Citizen Participation: Looks Good on Paper but Hard To Do in Practice
Aimee L. Franklin, University of Oklahoma (Primary Contact)
and Carol Ebdon, University of Nebraska at Omaha


Abstract: Theory offers normative prescriptions concerning citizen participation in resource allocation decisions. Yet, in practice, cities struggle with this activity (Ebdon 2002). Why is something that looks so good on paper so difficult to carry out in practice? That is the concern guiding this research. Using the extant literature to develop a model of citizen participation, we compare theory and practice both to identify areas where theory needs to be refined, but also to share a form of analysis that may be useful for cities when they consider their next round of stakeholder interaction. We find that there are four categories of factors that can cause poor participation outcomes. Identification of these allows for the development of targeted remedies that can improve desired outcomes.

How best to involve citizens in government decision processes has been a concern since the creation of the nation. Urban scholars suggest that local government has the best opportunity to promote face-to-face interaction between the elected officials and the populace (Saltzstein 2003). Based on this, there is a strong tradition of fostering citizen involvement in local political decision making. For example, in the 1960's the creation of Citizen Participation Organizations was a requirement for local governments to receive Community Development Block Grants. Allowing citizen boards to make resource allocation decisions is thought to foster high levels of social capital (Putnam 1993). Using social capital theory, the citizens represent key stakeholders for government programs and their input is solicited since they have the highest stake, that is they are the ones most likely to be impacted by the decisions being made.

Boschken (1994) supports this conclusion when he indicates that if an organization does not know its stakeholders, what they want from the organization and how they judge performance, there is little likelihood that they will be able to satisfy their key stakeholders. He also suggests that more important than having great numbers of participants is to purposively select participants to represent the range of stakeholder views (Boschken 1992). Franklin (2001) has found evidence that, when selecting participants, federal agencies are most likely to interact with the usual suspects: those stakeholders that the agency typically deals with most frequently. Yet, are these stakeholders representative of the public interests? How can you determine effectively determine the stakeholders to include in participative processes (Bryson 1995)?

Once the potential stakeholder participants have been identified, there are then choices to be made concerning the mechanisms that will be used for participation (Ebdon and Franklin forthcoming). Forums that provide and exchange information in more of an education mode are a common activity when citizens participate in government processes (Bryson 1995, 224). However, these activities lengthen the time commitment, so a trade off may have to be made. In addition, participants need to understand the purpose and the boundaries of the discussion before
they can state their preferences (Simonsen and Robbins 2000). Thus, the mechanisms for participation need to be carefully structured.

From a theoretical perspective, there are several normative expectations and prescriptions that can guide citizen participation in resource allocation decisions. Yet, in practice, there is evidence that cities struggle with this activity (Ebdon 2002). Why is something that looks so good on paper so difficult to carry out in practice? That is the concern that guides this research. We examine the nature of the gap between citizen participation theory and practice both to identify areas where theory needs to be refined, but also to share a form of analysis that may be useful for cities when they consider their next round of stakeholder interaction. The following section overviews literature on this topic, then a model of participation is presented and tested using case study data from five midwestern cities. We conclude that the model will probably need refinement and further testing; however, the suggested form of analysis does have value in that it attempts to integrate our existing knowledge as well as offers a practical tools for cities struggling with the practice of participation.

**Theories Guiding Citizen Participation**

How to accomplish meaningful citizen participation is a complex puzzle. This article suggests four groups of factors that must be considered: the structure of the city, the types of participants, the mechanisms used to foster participation and the process itself. The identification of these four groups of factors was made inductively based on the experiences of five local governments in the midwestern states. There are, of course, other theoretical factors that may offer more robust explanations. Some examples that quickly come to mind are the political culture of the locality or the nature of the decisions that require citizen input, etc. Space limitations prevent consideration of these, but the analytical technique presented here can be repeated in a sort of competition of theories.

