



# The future of public participation in Germany: Empirical analyses of administration experts' assessments



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## ABSTRACT

In democratically organized forms of government, public participation is a crucial element of the democratic process. Due to ongoing social change and the resulting changes in the requirements for democracy, the participative elements of democracy are constantly evolving. Consequently, in recent decades, the methods and instruments of public participation have developed and adapted to the changing demands in western democracies. Where, however, is public participation headed? This question remains unanswered, and the research at hand aims to answer it. To structure the current, at times controversial, discussion and gain insight into the future of public participation, we use a Delphi survey. Our survey focuses on expectations about the future of public participation using data from German administration professionals. The panelists evaluate 10 future projections on developments in public participation in Germany until the year 2020. Based on the obtained data, we identify the projections for which the panel agrees on the expected probability of occurrence. Moreover, we analyze the projections with dissent among the panelists in more detail and examine the evaluations for consensus within different subgroups.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, public participation has been a crucial component of legitimating, democratizing, and increasing the quality of political decisions in democratically organized forms of government (Lourenço and Costa, 2007; Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Fedotova et al., 2012; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). According to the Athenian-inspired democracy, direct democracy is the ideal form of democracy (Breindl and Francq, 2008). However, according to Crick (2002), it is unlikely that the Athenian ideal of full deliberative democracy ever existed. Although the Athenian ideal might not be realizable in our complex societies (Breindl and Francq, 2008), the elements of participative democracy change over time. Many publications

describe how the participative elements of western democracies have changed during recent decades or which different methods of public participation are applied today (Abelson et al., 2003; Asaro, 2000; Beierle, 1999; Beierle and Konisky, 2000; Chappelet and Kilchenmann, 2005; Chess and Purcell, 1999; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Webler et al., 2001; Webler, 1999; Hendriks and Tops, 1999; Beierle and Cayford, 2002; Creighton, 2005; French et al., 2007; Fedotova et al., 2012). Furthermore, various studies have identified methods and approaches that have proven their applicability in everyday practice on the basis of case-studies and best-practice analyses (Hoskins et al., 2012; Hoskins and Kerr, 2012; Trénel et al., 2001; Soneryd, 2002; Webler and Tuler, 2000; Lowndes et al., 2001; Vogt et al., 2014). What, however, does the future hold? And to what point will public participation evolve? These questions remain more or less unanswered and generate controversy. One reason for the controversy is the allocation of roles among different interest groups, such as citizens, politicians, and public managers

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(Pateman, 1970; Sartori, 1987; Grönlund, 2003). The understanding of their role with regard to public participation is especially for administration employees ambivalent. On the one hand, the everyday work of administration employees is directly influenced by the involvement of citizens into political decision making (Thomas, 1995; King et al., 1998). On the other hand, administration employees are the performing part of the executive authority (König and Siedentopf, 1997) and have a direct influence of the design of public participation initiatives. Hence, especially for public managers, the upcoming developments in public participation are crucial due to increasing public demand for more opportunities to participate (Breindl and Franco, 2008; Rowe and Frewer, 2000; King et al., 1998). Thus, in literature agreement prevails that the new involvement of citizens has changed the work of public managers and will increasingly do so due to this growing demand for public participation (Thomas, 1995; King et al., 1998). Thus, the future development of public participation is of particular relevance to public sector employees because they must adapt both personally and in their work to changing demands. Even though literature is aware of the particular role that administration employees have for public participation, expectations on the developments in the area of public participation are considered to be equal for all different stakeholder groups. It is suggested that the different stakeholder groups have identical expectations about the developments in public participation. With regard to the special role of public administration employees, the question arises whether administration employees are drivers or hinderers of certain developments in this area, as their daily work is affected by these developments. It can rather be assumed that administration employees are reserved regarding some of the expected developments or might even oppose developments utilizing their decision making power. This expectation is founded on the behavioral insights according to which employees are narrow-minded with regard to innovative processes, novelties, and change in their everyday work process (Frey and Schulz-Hardt, 2000). To our knowledge, until today, no research has addressed the question of public employees' expectations regarding the future of public participation. Additionally, the question whether the stakeholder group of administration employees are drivers or hinderers of different developments was not addressed. A differentiation of the expectations of the subgroups differentiated by age, gender, size of municipality, or region was not treated yet.

This paper addresses these research gaps by presenting original data from a survey of administration experts that was conducted in Germany on the future of public participation. In a web-based Delphi survey portal, projections for the year 2020 are presented and analyzed in an iterative and sequential process. The Delphi method is an appropriate approach to structure and analyze experts' opinions to achieve an understanding of future and uncertain developments. Additionally, it has proven to be an effective technique for foresight and scientific, long-term analysis (Goodwin and Wright, 2010; Landeta, 2006). The survey polls a panel of administration experts who work at different administrative levels and in different departments to gain a broad perspective on potential future developments.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we derive Delphi projections from a literature review. Second, we introduce the

Delphi method and the survey panel. Third, we present the results of the data analyses. Fourth, we discuss the implications of the research. In the final section, we present the limitations of the research and suggest areas for future study.

## 2. Literature-based projection development

The enthusiasm of a multitude of democratically organized countries to increasingly involve citizens in the decision-making process has been realized using a variety of initiatives within the governing process (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; Nylen, 2002; Trenam, 2000; Gramberger, 2001; Buchy and Race, 2001). How, however, might the future evolve? From the perspective of administration experts, where is public participation headed? Should administration experts be considered as drivers or hinderers of an increase of public participation? To answer these questions, the underlying understanding of the term "public participation" must be defined. In general, the literature distinguishes between formal and informal public participation (Fraser, 1990; Innes and Booher, 2004; Cramton, 1972; Vogt et al., 2014). While formal public participation is based on legal requirements, informal public participation includes all those activities that are conducted voluntarily, that is, without a statutory obligation to involve citizens in the political decision-making process (Cramton, 1972; Vogt et al., 2014). In Germany, the country that served as the locale for the underlying research, one typical example of a formal requirement of public participation is including the citizenry in land use planning procedures, where clear statutory obligations to involve citizens exist (Knapp and Coors, 2007). The voluntary and informal venues for public participation in Germany include citizen surveys and participatory budgets (Krek et al., 2012). In its manuscript on the further development of local democracy, the German Association of Cities (DST) emphasizes the increasing importance of both formal and informal public participation (DST, 2013).

In another approach, three categories of democracy, namely quick, strong, and thin democracies (Åström, 2001) are distinguished. Again, this differentiation might affect the understanding of the term public participation. According to Åström (2001), our understanding of the term public participation follows the democracy category of strong democracy. Strong democracy assumes active citizens who get involved in the political decision-making processes with the help of discussion and deliberation processes.

With this background, not only the formal but also the informal public participation are the foci of the future projections that are derived in this section and further analyzed in the remainder of this article.

For the formulation of the projections, we chose a medium-length time horizon of eight years (to 2020) for two reasons. First, elections in Germany take place every four to six years (e.g. on municipal level), and we aimed to separate the participants' assessments from those of current politicians and parties to stimulate creative and innovative thinking among our expert panel (Murphy, 1989). Second, multiple official institutions chose 2020 for the formulation of their strategy timeframes, such as the European Commission for their development strategy "Europe 2020" (Commission, 2010). Hence, the similar horizon maintains comparability with official strategies.

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