

# Putting the Public Back into Governance: The Challenges of Citizen Participation and Its Future

*Editor's note:* Professor Archon Fung contributed one of the most recent articles selected as *Public Administration Review's* 75 most influential, "Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance." In that 2006 article, Fung offered a framework for understanding the institutional possibilities for public participation. In this 75th-anniversary essay, Fung takes stock of the prospects for citizen participation to advance three values of democratic governance. He concludes by enumerating three challenges to successful participatory governance.

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**Abstract:** *The past two decades have seen a proliferation of large- and small-scale experiments in participatory governance. This article takes stock of claims about the potential of citizen participation to advance three values of democratic governance: effectiveness, legitimacy, and social justice. Increasing constraints on the public sector in many societies, combined with increasing demand for individual engagement and the affordances of digital technology, have paved the way for participatory innovations aimed at effective governance. Deepening legitimation deficits of representative government create opportunities for legitimacy-enhancing forms of citizen participation, but so far, the effect of participation on legitimacy is unclear. Efforts to increase social justice through citizen participation face the greatest obstacles. The article concludes by highlighting three challenges to creating successful participatory governance: the absence of systematic leadership, the lack of popular or elite consensus on the place of direct citizen participation, and the limited scope and powers of participatory innovations.*

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## Practitioner Points

- Practitioners should consider the full menu of design choices for engaging citizens. The "democracy cube" is one way of reflecting on the many other ways of designing participation—different kinds of participants; different ways of speaking, hearing, and exchanging information (e.g., small groups); and different levels of empowerment.
- In order to engage citizens, practitioners should be clear about the intention for convening citizens and design engagement in a way that envisions a clear path leading from engagement to the satisfaction of that intention.
- It is important to design participation in ways that its outcomes are meaningful to participants. Frustration, cynicism, or apathy can be the results of a poorly designed public engagement process in which participants' hopes for learning, working, or accomplishing some goal are disappointed by a process that is futile, in which the relevant decisions have been made elsewhere by someone else, or in which the choices and stakes are trivial.
- Citizen participation is not just about policy; it is also deeply political. Substantial citizen engagement will be sustained over time only if citizens come to support the institutions and practices of participation—that is, if they grow into a constituency that will not just engage but also defend against efforts to reduce participation.

**M**y *Public Administration Review* article "Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance" (Fung 2006) had three aims. The first was to draw attention among public administration scholars and practitioners to the fact of the incredible diversity in the practice of public participation. Although public hearings are the ubiquitous form of participation, many other arrangements are possible. Following Robert Dahl, I used the

term "minipublic" to describe this broad genus of arrangements (Fung 2003).

Participants could be elected or randomly chosen rather than self-selected. Instead of just speeches followed by questions, there could be actual deliberation. Conclusions reached by participants could play a greater role in shaping public policies. These possibilities were not mere theoretical potentials; rather, many

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of them had been instantiated in real projects and institutions, as in the innovations of democratic reformers in far-flung places such as Brazil, Canada, and Chicago.

The article's second aim was to show that these variations in design matter. In particular, public participation can be a potent means to achieve key democratic values such as legitimacy, justice, and effectiveness in governance. From this perspective, public actors ought to view participation as a potential solution to some of the democratic challenges they face. Participation is not just good in itself. Carefully crafted—which is not to say manipulated—participation can be an effective means to accomplish the values of good governance. The third aim was to offer a focused way of organizing our thinking about participatory design choices along three dimensions that together formed the rubric of the “democracy cube”: (1) Who participates? (2) How do they communicate and make decisions? (3) What influence do they have over the resulting public decisions and actions?

“Varieties of Participation” concentrated on the “domain” (in the sense of the span of independent variables in a mathematical function) of participatory design choices. Participant selection, methods of communication and decision making, and intended influence can be thought of as the independent variables that democratic architects manipulate in order to achieve more desirable outcomes. The outcomes they seek, in turn, can be thought of as the “range” of participatory designs, if we continue using the analogue to mathematical functions.

The present article takes stock of some broad trends in participatory governance that have unfolded since “Varieties of Participation” was published and attends more to questions about that range: What are the values that greater citizen participation might advance? What are the opportunities and challenges to doing so? I examine these questions inductively by considering a number of participatory governance innovations—and studies examining participatory governance—that have appeared since “Varieties of Participation.”

## A Speculative Retrospective of Participatory Governance

By way of orientation, consider some broad trends in the use of participatory mechanisms that have unfolded over the last decade or two. I offer these trends for the most part as speculations—because the forms of participatory innovation are often local, sometimes temporary, and highly varied, I know of no general census of participatory innovation and few efforts to quantify the instances of participatory governance at geographic scale.

Lack of quantification notwithstanding, the first pattern is that there seems to have been substantial growth in participatory innovation in recent years. One dimension of that innovation is its expansion. Participatory budgeting, for example, was invented only in 1989, but it has spread very widely. Tiago Peixoto (2014) counts some 1,500 instances of participatory budgeting, spreading from Latin America to Europe, North America, and many other corners of the world. In their 2012 volume, Mansuri and Rao write that the “World Bank alone has invested about \$85 billion over the

last decade on development assistance for participation” (iv). They contend that this attention to participatory development marks a sharp shift from the prior conventional wisdom regarding development that emphasized top-down expertise and, heavily influenced by thinkers such as Mansur Olson and Garrett Hardin, the need for centralized coercion to overcome collective action problems (27).

