Participation in a Rapidly Changing Democracy

Citizenship, Outside the Public Square

The problems we face are daunting, and our capacity to address them is remarkable. Climate change, terrorism, financial instability, and other challenges are indeed formidable, but our power to address them is more advanced than ever before.

The greatest element of our improved problem-solving capacity lies in citizens themselves. We enjoy higher levels of education and communication, and we are more committed than ever to the notion that all people deserve certain inalienable rights. Our ability to understand, use, and improve technology is growing by leaps and bounds: everyone, it seems, is a potential scientist, analyst, or inventor. The power of ordinary people, and the ability of government, civil society, and other institutions to unleash that capacity, is the key to our progress as a civilization.

The reality of rising citizen capacity is not, however, a comfortable fact for public leaders. Trapped in systems designed to protect their expertise from citizen interference, besieged by people who no longer believe their data or respect their authority, and faced with hostile constituents at public events, public officials, managers, and other leaders are understandably skeptical about the virtues, capabilities, and good sense of their fellow men and women.

In turn, citizens are skeptical about the virtues, capabilities, and good sense of their public officials. Highly polarized policy debates, the inability of elected leaders to agree on seemingly common-sense measures, and the massive influence of moneyed interests have helped produce the highest levels of citizen distrust in government that we have ever seen.

The official, conventional processes and structures for public participation are almost completely useless for overcoming this divide between citizens and government; in fact, they seem to be making matters worse. In large part, that is

because the infrastructure for participation is inefficient and outdated; it does not recognize citizen capacity and it limits our collective problem-solving potential.

To supplement or circumvent this official participation infrastructure, local leaders have devised a host of new processes, formats, and structures for engaging the public. These include intensive face-to-face deliberations, convenient digital tools, and online networks that add dexterity to the power of face-to-face relationships. Many of these innovations not only satisfy the fundamental needs and goals of citizens, but also demonstrate the potential of public participation for making difficult decisions and solving formidable problems. So far, however, they have been pursued primarily on a temporary, ad hoc basis and have not been incorporated into the way that governments and communities operate.

Public participation can help protect our liberties, ensure justice and equality, and improve our quality of life. It is sometimes characterized as the interaction that makes democracy work—but it might be more accurate to say that public participation *is* the democracy in our primarily republican political systems. The greatest challenge we now face is how to transform those systems in ways that allow us to tap citizens' full, democratic, problem-solving potential.

Illuminating that challenge is the purpose of this book. Before we explore the potential of participation (in Chapter 2), we will first examine the new attitudes and capacities people bring to public life. We also describe the existing infrastructure for participation and begin to explore why it typically fails to provide the things that citizens want.

CONFIDENT, FRUSTRATED, CONNECTED, AND LONELY: THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE 21ST CENTURY CITIZEN

"What is public participation?" would seem to be the first question to answer in this book. But there is a more fundamental question: "What do citizens want?" The most common mistake made by people who are trying to engage the public is that they try to facilitate citizen participation without first trying to understand citizens. Understanding citizens is, of course, no easy task. Citizens' attitudes toward community and public life seem full of contradictions.

Public Problem-Solvers, Who Distrust the Official Public Problem-Solvers

People who are not policy experts or public servants are making increasingly sophisticated contributions to the governance and improvement of their communities.

Some of these efforts involve the use of new online tools. Armed with new technologies and previously inaccessible government data, people have mapped crime patterns, assessed zoning policies, developed bus schedule apps, and monitored water quality. Other examples are impressive not for their technological sophistication, but for the audacity and commitment of volunteers. In Kansas, a team of forty-two volunteers worked with state government to complete a twelve-mile water pipeline in a fraction of the time (and cost) it would normally have taken (McGuigan, 2013). More common examples are the numerous street cleanups, neighborhood patrols, and after-school programs conducted by citizen problem-solvers.

Despite the obvious public-spiritedness of these and many other examples, the attitude of citizens toward government and other public institutions is strikingly negative. Trust in government is at an all-time low (Pew, 2013). Voting rates have declined steadily for decades, along with other measures of civic attitudes. One finding of the Knight Foundation's (2010) *Soul of the Community* research was that people who had participated in a conventional public meeting had lower levels of attachment to community than people who had not. Citizens seem more eager to contribute to public problem solving, yet more frustrated with the conventional processes for governance.

Civil in Private, but Not in Public

Another curious contradiction has to do with the state of civil discourse. In public life, incivility has become increasingly common. Rudeness and intolerance are apparent in official public meetings, on newspaper comment threads, and in other public venues. A study of California public managers concluded that "everyone involved . . . had personal experience with—or could relate to descriptions of—instances of the public-acting-badly and civic-engagement-gone-wrong" (Pearce & Pearce, 2010).