**City Structure**

There are several characteristics of a city that theorists claim will make it more or less likely that citizen participation is viewed as a valuable activity by city officials. Three factors related to city structure are considered in our model: the size of the city, the form of government, and the legal requirements governing citizen input. In terms of the size of the city, Ebdon (2002) finds that larger cities are more likely to provide formal opportunities for citizen input than are smaller cities. Part of the explanation for this practice may be that officials in smaller cities have more opportunity to interact with citizens during informal activities such as social club meetings or school activities (Saltzein 2003). Professional organizations such as the ICMA (1999) and NAPA (1999) have long touted the importance of the use of participation mechanisms. As evidence of the importance of this practice, Nalbandian (1999) finds that the council-manager form of government has made the greatest strides in encouraging citizen participation suggesting that the presence of a full-time city administrator makes it more likely to occur since they have a "... commitment to a broader array of community values" (1991, 167). City officials recognize that there are important benefits gained from encouraging participation. Berman (1997) finds that
through participation citizens become less cynical about local government. One way to gather
citizen input that is typically legally mandated by state statute or city charter is the public
meetings of the city council or commission to discuss the budget. Council or commission
meetings are thought to be a suitable forum for discussing difficult budget issues (Roberts 1997);
however, this input often comes after key decisions regarding resource allocation have been
made. That is why the concern with the legal requirements and their impact on desired outcomes
is important.

Based on these normative conclusions, we would predict that the best likelihood that
citizen participation will be encouraged in a city is when: 1) the population of the city is large,
say over 100,000 population, 2) the council-manager form of government is used, and 3) legal
requirements support the incorporation of citizen input during the resource allocation process.
When these conditions exist, then cities will be more likely to institute citizen participation
mechanisms both because it is "good urban management" but also because it can build bridges
between political leaders and citizens (Saltzein 2003), an activity that is supported by theoretical
prescriptions and professional organizations both.

Citizen Participants

The next group of factors to consider when determining how to foster citizen
participation is the selection of the participants themselves. In this respect, city officials have to
consider who will participate and who will identify and invite the participants, the criteria by
which participants will be selected, and the reasons why citizens will choose to become involved.
Often citizens are invited to participate by either the city council or a lead city administrator such
as the manager or the CAO because these officials see the benefits of two-way communication
(Kathlene and Martin 1991). Assuming that there is a desire by city officials to gather a wide
range of views, the criteria used to encourage or allow participation must be purposively
determined (Thomas 1995). There are several choices. First is to make participation open to
anyone with an interest and willing to invest their time. This is the format typical for city council
or commission meetings. Or, there may be some form of blanket invitation made for special
meetings in a variety of locations around the city. A third type of invitation would be to invite
people selectively based on the geographic regions or districts in the city or on the basis of
selecting representation of particular community groups or occupations. Another type of
purposive invitation is to invite known political "friends" or else the "usual suspects", i.e., those
that have been active in this type of activity in the past. Of these four types of invitation methods,
the third is preferred because it strives for a representative sample of viewpoints. The last factor
in the citizen participant group is the reason why citizens decide to participate (whether they are
invited by the city or not). Some purposes that are positive are because they have a strong sense
of civic duty or because they are curious about how resources are allocated among all the issues
and needs the city faces (Mitroff 1983). On the other hand, reasons for participating that would
not be viewed as positively are because there is dissatisfaction with the existing or proposed
distribution of resources or to influence the decisions being made on a single "pet" issue (Ebdon
To summarize this group of factors, the kinds of citizens that are involved and the impetus for their participation should be carefully considered when attempting to structure effective participation. When the invitation comes from the city council or the city manager/administrator, it suggests a commitment to two-way communication. When the participants are purposively selected to be representative of a variety of interests and when the participants begin the process with an agenda to make suggestions that are in the best interest of all the residents of the city, then the input from citizen participation will be valuable since the results will be viewed as representative of and in the public interest.