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Another dimension of expansion is scope: the injection of participation into new kinds of issues and governance questions. One of the first instances in which ordinary citizens participated in a constitutional question was initiated in 2004 with the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (Participedia 2009). Since then, the idea of incorporating the direct

input of ordinary citizens into questions about voting rules, districting arrangements, and other constitutional-level questions has spread to Ontario with its own citizens' assembly (Grant 2013), to California (Sonenshein 2013), and to Iceland with its crowdsourced and participatory constitutional drafting process (Landemore 2014). At the national, regional, and local levels, the number and variety of citizen forums seem to have grown in policy areas including health care, fiscal choices, urban and regional planning, accommodating racial and ethnic diversity, and addressing the challenges of scientific and technological development.

Furthermore, the kinds of actors who initiate and support citizen participation now constitute a diverse and mutually interacting ecology. Just a decade ago, it seemed that “minipublics”—venues for direct citizen participation<sup>1</sup>—unfolded primarily within the purview of administrative agencies (such as education systems, health departments, environmental agencies, or planning agencies) or came from outside government at the behest of educational, civic, or advocacy organizations (as with some deliberative polls or community-based problem-solving efforts). While many participatory initiatives still come from public agencies and civic, third-sector organizations, several important minipublics have been created by politicians operating from legislative or executive positions. The Oregon legislature, for example, created a citizen jury to review statewide ballot initiatives (Participedia 2010a). In Chicago and New York, aldermen and city counselors have used their authority to create participatory budgeting processes (Russon-Gilman 2012). As the number and diversity of minipublics have grown, associations and organizations devoted to cultivating the professional expertise—and providing the business services—required to implement successful public forums have emerged. Venerable organizations in this space include the International Association for Public Participation, Everyday Democracy,<sup>2</sup> the Kettering Foundation, and the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University. To name just a few, newer players include the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, the Participatory Budgeting Project, and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium. Consultancies, both nonprofit and for-profit—such as the German-Dutch consultancy IFOK—are also active in designing and creating minipublics.

However, it seems that the dominant form of public engagement against which the democracy cube was directed—the public hearing or traditional public meeting—is still dominant. Despite the proliferation of sophisticated minipublics, public participation most

often takes the form of conventional public hearings and meetings. Because the meeting is open to the public, the participants are self-selected. As a result, those who participate are often those who are highly interested in the topics addressed. They are frequently more socioeconomically advantaged than the broader population. In terms of communication, most of the speaking is done by officials or invited guests; a few of the participants say their piece during the discussion period, but most listen as spectators. Finally, public meetings and hearings are low on the scale of influence and empowerment. They rarely attempt to reach a consensus or majority view among participant, and the results of those events seldom have more than advisory force on authorized decision makers.

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that process: they have had opportunities to choose the policy makers. It may be, however, that the legitimation capacity of these conventional mechanisms of electoral representation has declined. According to many indicia, the bond between citizens and political institutions has weakened in the United States and other industrialized democracies. Public

trust in legislative and administrative organizations, membership in and identification with political parties, and rates of voting and conventional political participation have declined in many mature democracies (Dalton 2008; Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997). That decline may stem from perceptions that politicians and parties have lost touch, that these actors are beholden to some (Lessig 2011), unresponsive to many (Gilens 2012), corrupt, or simply ineffective.

In “Varieties of Participation,” I argued that public hearings occupy a very small region in the potential space of organizing of public engagement. The design space of the “democracy cube,” reproduced in figure 1, highlights three key variables in the construction of public engagement: (1) who participates, (2) how they communicate and make decisions, and (3) the extent of their influence over social action and public decisions.

With these broad patterns in mind, we turn to consider the impact of recent minipublics on three central democratic values: legitimacy, effective governance, and justice.

**Legitimacy**

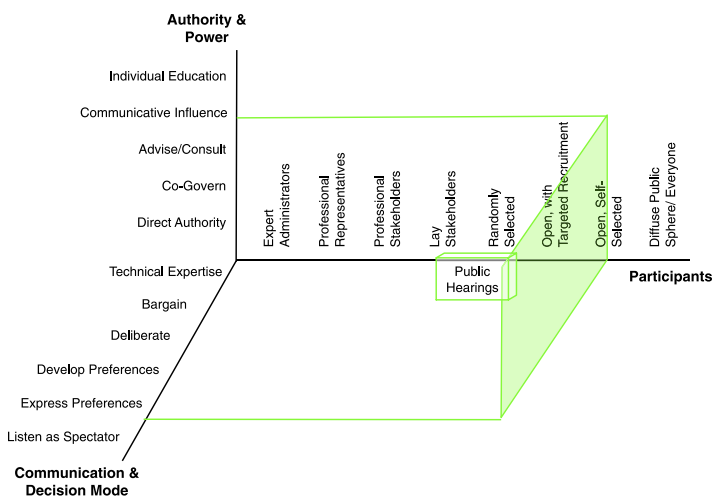
In political theory, many of the justifications for greater participation, especially its deliberative variants, stem from the desire to enhance legitimacy in democratic governance (Cohen 1989; Fung 2007). A fundamental premise of representative democracy is that laws and policies are rendered legitimate because citizens have had opportunities to influence the politicians and parties that make those policies and because subsequent elections will confer opportunities to judge the effects of those policies and hold politicians accountable (Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999). That is, processes of political competition through elections give citizens a good reason to endorse and obey the policies that result from

