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Public participation

Kathryn S. Quick and John M. Bryson

Forthcoming 2016 in *Handbook in Theories of Governance*, edited by Jacob Torbing and Chris Ansell, Edward Elgar Press.

Public participation in governance involves the direct or indirect involvement of stakeholders in decision-making about policies, plans or programs in which they have an interest. This chapter explores the theories illuminating key concerns, namely what constitutes legitimate and useful public participation; the relationships among diversity, representation, and inclusion; the appropriate influence of different kinds of knowledge; and how to align participation methods and contexts. We describe two areas needing additional theoretical development: what levels of participation are desirable and workable, and the threats and opportunities for participation posed by increasingly diffuse systems of governance.

Public participation in governance involves the direct involvement – or indirect involvement through representatives – of concerned stakeholders in decision-making about policies, plans or programs in which they have an interest. Stakeholders are persons, groups or organizations that may influence or be affected by policy decisions ([Freeman 2010](#)) or place a claim on an organization's or other entity's attention, resources or outputs ([Bryson 2004](#)). Through public participation, stakeholders may interact with government agencies, political leaders, nonprofit organizations and business organizations that create or implement public policies and programs. While participation may be limited to discrete acts (e.g., a town hall meeting or citizen survey) or described by a set of practices (e.g., convening public hearings or other types of consultation processes), participation more generally is the process of engagement in governance.

In democracies, citizens are presumed to be important stakeholders in that they are able to participate either directly or indirectly through elected representatives in the formation, adoption and implementation of the laws and policies that affect them. Public participation thus is a fundamental part of the public–government relationship in democracies ([Roberts 2004](#); [Jacobs et al. 2009](#); [Bryson et al. 2013](#)). The context of public participation in governance is broader than this relationship, however. Governance encompasses formal and informal processes of decision-making and management of domains of collective community interest or concern ([Kooiman 2003](#); [Bevir 2013](#)). It occurs through broad networks that often include public agencies but are not exclusive to them. The traditional responsibilities, efforts and effects of government are increasingly diffused across constantly changing, networked assemblages of government agencies, nonprofits, businesses and other entities ([Goldsmith and Eggers 2004](#); [Agranoff 2007](#); [Provan and Kenis 2008](#)). As governance has moved beyond government, so too have the scope and need for public participation ([Osborne 2010](#); [Bryson et al. 2014](#); [Morgan and Cook 2014](#)). Owing to space limitations, we focus primarily on public participation in connection with government activities but invite readers to extend these frameworks and critiques to other contexts for participation in governance.

Despite a widespread expectation for public participation in governance, practical and theoretical debates surround its implementation. Key concerns include the following: what constitutes legitimate and useful public participation; the relationships of diversity with

representation and inclusion; the nature and appropriate role of different kinds of knowledge and expertise in participation; and the challenge of designing participation processes that are well adapted to their context. In this chapter, we explore the theories that illuminate these tensions, prefaced by a brief summary of the relationship of public participation with other key concepts in governance and an exploration of what is at stake in doing public participation well.

DEFINITION AND SALIENCE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Public participation intersects with numerous other key concepts in governance developed elsewhere in this Handbook. Ensuring the accountability and transparency of government is a common motivation for public participation. Representation, power and authority – who is represented, how much influence they have (legitimate or otherwise) and what tactics can be used to address exclusion – are central, abiding concerns in the quality and legitimacy of public participation processes ([Young 2000](#)).

The focus of interest in public participation has changed, however, since it first became a prominent topic in governance in the 1960s. A 1969 article by Sherry Arnstein is still one of the most highly cited and influential pieces in the field. She described a “ladder” of increasing citizen influence and authority over government decision-making. Her approach reflected the orientation at that time of the Civil Rights movement, and other community organizing efforts in the United States, to transform social dynamics and gain power for excluded groups ([Boyte 1989](#); [Polletta 2012](#)), if necessary via direct action by oppressed groups ([Kahn 1970](#); [Alinsky 1971](#)) to break down the walls of government and elitist institutions ([Pateman 1970](#)). Doubts were arising about whether public participation could really accomplish equality and inclusion. D.P. [Moynihan \(1969\)](#) famously questioned whether new federal government policies requiring “maximum feasible participation” by previously marginalized groups might not be exacerbating rather than remedying class and racial differences, while Arnstein (1969) critiqued many ostensibly democratic processes for being tokenistic or manipulative.

