and placation—involve officials providing information and seeking advice. Citizen surveys, neighborhood meetings, and public hearings are common approaches in this category. However, these steps are mainly one-dimensional and there is no assurance that citizen voices will be heard, advice will be heeded, and the status quo changed. After reviewing program evaluations conducted for HUD and Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), Arnstein concluded that the level of participation in most of the Model Cities Act’s city demonstration agencies and the OEO’s community action agencies was at the placation rung or below. As in previous federal programs, citizens were being planned for by those in city hall. Boards tended to rubber stamp staff decisions instead of taking the initiative to identify and prioritize citizen or community needs and develop ways to address them.

At the highest rungs of the ladder are three degrees of power redistribution—partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. Partnership involves negotiations and trade-offs between citizens and officials, sometimes because of citizen anger and protests that attract media and federal attention. At the top are actions that give citizens a voting majority on decision-making bodies or control of policy and management, such as through establishment of a neighborhood corporation or decentralization of public services such as police, schools, and health to neighborhood governing bodies (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217). Not surprisingly, Arnstein’s review did

FIGURE 8.1 ■ Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation



Source: Arnstein, 1969, p. 217.

not reveal a significant number of examples of power sharing and community control. She did cite a number of arguments made by opponents:

It [community control] supports separatism; it creates balkanization of public services; it is more costly and less efficient; it enables minority group “hustlers” to be just as opportunistic and disdainful of the have-nots as their white predecessors; it is incompatible with merit systems and professionalism; and ironically enough, it can turn out to be a new Mickey Mouse game for the have-nots by allowing them to gain control but not allowing them sufficient dollar resources to succeed. (p. 224)

At the same time, there are some instructive examples of localities sharing power. Beginning in 1971, the Dayton city council awarded grants to seven neighborhood priority boards that served as the voice for the city’s 65 neighborhoods and were recognized as Dayton’s citizen participation structure. The boards made investments in priority projects within their respective boundaries, such as festivals, beautification efforts, and other neighborhood improvements. Members and officers were elected and each board had a city staff liaison assigned. According to the Dayton Priority Board’s website (City of Dayton, 2017),

They [priority boards] have been instrumental at both the City and grassroots level in their support of the legislative changes, new program implementation, and leadership development. The City of Dayton and the Priority Boards have worked together to improve Dayton by supporting income tax increase and renewals, the passage of local school levies, and support of innovative City ordinances.

In 2014, the city changed its community engagement strategy and stopped funding the priority boards due to concerns about insufficient neighborhood organizational volunteer leadership and domination of some boards by longtime members. Under the revamped system, instead of the boards acting as intermediaries and distributing money to neighborhood groups and business associations, all three organizations were considered as equals by the city in the competition for funding. In 2015, the city awarded mini-grants totaling nearly \$100,000 for neighborhood projects (Frolik, 2015).

In Reno, Nevada, eight neighborhood advisory boards are allocated a total of \$380,000 annually divided on a per capita basis to meet needs such as swimming

pools, litter control, neighborhood watches, and festivals. According to the city manager,

Having real resources to dedicate to neighborhood priorities has raised the profile of these boards, and the sense of local participation has caught on. . . . The NABs [neighborhood advisory boards] have become influential bodies and consistently communicate with their respective city councilmembers as well as with city staff. (McNeely, 2007, p. 17)

These examples demonstrate that the stridency and tone of the community power movement have changed since the 1960s. But Arnstein's ladder remains a useful way to differentiate approaches to citizen engagement.

International Association of Public Participation Spectrum

A second useful model, shown in Figure 8.2, was developed by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2). The IAP2 model features a continuum of participation moving from inform to consult to involve to collaborate to empower. Particularly helpful to both citizens and public officials are the promises made to the public by the latter at each stage together with the tools or techniques that are appropriate, given the level of public input being sought.

E-GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT

Today, engaging the public in the governance process can be facilitated with technology. The e-government movement and growth of social media applications have provided additional opportunities for localities to move beyond the traditional tools to engage citizens. While technology can make it easier for governments to reach larger proportions of their populations, due to some drawbacks, these methods should not wholly replace more traditional ways of involving the public.

Examples of E-Engagement

Among the examples of approaches that are being used by local government are the following, taken from the website of the Alliance for Innovation (2014):

- conducting electronic surveys, which can be quantified to solicit information and views from citizens on subjects such as spending priorities, neighborhood service adequacy, and planned development;

FIGURE 8.2 ■ IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation



	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
<i>Public participation goal</i>	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities, and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making power in the hands of the public.
<i>Promise to the public</i>	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
<i>Example techniques</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fact sheets • Websites • Open houses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public comments • Focus groups • Surveys • Public meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops • Deliberative polling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen advisory committees • Consensus building • Participatory decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen juries • Ballots • Delegated decision

Source: International Association for Public Participation, 2007.