This crisis of legitimation creates opportunities for democratic innovations that seek to build legitimacy for legal, administrative, and even constitutional decisions. Of the three values explored in this article, the strongest driver of participatory innovations has been the quest to enhance legitimacy. The hope is that such innovations can increase legitimacy by injecting forms of direct citizen participation into the policy-making process because such participation elevates perspectives that are more closely aligned with those of the general public and because that participation offsets democratic failures in the conventional representative policy-making process.

Choices about the construction of electoral systems have recently been subject to prominent experiments in citizen participation. Such design choices include drawing electoral boundaries, regulating primaries, financing of campaigns, and even choices between plurality and proportional systems of voting. Historically, such choices typically were made by elected legislators. However, it is unclear why this ought to be the case. First, if citizens have the democratic right to select their political representatives, should they not also, by implication, be able to select the rules according to which they select those legislators? Second, sitting legislators have a self-interest in choosing rules of political competition that favor their own electoral prospects or those of their party and allies, whereas citizens may have other priorities such as the extent of political choice, competition, and the quality of connections between constituents and representatives (Thompson 2008).

A recent series of participatory innovations have addressed this lacuna by enlisting citizens—who are not professional politicians or public officials—to redesign the rules of political competition. Consider three of these: the British Columbia and Ontario citizens’ assemblies and the California Citizens Redistricting Commission.

The first occurred in Canada. On that case, Dennis Thompson writes that “the conclusion that citizens have a right to govern their electoral system would have remained a theoretical ideal, had not British Columbia established its Citizens’ Assembly in 2004” (2008, 30). The British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly was charged with investigating and recommending changes to improve the electoral system of the province—in particular, whether the province should move away from a system of electing representatives based on a first-past-the-post, majority-rule system to some form such as proportional representation. The body was composed of 160 citizens selected at random from



**Figure 1 Conventional Public Meetings in the Democracy Cube**

throughout the province. These members met approximately every other weekend for one year to study and consider alternative voting arrangements. In October 2004, the assembly recommended that the province adopt a single transferable vote system.

The assembly's recommendation was put to the electorate-at-large in a referendum held concurrently with the 2005 provincial election. The referendum required approval by 60 percent of voters and simple majorities in 60 percent of the 79 districts in order to pass; final results indicate that the referendum failed with only 57.7 percent of votes in favor, although it did have majority support in 77 of the 79 electoral districts. Because this referendum was somewhat inconclusive, the government called another referendum on the same question, which was held on May 12, 2009, with the same approval thresholds. In that referendum, the single transferable vote proposal was defeated with 62 percent of voters opposing the change. (The foregoing description of the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly is drawn from Participedia [2009].)

Ontario, another Canadian province, created its own Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in 2006 to explore alternatives to its first-past-the-post system. The Ontario assembly was composed of 103 participants, one from each riding (district) in the province. In May of the following year, the assembly recommended that the province adopt a mixed member proportional representation voting system. This method would have designated both (1) members elected in local districts and (2) members elected by the whole province from party lists as Members of Provincial Parliament. Supporters argued that voters would have greater representation—with the ability to cast two votes on the ballot—under this system. The assembly reached this decision in a 94–8 vote. However, when it was put to a provincial popular referendum, 63 percent of voters opposed the measure.<sup>3</sup>

Another related instance leverages citizen participation to improve the determination of electoral district boundaries. In the U.S. state of California, a 2008 referendum (Proposition 11) transferred authority for establishing electoral district boundaries for the State Assembly and State Senate of the California legislature to a new body called the California Citizens Redistricting Commission. Two years later, the voters approved Proposition 20, which expanded the authority of the commission to draw congressional district boundaries as well. Many prominent Democratic politicians opposed the commission process, fearing they would lose seats as a result of losing districting control.

The Redistricting Commission would eventually consist of 14 members—five registered Democrats, five Republicans, and four members who did not belong to either major party. These 14 people came from an original pool of 30,000 applicants from throughout the state in a process led by the state auditor's office, with requirements that commissioners not have close connections to political officials (defined as a conflict of interest) and that they possess "relevant analytical skills, ability to be impartial, and appreciation for California's diverse demographics and geography."<sup>4</sup>

Once selected, the commission began its work of redistricting California in early 2011. Throughout that year, the commission—well supported by analytic staff—engaged in a painstaking

process of 70 public hearings throughout the state, gathering some 22,000 written comments, conducting deliberations, and producing draft maps. By the end of 2011, it had produced a new map of California's 177 state and federal electoral districts. These maps were widely praised by electoral reform groups and survived a challenge in the Supreme Court of California in a 7–0 decision upholding the constitutionality of the senate maps. A survey conducted by the field organization found that one-third of California respondents knew of the work of the commission, and among these, approval outweighed disapproval by a margin of 2–1. Furthermore, several independent analysts concluded that the new districts significantly increased political competitiveness (Sonenshein 2013, 70–71).

