

Analyzing Recent Citizen Participation Trends in Western New York: Comparing Citizen Engagement Promoted by Local Governments and Nonprofit Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Engaging citizens in the decision-making process is becoming an important priority for many local governments. This article evaluates three citizen engagement events in two jurisdictions in western New York: public forums held by the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority, Citizen Participation Academy, and Participatory Budgeting Project. Using in-depth interviews with public and nonprofit employees, the article outlines several findings, including a distinctly higher level of effectiveness of engagement strategies when advanced by not-for-profit organizations. The engagement initiated by state and municipal governments reflects authoritarian and bureaucratic models of participation. This study highlights several challenges to the sustainability of citizen involvement at municipal levels, and its results have important implications for other towns implementing participatory tools.

RÉSUMÉ

Pour plusieurs gouvernements locaux, l'engagement des citoyens dans la prise de décision devient prioritaire. Cet article examine cette situation en évaluant trois événements portant sur l'engagement des citoyens dans deux juridictions de l'ouest de l'État du New York, à savoir des forums publics organisés par le Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority, le Citizen Participation Academy et le Participatory Budgeting Project. Au moyen d'entrevues en profondeur auprès d'employés des secteurs public et sans but lucratif, cet article fait plusieurs constats, y compris celui d'une efficacité beaucoup plus grande des stratégies d'engagement suivies par les organisations sans but lucratif. En revanche, l'engagement sollicité par les gouvernements des États et des municipalités reflète des modèles de participation relativement autoritaires et bureaucratiques. Cette étude souligne plusieurs défis soulevés au niveau municipal par les tentatives d'inclure la citoyenneté. Les résultats de cette étude ont des implications importantes pour d'autres villes qui s'efforcent d'encourager la participation.

Keywords / Mots clés : Citizen participation; Local government; Nonprofit; Participatory budgeting / Participation citoyenne; Gouvernement local; Sans but lucratif; Établissement de budget participatif

INTRODUCTION

Engaging citizens in decision-making is becoming an important priority for many local governments. Citizen participation is seen as the core of democratic governance (Pateman, 1970), and it ensures the legitimacy of the political process (Box, 1998; King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998). However, administrators promote participation to varying degrees and some are more innovative than others. Some local administrators carry out participatory responsibilities on their own, while others outsource these functions (Silverman, Taylor, & Crawford, 2008).

Although numerous local participatory tools exist, they still have flaws or are not fully utilized by citizens (Barber, 1984). In 2005, Baker and his colleagues surveyed city managers to examine factors that led to effective engagement. The authors found that properly advertising forthcoming engagement events, ensuring that citizens' comments are taken seriously, and developing effective follow-up mechanisms made the process of participation more meaningful (Baker, Addams, & Davis, 2005). Yet municipalities often only include citizens after decisions have already been made (Yang & Callahan, 2007). Kasymova and Schachter (2014) illustrated that this phenomenon occurs even in the context of municipalities outside/beyond the United States.

Ideally, jurisdictions need to involve residents on a regular basis in order to promote “deep and continuous involvement in administrative processes with the potential for all involved to have an effect on the situation” (King et al., 1998). When it is properly encouraged, public engagement is found to be beneficial not only for citizens but for public officials as well (Adams, 2004; Hassett & Watson, 2003; Kuo, 2012; Watson, Juster, & Johnson, 1991).

In general, governance structure, population size, and budgetary resources influence how municipalities use engagement tools (Berry, Portney, Bablitch, & Mahoney, 1984; Dalehite, 2008; Ebdon, 2000; Fölscher, 2007; Franklin & Ebdon, 2002). The level of trust in the political system impacts participation as well (Berman, 1997; Cortner & Moote, 1999). More citizen involvement can result in an improved trust in government.

