

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN HEALTH POLICY REFORM

THE TRIUMPH OF HOPE OVER EXPERIENCE

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Advocacy on behalf of new mechanisms to enhance formal citizen engagement in making and implementing public policy is, in a famous phrase, “the triumph of hope over experience.” Samuel Johnson invented this epigram in the eighteenth century to describe second marriages. After re-examining my first hand experience with formal citizen participation and sampling recent publications on the subject, I decided that Dr. Johnson’s remark is also a concise description of advocacy for participatory policy.

Reading the findings of recent research on formal citizen engagement or participation has been instructive. Australian researchers have contributed many articles to this literature.

The implications that the Australians whose publications I sampled draw from their research range as quite widely. Here are four recent examples. Each begins with a sentence of mine summarizing the authors’ conclusions and is then followed by a direct quotation from the article:

- *Citizen engagement is grand; more would be better:* “Consumer and carer participation...has the potential to empower consumers and their carers and to improve mental health services.” (2003)
- *Citizen engagement is desirable but what it can accomplish may be exaggerated:* “While empowerment was universally considered to be desirable, opinions about the transfer of power were more ambivalent” (1999)
- *Citizen engagement may privilege political correctness:* “...simply devoting energy and resources to consumer initiatives, and thereby

achieving a politically correct approach, may not be a worthwhile exercise” (2002)

- *Citizen engagement can inhibit reform that is in the interest of citizens:* most participatory models “constrain thinking about other possible forms of political intervention” (1996)

The authors of the last quotation are among the few in the international literature who asked the same opening question I did when I first encountered advocacy to increase formal citizen participation in public decisions. At the time, the mid-1960s, I was a youngish official assigned to help make and implement regulations for what the US Congress, in the Economic Security Act of 1964, described as the “maximum feasible participation” of the “target populations” for federal anti-poverty programs. The opening question these Australians and I asked was: Where did the rhetoric and methodology of formal citizen participation come from and how and where had it been used before? Both the Australians and I found significant roots of formal participation in community development programs organized by the British Colonial Office in Africa during the 1920s and 1930s in order to secure the cooperation of village leaders through non-coercive methods.

I found other precursors of formal citizen participation closer to home. For example, the US federal government had created participatory schemes to engineer consent for two notable programs; the Tennessee Valley Authority, which flooded farmland in order to produce low cost electricity in the 1930s; and the national Urban Renewal program enacted in 1954, which uprooted low income people, bulldozed their homes and then replaced them with highways and better paying buildings. These early

policies for formal participation by citizens received close attention from researchers as well as from community activists and politicians. A study of citizen participation in TVA that was published in 1946 introduced the word co-optation to the discourse of social science. A few years later a famous study described the uprooting of almost the entire population of Boston's East End. The slogan that Urban Renewal was a euphemism for Negro Removal was repeated frequently in American cities by the end of the 1960s.

I found numerous other uses of formal participatory policy. For example, designers of community mental health programs, promoted it as therapy for the medicalized social diseases of anomie, apathy and alienation. More formal participation in public decisions had also had been endorsed by reformers who believed that decentralizing government is usually virtuous, by advocates of minority rights demanding voice for their people in order to obtain equal protection under the law, by advocates of the removal of barriers to employment in the form of racial or ethnic bigotry and union seniority rules, and, most controversially, by proponents of the redistribution of political influence and income by other means than electoral politics or violence.

As a young public servant assigned to increase citizen participation in health, housing and social service programs I encountered people within and outside government who espoused each of these purposes for participation. I also met many people who opposed and others who subverted formal citizen participation under rules set by the federal government and the states. For almost five years I worked mainly at improving citizen participation in public programs at two federal agencies, and in between advised the governor of a state on anti-poverty and participation policy, I acquired many stories, and even a folksong by a colleague who was a brilliant

community organizer as well as a gifted singer. The title of the song is “Talking Community Action Blues”.

The federal agencies for which I worked required, as a condition of subsidy, that officials of state, city and county government create new structures and processes to engage citizens. The regulations we wrote and implemented specified that residents of communities served by federal programs of health, housing, social services and workforce training should be involved in planning, staffing and evaluating these programs. We earmarked funds that participating citizens and staff who served them could use to purchase training and technical assistance acceptable to them.

I travelled the country explaining the rules of formal citizen participation, organizing training sessions for public officials and citizens, and occasionally warning mayors and county executives that their lack of compliance with federal rules could threaten federal subsidies for their programs. (A former West Virginia anti-poverty official, who later reaped cash and notoriety as the author of a book and a film about the relationship between a striptease artist and a Governor of Louisiana, began his writing career with a book about intrusive feds that he titled *They'll Cut Off Your Program*).

