chapter TWO

Good or Bad? Charming or Tedious? Understanding Public Participation

Knowing how to distinguish "good" participation from "bad" participation is an essential step in improving public life. In most cases, this is a visceral distinction—people know bad participation when they see it—but it is also an intellectual one. The purpose of this chapter is to describe, analyze, and categorize the main forms of engagement so that readers can understand how to judge the quality of participation.

But first, we want to take the moral undertones out of this comparison. "It is absurd to divide people into good and bad," wrote Oscar Wilde (1893). "People are either charming or tedious." We are not trying to stand in judgment of public officials, public employees, and other leaders: many genuinely good people organize, authorize, or facilitate public engagement activities that we would consider bad or downright terrible. But we do want to zero in on the people who matter most in participation: citizens, the (potential) participants. As Wilde's quote suggests, we can learn a great deal about the quality of engagement simply by finding out whether people find these experiences charming or tedious.

After justifying our broad definition of public participation, we describe the three main forms of participation in use today—thick, thin, and conventional—with some of their most charming and tedious properties. We then examine the true costs of bad participation and the benefits of good participation and explain why high-quality engagement has been so difficult to establish and maintain.

DEFINING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND EXPLORING ITS MODERN FORMS

Defining public participation is a challenge. The term encompasses a wide array of activities and processes, which makes it confusing both for civil servants who are simply trying to understand their responsibilities and for citizens who may never have attended a public meeting. To understand participation, we must not only define the term, but also explore some of its variations.

The definition we introduced in Chapter 1 is intentionally broad: *Public participation is 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*. In this book, our main focus is on direct forms of participation, in which citizens are personally involved and actively engaged in providing input, making decisions, and solving problems, rather than on indirect forms, in which citizens affect decisions primarily by voting for their representatives or donating money to their preferred candidates and causes (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014).

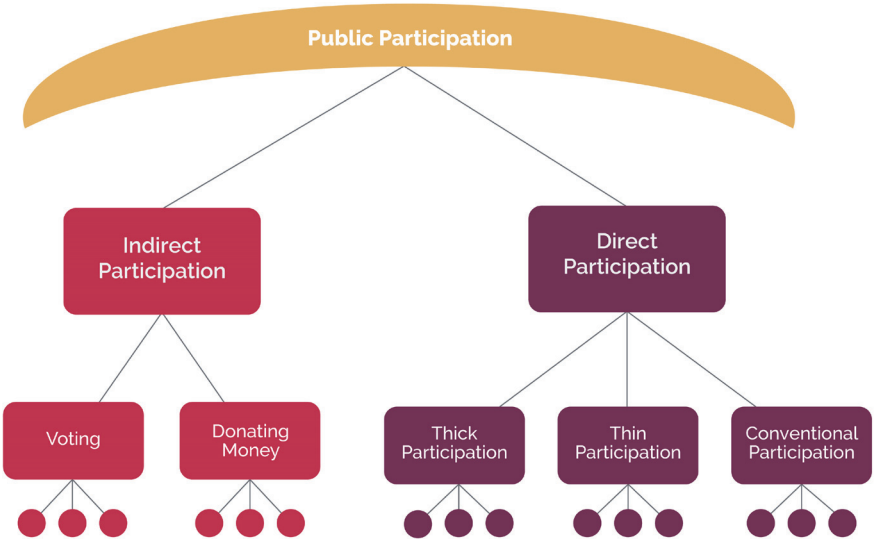
Of course, not all direct participation looks alike. It can occur in many different contexts and happen in many different ways. Moreover, the people who organize, support, or take part in these activities may also have many different purposes and goals. Over the last two decades, however, direct participation has coalesced into three main forms—thick, thin, and conventional—each of which encompasses a wide variety of processes and activities that share common features (Sifry, 2014; Zuckerman, 2013). Figure 2.1 shows the variations falling under the umbrella of public participation.

Thick Participation

Thick participation enables large numbers of people, working in small groups (usually five to fifteen per group), to learn, decide, and act. Generally speaking, it is the most meaningful and powerful of the three forms of direct participation, but also the most intensive and time-consuming and the least common.

There is great variety among thick participation processes (see Box 2.1), but perhaps the most significant commonality is the notion of empowering the small group. These processes encourage people to work out what they think and what they want to do in conversation with other participants. The main academic term for this kind of small-group talk is *deliberation*, defined as *a thoughtful, open, and accessible discussion about information, views, experiences, and ideas during which people seek to make a decision or judgment based on facts, data, values, emotions, and*

Figure 2.1
Forms of Public Participation



other less technical considerations (see Gastil, 2005, 2008; also Bessette, 1980, 1994, 1997; Bohman, 1998; Dryzek, 2000; Elster, 1998; Gastil & Levine, 2005; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1984). However, "deliberation" can be hard to use because it is not a very accessible term, and because some scholars define it so narrowly that their visions bear little resemblance to the deliberation that occurs in thick participation practices (Leighninger, 2012 ; see also Lukensmeyer and Torres, 2006).

Thick participation is not all deliberation, either. When looking at how people talk in thick participation processes, scholars also note many instances of dialogue and debate (see Walsh, 2007), and again, the scholarly definitions for each of these types of talk are often very specific. Regardless, for many people, the most important part of the discussion is at the end, when participants get down to brass tacks about what they actually want to do. Though this is a common feature in deliberative processes, it could also be labeled with the simpler term of action planning.

And while the way people talk is important, the other elements of thick participation processes—particularly, how many people take part and whether the people are diverse or similar both in terms of socio-demographic characteristics and political opinions—tend to have a more significant impact on whether they are successful.