As different jurisdictions are promoting engagement with various amounts of success, it becomes imperative to evaluate what contributes to the success of citizen involvement in different-sized communities. We evaluate this problem by looking at three engagement tools used in the city of Buffalo and the town of Tonawanda. The following are the three central research questions of this study: First, how are participatory tools implemented and who participates? Second, what factors influence the success of engagement? Third, what is the level of effectiveness of these mechanisms? The findings of this article could potentially broaden the research on drivers of participatory processes in jurisdictions. The results will contribute to and inform best practices in citizen engagement.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

A growing number of studies examine diverse citizen participation tools. But most engagement tools are not legally mandated, with the exception of citizen participation in public hearings (Berner, 2001; Berner & Smith,

2004). As a result, a larger number of existing studies focus on the analysis of citizen participation in hearings (Adams, 2004; Franklin & Ebdon, 2002; Goldfrank & Schneider, 2006; Paul, 2007; Vodusek & Biefnot, 2011). Theoreticians demonstrated several successful outcomes when an engaging process was used (Avritzer, 2000; Carr & Halvorsen, 2001). Successful engagements became common for some communities in South America and Eastern Europe (Hartay, 2011; Sintomer et al, 2008). As Sintomer, Herzberg, & Rocke (2008) have pointed out, engaging residents in European cities contributed to improving the communication between citizens, administrators, and political elites.

Citizen surveys are another widely studied participation tool among public administration researchers (Gao, 2012; Miller & Miller, 1991; Rivenbark & Ballard, 2012; Swindell & Kelly, 2000; Van Ryzin & Charbonneau, 2010; Verschelde & Rogge, 2012). In contrast, other participation tools, such as conversations with community groups, community dinners, citizen advisory boards, and citizen academies have not been as widely investigated (Carr & Halvorsen; 2001; on citizen academies, see Marcus, 2007; Morse, 2012).

Given the long history of participatory studies, researchers have developed several theoretical frameworks to evaluate citizen participation as advanced by government agencies (Arnstein, 1969; Fölscher, 2007; Goetz & Gaventa, 2001). However, in 2008, Silverman and colleagues came to the conclusion that these frameworks, such as Arnstein's participation theory, are becoming less effective in understanding modern citizen involvement practices. This is due to the fact that local governments now outsource many of their services, leading to the outsourcing of citizen participation functions (Silverman et al., 2008). As a result, it is necessary to examine whether citizen participation organized by other players, including nongovernmental actors, results in different outcomes when compared to government-led participation.

In 2012, Waheduzzaman (School of Management and Information Systems, Victoria University) and Mphande proposed a new theoretical framework to evaluate participation tools and their relationship to the governance model. The authors argued that citizen participation has a direct impact on the improvement of governance, by ensuring accountability, transparency, and legitimacy. They suggested a direct relationship between stages of participation and stages of improving governance. Similar to Arnstein (1969), they identified stages of participation, which range from informing to empowering (see Table 1 for details). They also further deconstructed governance into authoritarian, bureaucratic, political, and democratic models, in relation to stages of participation, making their framework particularly useful.

This study examines and compares three participation events in western New York. Specifically, it explores the origins of engagement tools, including the drivers of participatory processes. I also evaluate challenges faced during the implementation process of participatory tools. Most importantly, I examine the effectiveness and rank of each tool based on Waheduzzaman and Mphande's (2012) governance framework.

Table 1: Relation of citizen participation with good governance

| Stages of Participation | Model of Governance |
|---|--|
| Stage 1: Informing—a one-way process, when the governing agency tells people about their decision before or during implementation of development programs. | Authoritarian model: In this model, a decision comes from the top and is implemented mostly by bureaucrats. Total process of the program lacks transparency, accountability, and predictability. |
| Stage 2: Consulting—a two-way communication, but engagement of people is limited within the decision-making of the program. Governing agency is used to inform people and to get feedback but the agency makes its decision and implements it unilaterally. | Bureaucratic model: In this model, people's participation is not enough to ensure the transfer of power. The process of the program is less transparent and less predictable, and the agency remains accountable to the top, not to the people. |
| Stage 3: Involving—at this stage, the governing agency not only listens to people to make its decision, but also engages people for budget distribution and implements the program together. Usually the whole community does not get the scope to be engaged in this process. | Political model: In this model, people's participation is enough, but people are engaged in the development programs in different segments that may revolve conflicts. The governing agency is transparent and accountable to a group of people but not to the whole community. |
| Stage 4: Empowering—at this stage, the governing agency allows developing the capacity of people to come with their decisions and resources to implement development programs jointly. The agency works as a facilitator. | Democratic model: This model allows for developing partnerships with people, delegates authority to make decisions, and implements a program with the sharing of local knowledge. Total process of the program is highly transparent, accountable, and predictable. |