Almost everybody I worked with was cynical about formal citizen participation. Many elected officials and the department heads they appointed complained, for example, that the politics of formal participation interfered with their ability to reward loyal members of their political party with jobs because these jobs were now controlled by leaders of boards of citizens required under federal regulations. Other officials offered evidence that the rules of participation made it more difficult for them to run

efficient services because citizen-dominated community boards demanded over-staffing, often by low-paid workers with inadequate skills.

A few officials charged some of us with misconduct for enforcing too zealously regulations to promote citizen participation. I was so honored by a Mayor of St. Louis and a Governor of Alaska. The latter threatened to indict me for incitement to riot, which would have been a virtuoso feat of political organizing in the sparsely populated Arctic.

However, American government, at any level, is never monolithic. While I was being censured by the Mayor I watched a St. Louis Cardinals baseball game from the absent Mayor's box as the anonymous guest of the director of the program to which I was interpreting federal regulations. Similarly, the senior United States Senator from Alaska congratulated my two colleagues and me for helping Inuit people to organize a cooperative to keep fish cold until they could sell it to wholesalers at the most favorable price.

I also heard considerable criticism about formal participation from citizens themselves, including leaders of new bodies created to enhance it. African American and Hispanic leaders, for instance, frequently criticized each other for selfish and devious behavior in making decisions about programs and hiring. Dissident whites in Appalachia complained that federal rules permitted the coal companies and school boards, the largest employers in most of the mountain counties, to select people who followed their instructions as officially participating citizens.

Most of my bosses were also cynical about the formal participation they were obliged to implement. For instance, the first African American to head a cabinet agency in the US federal government scoffed at draft regulations I was helping to write under a

new Congressional mandate of 1967. He said, “My people do not want to participate in planning programs; they just want better services.” His deputy in charge of the Model Cities Program—which required extensive citizen participation in 150 cities, said that our regulations for participation might limit the frequency or the intensity of urban riots because they would bring residents of ghetto neighborhoods to the bargaining table. Beyond that he was unimpressed.

Despite this evidence that formal citizen participation in decisions about public programs was problematic to many people, I continued for several years to defend even the most extreme version of formal citizen participation; which was direct community control of public programs by the people they served and leaders they chose. In 1967, while working for a Republican governor, I wrote an article in which I initially described the limitations of direct control: “it supports separatism...balkanizes public services, enables minority group hustlers to be just as opportunistic...as their...predecessors...it is incompatible with merit systems and professionalism...and it can allow [have nots] to gain control but not allow them sufficient dollar resources to succeed.”But then I concluded that we could not “take lightly the arguments of embittered proponents of community control—that every other means of trying to end their victimization has failed.”

By the late 1960s, however, I realized, as many of my colleagues also did, that the acknowledged successes and well-known failures of formal citizen participation had hardly anything to do with the goals for it described in law and regulations. Here are two examples, each of which received widespread attention in the media. A notable success was the election of an African American Congressman whose base of support was the

participatory mechanism in the Oakland, California Model Cities Program. A significant failure was the Hunts Point Multi-Service Center in New York City, a multi-million dollar program that was so fouled by graft and patronage that the press invented the phrase “poverty pimp” to describe its founder and chief executive. Despite this publicity he was elected to the City Council, leaving his family in charge of its business, the Multi-Service Center; which stayed under their control for decades.

Another negative effect of enhanced citizen participation on American politics became evident as a result of the presidential election of 1968. In the mid-1960s the Johnson Administration supported the enactment of controversial legislation on civil rights, and especially on voting rights, aimed principally at improving opportunities for African Americans. In the same years the Administration also promoted mandatory citizen participation in major public programs. The unintended reciprocal consequences of these two sets of policies contributed to a major change in national politics. Civil rights legislation enabled Republicans to end the Democratic Party’s century of dominance in the states of the South by functionally endorsing racist resistance to federal law. At the same time, mandatory citizen participation in public social programs undercut the power of Democratic Party machines in the North and Mid-West because it reduced their ability to get voters to the polls and influence how they voted. The Democrats had won 8 of the 10 presidential elections before 1968; the Republicans have won 7 of the 10 since that date.

Of course, political realignment had many other causes; which included white migration to the South and especially to its suburbs, the undercutting of the informal

welfare programs of city political machines by the influx of federal grant funds since the 1930s and, not least, the polarizing effects of the Vietnam War.

However, one perceptive observer of politics and policy made a strong case that controversies stirred by citizen participation policy prevented the nation from seizing the first opportunity since the 1930s (and, as it happened, the last for a long time) to expand the safety net of public services. In 1969, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a former Johnson Administration official who later became a powerful U.S. Senator, made this point in a book the title of which played on the legislative language requiring the “maximum feasible participation” of citizens in anti-poverty programs. The title was *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*.

