# Citizen Participation: Questions of Diversity, Equity and Fairness

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*Numerous questions surround the concept of citizen participation and, in particular, the diversity, equity and fairness of the opportunities to participate as well as the processes that promote, or inhibit, meaningful and diverse participation from taking place. This essay raises questions about the meaning of citizen participation; the impact institutional structures have on the opportunities to participate; the effect of socio-economic inequities on civic participation; and the perceptions of value and fairness in the participatory process. Whether consciously intended or not, the design of our current administrative and legal processes can alienate people and discourage meaningful participation from taking place. From an administrative perspective, this essay presents steps that can be taken to broaden and diversify citizen participation to improve the quality of civic discourse across the boundaries of race, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. A civic dialogue representative of the people advances more responsive, transparent and effective policy than would otherwise occur.*

Citizen participation in the deliberative process of government appeals to our democratic values, it is the cornerstone of democracy and yet it is a concept that generates controversy and debate and one that is surrounded by a great deal of ambivalence. From a public administration perspective, the controversy and ambivalence surrounding the appropriate role for citizens in the decision making process can be partially attributed to the conflicting perspectives of administrative and democratic theory. On one side of the debate are those who believe that citizens should have a direct and active role in the decisions of the state to insure that government entities do what is right, perform as expected and act in the best interest of the public. On the other side of the debate are those who favor and support representative democracy and indirect participation. Citizens elect representatives to act on their behalf and trust professional administrators to fairly and efficiently implement public policy. A critical question is to what extent can the administration of a representative government actively, and meaningfully, involve citizens in public sector decision making that is truly reflective of the people (Stivers 1990)?

An obvious and inherent tension exists between the public's desire for greater involvement and the prerogative of public administrators to act as the authoritative voice

in determining if, when, and how citizens will be included in the decision-making process. Numerous questions arise as a result of these tensions. Should citizens be included in the decision-making processes of government? How much public participation is appropriate? What happens when there is too much participation? What happens when there is too little? What can be done to ensure representation and equality in the process? The more open the process, the more polarized an issue is likely to become. The more closed the process, the more distrusting the public becomes.

While these administrative questions are important for public administrators to address, far more critical to the deliberative process are questions that address democratic values – to what extent are we achieving diversity, equity and fairness in public participation? What role does public policy have on the diversity and equity of citizen participation? What impact does institutional design have of the level and quality of participation? What role do "civic skills" have on the diversity of participants? How do place and structure influence who participates and who does not? The purpose of this essay is to draw attention to the inequalities that prevent fair and equitable citizen participation from taking place in an effort to develop a better understanding of the barriers that prevent meaningful, authentic, participation from taking place on a regular basis (King et al 1998). If the choice to participate, or not, is an individual's personal choice, that is one thing; but if public policy and institutional obstacles create barriers to fair, equitable and diverse participation then public administrators need to develop a better understanding of the institutional obstacles and why they persist so that strategies can be designed to strengthen democracy, empower citizens and reinvigorate citizen participation in such a way that broad and diverse participation is valued, rigorously sought and routinely implemented.

**Democratic Governance and Existing Inequalities**

The belief that individuals should be given a voice in their governance appeals to our democratic ideals and in fact has long been identified internationally as one of the unique aspects of the United States (Stivers 1990). However, as much as we may recognize and value the ideal of citizen participation it remains a "contested concept" (Day 1997). Some theories argue in favor of direct and deliberative models of collaboration, while others favor indirect involvement. Direct democracy suggests that citizens are the "owners" of government and should therefore be involved in the decisions of the state (Schacter 1997). Indirect involvement, on the other hand, acknowledges that in a representative democracy elected officials and professional administrators should act on the behalf of citizens and in the best interest of the state.

While citizen participation and civic engagement appeal to our democratic ideals, it is hardly representative. It is a complex process that more often than not discourages people from getting involved and in particular discourages racial and ethnic minorities from getting involved. A vibrant, healthy democracy requires that citizens participate on a regular basis and are informed about the issues. Unfortunately, the current situation in the United States threatens our democracy as far too few people participate and those who do participate on a regular basis are not representative of the overall population (Macedo 2005; Fung 2004; Roberts 2004; King et al 1998).