Source: Waheduzzaman and Mphande, 2012.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE CONTEXT OF WESTERN NEW YORK

This research was conducted in the city of Buffalo and the town of Tonawanda. Buffalo is the second-largest city in New York state, with a population of more than 259,000. The city is known for its relatively high volunteer rate and active civic engagement, with a reported 24.7% of residents active in volunteer work and a reported 8% participating in public meetings (Corporation for National & Community Service, n.d.). According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, in 2011, the Buffalo-Niagara district, which includes Buffalo, is reported to have registered 1,563 charitable organizations working in a variety of areas, including human services and the environment (NCCS, 2014). With respect to its political structure, the city is headed by a mayor who is elected by the population. From a socio-economic development perspective, Buffalo faces numerous economic challenges, including mediocre performance of public schools, a high level of poverty, and environmental issues. The city received a Citizen-Engaged Community Award from 2010 to 2014, granted by the Public Technology Institute.

Tonawanda is a small town with a population of 41,676 located in western New York. Like in many other towns in western New York, Tonawanda's younger population has been emigrating elsewhere at a high rate. With the median family income at \$51,416, Tonawanda is a comparatively wealthier town and is racially homogeneous, with a 95.7% white population, according to the 2010 census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

There is a clear deficiency of research on citizen engagement in western New York. To address this, this study examines the implementation of the Mayor's Citizen Academy in the city of Buffalo, citizen participation within the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority, and participatory budgeting in the town of Tonawanda. Different agents promoted each of the three participatory tools. For example, the Mayor's Citizen Academy was convened by the city of Buffalo. Public participation in budget forums within the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority was administered and controlled by New York state, while participatory budgeting in Tonawanda was implemented by a local community-based nonprofit organization.

METHOD

The study is based on eight interviews and nonparticipant field observations, as well as archival materials, government and news reports, and informal reports of nonprofits. I conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with three municipal public administrators in Buffalo, two mid-level administrators at the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority, two representatives of the key nonprofit organizations in Tonawanda, and one municipal employee of the Town of Tonawanda in November and December 2013. (Please see the Appendix for a list of interview questions.) Several follow-up questions were asked by phone and email. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify themes and key points, as well as similarities between responses. The author spent a day witnessing the budget hearing that took place in Buffalo in 2014 and attended one session held at the Citizen Participation Academy on February 25, 2014. On March 3, 2014, the author participated in a tour of a Tonawanda neighbourhood. Given the context of this research, I use a case study approach. Yin (2009) notes that the case study method is used when a researcher believes that the contextual conditions are highly pertinent to the circumstances and results of the study.

THREE CASE STUDIES OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

City of Buffalo

A centre of commerce in the early 1900s, Buffalo turned into a less competitive city by the end of the 1960s. It experienced financial losses and a high emigration rate. Residents in Buffalo became less confident in the leadership as a result of historical mismanagement and a patronage culture that remains strong in the public sector (Dillaway, 2006). In the past several decades, Buffalo has had several opportunities to build on feasible and lucrative economic opportunities, including the development of a rapid-transit line connecting the city with its developed suburbs. This project failed primarily because of a lack of leadership, vision, and consolidating power (Dillaway, 2006).

Although Buffalo is one of the largest urban jurisdictions in New York State, it is also one of the poorest cities in the United States. The local government in Buffalo has tried, through several different avenues, to involve citizens in the budgeting process. The division of citizen services within Buffalo city hall has initiated a diverse set of engagement processes, including the Mayor's Citizen Participation Academy. Like many other towns around the country, the city of Buffalo has implemented a 311 call centre, and in 2013 it celebrated its one hundredth call. Extensive public input is being sought for the city's ongoing rezoning efforts (Buffalo Green Code, 2014).

