

Public Participation in the Local Budgeting Process: Definitions, Impediments, and Remaining Questions

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Abstract Despite a great deal of popular rhetoric and scholarly research, there is no universal agreement on which categories of behaviors constitute civic engagement or public participation in the policy process. This paper showcases various definitions, arguing for a more holistic understanding of the phenomena in popular and scientific literature and discussions. Afterward, the research explores impediments to public participation in one area of policy, public budgeting. The paper concludes by discussing some optimistic happenings that have begun to unfold in this arena.

Keywords Civic Engagement, Public Finance, Public Budgeting, Public Participation, Efficacy

1. Introduction

If asked, most public administration scholars would agree that the politics and processes of American municipal budgeting are notoriously devoid of proactive citizen participation. Such consensus, however, might be less likely if these same scholars were asked about the desirability of such participation, and would certainly evaporate if they were asked to define the activities that constitute participation (Ladd, 1996; Ebdon & Franklin, 2004; Fiorina, 1999; Skocpol, 1999; Putnam, 1995; Adams, 2004; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Strange, 1972; Cole, 1975). In this essay, we will first attempt to define participation in budgeting as a series of actions along a non-dichotomous continuum. We will next explain endogenous and exogenous factors that affect both the likelihood and impact of an individual's participation in local level budgeting. We will then argue that participation in the budget process, though it may not result in immediate maximization of individuals' desired budgeting priorities and policy preferences, is crucial for the long-term sustenance of municipal government legitimacy (Adams, 2004). We will conclude by presenting some unresolved questions in the vast literature of political participation, along with methodological and theoretical prescriptions aimed at addressing them.

2. Objectives

One of the most immediately visible arguments in the participation literature revolves around the varied definitions

of participation. Scholars continue to debate whether the definition of this term should be limited to formal activities in which citizens engage government officials, or if the term can be expanded to include informal activities and expressions of budget preferences (Putnam, 2000; Ladd, 1996). Other scholars question whether participation means only direct activities, or if a person or group can participate indirectly as well. Yet another looming question asks if participation can solely be understood as an individual phenomenon, or if participation includes collective activities, and if the latter is so, which collective activities are worthy of inclusion? In addition to the complexity of these nuances, a final question might ask if the definition of participation should be limited solely to actions that are judged to have been effective in ensuring that a person's or a group's budget preferences are met. We will revisit this additional question at the conclusion of this essay. For now, however, we will focus on reconciling the disparate views of participatory behavior into a manageable arrangement.

The arrangement of each form of participatory behavior necessitates some degree of subjective, value-based analysis. If the reader will assume, if even ephemerally, that the most stringent category of participation embodies actions toward the maximum end of a participation continuum, while the minimum end of this continuum consists of more indirect and informal methods, participation can be defined in a fashion that is simultaneously holistic, yet comparative.

2.1. Rationale for a Limited Definition in this Essay

For the remainder of this essay, we will focus exclusively on the direct and formal participatory behavior in which individuals and collective entities engage at the local level. We choose this limited focus for three reasons. First, it seems that direct and formal actions would be the most memorable to local budget officials and politicians, thus making this narrowed conceptualization of participation the most salient

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of the definitions available. This claim is evidenced in the responses Alexander, Paterline, and Hulsey (2007, p. 175) received in their study of 102 of Georgia's 159 county budget officials, in which the authors assert that many of the Georgia finance officers, "complained that very few citizens participated at all [in the budget process], only one or two per year in many cases." Similarly, one county commission chair, lamented that "we're [the commission is] lucky if one person shows up at the budget hearing." Second, the local level budgeting process is less complex, and perhaps more transparent, than budget processes at the state and federal levels. Thus, an exploratory analysis that seeks to identify the relevant variables that inhibit or encourage participation in the budget process should be relatively easier with a local level focus. Finally, the field of public administration is uniquely oriented toward practical application of scholarly analyses at the local level. Though we will limit our focus to local level individual and group participation, we will mention participation trends at the national level in the context of their relationships to local level participation in the following section, where we will attempt to explain factors that may serve to inhibit local level participation.

3. Methods

The methodology we are employing is a meta-analysis of the participation literature. Thus, we will survey the literature to see which impediments are commonly mentioned.