The deliberation, dialogue, and action planning may be happening "inside the room" (although in some cases the room may be virtual), but "outside the room" factors are just as important. The best thick participation projects rely on a number of inside and outside tactics, which are listed below and explored in more depth in the Participation Skills Module (available online at www.wiley.com/go/nabatchi).

- *Proactive, network-based recruitment* that attracts large, diverse numbers of people. Organizers map the different kinds of networks to which residents belong and reach out to influential people who, in turn, reach out to constituents within those networks. In many cases, organizers pay special attention to recruiting people who will be affected by the issue or decision being addressed, but who may be less likely to attend. The result is that many potential participants hear about the process from (or are approached by) people they already know and trust.
- *Small-group facilitation* that helps each group set ground rules for their discussion and use the time and materials they have been given. In most cases, this is a relatively light form of facilitation, often done by trained volunteers rather than issue experts or professionals. The main purpose of facilitators is to help guide the discussions, for example, by ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to speak and follows the ground rules.
- A *discussion sequence* that takes participants from sharing experiences to considering views and policy choices to planning for action. The first step in this sequence creates understanding and empathy, the second informs and establishes common ground, and the third helps participants define goals and actions.
- *Issue framing* that describes the main views or policy options on the issue or decision being addressed. Operating foundations and nonprofit organizations such as Everyday Democracy, Public Agenda, and the National Issues Forums Institute, frame national policy issues and produce discussion guides used by local organizers. Groups like MetroQuest have pioneered online formats for issue framing, and many local organizers, including public employees and private consultants, have become adept at framing issues.
- An *action strategy* that helps participants, public officials, and other decision-makers capitalize on the input and energy generated through the process. This work is accomplished in different ways. In some cases, it resembles a volunteer fair, where local organizations help participants connect with specific service opportunities. In other cases, it focuses on fundraising and ensuring that ideas and projects have the in-kind support and financial capital they need to move

forward. In still others, it looks more like an advocacy campaign, with participants and public officials working on policy proposals and reaching out to other citizens and officials who are neutral or opposed.

An underappreciated type of thick participation is the category of "serious games" that simulate real-world events to educate users and sometimes solve problems (Lerner, 2014). Although a serious game may be entertaining, amusement is not its primary objective; rather, a serious game is intended to "further government or corporate training, education, health, public policy, and strategic communication objectives" (Zyda, 2005: 26; see also Abt, 1970; Lerner, 2014). Serious games are sometimes used as discrete exercises within thick participation processes. Others are standalone processes that include large numbers of people in deliberation, role-playing, and competition. "Participatory Chinatown" (an immersive 3-D game designed to be part of the master planning process for Boston's Chinatown) and "Community PlanIt" (a local engagement game designed for community planning, learning, and action) are two examples (see www.participatorychinatown.org/ and https://communityplanit.org/; see also Phelps, 2011).

Thin Participation

Thin participation activates people as individuals rather than in groups. Before the Internet, signing petitions and filling out surveys were probably the most common kinds of thin participation. Now, just by sending a text or clicking a link, a citizen can sign an e-petition, "like" a cause on Facebook, retweet an opinion, or rank ideas in a crowdsourcing exercise. In just a few minutes, people can contribute to maps and documents, donate money to a project, or give feedback on public problems and services (Patel, Sotsky, Gourley, & Houghton, 2013).

While they participate as individuals, people who take advantage of these opportunities are often motivated by feeling a part of some larger movement or cause. When sufficient numbers of people are involved, thin participation can have real impact (Fung, Gilman, & Shkabatur, 2013). These activities occasionally "go viral," through the vast networking power of the Internet, attracting huge numbers of people and mass media attention.

As compared to thick participation processes, thin participation experiences require shorter time commitments, as well as less intense intellectual and emotional contributions. While the need to absorb information and listen to other

Box 2.1. Thick Participation: What's in a Name?

Some thick participation processes have official names. A few, such as 21st Century Town Hall Meetings™ and Deliberative Polling™, have even been trademarked. Many other thick participation processes use a more generic name, such as "community conversations," and others do not use a name at all. Sometimes, the project itself has a title—for example, "Decatur Next," "Chapel Hill 2020," or "Portsmouth Listens"—but not always. Furthermore, the names tend to describe only the "inside the room" dynamics of these processes, rather than the "outside the room" factors that are so critical to their success.

Chapter 8 describes some of these thick participation processes in greater detail. (For more information, see Gastil and Levine, 2005; Leighninger, 2012.) We list a number of face-to-face and online processes here to illustrate the diversity of thick participation.

Some Face-to-Face Processes for Thick Participation

- Appreciative Inquiry
- Citizen Assemblies
- Citizen Juries
- National Issues Forums
- Open Space
- Participatory Budgeting
- Planning Charrettes
- Serious Games
- Study Circles
- Sustained Dialogue
- World Café

Some Online Platforms and Tools for Thick Participation

- Common Ground for Action
- Dialogue-App
- Engagement HQ
- MetroQuest
- Zilino

participants is built into the structure of thick participation, thin participation opportunities often allow people to skip those steps.

Although it would be easy to recast the thick-thin distinction as face-to-face versus online participation, that would be too simplistic. Some face-to-face participation can be fast, convenient, and thin, while some online engagement is quite thick and intensive. Furthermore, some of the best examples of thick participation use online tools to inform and complement face-to-face processes.

In fact, some online participation opportunities can be as thin, or thick, as the participant wants them to be. A visitor to a crowdsourcing platform can take

two minutes to vote for her favorite ideas or spend many hours submitting or commenting on ideas and interacting with other users. People are often drawn to what Mark Headd calls the "3 Bs of open data: bullets (crime statistics), budgets (city expenditures), and buses (public transit schedules)," but in addition to giving citizens the information they need, these platforms also often give people the chance to make comments, engage with civil servants or other citizens, or help gather more data (Nemani, 2014). As these digital activities grow, they will presumably continue to blur the line between thick and thin and allow people to move back and forth between the two more easily.

