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Testing the value of public participation in Germany: Theory, operationalization and a case study on the evaluation of participation

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the implications posed by the European Climate Protection Plan and the German Energy Transition. Both involve social conflicts regarding technical feasibility, norms, and values. Technological expertise alone is insufficient to resolve these normative questions and conflicts. In addition to technological expertise, social and communicative competence is therefore needed to deal with the social and cultural challenges of an energy transition. One method to cope with conflicts that arise as a result of the energy transition refers to the use of citizen participation. Many analysts of participatory processes suggest that participation, if done properly, enhances acceptability and legitimacy of a transition process, contributes to improved efficiency of decisions, and promotes factual knowledge. This paper analyses and discusses these anticipated positive effects within a theoretical framework and a corresponding empirical case study.

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1. Introduction

In 2014 the European Union agreed on common goals for the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions. This plan limits the emissions in 2030–60% of the 1990 emission level. In addition, a minimum of 27% renewable energy production is prescribed for each national energy mix and a 27% increase in energy efficiency, all to be achieved by 2030.

This pan-European energy systems transition process will be executed on the national level. For Germany this agreement is in line with the national Energy Transition Act of 2011, which contains an additional goal: to phase out nuclear power by the year 2022 (see [8]: 16).

Transforming the energy system is associated with significant changes in society, for example on individual households: While experts regard the transformation process as a necessary change to protect the climate and to ensure the energy supply in the future, consumers might consider rising energy costs, new regulation requirements (for example for better insulation of their homes), or the comprehensive adoption of smart meters as burdens to their lifestyles, while others welcome these innovations as signals of a more sustainable future (see [29] w. p.).

In this respect, the proposed changes involve social conflicts about technical as well as economic feasibility, and touch upon deep-rooted norms and values. Technological expertise alone is not sufficient to resolve normative questions of what it means to pursue a good life. In addition to ethical arguments, it is essential to take the demands, concerns, and wants of the affected people into account. A concept is needed to cope with both technical feasibility and social conflicts that can facilitate the implementation of planned changes. Many social scientists and political observers recommend more and more adequate citizen participation as an appropriate tool to cope with transformation-related conflicts. Many analysts of participatory processes suggest that participation, if done properly, enhances acceptability and legitimacy, contributes to improved efficiency of decisions, promotes innovative solutions, and improves the quality of decisions (see [2]: 37, [3]: 775; [6]: 475; [7]: 628; [14]: 536; [15]: 5; [27]: 419f; [28]: 162 f.).

Even though citizen participation seems promising as a means to facilitate a smooth energy transition, several limitations and problems come along with public participation processes that are discussed in the literature. This paper reviews this discussion and addresses the main arguments on both sides of the coin. Furthermore, based on a theoretical concept of participation, it reports on an empirical case study that provides an answer to the question: How can one measure and evaluate the effects of a participation process in order to determine its quality? Evaluating the quality of

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participation is crucial to determining whether or not participation can adequately address societal problems. On a conceptual level the paper studies, compares, and analyzes different definitions of public participation. Specific criteria can be deduced from these analyses that are widely used within the literature for assessing the quality of participatory processes. In a second step, these criteria are operationalized and converted into sub-criteria and indicators. They serve as a basic instrument for measuring quality of process and outcome.

In the second half of the paper, these criteria and indicators are applied to a case study called “BEKO” (German abbreviation for: Citizens’ and public participation in an integrated energy and climate program). This project had been initiated by the Ministry of the Environment of Baden–Württemberg. The State government had decided to use citizen participation as a major element for articulating basic climate protection policies that were introduced to the State Parliament in mid-2015. The public participation project included stake-holders, NGOs, environmental groups, and a variety of randomly chosen as well as voluntarily recruited citizens. Their task was to assess and evaluate 110 action items to protect the climate as suggested by an expert consultancy company working for the State. Throughout the participation process, several surveys were conducted to measure the subjective impressions of all participants with respect to the above-mentioned quality criteria. This empirical investigation of a participation process which included directly and indirectly affected societal groups with multiple types of evaluation instruments (on-/offline, qualitative and quantitative social science) provides a unique database for investigating the appropriateness of the underlying theoretical concept for designing a valid and reliable evaluation (Table 1).