Mechanisms for Participation

As mentioned before, requirements in the state statutes or city charter normally give citizens the opportunity to register their budget preferences during public hearings of the city council/commission. Neither these public meetings nor citizen surveys are viewed as very good mechanisms for gathering sincere preferences (Glaser and Denhardt 1999). Instead theorists such as O’Toole, Marshall and Grewe (1996) recommend providing multiple opportunities for citizens to register their preferences. This way the opportunities for access are improved (NAPA 1999). In addition, timing is important. Ebdon and Franklin (forthcoming) find that, to be valuable, the input must come early in the process, before initial decisions are made by city administrators or elected officials and sufficient time must be allowed but the time commitment must not be too large. Another consideration when designing the participation mechanisms is the scope of the material to be presented. Gurwitt (1992) suggests that citizens will be active when the discussion concerns neighborhood issues; however, since the budget impacts all areas of the city, Mark and Shotland (1985) advise that the stakeholder input should be structured to consider the larger, societal interests and thus preserve the perceived legitimacy of the results.

Thus, from this literature, we can conclude that citizen participation outcomes will be improved when there are multiple opportunities for access, that occur early in the process and allow sufficient time for deliberation, and the discussion centers on city-wide rather than geographic or single issues. When these conditions exist, then the citizen participation mechanisms will be structured to foster meaningful discussion and provide valuable input into the decision making process.

Participation Process

The last group of factors considers the logistics of the process itself. One common barrier to meaningful participation, noted by Frisby and Bowman (1996), is a lack of participant knowledge. When this occurs, participants are less likely to provide valuable information. Simonsen and Robbins (2000) echo this concern with the content of the information being discussed when they recommend paying attention to the amount of information and how it is presented. They recommend using graphs, figures and tables targeted to the language of the layman. Another factor that can impact the success of the participation process is the extent to which the process results in the citizens being able to explicitly register their preferences. When determining the citizen’s preferences, Webb and Hatry (1973) caution that an attempt must be
made to determine sincere preferences. Their concern is with measuring desires that are grounded in the reality of the fiscal situation, or to gain accurate estimates of the willingness to pay. Even though gathering information reflecting sincere preferences is difficult, it would be desirable to structure decisions regarding preferences so that some ranking or determination of comparable worth would be made (Wilson, 1983). If this condition can be achieved, then public officials would be more likely to consider these preferences during the decision making process (Franklin and Carberry-George 1999).

Designing a participation process that provides the information necessary to educate and inform the participants, in language they understand, is an important first step for gathering their preferences. Since the desired result of participation is to produce usable information, the process should culminate with the participants registering their sincere preferences that weight the relative importance of a variety of budget items. Then, once the preferences are registered by the participants, the input will be more valuable to the city officials as they make their final resource allocation decisions.

The factors included in each of the four groups of causes: city structure, citizen participants, participation mechanisms and process, suggest important variables that can lead to a more or less effective participation outcome. Table 1 recaps the groups of factors and identifies conditions supportive of desired participation outcomes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor Group/Variable Name</th>
<th>Description of Supportive Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>City Structure</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Larger cities are more likely to structure participation opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form of Govt</td>
<td>City manager will emphasize and council will support participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Requirements</td>
<td>Structured to foster the incorporation of citizen input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation</td>
<td>Council or manager encourage participation as valuable interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>Purposive criteria to foster opportunity as well as representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>Citizens doing civic duty, not because of isolated dissatisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanisms</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>Multiple, interactive and institutionalized (good mgmt not crisis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing</td>
<td>Early in process and more than one-shot, but not large commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage</td>
<td>City wide concerns rather than single issue or geographic focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Explicitly stated and ensures sufficient education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format</td>
<td>Presents materials in laymen’s terms (tables, graphs, comparisons)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences</td>
<td>Participants reveal preferences (sincere or relative weights)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Desired Outcomes</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decision makers use information for stated purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two-way communication and feedback on utilization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants are satisfied and perceive impact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Determining Impacts

The next step then is to identify factors that represent the desired impacts of participation. The literature offers a variety of normative conclusions regarding the desired outcomes from citizen participation. For this research, we focus on three factors that could constitute evidence of outcomes. First, the city council or commission will use the information generated by the participants to make decisions or for the stated purpose (Long and Franklin forthcoming). Second, there will be two-way communication to show that citizen input was considered (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998). And, third, the participants will be satisfied that their involvement was meaningful or that it had some impact (Berman 1997). When these conditions exist, then citizen participation is considered effective and there is predicted to be a greater likelihood that participation will continue and will have an impact on resource allocation decisions.