There is more variety among thin participation activities (see Box 2.2) than among thick or conventional processes. Specifically, thin activities may include opportunities for people to:

- *Affiliate* with a cause;
- *Rank ideas* for solving a problem or improving a community;
- *Donate money* (although we have characterized this as an indirect form of participation, the ease and customization of online "crowdfunding" blurs the line between direct and indirect);
- *Play games* that educate citizens, gather public input, or contribute in some other way to decision-making and problem-solving (see Lerner, 2014); and
- *Provide discrete pieces of data* that help identify community issues, improve public services, or add to public knowledge.

What unites thin participation activities is that individuals are provided with opportunities to express their ideas, opinions, or concerns in a way that requires only a few moments of their time. While thin participation opportunities that take place online can spread more rapidly than their thick counterparts, in most cases they still require the same kind of proactive, network-based recruitment to attract a large, diverse critical mass of people. "The phrase 'If you build it, they will come' definitely does not apply," argues digital strategist Qui Diaz (Leighninger, 2011).

Thin and thick forms of participation have different strengths, but similar shortcomings. Thin participatory innovations often have limited impact because they are isolated products that are seldom incorporated into any larger engagement plan or system. Thick participatory innovations tend to be temporary processes, and they, too, are seldom incorporated into any larger engagement plan or

Box 2.2. Varieties of Thin Participation

Thin participation takes many forms. We list a number of activities here to illustrate their diversity.

Some Face-to-Face or Telephone Activities for Thin Participation:

- Surveys
- Petitions
- Polls
- Open Houses
- Booths at Fairs and Festivals
- Telephone hotlines (e.g., "311")

Some digital tools blur the lines between thick and thin participation, either because the user can become much more involved in the activity or because it is connected fairly seamlessly with more intensive participation opportunities. Moreover, as with thick participation, some of platforms, apps, and processes for digital thin participation are trademarked as proprietary technologies. Because the pace of innovation is so rapid, there is a great deal of turnover, with platforms and organizations emerging and disappearing constantly. In the list below, we offer some general purposes of online thin participation activities on the left, with specific examples on the right.

Some Online and Digital Applications for Thin Participation

General Purpose	Examples
Crowdsourcing and Ideation	MindMixer; IdeaScale; OpenTownHall; SpigitEngage, Peak Democracy; Granicus; Codigital
Data Gathering and Feedback on Public Problems and Services	SeeClickFix; FixMyStreet; PublicStuff; Waze; NoiseTube
Crowdfunding	Citizinvestor; Neighbor.ly; Kickstarter
Petitions	Change.org; e-Petition
Games	Community PlanIt; City Creator; Super City
Mapping and Wikis	LocalWiki; Wikiplanning; MapIt; Mapumental; OpenStreetMap
Indicating Preferences on Social Media	Facebook; Twitter; LinkedIn

system. Micah Sifry, who covers civic technology as the editor of TechPresident, laments that "thick engagement doesn't 'scale,' and thin engagement doesn't stick" (Leighninger, 2014). One promising direction is to combine the best features of

thick and thin participation, especially in ways that are replicable, sustainable, and embedded in communities.

Conventional Participation

Conventional participation processes are older forms of engagement that were developed to uphold order, accountability, and transparency. If thick and thin participation are designed to empower citizens (albeit in different ways), conventional participation is intended to provide citizens with checks on government power.

Conventional participation is the most common form of direct participation because it is entrenched in most of our public institutions and often required by law. Accordingly, official participation is almost always conventional participation (though this need not be the case). Official, however, does not just mean governmental; even in more informal settings such as neighborhood associations and parent-teacher organizations, the participants often use *Robert's Rules of Order* and other trappings of conventional participation.

Conventional participation describes most of the meetings or hearings held by public bodies such as school boards, zoning commissions, city councils, congressional representatives, state and federal agencies, and other government entities. Exhibit 2.1 shows a typical conventional public meeting. Conventional processes generally rely on a number of common procedures (some of which are mandated by law):

- *Advance notification*, typically by putting an announcement on a bulletin board at City Hall, on a government website, or in the local newspaper.
- *An audience-style room setup*, with decision-makers behind a table (often on a dais) at the front of the room and citizens in chairs laid out in rows.
- *A preset agenda* that is strictly followed and that defines the specific topics for discussion. In many cases, issues not on the agenda cannot be raised.
- *Public comment segments*, during which citizens have two to three minutes at an open microphone to address their elected officials. Sometimes, citizens must sign up in advance to speak at such meetings. Other times, they must wait in line for their turns.

It would be easy to say that conventional participation is "bad"—and that because these processes are most often administered by government, that all *official* participation is bad. However, many public officials and employees

Exhibit 2.1
A Conventional Public Meeting

have led, organized, or supported better forms of public participation (both thick and thin). So the role of government does not have to be limited to official participation—and official participation does not necessarily have to be bad. Nevertheless, both citizens and public officials tend be frustrated by conventional participation opportunities. In the following section, we explore the characteristics that, as Oscar Wilde might conclude, make conventional participation tedious.

WHY DOES CONVENTIONAL PARTICIPATION CAUSE PROBLEMS?

While conventional participation processes are intended to uphold public values like transparency, accessibility, and accountability, they generally do not succeed (Nabatchi, Becker, & Leighninger, 2015); poll results indicate that the majority of citizens do not find their governments to be transparent, accessible, or accountable. There are many reasons for this. For one thing, transparent practices do not necessarily lead to broad public awareness or give people the sense that public officials have heard their concerns. But the most basic reason these processes fail is that citizens do not attend. As Mark Funkhouser (2014), the former mayor of Kansas City, Missouri, puts it:

> Regular folks have made the calculation that only in extreme circumstances, when they are really scared or angry, is attending a public hearing worth their time. And who can blame them when it seems clear that the game is rigged, the decisions have been made, and they'll probably have to sit through hours of blather before they get their three minutes at the microphone?