With respect to the legal framework for government openness, the following needs to be highlighted: Buffalo is subject to the legal regulations of New York state. The state established the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) on January 1, 1978. It is codified in Article 6 of the Public Officers Law. Its provisions are very similar to the Freedom of Information Act. Article 7 of the Public Officers Law, entitled the Open Meetings Law, became effective in 1977. This law lays out all the necessary requirements with respect to meetings held by public bodies, including rules that require every meeting be open and specific regulations for notifying the public (for more information, please consult the website: <http://www.dos.ny.gov/coog/foil2.html>).

Mayor's citizen participation academy

In 2006, the newly elected mayor of Buffalo launched the Mayor's Citizen Participation Academy. The goal of the initiative was to provide residents of the city of Buffalo with an opportunity to better understand the workings of their local government. Furthermore, the initiative was designed

to give practical and relevant information to citizens, while creating an informal environment wherein city administrators and officials can interact with concerned residents. ... By extracting the wealth of experience of these officials and in turn empowering citizens, the academy was supposed to create a citizenry who is educated and informed about the principles of civic action and excited about community involvement." (*Mid-level administrator C1*)

It was also expected that this inside view of government would inspire involvement in the community for a sustained period of time.

Citizen academies share many similarities with community police academies due to their civic education component. Researchers examined citizen participation academies in other jurisdictions and found that most citizen academies have the goal of building civic education capacities (Morse, 2012).

Selected participants of the Buffalo citizen academy attend a 10-session course, which includes meetings with department heads. "Each session brings together several commissioners and directors with participants in an informal setting to learn about the structure, challenges and the vision for their respective departments." By providing citizens an avenue to observe government, a "sense of connectivity is established between the city government and its constituents" (*Mid-level administrator C1*).

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Conducted two times a year, this mechanism is designed to bring together a diverse set of the population. On average, 28 residents participate each semester. The announcements and recruitments are carried out primarily online. The selection of participants ensures that at least three people represent each of nine common council districts. Administrators attempt to select a wide range of participants with respect to gender, age, and income. The interviewee noted that the academy normally has more women than men, with a ratio of 2:1. One of the most important selection criteria is the residence of a potential candidate, which should be the city of Buffalo. Candidates are required to provide references, while demographic characteristics, such as race, are not asked on the application form.

Once the selection is completed, participants are invited to attend the 10-session program arranged by city hall. Regular topics covered during a semester include education, community programs, public safety, and economic development. In addition to sessions at Buffalo city hall, program organizers arrange field trips to fire and police stations and other sites of city operation.

The author attended one of the sessions, on February 24, 2014. Approximately 22 academy students were present. Academy participants consisted of a diverse group of individuals with respect to gender, race, and age. A variety of commissioners from several municipal departments presented weekly from 6:00 to 8:30 p.m. At the meeting on March 25, 2014, for example, the academy organized a session on building permits and the municipal green code process. Earlier sessions had taken place in the field with the municipal police. During the workshop, academy members asked questions and the process appeared to be informal and interactive. Upon completion of the workshop, an evaluation survey was collected.

After finishing the program, attendees receive a certificate during an official ceremony attended by the mayor. With respect to the impact of the program, the following should be noted. The interviewee at the Buffalo citizen services division noted that the city maintains communication with all previous participants of the program. Some academy graduates have been recommended by the mayor to serve as board members in organizations in Buffalo (*Mid-level administrator C2*). The interviewee also noted that the city of Buffalo is evaluating opportunities to use social media to recruit a younger group of participants in its future programs.

Academy participants remain engaged after completing the program. "There is some evidence that former academy graduates get engaged in their respective block clubs" (*Mid-level administrator C2*). Other graduates "become leaders" in other organizations in the city (*Mid-level administrator C2*). In sum, former academy graduates become more involved in volunteer work in other organizations. For example, several former graduates are citizen committee members for the on going rezoning process of the Buffalo Green Code (*Mid-level administrator C2*). The key challenge for the academy's sustainability is the small number of applicants. In various years, sessions were cancelled due to an insufficient number of applicants (*Mid-level administrator C2*).

Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority

In 2003, the New York State Legislature declared that the city of Buffalo faced a "severe fiscal crisis," which "could not be resolved without assistance from the State" (Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority, 2003). As a result, the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority (BFSA) was created by the state of New York to oversee the financial

operation of the city of Buffalo. In general, the BFSA's responsibilities include reviewing financial plans of the city and assisting with deficit financing.

With an operating budget of over a million dollars, the BFSA is considered a corporate government agency; it is managed by a group of nine directors, one of whom is a citizen of Buffalo (Mancuso, 2009). The remaining members are appointed by the state of New York, and they include the mayor of the city and the Erie County executive (Mancuso, 2009). The BFSA places a high value on input from the public, which is viewed as fundamental to the success of the organization. As a result, the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority Act requires the authority to engage the public and examine citizens' recommendations about municipal financial management. Citizens can submit idea proposals related to possible cost savings and revenue increases in the city.

From 2003 to 2008, the BFSA partnered with the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York, to coordinate citizen participation. In 2003, the first year of the BFSA's operation, the institute reported that approximately "250 citizens attended the forum, while 54 orally voiced their opinions on the financial plan to the panel. Specifically, 27 citizens (18 individuals, 9 organizations) spoke at the first session, 14 at the second (7 individuals, 7 organizations), and 13 at the third (6 individuals, 7 organizations)" (Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth, 2003). The BFSA stationed three computer terminals outside the auditorium, which were used by eight citizens to submit comments; 38 offered written comments—either by mail or hand delivery to the institute or forum—and 29 delivered their comments via email to the BFSA forum, institute, and city of Buffalo email accounts (Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth, 2003).

That said, the number of participating residents decreased annually in the following years. In 2005, the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth reported that only 32 people attended the forum, while in 2012 only eight citizens were present, with six voicing their opinions on the budget and financial plan during the public comment period.

We analyzed all citizen reports posted by the BFSA on its website, which revealed that most speakers represented those who disagreed with the proposed budget plan as well as with the budget discussion. But frequently, concerns were raised over the *process of decision-making* rather than the document itself (with comments such as "lack of consultation," "behind closed doors," "rushed," "lack of accountability"). For example, several participants expressed concerns over the lack of citizen input in the budget process during the 2008 budget forum. Some complained that discussions were scheduled only a few days prior to the release of the budget.

The analysis of the BFSA's annual reports demonstrates a significant decrease in citizen input since the first year of operation. One interviewee representing the BFSA explained that limited public finance knowledge and a decreased interest in the work of the authority are key reasons for a decreasing number of participating citizens, as "the new institute like BFSA lost its novelty and became less interesting for residents" (*Mid-level administrator B2*).

The BFSA used various methods to involve residents in budget forums, including distributing information through the news media and other outlets, as well as preparing a simplified and user-friendly version of the budget. Since 2003, the authority exercised a “hard” oversight mandate that enabled it to implement a municipal employee pay freeze, saving the city close to \$150 million. Due to numerous lawsuits, however, the wage freeze was lifted in 2007. In 2005, the mandate of the BFSA was downgraded to an advisory status. The same interviewee noted that the change of mandate may also have negatively impacted citizens’ desire to participate, leading to a decline in institute influence.

Community involvement in environmental issues in Tonawanda

Tonawanda is a small town located in western New York and one of the most polluted towns in the state (New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, 2009a). The town has a high density of major sources of air pollution in the area, as it hosts multiple facilities, including a foundry coke plant, two petroleum distribution terminals, and multiple trafficking depots. According to various estimates, close to 52 industrial facilities are located within a radius of two miles in Tonawanda. In 2009, a local environmental community-based organization, the Clean Air Coalition of Western New York (CACWNY), began an investigation of local air quality due to a particularly high level of chronic illness. The investigation confirmed a high pollution level in Tonawanda. Following release of the coalition’s findings, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) initiated a year-long community air quality monitoring study in the town of Tonawanda to measure the concentration of air pollutants within the community and evaluate the potential risk to public health (New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, 2009b). The DEC results found the main source of pollution to be the Tonawanda Coke Corporation (TCC).