These inequalities in participation undermine the value of civic engagement. The voices of immigrants, the young, the poor, and the less educated are not being heard as they participate far less often than the general population (Macedo 2005, 75). While

Americans of Hispanic and Latino origin are the fastest growing segment of the American population, they participate in government affairs less frequently than blacks and far less frequently than whites (Macedo 2005, 71). No doubt, obstacles of language and legal status discourage participation among Hispanic and Latinos far more than the institutional obstacles that prevent other ethnic and racial minorities from participating.

Racial and ethnic minorities are typically underrepresented in public deliberation and groups that are disadvantaged with respect to education and income are less likely to be involved even though they may have the most reason to be involved (Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Rhodes 1999; Cohen and Dawson 1993). Data shows that disenfranchised Americans participate far less frequently than the well-off. In 1990, 38% of families with incomes over $75,000 a year participated in local government activities compared to 13% for those earning less than $15,000 a year (Macedo 2005, 66). The inequalities we see in the pattern of participation, that is who participates and who is heard, consistently favor and reflect wealth and privilege, and tend to be older, whiter and more male than American society as a whole (Macedo 2005, 10).

While Census 2000 indicates that larger, metropolitan regions are becoming more diverse, there is considerable variation in the patterns of diversity across regions and among metropolitan areas and racial segregation, overall, remains persistently high. Economic segregation, on the other hand, has increased significantly in the past 30 years. Census data shows that while racial segregation has decreased in some metropolitan areas, concentrations of poverty, that is people living in neighborhoods with poverty rates at 40% or higher almost doubled between 1970 and 1990 (Urban Institute 2006). The good news is the 2000 census data shows that the number of people living in such concentrated areas of poverty decreased by 24%, however, numerous political scientists caution that this decline reflects an unusually tight labor market that prevailed when the census was taken, rather than a long-term and systemic reduction in economic segregation (Macedo 2005, 75).

Research does suggest that neighborhoods with severe concentrations of poverty are qualitatively different in the political and economic opportunities afforded their residents than neighborhoods without extreme concentrations of poverty (Cohen and Dawson 1993; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999). Only recently has the concentration of poverty within neighborhoods been explored as a factor, in and of itself, that contributes to the "devastation of poverty" and significantly less attention has been paid to the impact of concentrated poverty on an individual's ability to function as a "participatory citizen"(Cohen and Dawson 1993, 286). According to William Julius Wilson, one of the leading sociologists of race relations and poverty in urban America, the "concentration effects" of extremely poor neighborhoods creates an environment where social isolation grows (Rhodes 1999). People living in these neighborhoods, according to Wilson, become disconnected from the community and the networks and group structures that facilitate economic and social participation; and as a result, social isolation and alienation are dominant characteristics of the poorest neighborhoods (Rhodes 1999). As such, these poor neighborhoods do not provide the fundamental characteristics for the functioning of a healthy democracy (Cohen 1993, 287).

**Prior Explanations**

Much of what has been written about diversity and equity in citizen participation has primarily focused on political participation and has appeared in sociology, political

science, urban policy and black studies journals. Previous studies on race and participation have attempted to explain the difference in black-white participation based on socio-demographic, psychological and structural factors. In addition, most of the previous research on the differences in the patterns of participation focus on the black-white differences and only recently have researchers begun to study the participation trends of Hispanics, Latinos and Asian-Americans. The research that has appeared in public administration journals, while addressing citizen participation in administrative decision making has, for the most part, failed to adequately and accurately address issues of diversity and equity in participation.

Some of the earliest research explained the difference in levels of participation on the basis of lower than average levels of education, income and occupational status of blacks (Matthews and Protho 1966; Orum 1966). This approach is commonly referred to as the "standard socio-economic model" and it serves as the framework for most of the research conducted on racial differences in the level of social and political participation (Verba and Nie 1972). Nearly every empirical study of political and social participation relied on this standard and most of these studies focused on who participates and in what venues, rather than why people participate or what prevents them from participating (Leighley 1995).

Verba and Nie (1972) were among the first to test this model as an explanation for varying levels of political and social participation. This model is based on the assumption that people who have high levels of socio-economic resources (e.g. education, income, occupational status) are more likely to participate than those with lower levels of socioeconomic resources (Conway 1991). The difference in levels of participation, they found, could be attributed, across racial and ethnic groups, to the disparity in civic resources that individuals have at their disposal. Individuals with higher levels of socio-economic resources have more opportunities through their jobs, organizational memberships, religious involvement, and family structure to develop the civic skills that individuals bring to the participatory process. Individuals, who through their work, their education, their organizational memberships, develop skills such as giving speeches, writing letters, or chairing meetings and these skills facilitate citizen participation.

