Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy:
Rethinking Our Civic Infrastructures

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Some Questions for You

Have you joined with others in your community to solve some kind of public problem?

YES  NO
Some Questions for You

Do you trust government officials to solve public problems effectively?

[YES][NO]
Some Questions for You

Is it ok to call people derogatory names?

YES

NO
Some Questions for You

Do you own a smart phone?

YES

NO
Some Questions for You

Do you use Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, or another social media platform?

[YES] [NO]
Some Questions for You

Do you feel connected to your community?

YES

NO
The Curious Case of the 21st Century Citizen

- Confident, frustrated, connected, and lonely
  - Public problem-solvers – who distrust the official public problem-solvers.
  - Civil in private – but not in public (governmental) settings.
  - Connected – and lonely.
  - More educated with more capacity, but more skeptical with less time.

- What do citizens want?
  - Problem Solving, Civility, and Community
What Public Problems Do We Face in Our Communities?

- Education
- Crime & justice
- Racial & cultural tensions
- Unemployment
- Housing markets
- Welfare & social services
- Economic development
- Energy & utility systems
- Transportation
- Etc., Etc., Etc. …
Public participation could help us better address many public problems. **BUT** To do so, we need to update our civic infrastructures.
The laws, processes, institutions, and associations that support regular opportunities, activities, and arenas that allow people to connect with each other, solve problems, make decisions, and be part of a community.
Why should we care about civic infrastructures for participation?

- **Normative arguments**
- **Instrumental arguments**
- **Legal requirements**
  - In the US Code 200+ times; in the US Code of Federal Regulations 1000+ times (Bingham 2010)
  - In the laws (and sometimes constitutions) of numerous nations around the world (Logolink.org)
  - Increasingly a requirement of international aid organizations (e.g., USAID, AUSAID, IMF, WB)
Why do we need better civic infrastructures for participation?

- Long term impacts of sustained participation:
  - Lower unemployment
  - Greater equity
  - Better public health outcomes
  - More economic growth
  - More community connectedness
  - Higher trust in government
  - Less corruption
  - Higher tax compliance
  - Higher completion rates for government projects

Civic Health Index
Defining Public Participation and Exploring its Modern Forms

Public Participation:

an **umbrella term** that describes

the **activities** by which people’s

**concerns, needs, interests, and values**

are incorporated into **decisions and actions**

on **public matters and issues**
Defining Public Participation and Exploring its Modern Forms

Public Participation

- Indirect Participation
  - Voting
  - Donating Money

- Direct Participation
  - Thick Participation
  - Thin Participation
  - Conventional Participation
Defining Public Participation and Exploring its Modern Forms

- **Indirect Participation**: people (the public) select representatives or intermediaries who engage in decision making and problem solving for them
  - Voting
  - Donating Money
Indirect Participation
Direct Participation: people (the public) are personally involved and actively engaged in providing input, making decisions, and solving problems

- Conventional Participation
- Thin Participation
- Thick Participation
Conventional Participation: Three Minutes at the Microphone

The most common form of participation, including public meetings, public hearings, advisory committees, and similar mechanisms:

- Agenda is pre-set by officials
- No discussion outside the agenda
- Public comment segments (3 minutes at the mic)
  - Goal is to get comments in the record
  - Easy to disrupt
- Physical layout reinforces power and other disparities
Conventional Participation: Three Minutes at the Microphone
Some Questions for You

Have you ever participated in a conventional participation process?

YES  NO
Some Questions for You

If so, did you enjoy that experience?

[Green box: YES] [Red box: NO]
How can we improve our public participation infrastructure?