3.1. National Level Interest Group Contributions and Perceived Efficacy

As we alluded above, for simplicity's sake, two dimensions of the continuum shown in Figure 1 have been omitted: (1) group size and (2) level of government in a federal system. Indeed, a separate continuum like that shown in Figure 1 exists for every category of group size at each level of government. These two variables, though, share a logical and empirical relationship; larger groups are much more likely to have a national focus because the formation and augmentation of these groups served as a reaction to the centralization of power within, and growing size of, the federal government (Skocpol, 1999; Berry, 1999). The most notable consequences of such group adaptation have been the diminishment of: (1) small, local-level associations' activities, (2) the bonding social capital that these activities formed between each group's members, and (3) the bridging social capital that these activities formed between local-level groups (Putnam, 2000). Thus, individuals are more likely than in the past to be "check-writing" members, whose sole participatory activity involves sending funds to national interest groups one time each year (Doherty, 2000, p. 321).

If a person perceives her role and duty as a participant in government to be fulfilled through such check-writing memberships as those embodied in cells IC and IIC of Table 1, it is not difficult to understand why she would be less

likely to engage in more direct and formal participatory activities for two reasons: (1) she has, most likely, already invested time and energy in earning the funds that she has sent (i.e., she has done her duty), and (2) she might rationalize her investment by reassuring herself that indirect participation is the only viable route toward achieving her desired budgetary outcomes without considering the differential impact she might wield at the local level vis-à-vis the national level; that is she may not perceive herself as an efficacious participant. This point is important because one study found that "perceived efficacy is the best determinant of generalized contact" with government officials (Hirlinger, 1992, p. 553).

3.2. The Participation Calculus, Efficacy, and Ideological Extremism

A common Rational Choice perspective on participation is embodied in Downs' (1957) idea that individuals make rational participatory decisions by weighing the costs of participation (e.g., time or money) against the potential benefits of participation. The simplest of the key questions each individual asks herself in making a participation decision is, "Will the benefits I derive from participation justify the costs incurred in doing so?" Sadly, the answer is often "No."

If, for a moment, one assumes that the benefits of participation are greatly outweighed by the costs in all instances of participation, why would any individual choose to participate in public budgeting? Fiorina (1999, p. 414) tackles this question, offering a simple RC solution to explain why citizens engage in the "unnatural act" of political participation. Fiorina explains that the traditional, or economic, Downsian calculus must be expanded to include an additional variable that measures the importance an individual participant attaches to having been able to express her preferences and budgeting priorities. Thus Fiorina concludes, albeit with no data to support his claim, that partisan and issue extremists are the most active participants in government, and in this context, the public budgeting process, and this becomes the "dark side of civic engagement" (p.414). Alexander, Paterline, and Hulsey (2007, p.175) provide empirical evidence, derived from their survey of 102 of Georgia's 159 county budget directors, asserting that many of these "officials...characterized [the] frequent participants largely as 'extremists' whose input was detrimental rather than helpful to the budget process." To counteract the influence of these extremists, Fiorina (1999, p.414) says that "the majority of moderate Americans must enhance their participation."

3.3. Participatory Efficacy: Implications of Socioeconomic Status

Similarly, Brady, Schlozman, & Verba (1999, p. 153) explain that "self-selection" determines an individual's participation. The aforementioned ideological extremism, though, is only one component of the self-selection process. The other component is a person's status, or level of "privi-

lege” in her municipality (Brady, et. al., 1999, p. 162). Thus, the aggregate views expressed by participants in government are often far from being an amalgamation of the views held by members of each social class. Instead, as Schattschneider’s (1960/1975) famous claim suggests, “the flaw with the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent” (As quoted by Jewell, 1962, p. 203). Thus, Goodin & Dryzek (1980) explain that those with more money are more likely to participate in political and administrative processes (See Also, Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, 1997).

Following this line of thought, Alford & Friedland (1975) offer an even more critical assessment of participation through the lenses of a Marxist perspective. Here, the authors explain that “power and participation” are independent of one another. Thus, they contend, “participation can exist without power—*symbolic* power—and powerlessness can exist without participation when particular social groups withdraw or are excluded” and “*systemic power*” can exist without participation (Alford & Friedland, 1975, p. 431, *Emphasis in original*).

Thus, Alford & Friedland (1975, p.432) explain why social class is such a strong determinant of participation by specifying three common factors in societal structures that serve to perpetuate elite control of governmental processes: (1) “antecedent structural factors,” (2) “historical origins of those structures,” and (3) “the success [of] dominant interests [elites] in making structures serve their interests.” Thus, “legislative, party, and administrative structures serve to maximize the political impact of economic power” regardless of participation. Simply stated, the authors contend that the government system is essentially closed to non-elites, especially minorities and women, and as “government continues to grow,” these interests become more deeply entrenched and more effectively insulated. We will revisit the notion of symbolic power in my discussion of government-created impediments to participation below. First, though, we will focus on the participatory efficacy of women and minorities.