Research indicates that people who possess civic skills participate far more frequently than people who lack the civic skills, which are perceived as a prerequisite for meaningful participation (Verba et al 1993; Leighley 1995). The development of these civic skills is critical to understanding participation because individuals may choose not to participate because they feel they lack the skills necessary for serious, thoughtful deliberation. The central task, as articulated by the researchers, was to understand the distribution of these resources among blacks, whites and, more recently, Latinos to determine the extent to which differences in resources and in the development of civic skills could be held responsible for disparities in participation (Verba et al 1993).

The socio-economic model was confounded by numerous studies that found once controls for socio-economic status and civic resources were introduced, blacks actually participated at higher levels than whites (Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie 1991). In an effort to explain this pattern, two psychosocial theories, the compensatory theory and the ethnic community approach, were advanced. Compensatory theory grew out of a sociological tradition and was based on the assumption that blacks join organizations and become politically active to an exaggerated degree to compensate for

the racism and structural barriers they confront in every day life (Myrdal 1944; Orum 1966; Babchuk and Thompson 1962).

The ethnic communal theory, originally advanced by Lane (1954) to explain the higher comparative rates of black participation, assumes there is a common identity and mutuality of interests among blacks that is not found among whites. This group attachment and group consciousness, among other things, produces group norms that "call for political action to improve the status of the group" (Bobo and Gilliam 1990). Proponents of this theory argue that blacks realize there is power in numbers and are more likely to organize and identify with a group to achieve group goals. Miller et al (1981) found that group consciousness is associated with participation for blacks, women, and the poor and Wilcox and Gomez (1990) found that group identity significantly increases black participation.

Ellison and London (1992) revisited the compensatory and ethnic community approach and found strong support for the ethnic community model and virtually no support for the compensatory model. They note that much of the prior research on black participation was based on data collected during the 1960s and early 1970s, at the height of the civil rights and "Black Power" movements. This period reflected a dramatic shift in the ideological underpinnings of social and political participation within the black population and the participation rates and patterns of participation may have more accurately reflected the institutional structures that encourage or discourage participation (Verba et al 1993). They noted that the declining visibility of the civil rights movement resulted in blacks being less likely to participate in 1987 than they were in 1967. Critics argue that the logic and assumptions of the compensatory model were based on the erroneous belief that blacks had disproportionately low self-esteem. This belief supported the prevailing conservative, status-oriented paradigm that interpreted the political attitudes of minority groups as marginal to mainstream American values and as a potential threat to the sociopolitical status quo (Ellison and London 1992, 695).

Another criticism of this early research relates to the assumptions regarding the act of participation itself (Leighley 1995, 187). It is assumed that participation consists of separate, discreet events. For example, when an individual decides they want to participate then it is sufficient enough for participation to take place (Leighley 1995). However, participation is rarely a singular pursuit. Even if someone is motivated to sign a petition, join a group, or attend a meeting they can only participate if a petition is available to sign, a group is there to join or a meeting is scheduled and open to the public so they can attend. The implications of this assumption are most clearly seen, as Leighley states, when you attempt to interpret survey data. "If an individual claims that she has signed a petition, we can be fairly certain that a petition was presented to the individual, and she responded positively; but if an individual claims that she has not signed a petition, is that because she has been asked, and responded negatively, or simply because she has not been asked?" (Leighley 1995, 187).

Another set of assumptions is that participation opportunities are evenly distributed across populations. The assumption that people of low socio-economic status are afforded the same opportunities to participate as people of high socio-economic status is easily challenged. The different levels of participation attributed to socio-economic status could have more to do with the opportunities available than with the attitude or behavior of the individual. "Given that mobilization techniques are typically directed toward high-status individuals or neighborhoods and that membership in voluntary

organizations is concentrated among high-status individuals, the existence of differential opportunity structures across socioeconomic class is likely (Leighley 1995, 187-188).

