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### A Brief Overview of Public Participation in Public Administration

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#### Abstract

Public participation is often viewed as a cornerstone of democracy given that it allows for citizens to participate and play an active role in government decision making. The existing public participation scholarship tends to focus on the mechanisms, processes, and outcomes of public participation. The goal of this paper is to give a brief overview of public participation in public administration as the practice is commonly becoming a key responsibility in public agencies.

**Keywords:** public participation, public administration, public agencies

#### Introduction

The extant literature on public participation focuses on different meanings and definitions of the mechanisms, evaluation, and predictors of public participation. Public participation is commonly defined as “the involvement of stakeholders in administrative functions and decision making” (Wang and Van Mart 2007, 217). The term ‘public participation’ is used interchangeably with public involvement and public engagement or civic engagement. ‘Public’ is defined broadly to include “community, stakeholder, citizen, and consumer” (Figuredo 2005, 15). Public participation mechanisms can be divided into passive and active (Figuredo 2005). Passive mechanisms, such as “press releases, websites, printed materials, and advertisements,” are generally used to disseminate information to the public (Figuredo 2005, 17). Active mechanisms of public participation include public hearings, citizen advisory boards, citizen focus groups, business community meetings, and social media exchanges (Dabney 2013).

Nabatchi et al. (2015) classified public participation mechanisms into three categories as below. They called it direct public participation.

Table 1: Direct Public Participation

Direct Public Participation	Description
Conventional participation E.g. advisory committees	Public participation activities held by government officials and often prescribed by laws. Elements include advance notification, an-audience-style room setup, a strictly followed preset agenda and a segment of the meeting when citizens can address public

Thin participation E.g. surveys, petitions, crowdsourcing	officials for a short period of time. A variety of tactics that allow individuals (sometimes in large numbers) to affiliate with a cause, submit ideas, indicate preferences or provide information in fast and convenient ways.
Thick participation E.g. small-group facilitation	Enables large numbers of people working in small groups (face-to-face or online) to discuss, learn, decide, and act together. Includes deliberation, decision making or action planning.

Source: Nabatchi et al. 2015, 36.

Normatively, public participation is designed to foster relationships between public agencies and citizens in order for both to have a meaningful engagement. Scholarship on public participation also focuses on the advantages of having the public participate in decision-making processes. The larger goals of public participation from the new governance perspective are promoting collaboration between citizens and government; enhance democratic decision making; and legitimize decision making (Bingham et al. 2005). Giering (2011, 10) points out several benefits of public participation, including “public ownership of policies, better decisions that are sustainable, supportable, and reflect community values; agency credibility; less opposition; and faster implementation of plans and projects.” By and large, the goal of public participation is to offer benefits for both organizing and participating parties. On one hand, the organizing party will get input and feedback, and on the other hand, the participating party will have a say in the project or program that will impact their life.

In some countries public participation is regulated by laws. In the U.S, the federal requirement for public participation can be traced back to the Administrative Procedure Act of 1946 that requires federal agencies to inform the public of their procedures and rules (Childress 2008). Many federal regulations that mandate public participation includes policy areas such as housing, education, transportation and the environment. Buckwalter (2012, 12) points out that mandated public participation should be viewed as “not as forcing the public to participate, but rather forcing the state to provide a venue and means for the public to participate.” In fact, mandated public participation is not a new practice, especially where local governments are concerned (Amsler 2013).

### “Successful” Public Participation

The literature also considers the outcomes of public participation. Among other things, scholarship discusses the effectiveness of public participation mechanisms in producing more “meaningful” and “successful” participation in engaging the public. By and large, there is no consensus on how one defines a “successful” public participation process. This is largely due to different approaches to and conceptualizations of participation. As Kulozu (2014, 48) argues, there is little agreement on whether “it is as a means to an end, or an end in itself,” shaping how one might assess public participation outcomes. Abouassi et al. (2013) agree that empirical research point to mixed results on the outcomes of public participation because of different context, goal, the structure of participation and so on.

Successful participation may require several conditions such as the willingness of citizens to take part in the process, accurate information about issues being disseminated in a timely manner, and a process that provides ways for clarification and consensus (HRCCE 2013). In addition, Kweit and Kweit (1981, 104) suggest three determinants of successful public participation: “Characteristics of the structure of participation (i.e., mechanisms, organizations); ... participation targets (resource base, structure, member attitude); ...environment (stability, forms of government, and community size).”

Similarly, Pandey and Yang (2011, 882) in their research examined four variables that may contribute to participation outcomes: participation tools (the use of multiple types of mechanisms), characteristics

of participants (e.g., citizen competence and representativeness), characteristics of target organizations (e.g., bureaucratic structure and red tape), and environment (e.g., elected official support). They found four significant public management factors that contributed to successful public participation: elected official support, lower levels of red tape (too many rules e.g., rigidity and inflexibility may impede the process), hierarchical authority (multiple management levels and centralization may hinder participation), and transformational leadership (transformational leaders are able to motivate followers' behavior by changing their attitudes and assumptions about participation) (Pandey and Yang 2011). In addition, strong and better leadership may enhance participation outcomes (King et al. 1998).