3.4. Participatory Efficacy: Implications of Minority and Female Status and Descriptive Representation

Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (1997, p. 1051)), using data from the Citizen Participation Study, find that “women are less politically interested, informed, and efficacious than men.” The authors hypothesize that the high visibility of male politicians and administrative officials serves to reinforce traditional, gender roles in political processes. However, in an area with “visible” female candidates campaigning for office, “the gender gap with respect to [political] knowledge closed completely and the gender gap with respect to campaign interest nearly closed” (Verba, et. al, 1997, p. 1068). Similarly, Bobo & Gilliam (1990) find that African-Americans in “high empowerment” cities (i.e., cities with black mayors) are “more active than blacks living in low-empowerment areas or their white counterparts of

similar socioeconomic status” (p. 377). Thus, a person’s status as a woman or a minority does not always preclude her participation in government (Burns, Verba, and Schlozman, 2001; Verba, Brady, Schlozman, and Nie, 1993).

3.5. Math Anxiety as an Impediment to Efficacy?

In addition to the preceding arguments about perceived efficacy, a final potential impediment to efficacy, math anxiety or mathematical confusion, might be relevant to the study of participation in the budget process. Tobias (1985) uses federal defense spending to exemplify the difficulties one encounters in trying to interpret the numbers, figures, and charts used to summarize this spending. Tobias’ normative argument (i.e., that monies used for defense should be reallocated to social welfare programs) aside, one can understand her complaints.

Even if Thurmaier (1992, p. 204)) is correct in arguing that “lies and deception” are not included in an agency’s “standard operating procedures,” as Jones & Euske (1991) seem to assert, budget officials do use technical, economic jargon that may be largely incomprehensible to most members of society, especially when one considers an article from the popular periodical, *Reader’s Digest* entitled, “America’s Brain Drain Crisis” (Wallace, 2005). Here, Wallace relays data from a variety of empirical sources en route to her conclusion that America is, indeed, facing a crisis in math and natural science scholarship. One figure she cites is especially troubling for advocates of participation in public budgeting: “[A]ccording to a 2004 Indiana University survey, 18% of college prep kids weren’t taking math their senior year of high school” (Ibid, p. 3).

With such a minimal percentage of college-track students are enrolled in math classes, one can only imagine the amount of mathematical training that the majority of non college-bound students are receiving. However, there is consensus in the literature that many student participatory endeavors in service learning, as well as general participation in “service and volunteer programs” have “failed to sufficiently address development of fundamental civic skills such as expressing opinions and working collectively to achieve common interests...” (Kirlin, 2002, p. 571). We will revisit the roles that administrative professionalism and specialization play in budget participation below. First, however, we will present one final endogenous factor that might limit citizen involvement in budgeting: issue salience.

3.6. Issue Salience and Budget Participation

Another argument, made by Dahl (1961), is used to explain participation decisions. Here, issue salience is a key determinant of a given individual or group’s decision to participate. For instance, Dahl explains that New Haven elites rarely participate in political processes involving public primary and secondary schools because many of their children are enrolled in private preparatory schools. At first, this argument may lose its sting in the participatory arena of public budgeting, because property taxes from such elites

often comprise the bulk of revenues used to fund public schools. This irony exemplifies Rubin's (1998) notion of a demarcation between the "payer" and the "decider." This point is reinforced in Buchanan's call for decentralized control of government by consumers of government services (Buchanan & Musgrave, 2001). Still, the relatively dominant use of the incremental mode of budgeting might imply that most issues at the local level have already been resolved; the budget process, then, might be perceived as little more than business as usual unless an especially contentious economic policy (e.g., a tax cut or a tax hike) is being considered in a given year. Thus, in cities lacking political reformation, and its consequent budget reformation (Rubin, 1992), one should not expect enhanced participation.

4. Results

The literature gives us a useful understanding of some of the roadblocks citizens find en route to participation. In this section, we will explain how these can result in (and from) flawed institutions for participation.

As mentioned above, institutional and administrative arrangements and practices often serve to limit popular participation in the budget process. Even if a reader eschews Alford & Friedland's (1975) fatalistic conclusion regarding the entrenched power wielded by elites in the budget process, she would be hard-pressed to deny the weight of institutional arrangements and practices in this process. Here, we will consider three factors: (1) the sheer number of public hearings held before the final budget is approved, (2) the reactivity of government embodied in retroactively providing information rather than encouraging participation in the process, and (3) the aforementioned technical expertise and specialization that resulted from Progressive Era efforts to reform governmental structures and operations in the face of patronage.