As this brief summary of prior explanations shows, the effects of race and socio-economic status on participation are not easily summarized as there is a large body of somewhat contradictory research. When controlling for socio-economic status, blacks are sometimes more likely and sometimes less likely to participate than whites depending on how citizen participation is defined and the time period in which it is measured (Leighley 1995). In spite of its limitations, the SES model is still widely accepted since few empirical studies find that socio-economic status is unrelated to participation, although researchers recognize other important variables at the organizational level (structure, procedures, administrative discretion) and at the individual level (trust in government, language, political interest, self-efficacy and system-blaming attitudes (Leighley 1995, 187). Although SES has dominated the research and study of political and social participation, it fails to explain why, in spite of a significant increase in the levels of education and income in the United States, the level of voter participation and social capital has decreased.

**Questions Surrounding Citizen Participation**

Numerous questions surround the concept of citizen participation and, in particular, the diversity, equity and fairness surrounding the opportunities to participate and the processes that can promote or inhibit broad and diverse participation from taking place. The following section of this essay raises questions about the meaning of citizen participation, the impact institutional structure has on the opportunities to participate, the effect of socio-economic inequities on civic participation, and the perceptions of value and fairness in participatory processes. Whether consciously intended or not, the design of our current administrative and political processes can alienate people and discourage meaningful participation from taking place. If poorer Americans believe that local political institutions and administrative structures are incapable of addressing their problems and if middle and upper class Americans seem disconnected from the problems and experiences of poorer citizens it is because public policy and political institutions have encouraged segregation of the classes so much so that Americans do not share the common bonds that contribute to a shared fate and a common good (Macedo 2005, 2-3).

This is where public administrators can make a difference. The persistent pattern of inequality between the advantaged and disadvantaged is obviously something that public administrators need to address and progress has been made toward eradicating discriminatory practices. More immediately, public administrators can take some very basic steps toward eliminating institutional barriers that prevent people across the boundaries of race, place, age, and income from meaningfully participating in the deliberative process of government. Poor design discourages people from becoming involved. Participation can cause people to “feel injured” (Macedo 2005, 11). People can emerge from attempts to participate feeling frustrated by the inefficiencies in the process, the inefficacy of their efforts, and the hostility in the discourse. Institutional choices shape the quality of civic engagement. We can create institutions and implement practices that invite people to participate, that create opportunity and incentive for people to get involved and remain involved. We can design processes that insure fairness, competence and value that will ultimately lead to diverse, equitable and authentic participation (King et al 1998).

## Questions of Meaning

Part of the problem associated with understanding who participates, how they participate and why they participate, centers on the meaning of citizen participation. As with many concepts associated with the governing process, citizen participation is one that defies precise definition. Citizen participation can refer to a wide range of activities implemented by different individuals or groups of individuals. The term citizen itself has several different meanings. To some it reflects the legal rights and responsibilities of an individual as defined in constitutions and statutes that articulate the qualifications, obligations, and rights of citizens (Cooper 1984; Kalu 2003; Roberts 2004). For others, citizenship reflects the broader sociological concept of being a member of a larger community, an inhabitant of a particular place, and as such does not exclude members of society who by place of birth are not entitled to the privileges or bound by the responsibilities legally associated with formal citizenship (Dimock 1990; Frederickson 1982; Hart 1984). And still others see citizenship as virtue, a civil "temper" coupled with attitudes and values concerning the nature of political authority, an embodiment of virtue and moral character, an ennobled public motivated by shared concerns for the common good (Kalu 2003; Dimock 1990; Frederickson 1982; Hart 1984).

We can view citizenship as a right, a community, or a virtue. Citizenship as a virtue extends beyond the formal relationship with government to involvement with the community and with voluntary organizations (Roberts 2004). Its focus is on building and sustaining strong communities and bonds of social connectedness between members of the community. It also emphasizes the development of community values, norms, and traditions (Roberts 2004; Cooper 1984). Citizenship as a virtue requires a sense of responsibility and civic devotion to one's community and to one's country as well as a dedication to the improvement of societal conditions (Dimock 1990; Roberts 2004, Frederickson 1982).

Richard Flatham divided citizenship into two concepts – "high" citizenship and "low" citizenship. High citizenship, which is based on the classic traditions of Aristotle and Rousseau, recognizes that "citizens are free, equal, and engaged with one another in pursuing matters of high and distinctively human import. Citizenship is the distinctive human activity and the distinctively important feature of a political society" (p. 9). Theorists who advance low citizenship, according to Flatham, believe that high citizenship is "unachievable in, and hence, irrelevant to political life…" (p. 9). He contends that the critics of high citizenship are wrong and whatever limitations high citizenship may have it is far more desirable than an uninvolved citizenry; he argues that democracy depends upon it (Flatham 1981).