As a result, conventional public participation has become more than just an obstacle. These meetings and processes incur a range of costs, from the time and resources needed to organize them to their long-term impacts on public trust and the financial sustainability of public institutions.

All kinds of public leaders have reacted to the shortcomings of conventional participation by organizing more effective and participatory processes. But at least in the United States and other countries of the Global North, leaders typically do this on a case-by-case basis, in reaction to the latest controversy or crisis. Their projects tend to be temporary and limited to a single issue or decision, and, although they offer better processes, they do not change official structures. In her essay, "Participatory Democracy Revisited," Carole Pateman (2012: 10) argues that most examples of public participation today "leave intact the conventional institutional structures and political meaning of 'democracy.'" They do not, in her words, "democratize democracy."

By attempting to bypass conventional participation processes rather than improve them, leaders are simply trying to work around a problem rather than solve it. And conventional participation is indeed a problem, for a number of reasons.

Conventional participation can be harmful to citizens. Conventional participation tends to increase citizens' feelings of inefficacy and powerlessness. It decreases political interest, trust in government, and public-spiritedness, and damages perceptions of government legitimacy and credibility (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; McComas, 2001; see also Collingwood & Reedy, 2012; Dryzek, 2000; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). For example, Katherine McComas (2003a, 2003b) found that in two public meetings about landfills, only 41 to 44 percent of participants were satisfied with the process, only 5 to 8 percent thought their opinions would matter in the final decision, and most left the meetings feeling worse about the situation. Conventional participation may also increase polarization, with people shifting toward more extreme positions. As evidence for this claim, one need only think of the 2009 town hall meetings on health care reform held by members of Congress.

Not surprisingly, fewer and fewer people participate in conventional opportunities (Hock, Anderson, & Potoski, 2012). To give one specific example, nearly 80 percent of all public meetings on how to spend community development block grant (CDBG) funding have an average attendance of fewer than twenty people, and often have no attendees (Handley & Howell-Moroney, 2010). This trend of declining participation is not a sign of citizen apathy, but rather is a rational decision based on a calculation of costs and benefits (Funkhouser, 2014). People have to overcome high transaction costs to attend—they have to expend time and often spend money (e.g., for transportation and childcare), and they have to forgo other activities.

Conventional participation can harm administrators and public officials. Administrators and officials also face high transaction costs for participation (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). They must organize and prepare for conventional meetings, diverting energy and resources from other aspects of their work.

This is made worse by another problem: it is frustrating, discouraging, and sometimes even dangerous to deal with hostile, uninformed citizens in public meetings. In a personal communication with one of the authors, a California city clerk described council meetings as a "hostage-taking and punishment process." In some tragic cases, this frustration has escalated into actual violence, like the 2008 city council shooting in Kirkwood, Missouri (Davey, 2008). These scary and scarring experiences have contributed to an apparent decline in the number of public participation processes held by government officials, and particularly town halls by members of Congress (Chaddock, 2011; Kroll, 2011; Rupp, 2013).

Conventional participation can harm policy and governance. Many scholars assert that conventional public meetings do not actually involve citizens in decision making in any policy area (Wang, 2001). Moreover, a study of California public managers found that most officials believed public participation actually degraded the quality of decision making and policy implementation (Pearce & Pearce, 2010). Adams (2004: 44) explains that this is, in part, due to the organization and design of such processes:

> Citizens march up to the podium, give their two minute speeches, the presiding official says "thank you very much," and then officials proceed with their business irrespective of the arguments made by citizens. Citizens may speak their minds, but officials do not listen and

> usually have their minds made up before the public hearing. Hearings, in this view, are mere democratic rituals that provide a false sense of legitimacy to legislative outcomes: Officials can say they received input from the public, and it can give their decisions the respect afforded to democratic processes, even though citizen input has no impact.

The consequences of conventional participation go far beyond miserable meetings. As the relationship deteriorates between the people and their public institutions, the legitimacy and financial sustainability of governments continue to decline. Many local leaders understand the implications of this shift. They know that the financial pressures facing local governments, school systems, and other public institutions are not just the result of larger economic cycles. "If we think we're going to come out of this recession and expect everything to go back to normal, we've got another thing coming," said Harry Jones, former county executive of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. "We need to reach out and reframe our relationship with citizens—the people who are the ultimate source of our revenues" (Leighninger, 2013). The attempt to reframe this relationship is at the heart of "good" participation.

WHAT IS "GOOD" PARTICIPATION?

If conventional processes are usually examples of "bad" participation, what do we mean by "good" participation? At the most basic level, *good participation means treating citizens like adults.* An exchange that typifies this trend took place at a public meeting in Lakewood, Colorado, in 2004. The mayor called a meeting of neighborhood and community leaders to better understand how he might balance the city budget. Even though survey results suggested that residents valued local government services, they had repeatedly voted down local sales tax increases meant to maintain the same level of services. Finally, someone at the back of the room said, "Look, mayor, we like you, and we think you work hard, but what we've had here is a parent-child relationship between government and citizens, and what we need is an adult-adult relationship" (Leighninger, 2006: 1).