2. Better understand Thin and Thick Participation (and how to combine them).

3. Assemble the Building Blocks of Participation

4. Empower and activate Participation Leaders and Networks

5. Provide Systemic Supports
Give Good Process!

- Treat citizens like adults. Give them respect, recognition, and responsibility
  - Information and choices
  - A chance to tell their stories
  - A sense of political legitimacy
  - Opportunities to take action
  - Participation experiences that are enjoyable, easy, and convenient
Thin Participation

- Thin participation empowers individuals and can inform effective problem solving. These fast, easy, and convenient opportunities allow us to:
  - Affiliate with a cause
  - Rank ideas
  - Crowdsourcing ideas and solutions
  - Play serious games
  - Provide discrete data on public services/problems
Thin Participation
Some Questions for You

Have you ever participated in a thin participation process?

YES  NO
Some Questions for You

If so, did you enjoy that experience?

YES

NO
Some Questions for You

How do you pronounce **foci**?

- **Fo Ki**
  - With a “ka” sound
- **Fo sigh**
  - With an “s” sound
This Isn't the Petition Response You're Looking For

The Administration shares your desire for job creation and a strong national defense, but a Death Star isn’t on the horizon. Here are a few reasons:

• The construction of the Death Star has been estimated to cost more than $850,000,000,000,000,000. We’re working hard to reduce the deficit, not expand it.

• The Administration does not support blowing up planets.

• Why would we spend countless taxpayer dollars on a Death Star with a fundamental flaw that can be exploited by a one-man starship?
Thick Participation

- Thick participation empowers groups and can lead to more effective problem solving.
  - Proactive, network-based recruitment to attract a diverse, critical mass
- Small-group discussion with impartial facilitators
- Information sharing and issue framing to give views and options
- Decision making and/or action planning
Thick Participation
Organizations Using Thick Participation

Kettering Foundation
National Civic League
Jefferson Center
Everyday Democracy
Involvement Renaissance
Logolink
EDemocracy.org
Deliberative Democracy Consortium
CIRCLE
Institute for Local Government
Public Agenda
Maxwell Syracuse University
The Democracy Imperative University of New Hampshire
Some Questions for You

Have you ever participated in a thick participation process?

YES  NO
Some Questions for You

If so, did you enjoy that experience?

[YES] [NO]
Participatory Budgeting
Combining Thick & Thin Participation

A National Dialogue on Mental Health

Oregon, Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts
Assemble and Connect the Building Blocks of Participation

- Enabling Small-Scale Decision Making (Individuals, Families, Groups, Neighborhoods)
- Enabling Large-Scale Decision Making (Cities, States, Nations)
- Encouraging Public Work

Gathering Information
Discussing and Connecting
Disseminating Information
Empower & Activate Participation Leaders and Networks

Leaders
- Elected Officials
- Public Servants
- Civic Leaders
- Community Leaders
- Participation Professionals

Networks
- Schools, colleges, universities
- Businesses
- Nonprofits and foundations
- Community and youth groups
- Social service agencies
- Unions
- Media
- Homeowner / neighborhood associations
Provide Systemic Supports

- Incentives for participation leaders
- Training and skill development
- Financial and other resources
- Policies and procedures
- Evaluation measures and benchmarks
Rethink our Civic Infrastructures: The Old Principles

Old Principles of Participation
(A 20th Century Logic)

- Exert Power
- Narrow Focus
- Government Led
- Assembles on Home Turf
- Separate Politics & Administration

New Principles of Participation
(A 21st Century Logic)

- Share Power
- Broad Context
- Cross Silos
- New Assemblies in New Places
- Blur Politics & Administration
Building Stronger Civic Infrastructures for Participation

- Take stock of civic assets
- Create or improve:
  - Public Meetings and Citizen Advisory Boards
  - Physical Hubs for Participation
  - Local Online Networks
  - Civic Health Dashboards
  - Youth Councils and Citizen Academies
  - Participation Commissions
- Make participation a cross-sector priority.
- Use plainer, more compelling language that appeals to progressive and conservative visions.
A Question for You

Have I convinced you that we need to rethink our civic infrastructures?

YES  NO
A Question for You

Have I convinced you that we can upgrade our civic infrastructures?

[YES] [NO]
What kind of democracy do we want?
Thank You!

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