The terms public participation, citizen participation, political participation, and civic engagement are often used interchangeably, yet they each reflect different aspects of participation. Public participation is the broadest concept, and it includes participation activities that involve the public, the media, and other non-government social groups (Yang and Callahan 2005). Citizen participation, as defined by administrative scholars, refers to the role of the public in the process of administrative decision-making or involvement in making service delivery and management decisions (King, Feltey, Susel 1998; King and Stivers 1998; Box 1998; Thomas 1995; Denhardt and Denhardt 2000). Political participation in its narrowest sense reflects the act of voting or contacting elected officials and, more broadly, refers to involvement in political campaigns and party politics (Verba and Nie 1987; Verba et al 1995). And civic engagement refers to

involvement in community activities and volunteer groups, which can take many forms, from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation (Oliver 2000).

Part of the uncertainty and ambivalence with seeking broader, more diverse, citizen participation rests with the competing perspectives of what it means to be a citizen and what it means to participate. Even if we were to agree on a definition for citizen participation, questions remain surrounding what it actually looks like and how it takes shape. The ideal of citizen participation is intuitively appealing; the practice of citizen participation is inherently complex.

**Questions of Structure and Opportunity**

While citizen participation is meant to ensure that citizens have a direct voice in public decisions, and to ensure that government does the right thing, many agencies habitually choose to exclude, or minimize, participation in decision-making efforts, claiming that citizen participation is too expensive and too time consuming. For many citizens, the reality of conventional participation efforts rarely meets the promise of democracy. Public input in program and policy decisions is likely to be solicited only after administrators and elected officials have defined the problem and developed proposed solutions. Public participation is little more than a formality in many cases, designed to allow the public to comment while protecting the agency's or organization's interest.

Here lies part of the ambivalence about the value of direct participation. As currently, and commonly, structured, many participation efforts fail to realize the full potential of direct participation. Conventional participation, which includes the well-known and well-utilized practice of public meetings and public hearings, can exclude broad and diverse segments of the population from participating, prevent meaningful dialogue from taking place and can frustrate both public administrators and the public.

With conventional participation, the public manager, through the administrative structures and procedures that are in place, controls the ability of the public to influence the agenda and the process. These politically and socially constructed frameworks give administrators the authority to control and orchestrate the process so that citizens are invited to the table when the manager deems iT appropriate, usually after the issues have been framed and decisions have been made (King et al 1998). The managers also determine the venue—the time, location, format—and that can dramatically influence how the public participates as well as who participates. The public administration literature clearly places the responsibility for "managing" citizen participation on the administrators (King and Stivers 1998; Box 1998). They control the process and they control the agenda.

Part of the problem with conventional participation rests in the duality of the relationship. As currently structured, citizens are on one side of the debate and government on the other, resulting in an adversarial and conflict-ridden relationship. Another part of the dilemma is the way government is structured and how the problem is framed. The participation process, as most commonly framed, places citizens furthest from the issue. Typically, the issue is framed by the administrative process and procedures, and the administrator is the intermediary between the public and the issue. This framework gives the administrator the authority to control the process as well as control the ability of citizens to influence the situation or the process.

Many of the structures and frameworks that are in place discourage meaningful participation from taking shape and they discourage racial and ethnic minorities from participating. Formalistic and confrontational in design, they can create an adversarial relationship between the public and government. A formal process often becomes a ritual shaped by the existing administrative systems and procedures and citizens question the value of engaging in such a ritual. When hierarchical relationships dominate, surrounded by rules and regulations, the public's right to participation is undermined, people who lack "civic skills" often feel intimidated and meaningful dialogue is replaced by the exercise of control and authority on the part of the administration.