The challenge comes in being able to test this model: there may not be clear and consistent links to theory. In part this may be because of the large number of variables and their imprecise measurement, but also because this is not a comprehensive list of all variables that may be important. Others suggested in the literature that could be included are: political culture, voter participation levels, type of budget format, extent of budget change being considered, the availability of information, media fostered perceptions, the nature of the mechanisms (institutionalized or episodic or unique) and the tenor of relationships between the different types of participants. Rather than create an exceptionally complex model that strives for comprehensiveness, we are trying, through theoretical testing, to identify gaps between theory and practice and their relative significance. In addition, we present an analytical technique that can be replicated with any factors that are thought to offer robust explanations.

Analytical Design and Methodology

The literature on continuous improvement and total quality management offers many analytical tools, borrowed from the private sector, that can be helpful for improving the quality of existing processes. One of these is the Ishikawa fishbone diagram. The purpose of the fishbone, or cause-and-effect, diagram is to stimulate thinking about the factors that enhance or impede quality and to assist in problem solving (Huddleston 2000, 39). The diagram presents a conceptual map of the major categories and subordinate factors affecting the quality of the outcome of interest. Creating a diagram does not identify primary problems or solutions, but it does focus discussion and initiate a process whereby possible causes can be weighed and remedies identified. Similar to a Pareto chart, the fishbone diagram can be used to identify what groups of factors contribute the most to less than perfect outcomes and thus, suggest what areas to work on by observing the "80-20" rule where 80 percent of the problems stem from only 20 percent of the causes (Huddleston 2000, 40).

We have used the cause-and-effect diagraming technique to create conceptual maps for five midwestern cities. The template is presented in Figure 1. The normative literature discussed in the previous section was used to identify four categories of causes labeled: City Structure, Individual Participants, Participation Process, and Participation Mechanisms. The analysis does
not test each cause within a category, rather it aggregates them to examine the group of factors as a whole and compares the four different categories of factors as an interacting group that affects the outcomes from participation.

[Figure 1: Model Cause-and-Effect Diagram]

To test the model, we did secondary analysis of case study data gathered by the authors on five midwestern cities: Wichita and Topeka Kansas, and Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Davenport Iowa. The cities were purposively selected because they had tried a variety of citizen participation mechanisms. The case study material (interviews of elected officials, city administrators, and prior participants; surveys; documents; publications; media outlets; videos; and non-participant observation) was gathered in approximately one week visits to each city in 1999 and 2000. The original lines of inquiry for the case studies were the types of participants involved in city budget development, the perceived representativeness of participants, the mechanisms used to gather input, the degree of and reasons for (non) institutionalization of mechanisms, and the outcomes from participation. For this analysis, we present the data for one city, Topeka Kansas, and the resultant cause and effect diagram in the text. The narratives and diagrams for the remaining four cities appear in the appendix.

The population in Topeka is around 126,000. The Mayor is elected at large and the nine council members are elected by district. The city has had a strong-mayor and chief administrative officer (CAO) form of government since the mid-1980's. Prior to this time, the commission form of government had been used. The city uses a calendar fiscal year. State law requires one public hearing that is to be held after publication of the maximum amount of the budget and the tax levy. Typically these maximums are set in council hearings in July and the budget is adopted by mid-August with the public hearing occurring somewhere in between these two dates.

