

Politics, Policy and Citizen Participation in City Governance

Civic Studies, Civic Practices Conference
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SESSION NOTES – Version 1

Session Leaders:

Rebecca Lisi, PhD Candidate @ University of Massachusetts Amherst (Political Science)
Rebecca Moryl, PhD Candidate @ University of Massachusetts Boston (Public Policy)
Felicia Sullivan, PhD Candidate @ University of Massachusetts Boston (Public Policy)

Overview of facilitators' research

Began with a brief overview of Gateways Cities in Massachusetts which can be seen as part of the session's presentation slides found here:

<http://www.slideshare.net/Felicia/politics-policy-and-citizen-participation-in-city-governance-fmsrev>

Rebecca Moryl is interested in how the economic preferences of citizens get understood and realized through local government policies. How aligned are community needs and wants with the actual goals and activities of local economic development departments. She specifically is looking at economic development policies in three Massachusetts municipalities – Leominster, Pittsfield and Worcester.

Rebecca Lisi, who is also an elected city council in Holyoke, MA, is interested in the social networks and capital of various interests groups in that municipality. Specifically, looking an ordinance that would allow for backyard chickens, she is interested in exploring how the stronger social networks of the older Irish ethnic residents compared to Latinos and a group of newly arising progressives. To what extent is each group able to frame issues and build their capacity to act as a collective voice around key issues is a focus here.

Felicia Sullivan is interested in nonprofit and community-based settings as sites for the learning and practice of civic and political engagement skills. Specifically, she is interested in how structures and values embedded within organizations and groups shape the lessons learned by individuals interacting with these groups. Theories of self-organization informed by adaptive management, grid-group theory, complexity science, social network analysis, and participatory democracy are informing this emerging work.

Interests and Issues of Participants

Noam Shore (Idealogue Inc.) interested in how technology can aid civic participation and dialogue. Also interested in how elected officials see community challenges and citizen needs.

Timothy J. Shaffer (Cornell University) interested in how university and community partnerships can best be leveraged especially related to land-grant institutions of higher education. Specifically involved in debates around urban deer populations. How do you create cooperative and deliberative forums in these settings? How can you connect university faculty to local governments? How is citizen participation encouraged and enhanced.

Debbie Wise (University of Texas Austin) working with young people and interested in how you connect youth to local government. Specifically engaged with forming Youth Council in Austin.

Seana Moran (Stanford University) interested in questions of how you define community and build commons. What do you leverage creativity and expression towards community engagement?

Rebecca M. Townsend (Manchester Community College) works in communications with a specific focus on small groups and rhetoric leading to group discussion and deliberation techniques. Working on public transportation and civic engagement around transportation needs in the community. Also what are the roles of community colleges in these processes.

Liza Pappas (City University of New York Graduate Center) interested in how even when you get large groups of people to “participate” in things like public hearings like ones around school closings in New York City, that institutions and political process can still ignore or not incorporate the needs expressed through such participation. Using Fung’s concepts of mini-publics, who do policies get shaped and how do you work with the state and institutional power around public needs.

Erin Brandt (Indiana University) interested in environmental policy and planning. What is the role that civic engagement plays in these processes? How do you motivate individuals to get involved in policy and planning? How do you get new practices into the engagement process?

Cecilia Orphan (American Democracy Project) works on bringing civic skills and participation to state colleges and university settings and curricula. She had an important experience where the framing document of an institution she was working with was reconceived and involved many stakeholders. What is the role of universities and colleges? How can intellectual resources be leveraged? How can we work to put experts in positions of being “on tap” rather than “on top”? Institutional design is important.

Discussion

We began with a discussion of how do you define community and participation in an urban setting. How do we define community? Is there such a thing as collective voice? Or desired community outcomes? What are the opportunities and obstacles to participation?

The group noted that a broad range of activities could count as participation such public hearings, public comments, information sharing, newspapers, contacting representatives and government officials, listening, civic forums, meetings in community spaces (i.e. churches, community centers), participating in public events, and even walking on the streets.

The idea of a collective voice is amplified in urban settings when there are many publics or “mini-publics” to contend with. There is the challenge of speaking to a unified public and how do we incorporate voices of dissent? Does a collective voice work against change? And what about the non-verbal forms of participation? What sorts of opportunities are there for these in city life? Thinks like arts and culture.

Shifting demographics and new development can also create tensions and challenges in civic engagement. For instance, what happens when new populations move in, but institutions are not able to engage them in meaningful ways? As development and expansion occurs, new problems arise that may respond to the incorporation of new ideas or constituencies or because existing institutions may not be able to handle (i.e. backyard chicken ordinance, urban deer problems, school of mostly Latino or new immigrant students in districts with primarily white school boards making policy decisions that may not fit their target group adequately).

How do government and governing institutions engage people? We are working from an assumption that these bodies want citizens to participate. However, the capacity of government workers may not be there to accommodate or create engagement opportunities. State and federal funding are more and more requiring engagement as part of resource transfers. However, there are many examples of poor engagement practices as a *pro forma* response to these requests. Real engagement may never really happen. We may end up with “faux” or “marketing” veneers that mimic engagement. Reference to the book *Participation: The New Tyranny?*.

We then talked about the role of information and who is responsible for it. Who provides the background knowledge needed to inform? Colleges and universities? NGOs? Again the need for experts to support communities was stressed. But also how do we come to know what counts as knowledge and truth – scientific or otherwise? We need to build the capacity of citizens to participate and engage with knowledge and information.

Citizens fundamentally lack understanding of what city governments can do and do do. There is a need to educate communities about local politics and to engage more young people in seeking elected office. This led to a discussion of reorienting our thinking about politics and governance. Rather than static things that happen “out there, somewhere else,” they need to be seen as ongoing processes. To think of politics and governance as processes places a number of responsibilities on the participants (both government/ agency officials and the citizens) to remain actively engaged; it is continually unfolding, never finished, never an opportunity to walk away and say “I’m done” or, “that’s your job”.

We need to sensitize individuals about their roles in such processes. Also, elected officials have an opportunity to mediate competing voices in a community.

Looking to build links between government and community groups as ways to address limitations and expertise of each group might help. On one level governments want to be efficient, yet efficiency may work against engagement and public participation can become a charade. Activities that involve communities in governing (i.e. the creation of a new charter of government) have the potential to bring the public in as a strategic advantage. 'Strategic' because getting feedback and grievances earlier in the process will save time and effort that would be invested in a final product developed without citizen input that they may then reject. Yet these processes are not always "efficient".

There is also a need to think about power in the equations of engagement. Who is at the table and who isn't. How might existing processes of decision-making and resource allocation actually benefit and be the result of one group's efforts at engagement. Opening up engagement to others means that it may dampen the engagement of those currently engaged. Again how do we engage multiple publics and how do we ensure that government can adequately engage these publics?