

Tina Nabatchi & Matt Leighninger. (2015). *Public participation for 21st century democracy*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.Jeanette Musselwhite
University of Colorado Boulder

Public participation in the 21st century is often complex, frustrating, and confusing. A guide to help navigate through the labyrinth of bureaucracy and conventional participation is necessary as we strive to find ways in which our civic engagement will create a more democratic, just, and participatory country. With *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*, Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger provide a history of public participation, contemplate the current state of our democracy, and offer both theory and praxis regarding how we might effectively engage in public participation to create the changes we desire. This book presents more than hypothetical constructs, and instead produces concrete examples to illustrate how various methods of public participation have succeeded. The authors emphasize the importance of partnerships, especially those between members of the public and the institutions that represent them. *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* offers both the hope and means for people to solve public problems, effect social change, and ensure democracy's survival.

Nabatchi and Leighninger have extensive experience in the field of public participation, and the insight resulting from their scholarly work and civic engagement has culminated in this enlightening and invaluable book. The authors build upon previously established public participation tactics like Gordon and Baldwin-Philippi's research on deep civic engagement and game playing as inventive ways to engage society (Gordon & Baldwin-Philippi, 2014). Nabatchi and Leighninger advocate for playing games, and offer additional tactics to improve public participation such as crowdfunding, wikis, crowdsourcing, and social media. The book not only reinforces previous notions about public participation; the authors also propose several innovative solutions to strengthen the infrastructures behind public participation endeavors. New strategies are vital to the improvement and success of public participation, and this book serves as a how-to-guide for bettering civic engagement.

The book is divided into three sections, the first being Participation in a Rapidly Changing Democracy. Chapter one discusses the immense problems this country faces today, and the need for citizens to engage in public participation to

solve these dilemmas. Nabatchi and Leighninger write:

It is sometimes characterized as the interaction that makes democracy work – but it might be more accurate to say that public participation is the democracy in our primarily republican political systems. The greatest challenge we now face is how to transform those systems in ways that allow us to tap citizens' full, democratic, problem-solving potential. (p. 4)

Chapter two focuses on the quality of public participation with analyses of thick, thin, and conventional types of participation. Although thick and thin are ideal, conventional participation is the most common form faced by the public, and its paternalistic nature can leave people feeling frustrated and powerless. The authors argue that good participation, "means treating citizens like adults" (p. 25). This notion of treating people like adults is particularly beneficial to leaders in the community who wish to instill trust and forge connections with people by displaying benevolence rather than condescendence. Chapter three delivers a history of public participation in the United States from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy founded around 1090 CE to how today's technology, and specifically social media, presents new opportunities for public participation. Discussing our public participation past is helpful to elucidate the need for continued involvement and overturning outdated laws which serve to marginalize citizens.

Part two of the book, Participation in Action, considers various scenarios in which public participation is necessary. Chapter four focuses on the importance of education to public participation and democracy. Educational institutions should serve as a gathering place for the community and a training ground for future leaders and participants. The authors provide examples of ways in which some school systems have addressed achievement gaps and inequality to further civic engagement. Highlighted is the importance of partnerships between parents, teachers, community members, and education administrators to improve public participation by promoting greater understanding and creating beneficial relationships. Chapter five addresses the connections between health and participation. The authors discuss the history of

health and public participation from the Progressive movement of the early 20th Century to mapping inequities such as food deserts today. People should be involved in policymaking regarding their health, yet a logical infrastructure for such participation is seriously lacking. This chapter would be particularly useful to health communication instructors and researchers, as it highlights the need for improved methods of gathering data, disseminating information, and enabling community decision-making concerning health related issues.

Chapter six details participation in planning and land use, and encourages leaders to engage in thick participation by providing the public with information and allowing people to tell their own personal stories. These suggestions foster greater understanding between participants and elected officials by offering personal perspectives for public problems. Participation in state and federal government is the focus of chapter seven. Recent political campaigns have underlined the need for public participation, yet once elected, few politicians further encourage such involvement. Many elected officials refuse to address their constituents directly, instead favoring conventional participation during which the public is not permitted to engage in conversation. Thick participation allows people to come together, engage in dialogue and deliberation, and create real change while putting their ideological and political differences aside, and this is desperately needed in our politically divisive society.

Part three of *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* is titled Participation for Democracy, Present and Future. Chapter eight suggests several different participation tactics to employ while ensuring that a group's interests are focused upon rather than its positions. Participatory budgeting is offered as an example of a participation tactic which allows people to propose, deliberate, and democratically create improvements for their communities. Chapter nine engages in ways to strengthen participation infrastructures, and again asserts the importance of partnerships. Chapter ten places the aforementioned suggestions of the book in the context of political and social change, and reiterates the importance of fulfilling our civic duties and becoming part of the solution rather than silent bystanders. As society continues to

change and evolve, our participation tactics must do the same.

Each chapter ends with discussion questions, which makes this book ideal for instructors who teach public participation, public administration, and/or civic engagement courses. Community leaders and politicians would also benefit from this book. As Nabatchi and Leighninger state often, public participation benefits from partnerships between the public, participation leaders, and elected officials. These relationships can clear up some of the misunderstandings and frustration which make public participation so difficult to navigate. This book would also prove helpful to the average person who wishes to create positive changes yet feels powerless, disillusioned, and unsure of where to begin.

The authors place public participation in familiar contexts, which allows a large audience to grasp the material. Charts, graphs, and case studies are included throughout the book, and this makes the information more accessible to readers who may not be familiar with public participation or civic engagement. This book would prove beneficial to undergraduate and perhaps even high school students. Nabatchi and Leighninger posit that students are this country's future leaders and essential to the continued success of public participation, and as such, the accessibility of this book to younger readers is significant.

Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy takes previous work on civic engagement and contributes a wealth of new ideas and tactics. The result is a guide for even novice public participants to successfully create change. I highly recommend this book for students, instructors, community leaders, politicians, and virtually everyone. So many people in our society are disenfranchised with governmental procedures, feel alone and apathetic, and refuse to even entertain the notion of public participation. This book provides the hope that public participation is changing for the better, and that we can create partnerships within our communities that effect the changes we so desperately need.

References

- Gordon, E. & Baldwin-Philippi, J. (2014). Playful civic learning: Enabling reflection and lateral trust in game-based public participation. *International Journal of Communication*, 8(1), 759-786.