Figure 2 displays the cause-and-effect diagram for Topeka. Since the population is over 100,000, size is rated as a positive in terms of fostering participation leading to desired outcomes (recall factors leading to participation outcomes from Table 1). The form of government is rated as a negative factor since it is strong mayor rather than council-manager. A negative rating is given for the legal requirements as well since the budget and tax levy maximums have been passed before the public hearing. Overall, then, the city structure factor has a rating of one positive and two negatives.

[Figure 2: Topeka Cause-and-Effect Diagram]

In recent years, the Mayor of Topeka has invited a select group of citizens to participation in a focus group to review and advise on selected issues in the budget. The perception among the people we interviewed is that these citizens were selected based on partisan support. Other citizens who are active in the process go to the council hearings primarily to express their dissatisfaction with certain specific line items in the proposed budget. For example, when we visited the city, a contentious issue was proposed cuts in social service funding. This issue drew
over 100 citizens to speak at a council hearing that lasted more than six hours. Since the invitation to participate comes as an open invitation to a public meeting or directly from the Mayor but only to selected citizens, the first two causes in the participant category are rated negative. The bulk of the citizens that participate usually do so out of dissatisfaction, leading to the third negative rating in this category. The causes for participants to become involved, then, are all three negative and no positive.

The public hearing is the primary mechanism used to gather public input in Topeka. Other mechanisms, like a citizen satisfaction survey and open forum meetings on Saturdays, have been tried, but none have been institutionalized nor do they foster two-way interaction between citizens and the council or city staff when they are used. Further, the timing of the public hearings is poor since the maximum level of the budget and tax levy have been set before any citizen input is gathered. Given that the opportunities for citizen participation are few, the interaction is one-way and generally occurs after the maximums are set, and the mechanisms are structured so that participants generally register their preferences on only one issue, the three factors in the mechanisms group are also rated negative, with no positive factors.

Turning to consideration of the participation process, the council, during their public work sessions, often reviews the proposed budget at the line item level. During our review, one line that was extensively discussed was the amount spent for food by each city department. This issue and discussion of other single line item issues is described by interviewees as the norm during budget review. In summary, all three factors in the process category receive a negative rating. The purpose for inviting participation is not to encourage consideration of issues that have a citywide impact nor is there any attempt to educate participants about the wide range of issues the city faces. By allowing line item budget review, issues are considered sequentially and there is no attempt to weight the relative or sincere preferences of the citizens that do participate.

Turning to the outcomes that emerge from the Topeka participation process, we see results that are less than desired. While the city council did reincorporate the social service funding, based in part on the strong public reaction evidenced at the public hearing (others suggest that the cut was a political ploy and it never was expected to come to fruition), there is no evidence that other issues brought forth by the citizens were decided on the basis of the public input. The council does not interact with the participants and the citizens did not perceive that their participation has an impact on the resource allocation process. Instead, in this city, a recurring theme was the personalized politics between the councilors themselves and the Mayor and certain council members. As a results, actions are thought to be based on political power plays rather than attempts to serve the needs of citizens that represent the interests of the city as a whole. So, the outcomes are rated as mixed in terms of using information and negative for communication and perceived impact. Table 2 summarizes the results for the Topeka case as well as the other case study cities.

Table 2. Summary of Cause and Effect Diagrams for Five Case Cities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive and Negative Ratings for Causal Factors</th>
<th>Participation Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

From Table 2, we can see that there is wide variation between the cities in terms of the positive and negative ratings on the groups of factors. From this, it can be suggested that these cause less than perfect outcomes from the participation process. For city structure, legal requirements and size hold Wichita and Burlington, respectively, back from the highest positive rating. The other cities have multiple structural problems that may lead to less than desirable outcomes. The selection of the participants shows even more variation. Again, we see that Wichita and Burlington are the leaders in terms of having a well-designed invitation process that leads to the selection of participants representing a wide range of city interests. Further, citizens get involved out of a sense of civic duty rather than dissatisfaction. Topeka, as the city with the most negatives in this category, would perhaps have better outcomes if a stronger effort was made to have a more inclusive and representative invitation process. The structure of the participation mechanisms is an area where all five cities might find room for improvement. The biggest shortcoming that may lead to reduced outcomes was the timing of the input. This is a cause that can fairly easily be modified (provided there are no legal restrictions). Each city, except Wichita, has negative ratings for the process as well, suggesting attention can also be paid to remedies that could improve the quality of the outcomes. For example, changing the format and presentation of the information so that it is more user-friendly could make it easier for participants to register sincere preferences leading to input that would be more useful to decision makers.