- using social media such as Twitter and Facebook, blogs, online forums, and open city halls to enable citizens to receive real-time information such as street closings and traffic jams, communicate with one another and with public officials, and comment on local issues and personalities;
- changing the format of town hall meetings to become call-in shows or “telephone town halls,” enabling citizens to participate in discussions by telephone or e-mail as well as in person, and recording sessions for YouTube and local website access;
- providing a website for citizens to use to speak up on local services and interact with administrators and elected officials;
- scheduling “hangout at city hall” opportunities during which citizens can interact virtually with the mayor, council members, and city manager;
- relying on government-access cable to showcase local projects such as arts festivals, entertainer performances, and live conversations with the mayor, other elected officials, and the city manager;
- using 311 call centers or other one-stop shops for handling citizen nonemergency requests and complaints—such as missed trash collections, potholes, and nonfunctioning traffic signals—together with tracking, referral, and responding capacities;
- developing civic applications of high-speed Internet access and webinars to spur citizen engagement in budgeting, visioning, planning, and transportation;
- giving citizens access to local data using dashboards, websites, and apps to facilitate comparisons of their community’s cost of doing business and performance with peer jurisdictions; and
- offering online engagement games and simulations that allow citizens to participate and compete in comprehensive and land use planning or budgeting development exercises to give them greater appreciation of the difficulties of local decision making.

Concerns about E-Engagement

Using technology to involve the public is not without its drawbacks. There are two concerns to be had about e-engagement. First, it may be too customer-service oriented and one dimensional. While citizens may be viewed as customers of public

agencies and should be informed about the activities of their local government, this is not sufficient. As Arnstein's ladder and the IAP2 spectrum indicate, authentic citizen engagement involves using citizen input to inform government decisions or policies.

Second, there are also social equity concerns related to e-governance tools. E-government is available to those who have access to technology but it could adversely affect disadvantaged citizens (Durant & Ali, 2013, p. 280). While public programs exist to make computers available in libraries and provide high-speed Internet access to rural communities and low-income areas, there still exists a digital divide. Even in cases where citizens have the means to purchase computer equipment and Internet service, there exist issues with computer literacy, particularly with senior citizens. As Reno, Nevada's city manager cautioned, "When turning to technology to improve on these traditional methods of citizen participation, we must remember that the heart of the matter is the residents' experience, not the tools used to improve it" (McNeely, 2007, p. 17).

As local governments implement new technologies to reach their residents, they must consider whether access disparities exist. Where disparities do exist, caution should be taken not to rely too extensively for social media to determine how to provide or prioritize services. For example, during Hurricane Sandy in Newark, New Jersey, Mayor Cory Booker rose to national prominence by quickly responding to Tweets from residents seeking assistance (O'Connor, 2012). While Mayor Booker demonstrated concern and responsiveness for his constituents during the storm, he may have also diverted city resources based on who had access to technology rather than who had the greatest need.

In addition to modifying responsiveness based on social media requests, there is the question of how uniform the use of social media is among different communities. A review of research on the use of social media by local governments concluded that social media use is not dependent on form of government or population size, although the literature hypothesizes that council-manager localities and larger units are more likely to use social media. The former jurisdictions might be expected to have an environment that is more conducive to citizen engagement due to the tenets of the ICMA Code of Ethics and professional training of the manager and management team. The latter type of community has more resources to invest in technology. Bryer and Nelson (2013) also concluded that local governments "are not using the technologies in much more than a unidirectional manner; this has potential implications for citizen engagement both in process (what do we expect of our citizens) and outcome (such as trust in government and efficacy)" (pp. 241–242). Other research found that the most common use of e-government has involved sharing information about local meetings and events and transacting services such as paying taxes, fees, or fines; registering for local athletic teams; or renewing library books and DVDs.

MAKING ENGAGEMENT WORK

Research has shown widely varying results from local application of the citizen engagement approaches across jurisdictions of all sizes and forms of government. There are many examples of successful and unsuccessful engagement efforts by municipalities and counties (Beierle, 2002). Even though there is more anecdotal than empirical evidence, what is clear from the literature is that there is tension between professionalism and participation and that administrative systems that emphasize the former can marginalize engagement.

Nevertheless, it is argued that the likely benefits of engagement outweigh the costs—that engagement is both the right thing to do and the smart thing to do (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, p. 183). What is also clear is that despite a checkered history and mixed results, leadership in promoting citizen engagement has shifted from the federal government to municipalities and counties. While federal crosscutting grant program requirements in this area continue to be influential, a review of the literature reveals a strong commitment, particularly from the local management profession, to reach out to citizens. For example, included among the competencies and skills expected of managers in ICMA's Practices for Effective Local Government Management (Appendix 2) is “recognizing the right of citizens to influence local decisions and promoting active citizen involvement in local governance.”