In 2011, more than 200 people who were primarily residents of Tonawanda, led by the CACWNY, filed a lawsuit against the Tonawanda Coke Company for violating the Clean Air Act. Tonawanda Coke was charged with 19 federal counts for violating the Clean Air Act and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act from 1998 to 2009. In 2013, the jury requested over \$200 million¹ in fines to be used to address the consequences of air pollution in the community (Bagley, 2013).

On March 23, 2013, the CACWNY held a community meeting to discuss potential ways of spending the settlement resources, including introducing the concept of participatory budgeting. The CACWNY reached out to the community by mail and other sources. It held a community assembly meeting with more than 100 residents in attendance and hosted four additional planning meetings, which led to the streamlining of numerous proposals into 25 final projects developed by elected budget delegates. These projects were designed to reduce and address the environmental damage caused by pollution, especially in heavily impacted areas. Residents were expected to select five final projects from the list of 25 used during the voting process.

The CACWNY became the key agent in advancing the participatory budgeting process in the town of Tonawanda. Volunteers and members of the CACWNY organized and administered 11 polling stations, which were open on the voting day, in May 2013. In total, more than 560 residents participated in the voting (Bagley, 2013), which led to the selection of five priority projects that residents considered important. After the voting, the

CACWNY submitted a memorandum with voting results to the Department of Justice, the EPA, and the judge on behalf of the Clean Air Coalition.²

In sum, the CACWNY used various strategies to engage residents, including educating the populace, organizing several deliberation and discussion sessions, and voting on priorities. The CACWNY faced several challenges in administering the entire participatory process, their most important hurdle being limited financial and human resources (*Interviewee T1*).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Although the three engagement tools presented are different, similarities emerge with respect to challenges in sustaining participation. All three events required time and resources to ensure continuous citizen interest in these projects. The level of effectiveness of participation differed across the three cases as well.

Some commentators contend that citizens may be more interested in government-led participation initiatives because of available financial and technical resources (Koontz, Steelman, Carmin, Korfmacher, Moseley, & Thomas, 2004; Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000). But this argument does not support how participation events in Buffalo, which were sponsored by the government, turned out.

Moreover, governments are often suspected of only engaging a specifically selected slice of the population (Barnes, Newman, & Sullivan, 2007). The leading role of a nonprofit organization in participatory budgeting in Tonawanda may be viewed as the key to its successful engagement because the nonprofit was perceived as a neutral entity in the process (please refer to Table 2 for details of analysis). The success of engagement is expressed in the number of voters and participants, whom the CACWNY was able to involve within a short period of preparation. The effectiveness of the engagement in Tonawanda is reflected in the final selection of community projects, one of which is currently in the process of being implemented.

Overall, the three engagement tools pursued different goals. Citizen involvement was particularly important to legitimize the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority. The mission of the Mayor's Citizen Participation Academy was to educate and foster trust and communication between the municipality and its residents. Both goals were not fully realized given the continuous difficulty that organizers faced in sustaining continuous participation. Participatory budgeting in Tonawanda had several goals, including an increased engagement in deliberation and decision-making. As a result, participatory budgeting in Tonawanda was the only tool that allowed the town to delegate decision-making power to residents, which, given the model by Waheduzzaman and Mphande (2012), places the process at the stage of empowerment, or the *democratic model of participation*.