By the early 2000s, public participation had become a routine and expected feature of public policy-making ([Bingham et al. 2005](#)). Concerns among practitioners and scholars have shifted from whether it should occur to a general recognition that when it is well done it can be very beneficial for decision-making, citizenship and inclusion ([Bryson et al. 2013](#)). Its practice has become increasingly professionalized: there is a large community of dedicated facilitation practitioners ([Moore, A. 2012](#)), and building public participation skills is a common part of public and nonprofit managers’ training ([Leighninger 2010](#)). However, the methods of participation vary greatly, so that there is great interest in how well it is designed and implemented ([Sandfort and Quick 2013](#)). In this chapter, we both focus on these contemporary topics and observe that problems of equality and exclusion have not been resolved.

The term “citizen participation,” once used interchangeably with “public participation,” is now falling out of favor. The term excludes many participants who do not have formal citizenship status and also neglects numerous other types of public or civic participation and engagement. We have mentioned already that governance occurs through networks of public agencies and other entities. Two highly influential frameworks in participation scholarship ([Arnstein 1969](#)) and practice ([International Association for Public Participation 2014](#)) dichotomize the government agencies and the public, emphasizing the influence of the latter on decision-making by the former ([Nabatchi 2012](#)). [Fung \(2006\)](#) asserts that appropriately characterizing and analyzing the “design space” of participation in

governance requires attention not only to the dimension of participants' influence on decision outcomes but also to what kinds of stakeholders participate and how the participation is conducted. The dynamics of public engagement in governance are multi-dimensional and mutually constitutive.

In fact, the implementation of participation in governance has important consequences for constituting the public. Different processes create different kinds of democratic communities (Quick and Feldman 2011; Dewey [1927] 2012). For example, giving testimony at a public hearing creates a different kind of belonging in and ownership of a problem and its solution in comparison with engaging in long-term deliberative processes (Innes and Booher 2010). Sometimes participation processes are oriented to the general public, sometimes to the interested public and sometimes to smaller circles of representatives of key stakeholder groups. These variable definitions of the public and processes for representation introduce tensions in diversity and access to decision-making. Depending upon how outreach, participant recruitment and the environment and dynamics of the consultation are handled, processes designed to involve small groups of key stakeholders can exacerbate power differences and elitism (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Dasgupta and Beard 2007).

Who does and does not participate is highly consequential for constituting which people and interests are considered part of the public domain (Young 2000; Disch 2012) and for people's sense of their rights and entitlement as members of a public (Soss 2005). Participation provides an opportunity for participants to enhance their own capacities to engage in democratic citizenship (Pateman 1970; Mansbridge 1999), produces lasting achievements of public value (Nabatchi 2010; Boyte 2011), helps articulate what the "public" interest is (Reich 1990) and provides the basis for broadly based social learning (Ansell 2011). M. Moore (2014) makes the argument that in a democracy a "public" collectively defined through democratic processes – that inevitably involve direct or indirect participation of some kind – is the appropriate arbiter of public value when government-owned assets are involved.

Some but not all forms of public participation involve deliberation, meaning that the involved parties make decisions through dialogue, exchange and mutual learning, rather than through the mere aggregation of individual interests through voting or other mechanisms for providing input (Reich 1990; Roberts 2004). Numerous techniques and concerns associated with stakeholder engagement in public participation are also found in the practice of collaborative public management and planning, in which multiple government, nonprofit, community or business entities coordinate their efforts to address public problems and pursue public value (Bryson et al. 2006; Cooper et al. 2006; O'Leary and Bingham 2009; Innes and Booher 2010).