A core design feature of these three bodies is that they impaneled a relatively small group of citizens over an extended period in order to solve a complex design problem that was laden with normative and empirical challenges. Because they were well supported by staff and field experts, it seems that these citizens—who were not, for the most part, political scientists, constitutional scholars, or policy professionals—were able to gain the area-specific knowledge necessary to make informed decisions. The technical constraints of these tasks—deliberation around voting systems and electoral maps—probably set an upper bound on the core size of the group to dozens or low hundreds (as in the British Columbia case), but probably not into the thousands. Perhaps because of this limitation, another important design feature of these quasi-constitutional decisions is that they included stages at which the core group in the assembly or commission listened—through written testimony, the Internet, and face-to-face assemblies—to other citizens and tried to incorporate their views and priorities. Compared with more common alternatives, these citizens' assemblies sought to improve the legitimacy of these public decisions by creating a prominent role for citizens (who were not also public officials or politicians) in these processes.

Looking into the future, the most important institutional design question for such processes concerns the extent to which they are empowered: who decides whether their recommendations become law or policy? The safe route for legislatures and elected executives, and perhaps the one taken most often, is to make the outputs of such commissions advisory to politicians. But when suspicions about legitimacy focus on those very politicians, the legitimating capacity of an advisory citizen body is limited. The designers of the three cases discussed here chose a different path. The citizens' assemblies in British Columbia and Ontario were advisory to the citizens as such, and this relationship was institutionalized in the form of binding referenda on the assemblies' recommendations. The California Citizens Redistricting Commission was directly empowered to draw the electoral maps.

One reason this shift may increase legitimacy is that it avoids an obvious conflict of interest: when sitting politicians make the rules of the game, they have strong incentives to make rules that favor their own electoral prospects or those of their party. Properly vetted, citizens who are not political professionals may act for reasons that advance interests that are more broadly shared by other citizens—for example, interests in the integrity of the electoral process, in political competitiveness and choice, and in respecting existing communities. A second instrumental reason is that citizens may possess

epistemic advantages over more professional political actors. In particular, they may be more attuned to relevant political values, more open to new inputs, and more aware of existing realities of existing social communities and their boundaries. A third, less instrumental reason is that—as with well-accepted institutions such as juries in court trials—legitimacy may adhere to basic identification between citizens at-large and decision makers: the sense that it is appropriate for “someone like me” (i.e., someone sitting on a citizens’ assembly) to make decisions about the political rules of the game.

But, of course, the notion that more intensive forms of citizen participation will increase democratic legitimacy is an ambition rather than a guarantee. Our political experience and the literature on participation are replete with cautionary tales in which participants have been co-opted (see, classically, Piven and Cloward 1977) or in which some influential participants co-opt organizations that ought to serve more general interests (classically again, see Selznick 1949).

### Effective Governance

A second value that participatory innovations sometimes seek to advance is effective governance. Governance is effective to the extent that governance arrangements are capable of solving the substantive problems that they are set to address: providing education, caring for the indigent, creating security, and providing public goods and services.

In “Varieties of Participation,” I focused on participatory innovations that increase effectiveness through the reform of particular administrative agencies such as police departments, school systems, or environmental regulators. By reorganizing themselves to incorporate greater citizen participation, public agencies can increase their effectiveness by drawing on more information and the distinctive capabilities and resources of citizens. Forms of administrative participation that aim to increase effectiveness in this way include community policing beat meetings (Skogan and Hartnett 1997), local school councils (Fung 2004), and watershed associations (Sabatier et al. 2005; Weber 2003).

Whereas administrative participation is still an important phenomenon, the most promising ways for citizens to contribute to effective problem solving may lie in other domains. In this article, I draw the reader’s attention to two other modes of participation that aim to increase effective governance: multisectoral problem solving and individualized engagement. The policy scope of the first is broader than a single agency, while the second is more narrowly focused than administrative participation.

### Multisectoral Problem Solving

In the public sector, multisectoral problem solving arises as a solution to an organizational problem: “the dynamic complexity of many public problems defies the confines of the established ‘stove-piped’ systems of problem definition, administration, and resolution” (Weber and Khademian 2008). One way to overcome the barriers to pooling knowledge and coordinating action is to create organizational networks that span the relevant organizations in order to more effectively address those “wicked problems.” A central

idea—common by now in the practice of public administration scholarship and practice—is that the solutions to many substantive problems require expertise and capacity across different disciplines (e.g., policing and social services and education) and even across public, private, and civic sector organizations. Thus, either by incremental organizational evolution or by intentional design, networks of organizations that span these disciplines and sectors have emerged to grapple with wicked problems (see Goldsmith and Eggers 2004; for an excellent discussion of collaborative governance efforts, see Ansell and Gash 2008).