There are a number of ways in which good participation activities—both thick and thin—can confer the respect, recognition, and responsibility that typify an adult relationship:

- *Providing factual information—as much as people want.* In an era when information—and disinformation—circulates more quickly and widely than ever,

providing basic information about public problems, budget expenditures, public services, and other data is an essential component of public participation. Information can be shared in numerous ways, including simple printed handouts, information briefs, infographics, interactive online maps, machine-readable datasets, presentations, discussion and issue guides, and the availability of subject matter experts. Some kinds of participation, such as action research projects (Cunningham & Leighninger, 2011) and online platforms like SeeClickFix, PublicStuff, and Ushahidi, rely on citizens to help gather and analyze the data.

- *Using sound group process techniques.* Process skills and techniques have emerged as a critical factor in the development of public participation. Public leaders have learned, often by trial and error, that thinking carefully about agendas, formats, and facilitation rather than accepting conventional formats—or not thinking through the process at all—can be the difference between success and failure. This is true for both online and face-to-face forms of participation.
- *Giving people a chance to tell their stories.* The chance for people to explain why they care about an issue, and to feel like others hear and understand their story, is the most fundamental missing ingredient in conventional formats. It is probably also what Oscar Wilde would call the most charming aspect of good participation. When people have a chance to relate their experiences, they are much more likely learn from each other, be civil toward one another, form stronger relationships, and make the connection between their individual interests and the public good (Ryfe, 2006). Over the last twenty years, small-group formats that allow this kind of storytelling have been a core component of successful face-to-face participation. With the rise of social media, a different but complementary kind of storytelling has emerged, no longer bound by the constraints of time and space (Gordon, Baldwin-Philippi, & Balestra, 2013).
- *Providing choices.* Although they do so in different ways, both thick and thin forms of participation give people choices. Rather than trying to "sell" participants on a particular policy, these good participation opportunities allow citizens to decide for themselves what they think. In their article on the future of the Internet and politics, Fung, Gilman, and Shkabatur (2013) hypothesize that this practice of giving choices, either in face-to-face settings or online, will be increasingly demanded by citizens—and increasingly granted by public officials.

- *Giving participants a sense of political legitimacy.* In almost every public participation setting, people want to know whether what they say really matters. They often ask for some kind of formal or informal legitimacy—a sense that decision-makers are listening, will use their input in policymaking, and will explain how it had an impact. Participatory budgeting is perhaps the fastest growing form of participation because it goes one step further: built in to the process is the opportunity for participants to vote on how to spend public funds (Ganuza & Baiocchi, 2012; Wampler, 2012). The question of who has a legitimate voice, and what the parameters are for using that voice, looms as one of the largest questions in any adult relationship.
- *Supporting people to take action in a variety of ways.* Participation processes can encourage and support citizens to take action in numerous ways, from clicking a link to joining a task force to cleaning up a park. Some projects result in higher levels of volunteerism. Others direct people toward avenues for further influence on the policymaking process. Still others support the formation of committees and task forces to tackle specific, more advanced assignments. All of these opportunities for action recognize citizens as (adult) problem-solvers, capable of making their own contributions to solving problems.
- *Making participation enjoyable.* Another way in which successful participation treats citizens like adults is by thinking seriously about the value of fun. Because people have many options for how to spend their time, making the experience enjoyable can help encourage and enrich participation. In *Making Democracy Fun*, Josh Lerner (2014) not only documents the increasing use of games in public participation, but also unpacks the ways in which participatory processes can be gratifying to participants.
- *Making participation easy and convenient.* Most adults have many different pressures on their time. They value participation opportunities that fit easily into busy schedules, in addition to the ones that are more powerful and time-consuming. People also value opportunities they can seize at the very moment they are confronted with a public problem or opportunity: for example, the smartphone app that lets Boston residents identify a burned-out streetlight, directing the information straight to the city's public works employees (Schreckinger, 2014).

This final attribute of an adult relationship is often in tension with the rest: there is an obvious tradeoff between convenience and the benefits people receive. Thick forms of participation, which are most likely to treat citizens as adults in

other ways, require a greater commitment of time and energy. Thin forms of participation, which usually offer fewer of the other attributes of an adult-adult relationship, are generally the easiest and most convenient.

Finally, it is important to note that the involvement of a large, diverse number of participants is usually a key factor in the success of participation—especially when the process is intended to inform policy. Engaging a critical mass of people maximizes the possibility of non-governmental action by bringing more problem-solvers to the table and distributing the individual benefits of participation to the widest possible number of citizens. In addition, the presence of a critical mass of participants may produce some aspects of the adult-adult relationship. For example, being part of a large cross-section of the community may give people a sense of political legitimacy, even when public officials have been unable or unwilling to confer the expectation that citizen opinions will "matter" in the policymaking process. When it comes to influencing a policy decision, anecdotal evidence suggests that a large, diverse number of participants is critical even when public officials are supportive (Fagotto & Fung, 2009; Friedman, 2006; Leighninger, 2006).

Given the attributes of "good" participation, it is easy to see why conventional processes do not measure up. Table 2.1 assesses each form of participation—thick, thin, and conventional—in terms of treating citizens like adults. Thick participation generally features many of the attributes of an adult-adult relationship, although it is not easy and convenient. Thin participation is easy and convenient and sometimes features the attributes of an adult-adult relationship. Conventional participation offers few of the attributes of an adult relationship, and in most cases it is not particularly easy or convenient. But aside from making people feel better, how does good participation actually solve problems?

HOW DOES GOOD PARTICIPATION SOLVE PROBLEMS?