A simple measure of the deference that public officials accord citizens in the budget process is highlighted in the sheer number of opportunities citizens are given to voice their budget preferences (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006). In many cases, public budget hearings are not offered throughout the fiscal year. Instead, many local governments hold what amounts to be a *pro forma* hearing on the eve of their enactment of the budget (Ibid, 2006). One commissioner described this mode of operation, explaining that only one hearing, which is minimally attended, takes place. Thus, he says, "once the budget made, it's pretty much set." That is, the budget is normally passed without revision on the same night of the single hearing. Knowing this institutional norm, one might see her participation as being merely "symbolic" in Alford & Friedland's (1975) terms. Additionally, one might consider the relationship between citizen attendance and the outcomes of the budget hearing, including attendance, as cyclical in nature. Thus, another potential hypothesis might predict a positive correlation between the number of hearings and citizen participation in these hearings. This hypothesis, too, must be qualified because any

such relationship may depend upon spurious variables, such as the overall participatory culture of a municipality and the dominant view of citizens' role in government in an area, that independently explain each of the others (Pateman, 1971; Ebdon & Franklin, 2006). Ebdon (2002) studied this phenomenon, "using Elazar's political culture typology" and found, "differences in the use of budget participation methods in cities with varying political cultures. Northern moralistic cities generally have greater use of participation, followed by southern cities with traditional cultures, with the least participation in individualistic cities in the middle portion of the country" (quoted in Ebdon & Franklin, 2006).

In addition, Ebdon's (2002) analysis might be strengthened if she considers the fatalistic culture that cyclical poverty creates in certain regions, such as: (1) the "Black Belt," (Levernier & White, 1998) (2) Central and Southern Appalachia (Billings, 1974), and (3) the inner cities (Chachere & Elliot, 1977).

A second telling sign of government's willingness to consider citizen input surfaces when one explores whether local government behaves as reactive or proactive. That is, do a given local government's budget officials "merely inform" citizens of decisions that they have made (e.g., by posting the budget document on its web page) or do they "actively solicit" citizens' suggestions? (Berner, 2001, p. 23). Again, these two behavioral manifestations may be related to local culture and government structure (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006). One might also question the role of proactive solicitation and information provision throughout the budget process, rather than in the aftermath of this process in enhancing citizens' efficacy, which may in turn foster more active participation (Berner, 2001).

This question, in turn, ripens inquiry concerning the relationship between government structure and budget participation rates in a given local government. For instance, Ebdon and Franklin (2006, p. 437) assert that the "council-manager form of government appears to be more likely to solicit [citizen] input." Unfortunately, Ebdon & Franklin (2006) fail to consider whether there is differential solicitation of certain sociodemographic groups by officials in a council-manager city. Kahn (1997) explains that the Progressive Era reforms that brought about this form of government also brought about overall bureaucratic specialization, including the use of professional and technical jargon and methodology in budgeting. These changes, Kahn says, served to exclude less educated citizens from participation in the budget process. Here, we revisit Putnam's lament of the current state of social capital in the United States to discuss two ironies inherent in this work.

Using the metaphor of murder, Putnam (2000) investigates the sources and factors that have contributed to the overall decrease in local-level associational and group behavior in the United States, concluding that the most blame (55%) rests upon "generational change—the slow, steady, and ineluctable replacement of the long civic generation (i.e., the Progressive generation) by their less involved children and grandchildren" (Putnam, 2000, p. 283). The second most

significant source of blame (25%) rests upon the advent of electronic media, especially television, which allow many Americans to live with minimal real-life contact with others.

The consequence of diminished social capital, Putnam argues, is a subsequent eradication of trust between individuals and groups necessary to advocate for mutual interests at the “neighborhood” level (Putnam, 2000, p.180).

Two ironies stand out in Putnam’s work, though he addresses only one, the formation of bonding social capital in exclusionary groups (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan) as undesirable and counterproductive to local level advocacy. Putnam largely ignores the second irony, which is encapsulated in his acknowledgement of the fastidious work of Progressive Era reformers, especially their efforts to: (1) introduce the Merit System as an alternative to governmental patronage, thus insulating the bureaucracy from political influence, and (2) professionalize government processes and service delivery.

At the Federal level, the introduction of the merit system with the 1883 Pendleton Act was seen by many Progressive reformers as the panacea for all administrative corruption and incompetence because bureaucratic processes would ideally be buffered from *political* pressures (Wilson, 1887; Goodnow, 1900). The cost of this and similar local-level reforms (e.g., the council-manager form of government), however, was diminished responsiveness to *popular* demands for change (Kahn, 1997).

