

Citizen Participation in Public Administration

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How important is citizen participation in the world of public administration? It could depend on whom you ask. I chose to research citizen participation, because as a future public service worker it is extremely important for me to understand the citizens that I could be serving one day. Above all else, serving the people around us is a benefit of working in the field of public administration. I sought to find articles that speak on the advantages of public participation, some interesting ways to garner public participation, while also entertaining some opposing views on the subject. This paper examines five published articles from Public Administration journals with the common theme of citizen participation. Citizens participating in public works can bring new opinions and a first-hand point of view on some issues to the table. Citizen input should be very valuable to public officials, but sometimes it is not as encouraged and valued as it could be.

While technology and social norms change, the way that citizens participate in government is changing as well! The first article I found focused on changes in avenues of participation and ways to utilize social media in modern governance. There has been a rise in the use of social media platforms to encourage citizen participation, specifically with participatory budgeting. This tactic focuses heavily on empowering citizens by giving them a role in the final decision-making process! Gordon noted that several barriers to meaningful citizen participation included: lack of knowledge, citizens feeling their input is not valued or wanted, lack of trust, time constraints, and the idea that self-interests of citizens may get in the way of community

interests. (Gordon, Boden, & Osgood, 2017.) They noted that social media is a great cost-effective tool to increase and maintain engagement among citizens. However, due to a lack of experienced personnel utilizing it, restrictive policies, being underused, and security issues, creating an infrastructure for participatory budgeting is more of a task than one might think. Ultimately, they concluded that a combination of traditional approaches, such as phone calls and flyers, mixed with social media platforms garners the most participation! While reading this article, it occurred to me that citizens might be more likely to participate if their local government is speaking their language, so to speak. If their constituents are communicating via social platforms, then using social platforms to reach them is a good tactic! There are obvious challenges that come with bringing this on board, as well as a trust issue with the audience, but I think we will continue to see a rise in citizen participation through the media.

The next article I read discussed citizens' motives for participation in governance by distributing a survey to participants on a renewal plan in Stockholm, Sweden. Their reasoning behind this study was that, "To better understand the role of participatory governance and its potential impact on the political system, we need to know more about why individuals participate and what meanings they attribute to their participation." (Gustafson & Hertting, 2017, p. 545) I agreed with this, as this was partially why I chose this topic to research. This article was different from the others as it looked more into the motives for citizen participation, rather than simply ways to connect with the citizens. I think it offered some valuable insight as to what are the real reasons some people participate. Their findings ultimately found that there were three main types of motivation for the participants: (a) a common good motive to simply improve the neighborhood, (b) a self-interest motive with a desire to improve specific personal, family, or political interests, or (c) strictly professional motives, which strongly consisted of people

participating due to their job. (Gustafson & Hertting, 2017.) They did not survey non-participants, so they did not offer any insight into why people might not be participating, but simply why they might be. Specifically, they found that “34% of respondents scored highest on the common good factor, 35% on the self-interest factor, and 31% on the professional competence factor (Table 4).” (Gustafson & Hertting, 2017, p. 543) This article was interesting to read and I found it interesting to see that people have different reasons for participating. It is worth noting that I found the common good factor to be lower than I would have expected.

Similarly, the next article I chose to research focused on understanding the motivations that public managers hold to encourage citizen participation. This article was interesting to find, as earlier I had read the article on motivations for citizens participating, rather than the motivations for a public official to encourage it. It was beneficial to find articles that look at motivation on both sides of the equation. Feeney and Huang noted that, “a higher level of citizen participation in political decision making may increase public trust in government and citizen compliance with public policy.” (Huang & Feeney, 2015, pg. 189) Basically, if public officials are motivated to encourage public participation, then they can start a cycle of participation that could potentially better the relationship between local government and constituents. They wanted to look into what motivates the public officials to start this cycle! They used data from two national surveys conducted in 2010 and 2012 to investigate links between extrinsic reinforcements (performance-based awards), autonomous motivation (public service motivation), and public participation. Most would think that both extrinsic and autonomous motivations would result in higher motivation to encourage public participation from public officials, but the study concluded otherwise. According to their findings, “extrinsic motivation, here measured as perceived performance-based rewards in organizations, is negatively related to citizen

participation in local government decision making.” (Huang & Feeney, 2015, p. 202) In contrast, they found that local government managers that associate high intrinsic value with public service motivation reported greater levels of citizens participating in decision-making! They suggested that this could stress the importance of building a strong system of trust and values in local government to encourage more citizen participation, which in turn motivates public officials. Trust seems to be a common theme throughout these articles, as having a constituent’s trust governance seems to be a large factor in garnering public participation!