If conventional participation incurs costs and causes problems, can other forms of participation do better? Can thin and thick participation better address the issues we face in our communities? In Chapter 1, we argued that citizens want civility, community, and problem solving. Can good participation provide what citizens want and what public officials need? A great deal of evidence suggests that it can, and often does; however, that evidence also suggests that the positive

Table 2.1
Forms of Participation and the Attributes of an Adult-Adult Relationship

Attribute	Thick Participation	Thin Participation	Conventional Participation
Providing information—as much as people want	Yes	Sometimes	Sometimes
Giving people a chance to tell their stories	Yes	Sometimes	No
Presenting a range of policy choices	Yes	Sometimes	No
Giving citizens a sense of political legitimacy	Yes	Sometimes	No
Supporting people to take action in a variety of ways	Yes	Sometimes	No
Using sound group process techniques	Yes	No	No
Making participation enjoyable	Sometimes	Sometimes	No
Making participation easy and convenient	No	Yes	No

benefits of good participation are difficult to sustain (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014; Nabatchi, Gastil, Weiksner, & Leighninger, 2012).

Participation can create civility. If the essence of successful public participation is treating people like adults, then it should come as no surprise that people act like adults in these settings. And yet public officials and citizens often *are* surprised; their experiences in conventional meetings have been so discouraging that they no longer believe civility in public dialogue is possible. When Tina Nabatchi and Cynthia Farrar (2011) interviewed state legislators and Congressional staffers, they had to explain in detail how productive participation processes worked—and even then, the interviewees treated productive participation as more of a far-fetched hypothetical than something that might happen in real life. Laura Black (2012: 78), a communication scholar, observes:

"What happens in deliberative events is vastly different from politics as usual, and participants often report being pleasantly surprised by their experiences in these events."

The surprising civility in well-structured participation seems to arise from two key elements in an adult-adult relationship: (1) more opportunities to share and digest information and (2) the invitation for people to use stories and personal experiences to explain what they think. As sociologist David Ryfe (2006) explains, storytelling helps participants relate to one another, analyze information they have been given, handle disagreements, and empathize with people who have views and backgrounds different from their own. As a result, the way people talk in successful participation environments is more emotional—including more anger, more sadness, and more humor—than you would expect from highly rational prescriptions for participation and highly theoretical visions of deliberation.

The new relationships fostered through participation do not simply occur among citizens; they also form between citizens and public servants, especially when those public servants are part of the process. This may be one of the reasons why some forms of participation lead to higher levels of trust between citizens and government. People who took part in the CaliforniaSpeaks project on health care reform, which was run by the national nonprofit America*Speaks*, were over 55 percent more likely to agree, after the process, with statements like "We can trust our state's government to do what is right" (Fung, Lee, & Harbage, 2008). In one North Carolina project, "external political efficacy" (the extent to which people feel that government is responsive to their interests) increased by 31 percent (Nabatchi, 2010).

Participation can create community. Given the demonstrated capacity of participation to produce civility and build relationships, it may seem safe to assume that participants can also develop stronger community bonds and networks. But since most participation processes are temporary projects lasting only a few weeks or months, their effects on community may also be short-lived. The link between participation and community is worth exploring, both strategically and empirically, because research demonstrates the extent to which community matters. Strong, ongoing connections between residents, robust relationships between people and institutions, and positive feelings by citizens about the places they live are highly correlated with a range of positive outcomes, from economic development to public health. For example:

- Cities and towns that have higher levels of community attachment have higher rates of economic growth and lower levels of unemployment (Knight Foundation, 2010).
- Neighborhoods where people work together and have higher collective efficacy have lower crime rates (Hurley, 2004; see also Davis, 2013; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997).
- People with stronger relationships to friends and neighbors are at less risk of serious illness and premature death (Olien, 2013). Reflecting on a successful public participation process conducted by the Centers for Disease Control, epidemiologist Roger Bernier speculated that "Democracy is good for your health" (Leighninger, 2006).

More evidence about the link between participation and community has emerged in the Global South, where some countries have established more durable structures for public participation. Scholars have studied the effects of citizen-driven land use planning exercises in India, local health councils in Brazil, ward committees in South Africa, and "co-production" in the Philippines (Spink, Hossain, & Best, 2009). These more sustained forms of participation seem to have stronger impacts on equity, government efficiency, and trust. In a review of longitudinal studies of these and other structures, Tiago Peixoto (n.d.) finds that:

- Participants are more willing to pay taxes (see also Torgler, Schneider, & Schaltegger, 2009).
- Governments are more likely to complete planned projects.
- Public finances are better managed and are less prone to corruption (see also Andersson, Fennell, & Shahrokh, 2011).
- Participants are more trusting of public institutions.
- Public expenditures are more likely to benefit low-income people.
- Poverty is reduced.

In the United States, treating people like adults, occasionally and in an ad hoc way, is helping public leaders deal with crises and make controversial decisions. There is increasing evidence from other countries that treating people like adults, in a more ongoing and systemic way, can unlock a more significant array of benefits.

Participation can solve policymaking and public problems. The evidence on how participation—particularly thick participation—can affect

policymaking is more abundant, even in the Global North. Initiated most often by local leaders, these strategies have been used hundreds if not thousands of times to address issues involving land use, crime prevention, education, racism and discrimination, immigration, youth development, budgets, poverty and economic development, and strategic planning. In communities across the United States, participation projects have left their mark on the physical landscape, from the Village Academy in Delray Beach, Florida (Leighninger, 2006), to the Fremont Street Troll in Seattle, which is shown in Exhibit 2.2 (Diers, 2008). One can easily find case studies demonstrating how these processes have affected public policy (Fagotto & Fung, 2009; Friedman, Kadlec, & Birnback, 2007; Leighninger, 2006; Levine & Torres, 2008; see also Participedia.net).

Exhibit 2.2
The Fremont Street Troll in Seattle

Although meaningful public participation has been much more common at the local level, there are some state and federal policy examples in the United States (see Chapter 7). For example, participation initiatives helped shape prison

reform legislation in Oklahoma, the Unified New Orleans Plan adopted after Hurricane Katrina (Lukensmeyer, 2007, 2013), and the flu vaccine policy of the Centers for Disease Control. There are additional international examples; in Brazil, policy conferences engaging thousands of people have been used to produce federal policies on a wide variety of issues since 1988 (Pogrebinschi, 2014).