Similarly, the professionalization of bureaucrats and the scientification of their work necessarily precluded involvement from all but the most educated of citizens. Nowhere is this irony more apparent than in the innovation of public budgeting wrought by the leaders of the Bureau of Municipal Research in New York City (Kahn, 1997; Willoughby, 1918).

Thus, while few would argue that post-Patronage Era reform has resulted in less accountability in government, one can see how budget officials have become less apt to come in contact with some citizens, especially those who are less educated. As a result of lessened contact between citizens and government, among other factors, each group may be less likely to trust the other (Cole, 1975; Yang, 2005). This is an important point because Yang (2005, p. 273) finds that “public administrators’ trust in citizens is apredictor of proactive citizen involvement efforts.”

4.1. Light at the End of the Tunnel?

The preceding discussion of factors that impede participation in the budget process has shown that participation, especially in its direct and formal connotation, is not a simple process in which citizens can frivolously engage themselves. Still, even while recognizing these endogenous and exogenous limiting factors, one may still be optimistic about the future of participation in the budget process. Technological innovation, especially the growth of “cybercommunities” among internet users, may serve to increase informal participation that compensates for lower rates of its formal cousin (Dumont & Candler, 2005). Similarly, the 1996

EFOIA amendments to the 1966 Freedom of Information Act have increased citizen access to budget information, which may serve to increase citizen efficacy. Other novel avenues for participation include interactive budget hearings described by Thurmaier in the PSPA 564 seminar as well as televised budget hearings like those in the city of DeKalb, Illinois. Furthermore, the coming mass retirement of the baby-boomers might lead to an increase in participatory activities among members of this enormous cohort, especially if these members have adopted a postmaterialistic view of government’s role at the local level (Inglehardt, 1990; Berry, 1999). Finally, some state legislation, such as Georgia’s Tax Payers’ Bill of Rights (TABOR) may serve to increase participation in the long-run, though it has not yet done so (Alexander, et. al., 2007).

5. Discussion

While participation efforts may not yield immediate victories for citizens in the budget process, they may serve to enhance communication and trust between government officials and citizens (Cole 1975; Adams, 2004), leading to reinvigorated levels of popular participation. Such efforts may also serve the long-term goal of “enhancing governmental accountability and responsiveness” (Adams, 2004, p. 43) because public officials may begin to attribute more importance to citizen input. Finally, government officials may also consider augmenting the range of participatory activities that they encourage because citizen satisfaction with a government system “increases as citizens participate in that system” (Baer & Jaros, 1974, p. 365; Weeks, 2000; United Nations Development Programme, 2006). Still, the desirability of participation is not universally agreed upon. For instance, Ebdon & Franklin (2004, p. 32) say that “citizen participation in the budget process does not always have the desired positive outcomes and may even be detrimental to the process,” and Irvin & Stansbury (2004, p.55) explain that not all participation increases “effective citizen governance.” Thus, these arguments present one of the many unanswered questions that remain ripe for scholarship concerning public participation in the budget process. We will suggest some of these other research questions as we conclude this essay.

6. Conclusions

Throughout this essay, we have raised research questions relating to this topical arena. The most fundamental of these questions centers on how participation is defined; that is, which activities scholars are willing to consider in their operational definition of participatory behavior. To this end, we have suggested a continuum of participation based on formality and directness. The acceptability of this model to the scholarly community remains to be seen. In addition to the two dimensions addressed in the continuum, we have

also presented group size and government level as additional variables that one must consider in her definition of participation. We have also presented several arguments that explain participation as a result of individual and group efficacy. These arguments remain to be tied together in a meaningful fashion, a feat that may be best accomplished via a triangulation of methodologies such as (1) participant observation of budget hearings, (2) in-depth interviews with citizens and government officials, and (3) the creation and use of an all-encompassing survey instrument to measure efficacy and its antecedent factors, especially the under-studied phenomenon of math anxiety or mathematical incompetence. Another area for future research rests upon the effects of institutional arrangements upon participation. This area, though, presents unique difficulties in generalization of findings because institutions, no matter how they are arranged, operate in, and adapt to, a greater environment where factors such as community and governmental culture, varied budget priorities, and historical participation in budget processes are rarely similar. Thus, the iteration of a list of best practices may not be ideal. Instead, comparative case study methodology might help researchers to offer normative prescriptions for municipal budgeting participation mechanisms, albeit in a limited fashion. Finally, the desirability of participation, as mentioned above, remains a contentious issue in the literature. In sum, scholars wishing to theorize about and investigate citizen involvement in local budgeting processes have much work ahead of them.

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