Table 2: A comparative analysis of three engagement tools

| | Buffalo Financial Stability Authority | Involvement organized by the community-based organization in Tonawanda | Mayor's Citizen Participation Academy in Buffalo |
|--|--|---|---|
| Initiators | <i>State government</i> | <i>Grassroots community-based nonprofit</i> | <i>Municipal government</i> |
| First year of implementation | 2003 | 2013 | 2006 |
| Participation time frame | Annual | One-time event | Two times per year |
| Goal | Inform / Involve the public | Involve citizens in budget expenditure allocation | Education, civic capacity building |
| Mode of participation | Information / Deliberation | Deliberation / Decision-making | Education |
| How residents are informed about this event | Through media, newspapers, and online | Through community leaders | Online, newspapers, radio, etc. |
| Who participates | Diverse group | Older residents over 50 | Diverse selection procedure |
| How many participate | 250 in 2003; 8 in 2012 | 560 voted | 28 or less |
| Organization of participation | Direct participation in the meeting | Direct voting and decision on priority policies | Direct participation in seminars and presentations |
| Challenges to implementation | A decreasing level of participation over time; difficulty to retain interest | Financial constraints to implement; difficulty of narrowing down citizens' priorities | Lack of interest among residents/time deficit |
| Effect of participation | Creates a forum for deliberation | Sense of empowerment | Better understanding of local government; local civic capacity building |
| How results of engagement are shared with the public | Reports are available online | Newspapers, reports, online newspapers | Information is available on graduation ceremony |
| Impact on the government decision-making process | BFSA pays attention to key comments | Education and knowledge diffusion about local government responsibilities; decision-making impact | Education and knowledge diffusion about local government responsibilities |
| Use of participation outcomes | Used during the budget discussion | Distribution of resources based on citizen preferences | City hall maintains communication with former graduates |
| Role of citizens in implementing feedback received | Lower level of engagement citizens | Active role of citizens particularly in the voting process | Not clear |
| Stages of participation | Informing | Empowering | Informing / Involving |
| Models of governance based on Waheduzzaman & Mphande (2012) | Authoritarian | Democratic | Bureaucratic / political |

Kasymova (2014)

In the case of public forums within the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Academy, the government used the services of a third party to help organize the forum during its first years. The BFSA created an increased interest in the first years, because it was a new institute, funded by the state (*Mid-level administrator B2*). The BFSA kept the public informed by sharing online forum discussion results and updates on citizens' cost reduction and revenue increase recommendations. But a transparent information sharing practice did not lead to more participation in the subsequent open forum meetings.

Using Waheduzzaman and Mphande's (2012) framework, we would place participation in budget forums within the BFSA at the stage of informing, which belongs to the *authoritarian model*.

The impact of the Mayor's Citizen Participation Academy is not clear. Although former academy participants are reported to have continued their involvement in other community-based projects, such as the Buffalo Rezoning Committee, it is not clear whether graduating from the academy influenced these citizens' decisions to remain active. It could also be claimed that those who attended the academy were already active within the community. Furthermore, the application form contains some questions that could potentially favour the selection of candidates who are already active in the community. Prior studies have found this to be the case (Hochsztein, 2011). Given the engagement format and goals of the Mayor's Citizen Participation Academy, it can be considered to represent a *bureaucratic/political model*.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was explorative in nature. It was designed to try to make sense of some of the engagement practices taking place in selected jurisdictions in western New York and to build a foundation for future in-depth studies. The study examined three participation tools: public forums within the Buffalo Fiscal Stability Authority (BFSA), the mayor of Buffalo's Citizen Participation Academy, and a participatory budgeting project in the Town of Tonawanda. The three engagement tools had different drivers as well as different goals. Using Waheduzzaman and Mphande's (2012) theoretical model, the findings demonstrated that the public involvement strategy used in Tonawanda was meaningful as it utilized several strategies, including education, deliberation, and actual decision-making. As a result, it reached the highest level in the participation stages. The size of the community in Tonawanda could have impacted the success of the event, as smaller communities are expected to be easier to organize around issues.

Ebdon and Franklin (2004) stress that some participatory tools used in the budgeting process do not guarantee a two-way communication between residents and the government. The BFSA faced a decreasing rate of citizen involvement, due in part to the lack of two-way communication. Although it proactively released reports on open forums, municipal budgets, and other related information, it is not evident whether citizen input was incorporated into the final budget decisions. The BFSA created a platform for deliberation, and the authority was proactive and transparent in sharing information, but citizens did not influence final decisions.