**Questions of Place**

In some respects, the racial and socio-economic inequities that prevent people from becoming meaningfully involved in their communities are rooted in discriminatory practices of the past and the evidence of these practices can be most clearly seen in the inequalities in place; that is the vast disparity in the quality of housing, education, and health care between the cities and the suburbs. The local circumstances of where we live and work have significant effects, independent of education and income, on whether or not we get involved in civic life and how successful our involvement will be. Research shows that suburbs have higher levels of trust because of homogeneity, but some scholars argue that homogeneity decreases the quantity and quality of citizen participation because there are few issues significant enough to mobilize residents. So, while levels of trust may be higher in the suburbs, levels of citizen participation can be significantly lower than what takes place in larger, more diverse communities. In these smaller, homogenous communities, local institutions are less likely to address broad public issues; they are more concerned with protecting and preserving their place and space than addressing issues surrounding race, class and social equity.

Just as segregation by race and class diminishes the quality of citizen participation in wealthier, whiter communities, it diminishes the quality of participation in communities that are poorer and more diverse. Although poor neighborhoods may possess impressive levels of civic activity, an individual's ability to become involved in civic affairs is compromised when inequalities and disadvantage are concentrated (Macedo 2005, 78). Obstacles to citizen participation in disadvantaged neighborhoods include, among other things, safety, transportation, child care, and employment issues. Working hourly, for a minimum wage, precludes the desire to head out of work early in order to attend a meeting. In addition, people who live in disadvantaged communities often lack the "civic skills" that foster and sustain effective civic engagement. Even if citizens develop the necessary civic skills, they often encounter public institutions that lack the resources to respond to their needs and public officials who lack the ability to implement and sustain opportunities for citizen participation (Macedo 2005, 79).

As Doug Rae writes in his book, *City: Urbanism and Its End*, "Central to the democratic experience is contact with difference – other races, other nationalities, other economic classes, other language groups." This separation by race and class, which is sustained by the city/suburb divide across suburban America, has a profound and negative impact on the democratic experience. This divide threatens the quantity and quality of meaningful, authentic, participation and deliberation. As Rae explains:

> Urbanism embodies some important ideals of a democratic society—one in which people are engaged with one another, where an individual who is a drill press operator by day may be a civic potentate by evening, where trust is earned through lifelong engagement…And, too often, the end of urbanism has undermined that experience by promoting social homogeneity within municipalities, leading to the evolution of regional hierarchies in which "purified communities" (Richard Sennett's term) brings likes together, safe from contact with persons different from themselves. In such regional hierarchies, or ladders, the bottom rung more often than not lies in the formerly working-class neighborhoods of central cities, where opportunity is scarce, danger is commonplace, and democracy in any plausible sense seems out of reach (30-31).

And yet place is changing (Urban Institute 2006). There is a browning of urban America with a decrease of whites in urban centers and an increase in Latino and Asians in cities. The 2000 census shows a consistent pattern of decreasing white population, a modest increase in black population and a significant increase in Latinos in the nation's 100 largest cities (Macedo 2005, 73). In spite of this browning, racial and economic segregation remains high and the fragmentation of communities with very different demographic profiles "narrows civic identities, polarizes political interests, and dampens important forms of civic engagement" (Macedo 2005, 80).

Urban planners recognize that sprawl undermines civic engagement. Things like reliance on cars, few public meeting places, no downtowns, no sidewalks and no porches encourages people to retreat to their private space and social capital suffers as a result (Putnam 2000). Community design can emphasize private space over public space and much of the sprawl that took shape in the 1980s has had a negative impact on the quality and quantity of civic engagement and community involvement. Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, the designer of Central Park, argued that public space, in particular urban parks, are a necessity of democracy because parks are a place where people from different social and economic backgrounds share open space, common ground and establish trust (Macedo 2005, 80).

**Questions of Fairness, Competence and Value**

Fairness, competence and value are discrete concepts that collectively contribute to the quality of citizen participation. Fairness in participation refers to the ability for everyone involved to assume a legitimate role in the decision-making process. Competence refers to the ability of the process to reach the best possible decision given the knowledge and information available. Value refers to the perception that the benefit of participating outweighs the cost of doing so.

Fairness reflects what people are permitted to do in a participatory, deliberative process. When people come together with the intention of openly and honestly discussing an issue and reaching an understanding every effort should be made to insure that people are given the opportunity to 1) attend; 2) initiate discourse – make statements, raise questions; 3) participate in the discussion – ask for clarification, challenge, answer and argue; 4) participate in the decision-making – resolve differences, develop consensus and

bring about closure (Webler and Tuler 2000). If any of these elements are missing the process is not fair.