Our paper is structured in 7 chapters. In the first chapter we introduce the normative background of this paper as well as three main characteristics that classify public participation. In the second chapter, these three characteristics are converted into sub-criteria and indicators to evaluate the quality of public participation processes. The fourth chapter introduces the case-study BEKO before theoretically-derived criteria and empirically-revealed preferences are integrated in the fifth chapter. The last section discusses and summarizes research results (Table 2).

2. Normative background

In addition to theoretical publications inspired by normative concepts of democracy and deliberative decision-making, many practical handbooks and guidelines offer suggestions for how to set up good citizen involvement processes (see [26]: 252; [31]: 2688). Notwithstanding this huge and still-growing body of literature, there is neither a commonly used definition of the term “public participation” nor a concept to measure its quality. The term “public participation” is often used interchangeably with other terms like political participation, citizen participation, citizen involvement or engagement, which does not reflect the difference between multiple types of participation e.g., between casting a vote or taking part in a citizen panel (see [4]: 413).

For our study we reviewed more than 30 definitions of participatory processes in order to find discriminating criteria for measuring the quality of process as well as output/outcome.

A widely used definition of political participation refers to all activities that are voluntarily taken by citizens to influence political decisions at any stage of the political process (see e.g., [17]: 350). The criteria embedded in this definition, such as the reference to voluntariness, rational action, or exertion of influence on political decisions, can be found in many other publications on public participation (e.g., [20]: 20, [26]: 253). However, there are more criteria that were identified during our review.

1. Many authors emphasize the methodical, organized character of public participation processes (see [1]: 216; [7]: 628; [12]: 524; [21]: 2418; [24]: 6; [30]: 179). For example [22] define public participation as “formats for exchange that are organized for the purpose of facilitating communication between government, citizens, stakeholders and interest groups, and businesses regarding a specific decision or problem.” [22]: 2). The organized and methodical character of different participation methods refers to many organizational and logistical questions, e.g., how many people can be included in the process.
2. Public participation is often associated with an increased or intensified exchange of information. Even though definitions differ in their emphasis on a bottom-up or a top-down flow of information, they do agree that participation creates a mutual communication flow between the public and political administrators. These definitions thus emphasize the discourse and highlight the potential for learning in public participation processes (see [5]: 2685; [6]: 473; [9]: 181; [22]: 2; [25]; [16]: 6; [30]: 179).
3. The third characteristic of public participation refers to its impacts, in particular the influence on political decisions. Compared to other political activities, public participation addresses the crucial questions of what is at stake and what kind of impact the results of the process may exert on political decision-making. While for some authors (e.g., Arnstein) self-determination is the end point of participation, most authors claim that the results of the participatory processes need to be adopted or at least seriously considered by political representatives. The fate of the recommendations of these participatory processes needs to be determined and specified even before the process unfolds. Only if participants know how their judgments are fed into the political process can one expect serious and dedicated individuals to strive for the best possible recommendations (see [11]: 225f; [24]: 14f; [15]: 56f; [27]: 421).

In an attempt to synthesize these different concepts and characteristics of public participation, we define public participation as a set of processes that include representatives of different social groups organized by a third party with the purpose of initiating a discourse and cooperative counselling process aimed at informing collectively-binding decisions.

In the next section, this definition is further operationalized into indicators for measuring the quality of a participation process. For every characteristic a number of sub-criteria is delineated that can be used as empirical indicators for evaluating participatory processes.

The aim of this concept is not to reflect different criteria that are outlined in many different evaluation concepts. The aim of this concept is to come up with a manageable list of criteria which many authors could conceivably agree with.

3. Conversion of our public participation concept into indicators and sub-criteria

3.1. Criterion: inclusiveness

The first criterion refers to the number of stakeholder groups that are represented within a participation process. This criterion refers to the democratic principle of equality. In a pluralistic view, an equal representation of all affected groups and their free competition within a given set of communicative rules comprises an important cornerstone. If the principle of equality within a participation process is disregarded, groups that are affected but ignored will likely reject the participation process and its results. Political decision-makers working on decisions that entangle different

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