Many multisectoral problem-solving, networked governance, or collaborative governance efforts do not create a substantial role for citizens. In some instances, however, multisectoral problem solving revolves around direct citizen participation. We call this variant *participatory* multisectoral problem solving. Why involve citizens given the cost in time and coordination that such involvement poses? Citizens can make several important contributions to solving wicked problems. First, citizens can help frame the particular problem in more accurate and viable ways than professionals acting alone. Second, when decisions involve important ethical or material trade-offs, citizens may be best placed to adjudicate those trade-offs. Third, citizens, who are often most affected by efforts to address public problems, are well placed to provide information relevant to devising solutions and evaluating implementation. Finally, citizens can sometimes become directly engaged in solving public problems and thus contribute additional resources through coproduction.

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, for example, several local civic organizations partnered with a national organization called Everyday Democracy to devise strategies to improve the welfare of children in New Mexico. By way of background, children and teens in New Mexico trail the country on important indicators of educational and social achievement, partly because of poverty and social isolation. The program was called Strong Starts for Children (SSFC) and began in 2010 in the Albuquerque and Santa Fe areas.

Although the initiative was led by five area civic groups—the All Indian Pueblo Council, Cuidando los Niños, Native American Professional Parent Resources, Inc., the University of New Mexico Family Development Program, and Youth Development, Inc.—SSFC focused first on convening ordinary citizens in “dialogue circles.” Each of the five civic organizations recruited area residents to participate in small group discussions about early child development and education. Each circle was composed of 8–10 participants and deliberated for five two-hour long sessions. According to Everyday Democracy, a total of 290 people participated in the circles.

These deliberations were led by trained facilitators, and each group was given informational discussion guides on child education prepared by Everyday Democracy. Each group moved through several structured stages of deliberation. They first became acquainted with each other. Then, they discussed why child development was important for each of them—the underlying values at stake in this question. Next, they sought to create together and agree on the goals and objectives that would constitute a successful environment

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of child development and education. They also sought to identify the challenges and obstacles that prevented children from achieving success and organizations from creating a successful environment. Finally, participants formulated and proposed solutions for addressing the challenges using their own resources, those of the civic organizations that convened them, and the broader governments and community in the area.

Each dialogue circle deliberated to identify the best solutions in terms of feasibility, effectiveness, implementation time frame, cost, the capabilities of the implementing community organization, and the need for coordination with government, private sector, civil society, and other actors. Participants voted to identify what they believed to be the three best solutions for improvement in early childhood development and education based on what the sponsoring community organization could implement. Finally, each dialogue circle appointed a member to represent the circle during a subsequent deliberation called an Action Forum. The participants were asked to evaluate each of the proposed solutions according to criteria such as feasibility, effectiveness, cost, timeliness, and availability of necessary resources. Participants then voted to select their top three proposals.

The SSFC project aimed not just to discuss the problems that New Mexico's children face but also to advance concrete strategies to address those problems. Their strategies were addressed to two types of organizations. First, the five convening civic organizations were themselves engaged in a range of child welfare activities, including direct service provision. The circles made a range of recommendations for programming changes that these organizations should make, including expanding early child programming, native language preservation, additional activities to raise public awareness, and the creation of community centers with early child programming. Second, one of the concluding stages of SSFC was a Policy Forum in which many participants in the circles convened to develop a series of policy recommendations for local and state government. These recommendations included the universal (not means-targeted) availability of voluntary early child education programs, greater local control for early child programming, and requirements for businesses to adopt more family-friendly policies to support families in their early child care and education efforts (see *Everyday Democracy* 2011).

Scholars of participatory and collaborative governance have debated many dimensions on which the effectiveness of such efforts might be reckoned: influence on decisions and policies, on outcomes such as welfare and risk, and on the problem-solving and collaborative capacities of organizations and citizens (Rogers and Weber 2010). While it is too early to assess whether SSFC will measurably improve the condition of children in Santa Fe and New Mexico more broadly, it seems that the effort has influenced the actions of civic and government organizations. The five convening civic organizations seem to have been receptive to many of the recommendations from the dialogue circles, embracing language policy recommendations and beginning programs to engage students in the development of public awareness materials about disadvantaged, especially homeless, children. Partly in response to the recommendations of SSFC, New Mexico enacted the Early Childhood Care and Education Act (S.B. 120) in April 2011.

### **Individualized Engagement**

A different set of methods for enhancing effective problem solving revolves around individual learning and conduct rather than collective decision making and social action. Whereas multisectoral problem solving harnesses the insight that solutions to many wicked problems require information and action spanning different organizations and even sectors of society, individual engagement turns on two observations. The first is that some social problems result from individual problems. The second is that many of those social problems will be more easily solved if the affected individuals can be actively enlisted in solving them. Think of this phenomenon as individual, even personalized, coproduction.

The basic dynamics of individualized coproduction are familiar. Every parent who has gone to a parent-teacher conference, discussed his or her child's strengths and weaknesses, and then worked with the student has participated in this kind of coproduction. Several broad developments, however, may signal opportunities for more effective governance through individualized engagement. First, survey results show that those in younger generations seek ways to become more deeply engaged with the public problems they care deeply about and may even expect a deeper, more discursive level of engagement with organizations than their predecessors (Public Opinion Project 2013). If true, this trend creates the potential for greater individualized coproduction. Second, digital technologies and social media create the resources, at least potentially, for citizens to acquire information about public problems and data about themselves that make them more competent partners in public problem solving. Third, in domains such as health, education, and consumer protection, public action based solely on governmental capacities may have reached limits that might be transcended by engaging citizens as coproducers.