There are many purposes for public participation. These may include: fulfilling legal requirements; embodying the ideals of democratic participation and inclusion; advancing social justice; informing the public; enhancing understanding of public problems and exploring and generating potential solutions; and producing policies, plans and projects of higher quality in terms of their content (Bryson et al. 2013). One of the important arguments for public participation is that it is an important end unto itself in a democratic society. We have just noted the key role participation plays in reflecting and constituting citizenship, the public and public values. Numerous other potential benefits of effective public participation are well documented. While public participation requires resources such as skill, time and money, it can generate numerous advantages (Roberts 2004; Feldman and Quick 2009). Participants can contribute to decisions through providing new information, different ways of seeing an issue and motivation to address problems (Renn et al. 1993), sometimes helping

government decision-makers and the public to become more informed and develop an enlarged view of issues (Fung 2007). Public participation can also support a more equitable distribution of limited public resources (Abers 2000; Simonsen and Robbins 2000). And it can create resources for future problem-solving and implementation to address new public issues by enhancing trust and legitimacy, building relationships and generating knowledge and interest about policy issues and processes (Feldman and Quick 2009; Ansell 2011). Whether participation actually does produce these benefits depends on a number of factors discussed below.

KEY THEMES OF THEORIES OF PARTICIPATION

Legitimacy

Participation's potential benefits are realized when the process goes well, but often it does not. Despite a great deal of practical knowledge and research, stories abound of participation failures. Legitimacy is one of the most contested features of public participation, typically expressed in terms of the adequacy of participation or representation, the technical or political workability of the decision outcomes and the procedural fairness of the process. When public participation is not seen as legitimate, it can alienate the public from government and disrupt the implementation of policy decisions (Innes and Booher 2004; Ozawa 2012).

How legitimacy is accomplished and evaluated can be viewed through multiple theoretical lenses. One commonly used in discourse about deliberative democracy is about the quality of the exchange, namely that legitimate participation requires that the participants explain themselves clearly, use logical arguments and utilize valid criteria for evaluating options and outcomes (Gastil 2000; Jacobs et al. 2009). Another relates to the legitimacy of the policy outcomes, meaning whether the decisions fulfill criteria for good policy, such as equity, efficiency or technical implementability. Indeed, one of the compelling reasons for public participation is to ensure that government policy and program choices are legitimate in terms of being acceptable to and addressing the needs of the public (Fung 2006).

Another theoretical lens for understanding legitimacy relates to the quality of the process. Procedurally just and procedurally rational processes are likely to be high in quality. Procedural justice refers to whether, or the extent to which, the process embodies democratic values such as fairness, transparency, attentiveness to stakeholders' concerns and openness to public input. A procedurally just process is presumed to increase the acceptability of the decisions reached (Innes and Booher 2010). Procedural rationality involves collecting, analyzing and using information that is relevant to the decision (Dean and Sharfman 1993). The presumption is that procedural rationality will help assure that final choices are substantively rational, meaning that they make sense on many grounds, including, for example, technical, administrative, legal, ethical and stakeholder support criteria (Simon 1996: 26–27).

Process legitimacy is also connected to trust. Trust is problematic in any process involving people with diverse interests and levels of power (Huxham and Vangen 2005), but, when diverse voices are included and power is managed so that potentially marginalized groups do influence outcomes, there are strong payoffs for the legitimacy of the process, the quality of decisions and effective decision implementation. Stakeholders are more likely to accept a decision that they believe was produced in a procedurally just manner, even when it is not their individually preferred outcome (Tyler and DeGoey 1996). This enhanced "buy-in" to decisions can limit delays, mistakes and lawsuits during project and policy implementation (Laurian and Shaw 2008). Conversely, the interested public will be unsatisfied and may even

protest vehemently if the participation process seems perfunctory, tokenistic or manipulative (Arnstein 1969; Flyvbjerg 1998). For example, public hearings are the most ubiquitous form of public participation and serve an important purpose of transparency and accountability in governance. Yet they are also very commonly considered illegitimate “window dressing” because decisions have effectively already been made (Innes and Booher 2004).

Diversity and Inclusion

Leaving the public out of decision-making is an example of tensions regarding inclusion in and exclusion from governance. A key challenge in participation is ensuring an appropriate range of interests is engaged in the process, including those normally excluded from decision-making by institutionalized inequities (Abers 2000; Young 2000; Parekh 2002; Schlozman and Brady 2012). All too often, supposedly participatory processes end up including the “usual suspects,” people who are easily recruited, articulate in the language and logics being used to make decisions, and reasonably comfortable in public arenas. Indeed, most public participation is not inclusive: it does not involve deliberation and creating new understandings together but rather is oriented to “consulting” with the public to gather input (International Association for Public Participation 2014) or just allowing people to express different perspectives (Innes and Booher 2004).