Competence reflects a process that results in the best possible outcome based on the information available at the time of the deliberation. It requires that information be shared with all the participants in a way that is easy to understand. It requires access to and acceptance of different types of knowledge including expert knowledge and local knowledge which is based on the experience and concerns of people, who are directly impacted by the decision. A competent process insures that appropriate rules and procedures are in place to gather, collect, evaluate and disseminate information.

While public involvement is meant to ensure that citizens have a direct voice in public decisions, and to ensure that government does the right thing, the opportunities to participate often lack value, fairness and competence. Many agencies habitually choose to exclude, or minimize, public participation in policy and decision-making efforts claiming that citizen participation is too expensive and time consuming. For them, the cost of participation outweighs the benefit. For many citizens, the reality of participation efforts rarely meets the promise of democracy. Public participation is little more than a formality in many cases, designed to allow the public to comment while protecting the agency's interest (Mitchell 1997; Timney 1996).

If people see the value in their participation, if they know the process will be fair and competent they will more likely participate and the more people who participate the more likely it is to achieve diversity and representation. When institutional obstacles undermine the opportunities for people to participate, when there is an inherent bias that favors and listens to the voices of privilege and power, and when administrative decisions are made prior to the public hearing or meeting there is little incentive to get involved. People need to see the value in participating. They need to see the time they invest in the participatory process is worth the effort. They need to see that the process is fair and competent. Citizens want to know that their involvement matters and that their involvement has an impact on the quality of the decisions made.

## Promoting Diversity, Equity and Fairness

Government policies, institutions, structures and processes all shape the interests, incentives and capacities of people to effectively participate. If government works collaboratively to create opportunities for citizen participation that emphasize value and fairness, encourage people from diverse backgrounds to participate, make it easy for them to participate, and to insure that every voice is heard then the quality, quantity and diversity of citizen participation will most certainly improve.

According to many researchers in the field of public administration we are moving in that direction as more people embrace the concept of "governance." Bingham, Nabatchi, and O'Leary (2005) explain the difference between government and governance in this way: "Government occurs when those with legally and formally derived authority and policing power execute and implement activities; governance refers to the creation, execution, and implementation of activities backed by the shared goals of citizens and organizations, who may or may not have formal authority and policing power (548)." As an activity, governance seeks to share power in decision making, encourage citizen autonomy and independence, and provide a process for developing the common good through civic engagement. Governance enables citizens, from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, to actively participate in the administrative decision-

making surrounding issues that directly affect them and, as such, encourages broader and more diverse segments of the population to participate.

Advocates of direct participation and deliberative democracy say the opportunity exists to move away from the ineffective, conventional forms of participation to more open, democratic and representative forms of participation. This opportunity exists in part because of the change in the traditional structures of government. Collaborative participation differs from conventional participation in that *all* stakeholders—citizens, interest groups, the business community, nonprofit organizations, faith-based institutions, public administrators, elected officials—are included and treated as equals and the information needed to intelligently discuss the issues is shared with all the stakeholders. Instead of participation as a formal ritual where citizens react to administrative decisions and communications flows in one direction, participation is a "multiway interaction" where all the stakeholders communicate and work in both formal and informal ways to influence action and bring about positive results (Innes and Booher 2004).

Finding the right balance between citizen access to the decision making process and the need to retain a sense of rationality in the process is challenging, to say the least. Collaborative processes can include such things as mediation, negotiation, consensus building, and deliberation. They can take place through new forms of public meetings that insure broad and diverse participation, as well as smaller, more intimate forms of deliberation such as focus groups, study circles, public conversations, and citizen juries that promote dialogue between citizens and other stakeholders (Bingham 2005, Innes and Booher 2004).

Collaborative governance does not have to occur in every situation; however, advocates argue the opportunity for citizens to collaborate should always exist. Just knowing that the deliberative process is open to the public is enough for many people. Knowing that the opportunity and ability to influence the process and the outcome exists can lead to positive, trusting relationships between citizens, elected officials and public administrators. Collaborative participation is an ideal, yet even if all of the conditions of collaborative decision making are not met, networks of trust can develop through the openness, inclusion, and transparency of the process. Communication and dialogue have transformative power, and through deliberation and collaboration a shared understanding of the underlying issue can emerge. Experimental research in social psychology has found that face-to-face communication is the single greatest factor in increasing the likelihood of cooperation (Bornstein 1996; Ostrom 1998). Talking face to face allows group members to demonstrate their willingness to cooperate and enables participants to assess the willingness of other group members. It also helps them see the connection between their self-interest and that of the group. The consensus that emerges from group dialogue leads to actual cooperative behavior, with more talking leading to more cooperation (Bouas and Komorita 1996).

