



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

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Citizen participation may be defined as a process in which ordinary people take part – whether on a voluntary or obligatory basis and whether acting alone or as part of a group – with the goal of influencing a decision involving significant choices that will affect their community. Such participation may or may not take place within an institutional framework, and it may be organized either by members of civil society (for example, through class action, demonstrations citizens’ committees, etc.) or by decision makers (for example, through referendums, parliamentary commissions and mediation, etc.).

This brief definition covers the diverse contexts in which ordinary people may participate. The mechanisms of obligatory institutionalized participation are defined by law, and citizens must take part in them or risk a penalty, generally in the form of fines or imprisonment. This is the case, for example, under a number of jurisdictions when it comes to elections, referendums, censuses and court summons. The mechanisms of voluntary institutionalized participation are defined by law or by an administration: they invite people to take part in a given process but do not oblige them to do so. Such mechanisms are exemplified by parliamentary commissions, public discussions, commissions of inquiry and public hearings. Finally, the mechanisms of non-institutionalized participation take less rigid forms and involve individuals acting on their own or as part of an organized group or spontaneous gathering. Examples include participation in a citizens’ committee, an interest group or a demonstration.

As used today, the word “participation” has the general sense of being involved or associated with others in some activity. According to *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, the word derives from the Middle English *participacioun*, which first appeared in the 14th century as the equivalent of the Late Latin *participatio*, a substantive related to the Latin verb *participare*, meaning to share. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the earliest meaning as the sharing of the substance, quality or nature of some thing or person. By the 17th century, the word “participation” was being used to mean a taking part, association or sharing with others in some action or matter. Its modern sense of “the action or state of taking part with others in an activity” was clearly present in a speech given in 1858 by British parliamentary reformer John Bright, who proclaimed, “I am afraid to say how many persons... are by the present constitution of this country shut out from any participation in political power” (*Speeches on Questions of Public Policy by John Bright*, quoted in the *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971).

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It might be asked which citizens are referred to in the term citizen participation. The concept appeared in the U.S.A. in the 1950s and 1960s in the context of urban renewal and anti-poverty programs.¹ Cunningham (1972) felt that citizen participation was defined by three essential elements: 1) ordinary people, or common amateurs² – that is, members of a community who have no formal source of power except for their numbers; 2) the exercise of power by these people, who lead their community to think and act as they do; 3) decisions involving significant and substantial choices related to the affairs of the community.³ More recently, Hardina (2008) has defined citizen participation as the process whereby those with the least resources – people on the margins of society – are involved in decisions about the services they receive on the part of those that represent them, namely, the government and not-for-profit organizations. Hardina emphasizes the benefits that result when these groups of people react to their economic and social oppression by taking local control of decisions affecting them. Those referred to in the term citizen participation are thus specifically ordinary people, whose sources of power are limited.

In practice, however, the concept of citizen participation takes on a number of connotations that distance it from the defining characteristics given by Cunningham and Hardina. Several other authors hold that citizen participation has various senses that can be classified according to the degree to which citizens are involved in the decision-making process, the direction of information flow between participants or the status of those who have taken the initiative. An example of a typology based on citizen involvement is the now classic model developed by Arnstein (1969). She proposed a “ladder of participation” with eight levels, or rungs, corresponding to increasing degrees of citizens’ power in decision making. At the bottom of the ladder are two rungs, Manipulation and Therapy, which Arnstein categorized as Nonparticipation. The middle rungs 3, 4 and 5, identified respectively as Informing, Consultation and Placation, belong to the category of Tokenism. At the top of the ladder, rungs 6, 7 and 8 correspond to Partnership, Delegated Power and Citizen Control respectively and are classified as Citizen Power. The higher up the ladder an instance of citizen participation can be placed, the more citizens can be sure that their opinions will be integrated into decision making and applied in the interest of their community. As Arnstein herself pointed out, the eight-rung ladder is a simplification and should not be considered exhaustive, but it nonetheless illustrates the significant gradations of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969).

Citizen participation should be distinguished from public involvement. While the concepts overlap, the former is broader in scope than the latter. Public involvement has gained importance since the late 1970s. Several of its objectives tend towards values other than the sharing of power and decision making with ordinary people (Rowe and Frewer, 2005; André et al. 2006, 2010). The key methods used for public involvement are public communication, public consultation and public participation. If, as specified at the outset, citizen participation includes power sharing and influence over major decisions in a community, this participation is situated in the upper rungs of Arnstein’s ladder⁴ and corresponds to true public involvement as described by Gauvin and Abelson

¹ When imposed by the state, citizen participation must be implemented through a bureaucracy; this leads Krause (1969) to speak of “‘citizen participation’ as a bureaucratic ideology.”

² For a discussion on the concept of ordinary persons, see Blondiaux (2007).

³ This is in keeping with the recent sense given to citizen juries and citizens’ assemblies.

⁴ This corresponds to the third method defined by Rowe and Frewer as well (2005).

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(2006).⁵ Furthermore, public involvement is often defined as the action of taking part in collective decisions within a government, a public institution or a civil society organization (Thibault, Lequin and Tremblay, 2000). According to this definition, public involvement does not encompass forms of citizen participation, such as voting in elections, class actions and public demonstrations, through which people seek to influence a decision. Citizen participation thus goes farther than simply taking part in decision making within formal participatory mechanisms.

Despite all the positive values associated with citizen participation, its implementation raises a number of issues. With cynicism towards leaders on the rise and voter turnout generally declining, the limitations of representative government are coming more clearly into view, some authors have argued (Rosenvallon, 2008). Citizen participation is one avenue in the search for a democratic model that involves ordinary people more closely and, in this sense, approaches something like participatory democracy. Both locally and internationally, the concept has a central and ever-growing role in development agendas, notably in those of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund; citizen participation is being used as a tool. However, as emphasized by McEwan (2005), policies constructed around citizen participation can produce ambiguous results. It is possible, for example, that more radical manifestations of citizen involvement are not accepted as participation. In this way, official practices of citizen participation may lead to new forms of governmentality, to use Foucault's term. Participatory processes may well end up strengthening the position of the vocal few in a society and marginalizing the poorest (McEwan, 2005, p. 8). In light of this observation, policies promoting citizen participation should not be viewed as a panacea for redressing a democratic deficit. Attention should also be given to forms of political action that exist outside official instances in which citizens can express themselves.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of current mechanisms of citizen participation? How does citizen participation fit in with representative democracy? What constitutes an effective process of citizen participation, and how should it be assessed? These are some of questions that remain to be answered by today's researchers.

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⁵ The discussion in the *Primer on Public Involvement* by Gauvin and Abelson for the Health Council of Canada (2006) is largely based on Rowe and Frewer (2005).

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