Owing to recent fiscal events, a distrust of government institutions is still prevalent in Buffalo and has a negative impact on any projects advanced by the government, even if the project is well intentioned. Consequently, any participatory initiative that is affiliated with the government is negatively perceived. In a political climate of distrust, all participatory tools are doomed to fail. For example, during several informal conversations with residents, I learned some of them felt that the municipality used the Mayor's Citizen Participation Academy to advance its own agenda and create a group of its own advocates in communities.

There are several implications to this research. First, the case of the BFSA demonstrates that transparency alone is not sufficient to sustain participation. Sustainability of participation requires a two-way communication with residents and, more importantly, concrete actions to address concerns. Similar to previous studies (Kasymova & Schachter, 2014), this research finds a more effective engagement process when it is advanced by local nonprofit organizations, especially in jurisdictions with a long history of corruption and a lack of trust in government. Finally, citizen involvement should not be limited to a single engagement tool, but instead, a set of various engagement techniques should be implemented, as was done in Tonawanda.

Leighninger (2014) suggests that current laws regulating citizen participation in government decision-making are outdated, inadequate, and obsolete, only intensifying distrust. These three case studies, to an extent, also demonstrate that the use of ineffective engagement tools may result in a more suspicious and skeptical citizenry.

Waheduzzaman and Mphande's (2012) framework was particularly useful for the analysis of the examined participation tools, although given the diversity of existing engagement mechanisms, the framework may require additional classifications, such as mixed models, for example, semi-authoritarian or semi-democratic.

As with any study, this research has its limitations. First, the research focused on selected participation events in western New York. Meanwhile, there are a growing number of different participatory initiatives in western New York that the study did not examine. Also, the study evaluated annual engagement events convened by municipal and state governments. In contrast, the participation process administered by the nonprofit organization in Tonawanda took place within a time frame of less than a year and may not occur again soon. This may impact the study's results. Future research could address this shortcoming by evaluating citizen participation led by nonprofit organizations through a number of years. A longitudinal analysis could also help in developing a quantitative metrics for measuring the effectiveness of participation. The number of participatory processes examined in the city of Buffalo and the town of Tonawanda are not equal, which is another limitation of this study. Tonawanda and Buffalo differ from each other in terms of social capital, income levels, and ethnic composition. The author acknowledges that these differences impact the study's results. Furthermore, the small number of interviews may also limit an ability to generalize the findings of this study.

I recommend that future studies attempt to include interviews with citizens. Most of the existing public administration studies rely on public administrators as the main source of data when evaluating citizen participation. To my knowledge only a few studies exist that have attempted to incorporate the perspectives of citizens (Gaynor, 2011; Kasymova, 2013). Ensuring the representation of citizens who participate and who do

not participate in public gatherings is one of the main challenges when collecting citizen-based data. Identifying and collecting data from a robust and representative sample of citizens may be the principal factor that prevents researchers from pursuing citizen-based qualitative studies on citizen participation.

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NOTES

1. The final fee was settled by the judge in the amount of \$24 million.
2. The projects that received the highest number of votes were 1) Industrial Pollution Prevention Project; 2) Community Environment Health Institute; 3) Wickwire Park Redevelopment Project; 4) Tonawanda Area Environmental Health Study; and 5) Town of Tonawanda Tree Farms (see Bagley, 2013). At the time of writing, the case was still being finalized at the court, the judge of which eventually decided to allocate some portions of fee payments to the project Tonawanda Area Environmental Health Study.

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APPENDIX: LIST OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Please tell me about your work.

Citizen involvement initiatives and procedures

- Tell me more about any of your projects that relate to citizen engagement.
- When did you start promoting this initiative?
- What are some key challenges in implementing citizen participation?
- On average, how many people participate in this initiative?
- Could you please describe what does an average participant look like?

Implementation

- How do you select your participants?
- What factors influence the success of citizen engagement?
- Can you please tell me in general about citizen participation in this community? Is the environment here conducive for engagement?

Effects, Challenges, Future

- What is the effect of citizen participation?
- Are there any changes that you observe when citizens become involved in the decision-making process? Please tell me more.
- Were there any managerial challenges and difficulties during the process of engagement?
- What did your organization want to accomplish by promoting this initiative?
- What is the future of your initiative?

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