Stakeholder analysis and the active management of conflict and power are thus needed to ensure that under-represented and marginalized groups are at least considered and may have a place at the table (Bryson 2004). Practitioners and scholars raise questions, however, about the impact for inclusion and diversity of the recent valorization of deliberative, collaborative and consensus-oriented approaches to public participation (Innes 2004). Depending upon how conflict and power are managed, participation may enhance marginalized groups’ influence and provide a robust container for negotiation among differences (Crosby and Bryson 2005; Forester 2009). Conversely, dissent may be silenced even while the sponsors of a process claim legitimacy through adopting the veneer of a participatory approach (Young 2000; Bulkeley and Mol 2003).

Inclusion and exclusion are often used in reference to the ethnic, racial, gender or socioeconomic diversity of the people taking part in public participation. This locates the focus of diversity on the status of the people taking part in a participation process. It may also be associated with concerns about the representativeness of the people participating, for example in terms of their socioeconomic diversity, relative to the people who have a stake in the policy decision. A complementary theoretical lens re-conceptualizes inclusion as practices of engaging a diversity of perspectives to discover new understandings of problems, resources and options (Quick and Feldman 2011). In this view, inclusion involves active negotiation among differences in perspectives, identities, institutional boundaries or issue definitions (Quick and Feldman 2014).

Expertise and Participation

Including a variety of perspectives in decision-making through public participation often agitates concerns about whether substantively rational outcomes can be attained and legitimated. Many concerns center on the nature and proper place of expertise in governance. Policy-making typically privileges what Scott (1998) and Yanow (2004) characterize as expert (i.e., certified, specialized, decontextualized, codified) knowledge over lay (i.e., locally specific, experiential, context-based) knowledge (Ozawa and Susskind 1985; Fischer 2000). In one view, giving the public influence over choices traditionally left to those with specialized expertise may produce poor outcomes. For example, involving residents in deciding how to address a traffic congestion problem may give currency to options that civil

engineers would consider unsafe, too costly or technically infeasible. Public participation may also provide a platform for well-resourced “not-in-my-backyard” (NIMBY) advocates who oppose policies or programs (e.g., group homes or affordable housing) that the greater public needs (King et al. 1998). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the empathetic, experiential understandings that are expressed through public participation introduce important knowledge and values into decision-making processes (Feldman et al. 2006; Thacher 2009; Innes and Booher 2010) and can provide a vehicle for important civic learning (Ansell 2011).

The Challenge of Designing Participation Processes

The solutions to these concerns are not simple. There is no formula for good participation. Unlike cars, which despite different models and updates operate in more or less the same way with predictable results even in different environments, public participation is not based on a fixed, reliable technology. Instead, public policy problems, the participants, methods for organizing the process and other features of the context interact uniquely in every setting (Pfister and Godana 2012; Sandfort and Quick 2013). Of course, research is uncovering important generalizations, but the generalizations do not amount to anything like a set of rules or step-by-step guide.

For example, currently there is a lot of excitement about the use of social media and other emerging forms of information technology to support participation (Evans-Cowley and Hollander 2010; Slotterback 2011). However, social media will not inherently transform the operation and effects of participation. Whether analyzing physical or online participation, the same questions arise. These include, for example: the accessibility of the participation space and representativeness of participants; the level of effort, competence or authenticity that the agency brings to the process; and the influence participants have on decision-making. Forms of e-government are highly variable (Coursey and Norris 2008), and the latest research suggests that social media are serving primarily as a new mechanism for reinforcing a longstanding form of government–public interaction – unidirectional communication from public agencies to their constituents about their activities – rather than as a platform for new forms of engagement (Mergel 2013).