How can participation affect policymaking? A range of anecdotal stories and empirical evaluations suggest some answers:

- *By participating, people become more informed about public issues.* Sometimes the awareness of a key set of facts, coupled with a set of recommendations reflecting this new understanding, can swing the pendulum in a policy debate (Abelson & Gauvin, 2006; Muhlberger, 2006). In research on National Issues Forums in South Dakota, 72 percent of participants reported gaining new insights about issues, 79 percent reported discussing aspects of the problem that they had not considered before, and 37 percent reported thinking differently about the issue (Fagotto & Fung, 2006).
- *Participation can bridge divides.* When participation brings together citizens on different sides of a policy debate, they often find common ground, which can break a legislative deadlock. In a statewide process called "Balancing Justice in Oklahoma," finding common ground helped the state legislature shift from an aggressive prison construction policy to becoming one of the leading states in community corrections (Leighninger, 2006). In the Cleveland Flats section of Cleveland, Ohio, it helped bridge what city councilman Joe Cimperman called a "culture of conflict" over development issues, and led to the "Flats Forward" plan (Leighninger, 2014).
- *Participation increases the accountability of elected officials.* Participation can connect citizens and public officials during the course of an effort, and inspire more communication afterward. For example, after the "CaliforniaSpeaks" process on health care in that state, 40 percent of the 3,500 participants contacted a public official (Fung, Lee, & Harbage, 2008). But when public officials act against the recommendations of citizens who have been mobilized to address a key issue, they often regret it. When the city council of Eugene, Oregon, decided not to embrace the budget recommendations advanced through "Eugene Decisions," one of the first participatory budgeting processes in the United States, citizens rallied against the decision. City council members changed their minds and accepted the recommendations a week later (Weeks, 2000).

In all of these examples, the capacity of the public participation exercise to reach a large number of people played a key role in the policy-affecting capacity of citizens. Informing, reconciling, and empowering people has policy impacts only if it achieves a certain scale; breakthroughs are less likely if disinformation still predominates, if large segments of the community are still in conflict, or if there are only a few voices pressuring their elected representatives.

This kind of critical mass is easiest to achieve at the local level, and yet some observers feel that public participation is the most promising approach—and in some cases, the last hope—of solving global problems like climate change. In the Worldwatch Institute's 2014 *State of the World* report, editors Tom Prugh and Michael Renner (2014: 251) write:

> Deliberative civic engagement has been found to increase citizens' civic skills, involvement, and interest in political issues, with corresponding impacts on policy. Human-authored solutions to sustainability problems seem unlikely to emerge without those—indeed, they may be the only way of deepening the responsiveness of democracies to citizens' wishes and harnessing it to the pursuit of sustainability.

Similarly, Prugh and Renner (2014: 251) decry the "repeatedly disappointing results of the annual high-level international meetings on climate change," and conclude that the "rapid expansion of democracy around the world thus seems to offer the only kernel of hope for breaking the logjam."

Some of the thinner kinds of engagement, in which people spend less time but receive smaller helpings of information, legitimacy, and storytelling, have had significant policy impacts simply through their ability to "go viral," achieving impressive critical mass despite being geographically diffuse. Archon Fung, Hollie Russon Gilman, and Jennifer Shkabatur (2013) point to the Trayvon Martin case, the Kony 2012 controversy, and the defeat of the Stop Online Piracy Act/Protect Intellectual Property Act (SOPA/PIPA) as key examples. In each case, participants only had to click a link to express their support for a particular cause, but they did so in such numbers that they were able to affect decision-makers.

- *Participation can prompt citizen action to solve problems.* Public participation can also solve problems by catalyzing action outside the policy arena, by people who are not public employees and organizations that are not part of

government. There are several ways in which participation can support this kind of problem solving.

- *Participation generates new ideas.* Participation creates settings in which people come up with ideas for new activities or initiatives. Researchers studying a project organized by the West Virginia Center for Civic Life were able to quantify this effect: they found that 88 percent of the participants felt that the forums had given them new ideas of possible actions to take (Fagotto & Fung, 2009). Among the thinner forms of participation, online "crowdsourcing" has emerged as a structured process for idea generation. Crowdsourcing allows participants to propose solutions, comment on and add to others' proposals, and rank ideas according to which they like best. Cities like Manor, Texas, have supplemented the process by giving prizes to winning ideas (see generally, Svara & Denhardt, 2010).
- *Participation helps citizens find resources and allies.* A second way in which participation supports nongovernmental problem solving is that it helps citizens find the resources and allies they need (partly by forming relationships with others) to implement their ideas. Participation efforts have brought together citizen problem-solving teams to take on a host of issues. An early example was the construction of a shopping center in a low-income neighborhood in Fort Myers, Florida (Leighninger, 2006). In a large-scale participation process in several Southeastern states called "Turning the Tide on Poverty," 81 percent of the post-survey respondents who had participated in at least four of the five discussion sessions indicated they had joined an action team; over 39 percent of respondents volunteered after participating in three or fewer sessions. Moreover, 15 percent of all the volunteers indicated that this was their first time taking action in the community (Beaulieu & Welborn, 2012).
- *Participation develops new leadership.* Participation also provides spaces where new leaders can emerge. The Horizons project, which has involved people in over 300 towns across seven states in dialogue and action on rural poverty, provides empirical data that go beyond anecdotal stories (see Morehouse, 2009). Over 75 percent of the Horizons communities reported that, after the project, decisions about what happens in the community involve more people, and 77 percent reported that there are now more partnerships among local community organizations. In 39 percent of the communities, more people joined local boards, clubs, and service or other organizations. This leadership development may also encourage more government-initiated problem

solving. For example, 34 percent of the Horizons communities reported that people new to leadership roles were elected to public office.