In 1970 I told the annual national meeting of leaders in social welfare, I said that the mechanisms of formal citizen participation over-simplified the complexity of people and politics. “The central dilemma of social policy,” I said, “is the impossibility of taking into account the variety of citizens’ attitudes and aspirations. Every policy, program and project is more sensitive to the needs of some citizens than of others. Any policy is a partial, disputed solution...more as a result of citizens’ complexity than because of the venality, incompetence, or unimaginativeness of political and bureaucratic actors.”

In this talk and a subsequent essay I reported on what I had learned from the world literature about formal citizen participation when I temporarily left public service for a university job. I said that the most thorough and persuasive research revealed that “it remains to be convincingly demonstrated that citizen or government or guild domination of the delivery of particular services necessarily means a higher or lower quality of output, a ‘package’ more or less responsive to needs.”

Two years later, having returned to public service to work on health issues, I encountered one of the remnants of the formal citizen participation of the 1960s. Federal and state law required local bodies, a majority of whose members were consumers of health services, to review and advise state officials on requests from hospitals for capital to build and equip new facilities that states could borrow at favorable rates of interest. The boards routinely approved most requests from providers, enabling considerable duplication of services. Co-optation continued to be an effective purpose of formal citizen participation.

Over the next decade, in contrast, I observed the most important goals of enthusiasts for formal citizen participation being achieved as a result of fundamental institutional changes in government in American states. As a result of action by the three branches of our federal government, the states were becoming more responsive to voters and more efficient at managing public programs than ever before.

States became more responsive and efficient for two reasons. The first was a ruling by the United States Supreme Court in 1962 that is usually described as the “one man one vote decision.” The Court declared unconstitutional laws or constitutional provisions in most states that governed the drawing of boundaries of legislative districts. States had traditionally over-weighted the votes of residents of rural areas by permitting them to elect legislators from districts with fewer inhabitants than urban districts. After the Court required redistricting, the composition of state legislatures began to change to reflect the increasing suburbanization of the population since the end of the Second World War.

The qualifications and behavior of legislators also changed as a result of redistricting that took account of suburban population growth. The majority of the new suburbanites held middle-income jobs in business, government and the professions. Most of them owned their homes and accorded close attention to local and state politics, especially the politics of zoning, transportation, education and healthcare. These voters wanted to be represented by legislators who resembled them; and who earned re-election through two-way communication. By the mid-1970s, in government in many states (and certainly in the one that then employed me) as well as in county government, the chairs and ranking members of major legislative committees were experts on their areas of policy and sensitive to the preferences and priorities of their constituents.

The second reason states became more responsive to citizens was that they became more efficient managers of growing public funds. The federal government began making massive grants-in-aid to states and large cities for programs of health, social services, housing and income support during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The number and size of these programs increased between the late 1940s and the 1970s. Each state and major city increased the size and professionalism of its civil service in order to manage grants-in-aid under strict federal rules of accountability.

During the 1930s federal grants often went directly to cities, bypassing state governments because they were often dominated by politicians who were hostile to cities, to the party in power in Washington, or to both. As the management capacity of states increased, their representatives in Congress reduced the number of programs funded directly to cities. By the 1970s, the new suburban majorities in state government

were pressing Congress even more strongly to require that all federal grant funds go to states which supervise how local government spent them.

I am not claiming that the United States has achieved ideal or even admirable citizen participation in policymaking by improving the responsiveness and the machinery of government. I am merely saying that effective participation by citizens has improved since the 1970s because the representativeness and the machinery of government has improved and because of effective laws to protect citizens from being deprived of their rights. I have experienced the growing effectiveness of genuine citizen participation through the ordinary processes of government during every day of my working life for almost four decades.

I must confess, finally, that I remain uncertain about precisely how to define effective citizen participation. The tacit racism of the Republican Party in the South has been responsive to engaged citizens. The state and local school boards that require equal curricular emphasis to evolution and intelligent design are elected. Are ballot initiatives in many states to prohibit same sex marriage effective engagement? Is it effective engagement to grant public funds to so-called charter schools that are governed by citizens but are often less accountable for effectively educating children than public schools are? Are so-called faith-based social service programs that are governed by church leaders, clerical and lay, and receive public funding effective even when they blur the separation of church and state? Are consumer health advocates effectively involved when they accept funding from the pharmaceutical cartel to promote legislation?

I do not personally admire any of these examples of recent citizen engagement in the United States. I wish success to citizens who share my views and who organize politically to defeat these causes.

The best defense against forms of citizen engagement that distress me are the professionals in politics and at senior levels of government, especially in state and local government, who work hard at responding to and balancing the conflicting values and opinions that citizens, including citizens organized in interest groups, bring to them each day.