Design science provides a fresh perspective on questions about how to assemble the best resources, techniques or procedures for a particular problem. The theoretical perspectives presented thus far are drawn from typical social science approaches to hypothesis testing and generalizable theory development. Design science, in contrast, turns attention to achieving desired outcomes in problematic real-world situations. It makes use of evidence-based substantive and procedural knowledge and emphasizes the need to respond to particular contexts (Romme 2003; van Aken 2007). A design science approach to public participation thus makes explicit that processes should be designed and re-designed based on new knowledge and experience (Bryson et al. 2013).

Other context-based differences that are relevant to how well a given approach to participation will work include: the relative centralization and authority of the government entities; the distribution of power among stakeholders; the particular history and people’s attachments to a given place; which terms of argument are persuasive (e.g., equity, environmental sustainability, no new taxes); the expectations of government (e.g., level of confidence in government capacity and competence, corruption, values about what is the job of government or other entities); what other avenues for influence are available (e.g., lawsuits, direct political mobilization); competition among priorities (e.g., how participating

ranks with other household activities, the relative interest in a particular planning topic); and other dynamics of civil society.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THEORIES OF PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE

We have named several key theoretical concerns regarding public participation in governance relating to legitimacy, inclusion, the proper role of expertise and the challenge of designing participation processes. These are actively negotiated issues in all contexts of democratic governance. Because democratic governance is traditionally defined as occurring by, for and with the public, the boundaries between public agencies, elected officials and the public are inherently complex and contested. Many anxieties about the practice and theory of public participation are related to how democratic governance is conceptualized and how that affects the nature of participation. This is especially important in polities, such as the United States, which are characterized by significant inequalities, sharply divided public opinion on many issues, intensely partisan politics, powerful organized interests and numerous veto points built into the system (Jacobs 2014).

Indeed, we opened the chapter by noting that concerns regarding inequality, oppression, and exclusion from decision-making animated early interest in the practice and study of public participation. Before recommending new directions for theory development regarding participation in governance, we want to emphasize the value and necessity of revisiting and re-emphasizing these old themes. Despite participation becoming a routine part of government policy-making, there is nonetheless a growing sense that government is unresponsive or not representative of many segments of the public or perhaps even the majority (Mann and Ornstein 2012; Jacobs 2014). Racial minorities and the poor continue to feel disciplined by policies in which they are central stakeholders and which are ostensibly intended to empower them (Soss et al. 2011; Alexander 2012; Moynihan, D. et al. 2015). The societal concerns about inequality and exclusion that animated the push to public participation in the 1960s are still with us today, meriting renewed focus on the relationship between participation in processes of governance and personal, group or societal inclusion, empowerment and equality.

We conclude by recommending two areas where theory development is particularly needed. The first relates to how much participation is desirable and workable. Huxham and Vangen (2005) insightfully observed that the rapid rise in the popularity of collaborative governance could be misread as meaning it is a good or easy solution and instead cautioned that it is a hard solution to a hard set of problems. Similarly, public participation is not easily accomplished, and may not always be appropriate. As we noted, the move to incorporate design thinking frameworks into governance processes (Cowan 2012) offers a new lens for considering how to accomplish participation well for particular settings (Bryson et al. 2013). Participation is a particularly wise route to policy-making when it is legally required or when it is the only or most efficacious way of gaining one or more of the following: needed information, political support, legitimacy or citizenship development (Thomas 2012).

The second relates to the implications of increasingly diffuse systems of governance for opportunities for public participation. These include: the move to contract with non-governmental entities to provide public services through the New Public Management (Behn 1998); the “Big Society” push in the United Kingdom to relocate government services to communities and volunteers (Kisby 2010); decentralization efforts in the developing world (Hadiz 2004); and the European push towards the “co-production” of public services (Bovaird 2007) in de-centered networks involving many non-governmental entities. These movements are leading many observers to speak of the New Public Service (Denhardt and

Denhardt 2000), the New Public Governance (Osborne 2010; Morgan and Cook 2014) or public value governance (Bryson et al. 2014) as a necessary approach to governing and managing effectively in a shared-power world. This changed nature of governance may well enhance opportunities for public participation in shaping public policies and implementation. At the same time, however, these shifts have raised concerns about where and how public participation can occur to ensure the accountability, transparency and responsiveness of these governance actors.

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