One advanced example of individualized coproduction comes from pediatric health care. Pediatric irritable bowel disease (IBD) affects some 60,000 children in the United States. Its symptoms range from indigestion to gut pain and, in its severe forms, extreme weight loss and debilitating pain. The Collaborative Care Network, or C3N, is a group of some 65 hospitals and centers that together treat 18,000 children afflicted with IBD. (This description of the Collaborative Care Network is drawn from research conducted by Dina Kraft for the Transparency Policy Project in the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.) C3N members have used digital data tools and created informational and treatment networks among patients, among doctors, and between patients and doctors that engage young people much more actively in the monitoring and treatment of their conditions and improve the quality of care that doctors provide. C3N provides a range of digital tools, including applications and reminders, through which patients can closely monitor and record their own condition and behavior: diet, energy levels, therapeutic compliance, sense of well-being, and so on. It has also created a social network among patients in which they share their own experiences and strategies of disease management. But C3N is not limited to patients. It has also created separate networks for health care providers to compare notes, analyze data for both general and individual patterns of therapeutic success, and identify and diffuse best practices.

C3N seems to have improved the value of visits between doctors and patients by providing doctors with much more information

about individual patients before their meetings. One central goal of C3N is to increase the rates of remission for those who suffer from pediatric IBD. On this measure, C3N has been even more successful than its creators had hoped. Before 2007, when C3N was created, standards of care had achieved 55 percent remission rates for the disease. By 2011, C3N had increased the remission rates for its patients to 78 percent.

The Collaborative Care Network and other forms of individualized coproduction engage citizens in a very different way than the kinds of minipublics that Dahl imagined and most democratic theorists have considered. That is because we usually think of the *democratic* role of citizens as influencing—whether indirectly through elections or directly through participatory mechanisms—public policies. From a broader vantage, however, democratic governance ought to include a fuller range of activities through which individuals influence organizational decisions and actions—and themselves take action—to protect their interests. In a system of institutionalized coproduction such as C3N, that is just what patients do. They not only change their own behavior but also participate in the transformation of how care for many pediatric IBD sufferers is provided. Those changes come not through a clear decision-making process, such as those of citizens’ assemblies, but rather through the continuous accretion of therapeutic testing, behavioral change, reporting, data gathering, and analysis that occurs between thousands of interconnected patients and their doctors over long spans of time. In the aggregate, of course, individual improvements in areas such as education or health must count as helping to solve public problems.

## Justice

Social justice is a third governance value that participatory governance can advance.

Governance mechanisms often produce unjust outcomes when some groups—for example, those advantaged by political, economic, or social circumstance—exercise undue influence to secure policies and public actions that reinforce their economic or political positions. Although democratic theorists have long worried about injustice stemming from the domination of numerical majorities, domination by minority groups such as the wealthy or industrially concentrated interests is a common source of injustice in contemporary democratic systems.

Participatory governance reforms can mitigate such injustice in two distinct ways. First, increasing popular participation can shift the balance of influence away from dominant minority groups. Second, justice can flow as an indirect consequence of gains to the other two governance values: legitimacy and effectiveness. Consider these two paths in turn.

Notably, shifting power to those who are socially and politically marginalized was an explicit motivation for those who established the original participatory budgeting reforms in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The municipal Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores) initially advanced participatory budgeting as a way to “invert” the priorities for public investment away from wealthy sectors of the city to more needy ones. The creators of Porto Alegre’s participatory budget

baked a preference for the disadvantaged into the original participatory budget by weighting the amounts of public investment that different parts of the city received according to their relative levels of deprivation. Neighborhoods with subpar infrastructure levels would receive more funds for participants to allocate (Santos 1998).

But even as participatory budgeting reforms have spread to hundreds of other cities across the globe, the original emphasis on social justice seems to have receded. Gianpaolo Baiocchi explains why, from this perspective, participatory budgeting has not traveled well (Ganuzza and Baiocchi 2012). In its original instantiation, participatory budgeting was a means for a left party to accomplish its redistributive and electoral objectives. Reformers in many other places, however, adopted participatory budgeting as a way to advance other objectives such as civic education and popular legitimation. That is, they sought to advance good governance rather than increase social justice. These reformers created versions of participatory budgeting that do produce new ways for citizens to engage in the direct allocation of public investments, but without the elements—such as a redistributive allocation formula and attention to popular mobilization—necessary to advance distributive justice.

Social justice receded from the agenda of participatory budgeting as that participatory technique spread across the globe because the agents of its reproduction were often motivated by other governance priorities. Recent experience shows that there is no necessary bias toward social justice in participatory budgeting or other participatory innovations. Rather, participatory budgeting encompasses a variety of institutional designs in which direct citizen participation is a constitutive element but the advance of social justice is a contingent consequence. Whether some instantiation of participatory budgeting advances social justice depends, first and foremost, on the aims of the political agents who design and implement it.

This truth about participatory budgeting also holds for participatory governance generally. Advancing social justice through participatory governance is a nontrivial achievement. It requires at least two necessary conditions. First, reform champions must simultaneously seek both greater public engagement and greater equality. Second, champions must have the imagination and resourcefulness to design and implement participatory institutions that work.

