



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Social Science Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/soscij

Public meetings as sources of citizen input: Comparing attendees with citizens at large



Anne R. Williamson*

Department of Political Science, University of Alabama, 342 ten Hoor Hall, Box 870213, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 March 2013

Received in revised form 30 August 2013

Accepted 30 August 2013

Available online 29 September 2013

Keywords:

Public meetings

Citizen participation

Representation

Consolidated Plan

Community Development Block Grant

ABSTRACT

Although public meetings are the most frequently used method for obtaining citizen input into public decision-making, there is little systematic evidence comparing attendees with citizens at large. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by analyzing results from a series of public meetings and a random-sample telephone survey. The public meetings and telephone survey were conducted in Hillsborough County, Florida to obtain citizen input for the purpose of establishing spending priorities for more than \$39 million in federal block grant funds. Findings include representation at public meetings on a number of factors, including race, Hispanic ethnicity, and low-income status. Attendees favor redistributive activities more often than citizens at large; however, both attendees and the general public agree on the importance of funding activities serving certain vulnerable populations, including seniors, persons with disabilities, and victims of domestic violence.

© 2013 Western Social Science Association. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Public meetings are described as “the most commonly used, frequently criticized, yet least understood methods of public participation” (McComas, 2001b, p. 36). Despite the prevalence of public meetings as a formal venue for obtaining citizen input for public decision-making, systematic evidence is sparse (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006; McComas, 2001b).¹ Legally required in many instances, public meetings may be a source of biased citizen input due to a lack of representativeness among attendees. Biased citizen input may arise from both a lack of demographic representativeness among attendees and the propensity for attendees to hold strong opinions that may differ from those of citizens at large (Adams, 2004; McComas, 2001a). Despite recent innovations in methods of involving citizens in public decision-making, public meetings remain the most often-

used method for obtaining citizen input. Accordingly, empirical research addressing the potential for bias in such input is needed.

1.1. Citizen participation and democratic theory

Representative democracy is based on the idea that the public interest is served by elected officials voted into office to perform the work of government on behalf of the citizenry (Dahl, 1989; Urbinati & Warren, 2008). Having done their duty by voting, citizens are then free to go about their day-to-day business without taking the time or effort to become directly involved in governance. This view of representative democracy means that rational ignorance diminishes the need for direct citizen participation, where rational ignorance is defined as occurring when the cost of citizens sufficiently informing themselves outweighs the benefit that could reasonably expect to be gained by the endeavor (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). In other words, it is rational for citizens to be ignorant of much involved with governance, since they have already elected representatives to serve them. Such ignorance may be

* Tel.: +1 205 348 5528.

E-mail address: arwilliamson1@as.ua.edu¹ The term public meeting is used to refer to any formal public meeting or hearing held for the purpose of obtaining public comment.

described as not only rational, but justified (Robbins, Simonsen, & Feldman, 2008), given that most citizens are satisfied with their government services (Miller & Miller, 1991).

More recent trends in democratic theorizing call for greater citizen participation in public decision-making (King, 2007). This is primarily based on concerns with government's increasing use of network structures that allocate significant decision-making to private-sector organizations, thereby diminishing the impact of elected representation on government functions and heightening the capacity for resource-advantaged individuals and groups to capture policy processes (Box, 1998; Buss, Redburn, & Guo, 2006). Without representation of society's diverse members, however, even direct citizen participation will fail to meet the basic tenets of democracy. As a result, a key factor in assessing the success of citizen participation is representativeness (John, 2009; Yang & Pandey, 2011). Moreover, greater participant representativeness results in a higher probability that citizen input will be used (Yang & Pandey, 2011). This linkage between representativeness and the likelihood that citizen participation will be used in public decision-making highlights the continuing value placed on representativeness within democratic society.

Obtaining representative citizen input has long been noted as a challenging process (Checkoway, 1981; Thomas, 1995). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) and Verba and Nie (1972) are examples of empirical analysis presenting a socioeconomic (SES) explanation for citizen participation. Work by other authors also reinforces this view (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Sinclair, 1977). The SES model of citizen participation indicates that older, White males with higher levels of education and income engage in civic involvement more often than younger persons, females, minorities, and persons of lower levels of education and income, although differences between Blacks and Whites disappear as SES rises (Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995).

One of the chief problems associated with citizen participation reflecting the SES model is that citizen input is unlikely to include people who are affected by many public decisions (Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012). At a minimum, efforts at involving citizens in decision-making in a democracy includes involvement of relevant publics, where those most likely to be affected by a particular decision are provided with an opportunity to provide citizen input (Buss et al., 2006; Thomas, 1995).

1.2. Research hypotheses

This paper explores public meetings as sources of citizen input into government decision-making with regard to both attendee demographic representativeness and opinions expressed by attendees. Research is based on input regarding federal block grant spending priorities during the preparation of the Hillsborough County, Florida, Consolidated Plan for the period 2006–2011. This paper presents the only large-scale research on differences between public meeting attendees and citizens at large published in the last decade. Although the focus is on public meetings

in a single jurisdiction, the empirical analysis addresses a sizeable gap in the literature with regard to who attends public meetings and how they differ from those who do not.

Two hypotheses based on the results of citizen surveys are considered. Surveys were administered at public meetings ($N=207$) and through a random-sample telephone survey ($N=601$).

Hypothesis 1. Citizens who attend public meetings are not demographically representative of citizens at large.

Hypothesis 2. Opinions expressed by citizens attending public meetings are not representative of citizens at large.

2. Citizen participation overview

Direct citizen participation in public decision-making in the U.S. has its roots in the last half of the 20th century (Buss et al., 2006; Thomas, 1995). Citizen participation in federal program decision-making began with the urban renewal programs of the 1950s. Citizen involvement relied on political elites through blue ribbon commissions, a practice derided by many activists as ignoring the views of those most affected by urban renewal. As a consequence, Great Society programs of the 1960s called for "maximum feasible participation" by those most likely affected by public decisions, including the poor and minorities (Thomas, 1995). Maximum feasible participation was intended to engender political mobilization of the poor and minorities, an activity that many in federal government did not trust to state and local government, particularly in the South (Howard, Lipsky, & Marshall, 1994; Moynihan, 1969). Despite the fact that maximum feasible participation ultimately failed to fulfill its promise and was dubbed "maximum feasible misunderstanding" by one of the architects of Johnson-era anti-poverty programs (Moynihan, 1969), the number of federal programs requiring citizen participation more than tripled from the late 1960s through the late 1970s (Thomas, 1995). During this period citizen participation in public decision-making experienced a transformation from radical idea to routinized procedure (Howard et al., 1994). An important aspect of citizen participation as routinized procedure was the fact that "Ordinary citizens no longer had to fight over the right to participate in the direction. . . of public programs" (Howard et al., 1994, p. 73).

Notwithstanding the rise of citizen participation as routinized procedure, the focus on maximum feasible or even widespread citizen participation in setting priorities for federal programs declined considerably between the 1960s and 1970s.² By the time of the introduction of the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) in 1974, citizens were only required to be provided with adequate information and an opportunity to participate. The advent of the Reagan presidency further reduced federal attention to participation and translated into greater reliance on state

² The language of maximum feasible participation was changed to widespread participation by the late 1960s.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/140101>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/140101>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)