- *Participation encourages public-private collaboration.* There are also many instances in which people inside and outside government work together to solve problems. This is sometimes called the co-creation or co-production of public goods and services, and it, too, is more likely to happen when citizens, public officials, and public employees come together to compare notes, generate ideas, and take action (Spink, Hossain, & Best, 2009). For example, on the island of Kauai, Hawaii, business owners and residents joined forces to repair a bridge to a state park for which the State Department of Land and Natural Resources did not have the finances (Simon, 2009; see also Nabatchi & Mergel, 2010).

Table 2.2
Assumptions and Realities About Public Participation and Citizens

Assumption	Reality
Participation is and should be led by government.	Participation is sometimes organized by government officials, but also may be organized by civil society leaders and regular citizens.
Participation is and should be periodic and temporary.	Some participation opportunities are one-off endeavors; many others are regular but conventional (e.g., monthly school board meetings); and still others are repeatedly triggered by law (e.g., participation under the National Environmental Policy Act). Examples of sustained participation are rarer, but seem to have greater positive effects than temporary processes.
Citizens do not want to actively participate in the work of government.	Citizens increasingly express more desire to engage in public problem solving, and have more capacities and skills to do so.
Citizens do not understand their individual needs and interests, and are likely to give undue weight to personal, rather than public, concerns.	Participation can provide citizens with the information they need to assess their own needs and interests, as well as the needs and interest of others. In doing so, citizens can become more aware of and open to broader public concerns.

WHY BAD PARTICIPATION HAPPENS TO GOOD PEOPLE

Given the wealth of evidence showing the benefits of good participation, why is there still so much bad participation? This question becomes even more puzzling when one realizes that the decision-makers who preside over bad participation are often just as frustrated with it as everyone else.

The most important reason is the argument we introduced in Chapter 1 and flesh out through the rest of this book: our participation infrastructure is inefficient, outdated, and disconnected from the needs, goals, and capacity of citizens. Our current infrastructure is supported by, and works to reinforce, a set of outdated assumptions about participation and about citizens. These assumptions do not align with the realities of democracy and citizenship in the 21st Century. Table 2.2 lays out several of these assumptions and realities (see also Nabatchi, 2012). As a result, good public participation remains an uncommon, often unofficial, usually temporary phenomenon. To sustain more and better participation, we must understand the historic and modern roots of conventional, thick, and thin participation. This is our focus in Chapter 3.

SUMMARY

This chapter centered on the basics of public participation. We defined public participation as the activities by which people's concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues. Moreover, we distinguished between indirect participation (in which citizens select some kind of representative or intermediary to act for them) and direct participation (in which citizens are personally involved and actively engaged in providing input, making decisions, and solving problems).

Within direct participation, there are three main variations:

- *Thick participation*, in which large, diverse numbers of people engage in small-group discussions about issues, choices, and actions. Generally speaking, it is the most meaningful and powerful of the three forms, but also the most intensive and time-consuming, and the least common.
- *Thin participation*, in which individuals (sometimes in large numbers) indicate preferences, submit ideas, or provide information in fast and convenient ways. While there are face-to-face and telephone opportunities for thin participation, online approaches are proliferating rapidly.

- *Conventional participation*, in which individuals have the chance to submit complaints and briefly address their elected officials at public meetings. Conventional participation is sometimes legally required, although it seldom meets the needs of citizens or public officials. Because these older approaches are entrenched in our public institutions, they also frequently serve as participation models for civic organizations.

We asserted that conventional participation can be harmful to citizens, public officials, and policy and governance. Because it has high time and resources costs and negative impacts on public trust and the legitimacy of public institutions, we described conventional participation as "bad."

We asserted that "good" participation means treating citizens like adults. Good participation processes and activities—both thin and thick—are more successful when they: (1) provide people with information, (2) use sound group process techniques, (3) give people a chance to tell their stories, (4) present a range of policy choices, (5) give participants a sense of political legitimacy, (6) support people to take action in a variety of ways, (7) make participation enjoyable, and (8) make participation convenient. Good participation can have positive impacts on citizens, communities, and governance in many different ways and through many different mechanisms.

Despite the drawbacks of conventional participation, it is more common than thin and thick participation because it is supported by our current participation infrastructure. This infrastructure is based on, and works to reinforce, a set of outdated assumptions about participation and about citizens.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Define public participation. Explain the differences between indirect and direct participation.
2. Define conventional, thin, and thick participation. What are the merits and shortcomings of each form? Under what conditions do you think each form works well (and does not)?
3. Discuss your experiences in public participation. Would you categorize your experiences as conventional, thin, or thick? Why? Were your experiences positive or negative? Why?

4. Review the list of online platforms in Box 2.2. Have you used any of these? If so, what were your experiences with them? What are some of the inherent challenges of online engagement?
5. Do you agree with the claims that conventional participation causes problems? Why or why not?
6. Discuss the characteristics of an adult-adult relationship. Do you believe it is important to incorporate these characteristics into public participation? Why or why not? What would you do to integrate these characteristics into public participation?
7. What are the characteristics of "good" participation? Do you agree with the claims about what makes for "good" participation? Why or why not?
8. Do you agree with the claim that "democracy is good for your health"? Why or why not?
9. Do you think the assumptions and realties presented in Table 2.2 are accurate? Why or why not? Does your opinion change if you look at them from the perspective of a public servant?
10. Do you think public participation is more influential at the local, state, or federal level? Why?

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