Governments, civil society groups, and others have successfully implemented many participatory governance projects in recent years, and the trend seems to be growing. For the most part, however, these projects seem geared to advance values such as the legitimacy or efficacy of public action—as described in the two previous sections—rather than social justice. Unlike the Workers’ Party in Porto Alegre, most of the politicians and public officials who have created participatory governance institutions in recent years seem not to have viewed greater citizen participation as a way to equalize the distribution of resources or access to public goods and services. Because they have not been so motivated, the participation projects they created have not, for the most part, been designed to advance social justice.

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Participatory budgeting encompasses a variety of institutional designs in which direct citizen participation is a constitutive element but the advance of social justice is a contingent consequence.

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Even when not self-consciously motivated to advance social justice, participatory innovations can sometimes do so indirectly. That is, participatory reforms that are driven by desires to increase the legitimacy or effectiveness of democratic governance can sometimes also increase social justice.

The legitimacy deficits of governance institutions, for instance, sometimes stem from problems of exclusion (in that some people are systematically excluded) or lack of deliberation (in that some views or perspectives are systematically excluded or the decision-making process is unreasonable). When participatory governance reforms successfully incorporate people or views that were previously excluded, this can increase equality by enabling them to advocate more effectively for goods and services, rights, status, and authority. Although more time must pass before its substantive policy consequences manifest, increased electoral competitiveness from the redistricting reforms of the California Citizens Redistricting Commission may render both political parties more responsive to Californians broadly. That responsiveness, in turn, may generate a more just allocation of the benefits and burdens of public policy.

Innovations that enhance the efficacy of governance can also indirectly advance social justice. When governments—or social partnerships—create and deliver services such as education, human care, public health, training, security, or environmental protection more effectively, the users of those services benefit. We think of such services as benefiting everyone, or the public generally (hence we call them *public services* or *public goods*). In every actual case, however, some benefit more than others. Improving public primary education benefits different groups than higher education advances. When community policing improves public safety, people in high-crime areas benefit more than people who live in communities that were already safe.

The social justice consequences of participatory governance reforms that are principally directed to improving the efficacy of governance and public action through mechanisms such as coproduction, therefore, depend on the character of the beneficiaries of those public goods and services. In the case of SSFC discussed earlier, for example, the primary beneficiaries were children—many of whom were Native American—in the Southwestern United States. Although this initiative aimed primarily to improve the efficacy of public goods and services provision—both by government and through a range of partnerships with civic and private groups—this participatory reform also advanced social justice indirectly to the extent that it improved access to and delivery of those goods to very disadvantaged children and their families.

Justice, then, has proved to be an elusive goal for champions of participation. The principal reason is that those who possess the political authority and resources to initiate substantial participatory governance reforms—public officials or powerful civil society actors—have often been motivated to enhance legitimacy or efficacy rather than rectify injustice. There are exceptions to this general pattern, for example, in Porto Alegre, where the constituency of a political party favored social justice. Participatory governance can also advance justice indirectly—often implicitly—by increasing

access of the disadvantaged to decision-making processes or to quality public goods and services.

## Challenges to Participatory Innovation

Although initiatives in participatory governance have proliferated in many domains in recent years, many challenges to deepening democracy through increased citizen participation remain. Consider briefly three of these.

The first is leadership. It is almost tautological to observe that every significant participatory innovation has a champion, or set of champions, in government or civil society that has the creativity to adapt some participatory design to particular needs and circumstances, the political savvy to identify and organize allies in this endeavor, and the perseverance to see the enterprise through.

Leadership in participatory innovation has been fickle because its sources have been opportunistic and, for the most part, unsystematic. Often, participation projects are born from the coincidental alignment of forces. A community organization might demand greater voice for its members over some local issue when a philanthropy wants to invest in civic engagement and a local politician needs to shore up support in that community. These forces might converge on local school control or participatory budgeting as a public engagement reform that advances each of the different ends. Such alignments form weak foundations on which to sustain or expand participatory governance because motives that generate initial enthusiasm for participation may soon fade or shift toward other objectives.

What changes would produce more systematic political, civic, and administrative leadership for participatory innovation? At an abstract level, more consistent leadership in this domain requires the creation of more powerful and systematic incentives for organizational leaders to create effective forms of public engagement. Those incentives would most likely come from constituents who demand greater participation in public decision making. The model here is once again Porto Alegre, where for a decade the Workers' Party deepened its base of electoral support because the participatory budgeting programs they championed were popular among voters. As far as I know, few other political (or civic) leaders have been able to translate their commitment to participatory democracy into a source of political capital rather than a drain on it.

A second challenge, related to the first, is the lack of a broad popular articulation and agreement on the role of nonelectoral public participation in contemporary democratic institutions. While there are disagreements on the edges of representative democracy, there is broad understanding and agreement on core institutions and practices such as equal universal suffrage and regular competitive elections. That understanding and agreement allow democratic reform leaders to more easily explain the problems they are addressing (X is denied the right to vote), coordinate on solutions (restore X's right to vote), and build popular support for their efforts (when one of us cannot vote, it is an insult to our entire democratic system).