And yet, in our private lives, incivility is less obvious. For one thing, it is no longer widely considered acceptable for people to use slurs and stereotypes relating to race, gender, or sexual orientation. While public hearings may be full of angry people and angry words, at least anecdotally it would seem that workplaces, campuses, and other public spaces are not.

Connected—and Lonely

The omnipresence of social media and other online connections contrasts oddly with citizens' sense of social isolation. As of 2013, 73 percent of all adults who went online were users of social networking sites—a percentage that has doubled

in the last five years (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Twenty-two percent of American adults use "digital tools to talk to their neighbors and keep informed about community issues" (Smith, 2010).

But at the same time, the number of people expressing loneliness and a lack of social connections has continued to increase. The rate of people who consider themselves "lonely" has doubled since the 1980s, up to 40 percent of all adults. Furthermore, this social isolation seems to have other negative impacts on people's lives, including their health. One study suggests that loneliness is as deadly as cancer and twice as deadly as obesity (Olien, 2013).

These trends may seem contradictory, but they are not. People are mistrustful of, angry at, and unfulfilled by public life, in part because of the public participation opportunities they are (and are not) being offered. The most widely available of these opportunities—voting, attending public hearings, and filing complaints— are, at best, insufficient and, at worst, detrimental.

THE FAILING INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE PUBLIC SQUARE

To realize the full potential of participation, we need to focus on what citizens actually want: problem solving, civility, and community. If we start with these goals in mind, it becomes easier to understand why official avenues for engagement do not appeal to the public.

In Chapter 2, we define participation and its various forms in greater detail and describe how some of those forms are capable of delivering the things that citizens want. For now, we follow the line of our citizen-centered analysis to a definition that does not mention government at all: *Public participation is an umbrella term that describes the activities by which people's concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues* (see Nabatchi, 2012; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014; Roberts, 2008). The word "public" in this definition refers to all kinds of people and to all kinds of matters and issues—not just policy decisions and pieces of legislation, but also how people work together to plant trees, clean up vacant lots, or organize activities for children.

Ultimately, public participation is (or, at least, can be) a way for citizens to achieve problem solving, civility, and community. But for these participation activities to take place and for participation to have these impacts and benefits, it must be sustained by a robust participation infrastructure. We define participation infrastructure as: *the laws, processes, institutions, and associations that support regular opportunities for people to connect with each other, solve problems, make decisions, and celebrate community.*

We already have a participation infrastructure, and it occupies a great deal of our time, money, and political capital. But it does not support the kinds of participation we describe above, is not suited to the needs of citizens or officials, and is out of step with the way people live today. This participation infrastructure has several facets:

- **Legal**—At the local, state, and federal levels, we have numerous laws, rules, and regulations that were intended to help citizens monitor government decisions, comment publicly on them, and (in some cases) weigh in through petitions, ballot initiatives, and other forms of direct participation. These laws exert great influence on how participation happens, but in many cases, they are obsolete, unclear, or in conflict with one another (Working Group on Legal Frameworks for Public Participation, 2013; see also PARCC, 2013). At best, the current legal framework is inadequate; at worst, it obstructs and delegitimizes democratic innovation.

- **Governmental**—Most governments have employees tasked with informing and interacting with citizens, either in a particular issue area or by liaising with citizen groups and associations. These staff positions are often occupied by the youngest and most inexperienced employees. Many governments also have commissions and task forces, in areas such as human relations or planning and zoning, which are charged with engaging the public as part of their work. The volunteers serving in these capacities often see their roles as representative, not participatory: they are there to bring the interests and concerns of others to the table, not engage those people directly. Both the employees and the volunteers tend to have only a vague sense of the skills and capacities necessary for productively engaging the public (Lukensmeyer, Goldman, & Stern, 2011).

- **Civic**—There are many formal and informal associations, from civic watchdog organizations to neighborhood and parent groups, that exist, in part, to engage citizens in public affairs. Again, the term "public" should be understood broadly; these public affairs could be the policies being debated by city council or Congress, but they are more often the most immediate citizen priorities and concerns. However, these associations are usually not very participatory or productive. Their leaders are often relatively unrepresentative of the people for whom they claim to speak—and those leaders are unsure of how to bring more people to the table. Even at the grassroots level, these associations

function more as fundraising and lobbying organizations than genuinely participatory ones (Leighninger, 2008).

- **Electoral**—Some observers would argue that the electoral process represents another aspect of participation infrastructure, since candidates and parties could engage citizens on policy questions during their campaigns. But for the most part, the two main American parties have not involved their members extensively in platform decisions since the first half of the 20th Century. Some advocates believe that if campaign finance and other electoral reforms were successful, candidates would have greater incentives to engage meaningfully with voters. But right now, electoral campaigns rarely seem to engage citizens, other than to ask them for their votes and their money. So when they vote, citizens are selecting among candidate platforms that they did not help create, may not understand, and largely will not be able to affect after the election (Nabatchi, Becker, & Leighninger, 2015).