John Nalbandian (2008) argues that citizen engagement is no longer optional; it is imperative as an anchor for managers to use in bridging the growing gap between political acceptability and administrative feasibility (p. 37). And Valerie Lemmie (2008) contends that engagement needs to join economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and equity as the fifth core component of the manager's value proposition because “never before has the gulf between citizens and their government been so wide, frustrations and anger so high, and the solutions so seemingly elusive” (p. 34).

Robust citizen engagement in local performance management is a recent example of how managers and citizens can work together in the ways indicated by Nalbandian and Lemmie. These engagement efforts are multidimensional and entail citizens playing some or all of five roles that are key to aligning performance information with programs and services that citizens value. These involve treating citizens as more than just customers and seeking to engage citizens and exchange ideas about community activities that they really care about as (1) stakeholders who have expectations about local services and views on how well they are performed; (2) advocates on behalf of community interests, needs, and priorities; (3) issue framers for community visions, goals, strategies, alternatives, and outcomes; (4) evaluators of service quality and costs; and (5) collaborators and coproducers to help achieve community

goals. As local governments embark on the challenging journey from performance measurement to performance management, the most crucial of these five roles is issue framing (Epstein, Wray, & Harding, 2006, p. 19).

The effectiveness of citizen engagement depends on having the appropriate structure and process. Nalbandian (2008) stresses the importance of *planned* engagement, which “comes in many shapes and sizes but, generally speaking, brings diverse groups together either as individuals or as representatives in semiformal, facilitated settings to plan and problem solve” (p. 36). While there is no formula that guarantees positive results, there are at least twelve steps that local managers could take to increase prospects that the engagement experience will add value to both the government and citizens. These are (1) identifying important tasks for the citizens to perform in addressing a well-recognized problem; (2) selecting the appropriate engagement approach or technique in light of the goal of engagement (see Figure 8.2); (3) encouraging the community to volunteer for service, consulting with community leaders on possible representatives and chair candidates, and ensuring membership diversity; (4) clarifying the charge of the group and expectations of the members, elected officials, and staff; (5) determining roles, duties, and authorities; (6) establishing a transparent decision-making process; (7) giving realistic time limits and reasonable deliverables; (8) scheduling regular meetings at convenient times and in neutral, comfortable locations, preferably other than city hall or a county courthouse; (9) making staff available to provide information and historical perspective as well as arranging for neutral facilitation of meetings; (10) reimbursing citizen representatives for their transportation and child care expenses and providing food at meetings; (11) determining specific, realistic, and measurable outputs; and (12) developing an action plan for implementation, including communications and evaluations strategies (Stephens, Morse, & O’Brien, 2011).

Beyond these steps, success will depend on the readiness of elected officials, professional staff, and citizens to work together as well as on the community’s capacity to encourage and sustain engagement. The Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership at Pepperdine University has developed a self-evaluation scorecard that enables local officials to ask themselves, “How are we doing?” The scorecard lists 20 practices shared by agencies that take engagement seriously under three categories: culture of engagement, engagement practices, and community capacity and partnerships. The Institute also recognizes communities that embrace these best practices. In July 2016, it gave its highest award to San Rafael, California, for its use of

advanced technologies for involving its residents in a variety of thorny issues, including the development of a homeless action plan, quiet zones for a new

commuter train, business issues, negotiations with unionized municipal employees, climate-change activities, safety facilities, sidewalk maintenance and downtown parking. (Gould, 2016)

In some cases, managers might conclude that the costs of engagement outweigh the benefits and choose to use traditional top-down decision making. In other circumstances, the reverse may be true. The message to managers is that “it behooves the administrator to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the decision-making process when determining the most effective implementation strategy, bearing in mind that talk is not cheap—and may not even be effective” (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004, p. 63).

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RESOURCE LIST/ TO EXPLORE FURTHER

Books/Articles

- Nabatchi, T., & Leighninger, M. (2015). *Public participation for 21st century democracy*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass

Stephens, J. B., Morse, R. S., & O'Brien, K. T. (2011). *Public outreach and participation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina School of Government

Upshaw, V. M. (2010). *Creating and maintaining effective local government citizen advisory committees*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina School of Government

Web Resources

Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership, School of Public Policy, Pepperdine University. (2017). *How are we doing?* Available at <https://publicpolicy.pepperdine.edu/davenport-institute/evaluating-engagement/>

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