Ideally, group decisions will reflect what is in the best interest of the group and not an individual. The challenge in group deliberation, however, is ensuring that all voices are heard and all opinions are given equal weight. This is easier said than done, as public meetings tend to be dominated by the most vocal participants and framed by the opinions of the people in power whose voices carry more weight than the voices of the average citizen. There are ways to address the inequity inherent in an open meeting format. Meetings should focus on discussion and deliberation among citizens instead of

presentations, speeches, and the traditional question-and-answer sessions. Diverse groups of citizens should be encouraged to participate to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and that participants listen to and learn from one another.

Modifying existing processes to create opportunities for broader, more diverse participation might entail things like convening public meetings at convenient times, aggressively seeking the participation of underrepresented populations, holding meetings in different neighborhoods, and allowing people to speak at meetings without having to inform the governing body beforehand. These small steps all send a clear message that public input is valued. In conventional participation venues, the decision makers typically sit apart from the public, and usually at a higher level. The rules for speaking usually indicate that the public can only speak on a predetermined topic and for a predetermined amount of time. Eliminating these barriers—allowing people to sit around a table, or groups of tables, where everyone is considered equal—encourages collaborative decision-making. Modifying the physical setting and rules for speaking communicates that the process is collaborative.

Collaborative governance requires public managers to share power and relinquish some of the control they have over the process and the outcome. It seems politically naïve to expect those in power to share power with those who do not. Sherry Arnstein (1969), one of the first researchers to write about citizen participation and the different levels of access citizens have to the decision-making process, equated citizen participation with citizen power. She wrote that 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" (Arnstein 1969, 217).

## Conclusion

There is a great divide between the ideal of direct and representative citizen participation and the actual practice of representative citizen participation. The ideal is something we can all embrace as it is intuitively appealing. The actual practice is far more complex and difficult to envision and achieve. Meaningful participation is often perceived as inherently problematic because there is confusion about what it looks like in practice and what it's supposed to accomplish. "Direct citizen participation captivates our attention and imagination. There is something seductive about the idea that people ought to be directly involved in the decisions that affect their lives. Despite the warnings of its dangers, limitations, impracticality, and expense…it still remains an ideal that animates many of our theories and beliefs. Its appeal continues to attract and fascinate us" (Roberts 2005, 315).

There is ample evidence that, when done right, direct participation and deliberative democracy produce positive outcomes. However, it is evident that what is discussed in the public administration literature pertaining to collaboration and direct citizen participation is not common practice; many public managers remain ambivalent. Conventional participation mechanisms remain the most common venues for participation and, as such, discourage broad and diverse segments of the population from getting involved. There is inherent tension in the expectations that pull public administrators in different directions. The undertaking of finding the right balance between rational, responsive, and efficient administration with open, deliberate, representative and collaborative decision-making is complex and challenging, and more

guidance is needed for public administrators who are conflicted by this essentially contested concept.

Those who favor indirect participation may express doubt over the viability of direct participation. It is an ideal, but incremental steps can be taken to make government more open, accessible, and responsive to the public it serves. Supporters of direct participation can make the argument that if governments move beyond conventional participation toward collaborative governance and deliberative democracy, trust in government can be restored as transparency in the process increases.

We must remember: "One of the major tasks faced by democracies is the incorporation of previously excluded racial and minority groups – which may be internal groups, long objects for discrimination by dominant groups on the basis of race, or ethnicity, or external groups of recent immigrants – into full political, economic and social citizenship" (Verba et al 1993, 454) and, as such, we should create consistent and meaningful opportunities that encourage racial and ethnic minorities to participate in the governance process and empower them by demonstrating that those in power hear what they have to say and are responsive to their needs.

At the very core, these efforts to broaden and diversify citizen participation have the potential to expand government's capacity to make wise choices in order to create more just, prosperous and sustainable communities. This diverse participation, in combination with opportunities for informed, open and inclusive civic dialogue about fundamental values and long-term goals across the boundaries of sector, geography, race, age, and income will result in more responsive and effective policies and civic action than would otherwise occur.

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