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The social justice consequences of participatory governance reforms that are principally directed to improving the efficacy of governance and public action through mechanisms such as coproduction.

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There is not yet any analogous consensus understanding of the proper role or consequences of direct public engagement. Is it a privilege for young people in Boston to help decide what kinds of youth-oriented public projects should be built? Or, conversely, would it be wrong to deny them that influence? Are developers and zoning authorities obligated to consult with nearby residents when planning significant structures, or have the electoral and regulatory processes already fulfilled democratic requirements? Does parental involvement in schools make them more effective or hamper professional educators? The lack of any background agreement, or even common orientation, on even basic questions about public participation makes the job of those who champion participatory innovation much more difficult. Almost every single time, such champions must develop freestanding explanations and justifications anew—explaining to allies, supporters, and opponents alike why increased public engagement might be desirable in itself, might have good consequences, and what it could look like. There would be much more friction and unevenness in elections in the United States if, every two years, supporters of representative democracy had to convince people in every community across the country why voting is desirable and explain how to conduct elections.

A third challenge, related to the prior two, is triviality. Although the number of participatory governance innovations seems to have proliferated in recent years, the reach of many of those innovations is quite limited, even to the point of rendering them trivial. This is the park bench problem. When a city grants residents the power to decide which color that their park benches should be painted, this increases citizen participation, but not in a meaningful way. There are many different ways to restrict participation so that, at the limit, it is trivial: participants exercise little influence over outcomes, the agenda of issues that they consider can be highly constrained, or the resources and authorities invested in a participatory process can be tiny.

Triviality jeopardizes participatory governance in several ways. Most importantly, a trivial form of citizen participation will almost certainly result in widespread disappointment. By definition, a trivial kind of participation cannot advance any of the objectives—legitimacy, efficacy, or justice—discussed earlier. Participants usually engage in participatory processes to meet needs and desires that they have, and they cannot do so through a trivial process. A second-order risk is that officials, evaluators, and citizens will mistake the shortcomings of trivial participation for the failures of participation generally. Those in communities with little experience with direct citizen participation—where cases such as Porto Alegre’s participatory budget and the California Citizens Redistricting Commission are exotic—may easily make the mistake of thinking that participation is necessarily trivial because empowered, nontrivial forms of participation exceed the horizons of their political imagination.

## Conclusions

The past decade has seen substantial growth not just in the scholarship surrounding participatory governance but also in the practice itself. Increasing citizen participation is sometimes seen as a way to increase the efficacy of regulation, improve the provision of public goods and services, and bolster outcomes in areas such as health and education that straddle the boundaries between public and private, social and individual. If young people continue to demand

greater engagement with the institutions that affect them and digital technologies continue to make information more accessible, we can expect both the demand for avenues of coproduction and the potential of its contributions to increase.

Citizen participation is also sometimes seen as a solution to a quite different problem: shoring up the democratic legitimacy of governance processes. Representative democratic governance now faces several critical legitimation problems. In the United States especially, the corruption of the political process by financial power is very widely acknowledged as a deep injury to democratic ideals, but widespread despair about the inability to heal this injury is quickly hardening into a broader cynicism about the political system. In other mature representative democracies, where the challenges to its legitimacy are somewhat less acute, the unmistakable symptoms of political malaise manifest themselves as declines in party membership, decreased electoral turnout, and a rise of nontraditional parties and other political formations. Unless and until these party systems develop solutions to reconnect with popular constituencies and properly articulate their interests within the framework of representation, these legitimacy deficits will continue to deepen. Against such a political background, we can expect experiments and innovations such as the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly, the California Citizens Redistricting Commission, and the Icelandic Constitutional Council to continue and perhaps proliferate. It is important to note, however, that we do not yet know whether such efforts can indeed help to repair the legitimacy of democratic governance processes. The normative and empirical version of that question—the effect of direct citizen participation through minipublics such as citizens’ assemblies on democratic legitimacy—is one that merits continued attention.

Many participatory democrats hope that participatory governance reforms will also advance social justice. It is here that direct citizen participation faces its greatest challenges. This is not principally a problem of institutional design. There are many designs for citizen participation that would, in many different contexts, result in public decisions and social actions that advantage those who are now socially and economically disadvantaged. Rather, the challenge is political. In most contexts, the organizations and leaders who possess the resources and authority to create significant participatory governance initiatives simply lack the motivation to advance social justice through those projects (in contrast, they are sometimes strongly motivated to enhance governance effectiveness or legitimacy). This pattern is not universal—as the case of the Workers’ Party in Porto Alegre in the 1990s shows. The challenge, then, for those who seek justice through participation is, in the first instance, a political challenge rather than an institutional design problem. They must create the political conditions under which powerful organizations and leaders are motivated to advance social justice. Only then will those leaders be interested in learning whether and how greater citizen participation can increase justice.

## Notes

1. For a restrictive definition of minipublics, see Smith and Ryan (2014). In this article, I use the broader conception outlined in “Recipes for Public Spheres” (Fung 2003).
2. Disclosure: The author of this paper serves on the board of directors of Everyday Democracy.

3. This description of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly for Electoral Reform is drawn from Participedia (2010b).
4. For a detailed description of the California Citizens Redistricting Commission, see Sonenshein (2013).

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