Seeming to challenge the others, the next article I found, by Ji Huang Park, focuses on asking if citizen participation matters to performance-based budgeting. This study “hypothesizes that local governments with a commitment to citizen participation tend to use performance budgeting.” (Park, 2019, p. 280) While performance-based budgeting is on the rise, it not used in every case. Park’s study suggests that citizen participation is one of the most important determinants to implementing performance budgeting! This just further pushes the idea that citizen participation is so important to foster in local governments. However, this article also notes some opposing views on citizen participation, which we have yet to see in past articles. Park notes that citizen-input can lead to a more time-consuming process, which can lead to unnecessary costs. While public officials should be trusted to be the voice of the citizens, it is still helpful to receive input from citizens on budgeting matters and help making decisions. However, this article does offer some contrasting views, as it points out that lack of information and education on a certain topic can lead to ill-informed decisions sourced from the citizen participation. (Park, 2019.) It is touched on briefly, but we see this topic come up again later.

The last article I found was by far my favorite to read, as it challenged some previous notions that I had already formed in my head while reading other articles. John Stansburt and

Renee Irvin asked the question: Is citizen participation in decision making worth the effort? They argued that citizen participation can be costly and ineffective and listed some conditions under which this may happen. One of their arguments is that educating citizens and incorporating them into the decision-making process is not a costless procedure. (Irvin & Standbury, 2004.) In my opinion, it is worth noting that in the first article covered, the role of social media, using social media platforms to educate and encourage involvement is cost effective and efficient, but also states that it does need experienced media specialists to fully understand it, which can also be an additional costs factor. (Gordon & Osgood, 2017.) Another adverse effect of citizen participation is that it can lead to a distrust in government, which all other articles have seemed to highlight as being very important to succeed. For example, “If citizen participants are misled into thinking their decisions will be implemented, and then the decisions are ignored or merely taken under advisement, resentment will develop over time.” (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004, p. 59) There are also representation issues, which can stem from some public participants dominating the platform, and others simply not having the time to show up and plead their case. They even go as far to say that, “citizen participation may be ineffective and wasteful compared to traditional, top-down decision making under certain conditions.” (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004, p. 62)

A common theme I saw throughout these articles was the mention of public trust. A large part of working with the public can entail dealing with strong emotions and opinions and it can be hard to find a balance in making decisions that are not off putting to the public. In my opinion, my readings seemed to come full circle as public officials can use knowledge of what motivates their citizens to better tailor their methods of garnering support to participate, which can include social media and in turn offers intrinsic value to the public officials. However, in contrasting

views, there were several issues pointed out that highlighted the difficulties that come along with this cycle as well.

I found these articles very applicable to my goals and helpful to read. My aim is to serve the people around me through public administration, which will entail citizen participation. While several of these articles affirmed my original thoughts on citizens participating in governance, I was also exposed to some new ways to encourage that participation. I found myself also reading about some disadvantages to citizen participation, which opened my mind to some of the downsides of this participation. It did not lead me to think that citizens participating is inherently bad, but it did push me to acknowledge that there are difficulties and risks that come with the territory of public involvement. The articles I chose did not all agree with one another, but that is okay. It just goes to show the range of opinions among people, much like the range of opinions I will be faced with as a public official.

Overall, many of my feelings about citizen participation in local government were affirmed by these articles. I learned that public involvement is very important in public administration, but it will always have some drawbacks. In my opinion, the largest drawback that I read about was definitely how a decision that does not perfectly align with public ideals can lead to disdain and a distrust for public officials. I feel this is such a touchy subject, because no decision will ever be one hundred percent backed by everyone around. There will always be opposing views, and letting them be heard can be risky, but that transparency is needed in the realm of public administration. All sides of an argument need to be accounted for to make a good decision, and allowing for public discussion can be a good way to hear those viewpoints. If citizen participation is not encouraged beforehand, there will be feedback regardless! “Elected officials and top managers are always getting feedback from citizens – and from their own

observations. Citizens are rarely shy about complaining about problems they see.” (Kettl, 2018, p. 344) If you allow discussion and participation beforehand, hopefully that feedback will be positive and beneficial, because it is coming regardless of the situation. Ultimately, my largest takeaway from my findings is that there is a lot more that goes into citizen participation than meets the eye. There are difficulties I could face in my future career, that I would not have thought of, but that were brought to light through the comparing and contrasting of these articles.

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