Common terms that are associated with successful participation are "effectiveness, efficiency, and equity" (Kulozu 2014, 50). The elements of effective public participation include the need to be inclusive; to provide incentives for participation especially for vulnerable stakeholders; and to incorporate the input gathered from public participation processes (Khademian et al. 2007). In addition, Kaiser et al. (1995) argue that effective public participation can be attained if those who participate in the process are aware of their interests and have enough power to help ensure that outcomes are representative and equal.

Another common theme related to successful participation is the extent to which public participation is "authentic" (Figuredo 2005, King et al. 1998, Roberts 1997). "Authentic" participation is defined as "deep and continuous involvement" (King et al. 1998), which focuses on "organizational processes, structures, and implementation" (Figuredo 2005, 21) and involves the public at large in deliberation throughout (Roberts 1997). Figuredo (2005) outlines four determinants of the authenticity of public participation: the extent of representativeness of the public, the use of public input in decision making, the extent of interaction, and the quality of input received.

## Challenges of Public Participation

Although the goals of public participation tend to be positive, the process itself does not necessarily result in success. In fact, Rosener (1978) argues that even though the number of participation mandates has increased substantially, less is known about what constitutes "successful" and "unsuccessful" public participation. More broadly, the main challenges of public participation are lack of public awareness of the importance of participation, lack of financial resources, time and mobility constraints, language barriers, and cynicism toward government (Giering 2011). In addition, at times, public participation in well-functioning democracies can bring confusion and frustration rather than clarity and consensus (Wang and Van Wart 2007).

King et al. (1998, 322) describe three major challenges to successful participation:

- i. The nature of life in contemporary society such as "transportation, time constraints, family structure, number of family members in the labor force, child care, and economic disadvantages."
- ii. Administrative processes such as one-way communication (public agency to citizens)
- iii. Techniques of participation such as public hearings with accessibility concerns, citizen advisory committee with biases compositions, and surveys that tend to document one point in time opinion and having less interaction with the public.

Overcoming such challenges requires the cooperation from both public agency and citizens. King et al. (1998) suggest the following: citizens need to be empowered and educated. They need to know that their participation mattered and diverse representation will have an impact on decisions. Likewise, public administrators in charge of public participation need to equip themselves with the right participation knowledge and skills. Next are the changes in administrative structures and processes which can be difficult to do, but essential for positive participation outcomes. For changes to happen, leadership and resources are crucial in order to create an environment that would be able to facilitate meaningful participation.

Indeed, strong and better leadership coupled with support from elected officials may enhance public participation (King et al. 1998, Pandey and Yang 2011, and Kweit and Kweit 1981). The role of elected officials is also significant. As Pandey and Moynihan (2006, 135) point out, “through a variety of formal hierarchical as well as informal mechanisms, elected officials have the opportunity and ability to penetrate deeply into the inner workings of public organizations.” A Kadir (2015) in her study illustrates that a public administrator with a transformational leadership skill was able to prioritize public participation in an organization.

### Criticisms of Public Participation

Many criticisms of public participation rules tend to be directed at the kind of mechanisms chosen by public organizations and the processes. For instance, in terms of the mechanism, criticisms are normally directed toward the conventional public meetings and hearings. Lindstrom and Nie (2000, 34) indicate that based on their survey of state transportation officials responsible for public participation, mandated public meetings and public hearings are the most common techniques used, but they rank next to last in perceived effectiveness of all techniques. Public hearings and meetings are often criticized as ineffective due to their “failing to attract sufficient numbers of participants, encouraging only the most vocal opponents of a project or plan to attend, ignoring the time and financial constraints that limit the public’s ability to participate, and serving as an agency formality to meet legal requirements rather than an honest and open forum to gather meaningful input” (Giering 2011, 15). Similarly, Leighninger (2014) argues that conventional public meetings and public hearings failed to foster interaction between administrators and citizens, which in turn limited meaningful participation.

In terms of the processes, critics mainly point to “lack of trusts, concerns over efficiency, and quality of decisions” (Kasymova and Gaynor, 2014, 138). Without a proper plan, the process can be frustrating to both parties in a sense of cost and time consumption for organizing and attending public meetings. Several researches note that the main reason why conventional mechanisms remain unpopular is because the perceptions among the public that their decision will be ignored by public agencies (Kasymova and Gaynor 2014). This perception lead to a lower level of attendance to public meetings besides apathetic public that suffered from the not-in-my-backyard (NIMB) syndrome. Indeed, the burden to incorporate public’s inputs is on the public agencies. This largely depends on the quality of the recommendations and ideas of the public (Nabatchi et al. 2015).

### Conclusion

In sum, the importance of public participation cannot be stressed enough especially in the increasingly demanding public administration. The main challenge for public agencies is to have better designs or plans in implementing public participation. Public administrators need to better equip themselves to attract the public to engage effectively with them. Equally important, the public need to aware of their significant role to engage with public agencies.

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