What we can see from this preliminary testing of the cause-and-effect model of citizen participation is that several potential weaknesses (negative causes) emerge for each city. Knowing this, it is possible to suggest different remedies that could improve outcomes. Even though the fit between the categories of causes and the resultant effects is not exact, there does seem to be support for the notion that more positives within the four categories do lead to more positives in terms of desired outcomes. The reverse holds true as well; Topeka, which has the most negatives for the factors in each of the four categories, also has among the most negatives in terms of desired outcomes (only Cedar Rapids is lower, but it is close...).

From Table 2, we can also see how there is a gap between theory and practice concerning the relationship between the number of participation mechanisms and the participation outcomes. Topeka has tried several participation mechanisms including the public hearing, citizen surveys,
focus groups and open forums. There is scant evidence that decision makers use input from these mechanisms in making budget decisions. What causes this gap lies in the process factors: the citizens are not representative and do not express sincere or weighted preferences beyond their own self-interest issue. So, existing theory needs to reflect that not only does there need to be multiple opportunities for participation, but also that the citizen participants should be representative and be asked to register sincere preferences about a larger set of issues that impact the city overall.

This research suggests that the value of this exercise is that it systematically allows us to analyze practice in order to validate a variety of theoretical prescriptions. Further, it attempts to unify a wide range of theoretical prescriptions and begin the process of understanding the interrelationships that may exist. In suggesting this theoretical model and pilot testing it based on the limited experience of five midwestern cities, we anticipate many quibbles with the factors used in each category as well as challenges to the positive and negative ratings assigned for each of the cities. Instead of discounting the entire model by pointing out the errors and limitations and threats to validity, we can instead use this form of analysis to create mental models that allow us to think about how to improve our current citizen participation practices (Senge 199X). Social science theories are never 100% accurate. We are not attempting to reach that standard here, instead we are looking at how robust different theoretical prescriptions are and how great their explanatory power. And, we are building a model that can be deductively tested and incrementally falsified or verified as necessary for theory development (Popper 1934, Kuhn 1996).

Conclusion

Using extant literature, this paper presents a theory identifying factors that impact citizen participation outcomes. In testing this model, we compare theory and practice both to identify areas where theory needs to be refined. We find that there are four categories of factors that can cause poor participation outcomes. Identification of these allows for the development of targeted remedies that can improve desired outcomes by using the fishbone diagram technique made popular by Total Quality Management scholars.

Determining which factors might be included in a theoretical model of citizen participation is not the only purpose for this discussion. We think that the cause-and-effect diagraming technique is a powerful tool that practitioners can use to systematically analyze why citizen participation outcomes often fall short of expectations. Individual cities can assess themselves on what are ultimately determined to be important causes leading to desired citizen participation outcomes and can see where remedies might be suggested and where improvement is possible.

For theorists, application of the model and analysis of the results points out theoretical gaps and encourages consideration of why there is not better alignment of existing normative prescriptions. Ideally, this exercise may spur the next generation of theories (hopefully integrative rather than compartmentalized). The contribution of this line of research is the
presentation of a structured inquiry that validates theory within each category of factors, as well as allowing for examination of the interrelationships between the different groups of causes to foster whole systems thinking. In reality, it is clear that we need a systemic (and systematic) approach that offers a more integrated view of our world.

We welcome your comments concerning the model and the variables. If you have ideas, please contact Aimee at alfranklin@ou.edu or Prof. Aimee Franklin, Dept of Political Science, University of Oklahoma, 455 W. Lindsey DAHT 205, Norman, OK 73019-2001.
References