- **Educational**—From elementary schools to graduate programs, our educational system has always had the preparation of citizens as part of its core mission. There are many different ways to help people develop the skills and habits of participation, from courses in "civics" to extracurricular leadership programs to public service opportunities. As authorities like Peter Levine (2007, 2013; see also Levine & Youniss, 2009) argue, this wide array of lessons and activities has not been organized into a coherent, comprehensive system of civic education. Meanwhile, our professional graduate programs in public administration, public policy, social work, planning, journalism, and other fields do not adequately provide future public leaders with the skills and knowledge necessary to organize, inform, and evaluate participation (Leighninger, 2011).

Throughout this book, we examine our current participation infrastructure and explain how it fails to meet the needs, desires, and capacities of citizens. We also explore ways to transform it into the participation infrastructure we need— one that can support public participation for 21st Century democracy.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

For readers who were looking for new tools and techniques, this book may come as a surprise: they may feel like mechanics in training who have suddenly been confronted by the need for a whole new kind of automobile. Or, to use a more appropriate analogy, readers looking for new ways of interacting with citizens may

be challenged by the need to redesign the public square. Furthermore, while there are many established practices and promising experiments in public participation, these elements have rarely been combined in long-term plans or systems. Those who want to redesign and strengthen the infrastructure for public participation often do not know where to start or where to turn for guidance.

We assert that redesigning the public square is neither as abstract nor as difficult as it sounds. This book bridges the far-off visions and the up-close techniques and encourages people to look at their political systems with clear-eyed, hard-headed utopianism. Ultimately, the mission of this book is to help people get more of what they want out of participation, government, and democracy.

Part One of the book lays the foundation for readers' understanding of public participation. Chapter 2 defines participation more explicitly, including its conventional, thin, and thick forms. It also explains how bad participation causes problems and the ways in which good participation can solve them. Chapter 3 examines the (r)evolution of participation and democracy, using a number of snapshots that illustrate particularly salient moments. The chapter concludes with a summary of the current state of our participation infrastructure and briefly suggests ways that it can be strengthened.

Part Two of the book takes a closer look at how participation happens—and how it could happen. The first three chapters of Part Two focus on particular policy areas: Chapter 4 examines education; Chapter 5 focuses on health; and Chapter 6 deals with planning and land use. Chapter 7 describes participation at the state and federal levels of government. Each of these chapters begins by exploring the development of participation in that area. Each then turns to the people involved, including those working in the official settings and the various networks for participation. Next, the chapters explore how the participation infrastructures could be strengthened through six building blocks or overarching categories of participation activities, as well as by incorporating a variety of systemic supports for those building blocks.

Part Three provides more specific guidance on how to strengthen the skills and structures necessary for productive participation. Chapter 8 focuses on participation scenarios and tactics; it is supplemented by the Participation Skills Module, available at www.wiley.com/go/nabatchi. Chapter 9 delves more deeply into how to assemble local participation infrastructure. Chapter 10 concludes the book by summarizing its themes and discussing how the concept of participation in democracy can unite people who have, until now, been working in parallel to one another.

SUMMARY

This chapter set the stage for the rest of the book by arguing that public participation can be a powerful force for solving public problems. In fact, creating more meaningful, productive relationships between people and their public institutions may be a key to the development of democracy and our progress as a civilization. We summarized the main trends in citizen expectations and capacities, and then analyzed how our participation infrastructure fails to meet these needs and goals. Finally, we described how the rest of the book will examine the current state and future potential of public participation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree that the capacity of citizens to solve problems is more advanced than ever before? Why or why not? Do you have any examples where citizens have contributed to solving social problems?

2. Do you agree with the argument that public leaders and citizens are skeptical about each other's abilities to address problems? Why or why not? If you do agree, what do you think are the causes of this skepticism and how might it be addressed?

3. What do you think are the causes of declining trust in government? What can be done to counteract this problem?

4. Review the "citizen contradictions" discussed in this chapter. Do you identify with any of these contradictions? Can you think of others that were not included in the list?

5. The authors assert that citizens want problem solving, civility, and community. Do you agree? Why or why not? What do you want as a citizen from government?

6. Do you agree that the infrastructure of the public square is failing? In what ways (besides voting) have you engaged in the public square?

7. What do you think is the potential of public participation for repairing the connection between citizens and public leaders? Can it be used to solve problems? What have been your experiences with public participation?

8. Citizens are increasingly using social media and other online tools. Do you think these tools are good or bad? Why? How do you think they can be used to promote public participation?

9. This chapter identifies five facets of the participation infrastructure (legal, governmental, civic, electoral, and educational). Evaluate each facet from your perspective, and suggest ways that each might be improved.

10. Improving public participation will require both new skills and new structures. What might be some of those new skills and new structures?

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