



The future of public participation: Empirical analysis from the viewpoint of policy-makers



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ABSTRACT

In recent years, social changes have significantly increased the importance of public participation, and technological developments have delivered additional opportunities for participation in political decision-making processes in Western democracies. Nevertheless, despite discussions on this topic, little is known about the desirability of future developments in public decision-making from the viewpoint of policy-makers. Our study provides an evaluation of such future developments by allowing 171 German policy-makers to discuss ten projections concerning future public participation in an online-based Delphi survey. We thus obtain knowledge about expected developments, their desirability and their impact on political actions in the future. Moreover, on the basis of the collected data and 1415 text responses, we are able to identify the proponents and sceptics of these developments. We also determine the influential characteristics related to these developments and discuss power-related barriers to future developments. Thereby, our study provides guidance for policy-makers and civil servants. Moreover, we carry out the first comprehensive assessment of the future of public participation from the perspective of 171 elected representatives using a Delphi approach. The results obtained are not only of interest to German policy-makers; rather, they provide relevant information for all democratic countries with elements of public participation.

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1. Introduction

Since the very beginnings of direct democracy and public participation in policy-making during the times of the Greeks and Romans, the idea of the cooperative inclusion of the public in political decision-making processes has been subject to continuous change (Breindl and Francq, 2008). After a phase of little significance in the first half of the 20th century, public participation was demanded more intensely and has been employed to legitimize political decisions in Western democracies since the 1960s (Lourenço and Costa, 2007; Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Fedotova et al., 2012; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). In the following decades, this purpose slowly shifted, currently, the aims are to increase the quality of policy-making processes and to generate citizen support for decisions (Lourenço and Costa, 2007). In the 1990s, after the German reunification, this approach to public participation gained relevance in Germany. The newly formed German federal states anchored elements of participation within their constitutions on several institutional levels. Subsequently, and over time, the western federal

states also added additional participation opportunities to their constitutions (Kost, 2005). In recent years, the demand for public participation has increased even further, and controversial discussions have taken place regarding how the demand can be met. On the one hand, social and technological changes have led to an altered self-confidence and a perception of entitlement within the population (Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010; Ganapati and Reddick, 2014; Macintosh and Whyte, 2008). On the other hand, those in the political and administrative spheres feel uncertain about how to respond to these changes without excessively undermining their own interests (Bertot et al., 2012; Picazo-Vela et al., 2012).

Social processes of change manifest themselves in the form of increased citizen demands in the administrative and political spheres. The classical formal procedures of determining political representatives no longer satisfy citizens, and they demand additional informal opportunities to participate and represent their interests (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; King et al., 1998). Technological innovations have encouraged this development (Chadwick, 2003; Clarke et al., 2007; Kampen et al., 2006); Currently, communications and interactions between political stakeholders have become simplified through the use of new technologies, that offer numerous possibilities for application in the field of public participation (Macintosh and Whyte, 2008; Ganapati and Reddick, 2014; Ke and Wei, 2004).

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These dynamics have a strong political impact. Elected political representatives are confronted with an increased demand for opportunities to participate, which means that they must consider the will of the people more than ever before, especially during legislative periods. Their potential anxiety about a loss or shift in power could be a driving force for avoiding future developments (Klages and Vetter, 2013; Ruhnstroh-Bauer, 2012). If political representatives truly fear losing power, such fears could lead to strong impairments in the progress of public participation. Because it is not entirely clear what specific developments can be expected in the field of public participation nor what opinions municipal policy-makers have about such developments, the power that policy-makers possess due to their professional status explains why the separate consideration of their evaluations of such developments is necessary. In the end, policy-makers decide whether voluntary, informal public participation measures will be implemented. The question of the future structure and the examination of potential barriers to the progression of public participation is therefore of strategic importance, especially for policy-makers and administration professionals, and requires a thorough examination.

Despite extensive academic discussion about the impact of new technologies on the public sector, there are comparatively few findings regarding the impact of the incentive structures of individual stakeholder groups on the transformation process triggered by technical and social changes. The majority of the extant literature addresses the presentation of different participation methods and descriptions of their employment and their advantages (Webler et al., 2001; Hoskins and Kerr, 2012; Vogt et al., 2014). Other works are concerned with the analysis of technical, process-related and legal frameworks and problems (Bertot et al., 2012; Luna-Reyes et al., 2010). Moreover, Bertot et al. (2012) compile a comprehensive list of research questions that, from their point of view, need to be answered in the future. This list includes, inter alia, questions about governing and governance as well as the future design of democratic models. Thereby, the questions of who will have decision-making authority in the future and what a democratic transformation process will look like are identified as key policy and research questions. Specific questions concerning the incentive structures of individual stakeholders in the process as well as their impacts as potential barriers or hindrances to such developments are examined only sporadically, although various authors describe the potential of the described social and technological developments for the transformation of power relations as realistic and potentially problematic (Bertot et al., 2012; King et al., 1998; Picazo-Vela et al., 2012; Lathrop and Ruma, 2010; Noveck, 2009). Individual studies, such as the works by Hilbert et al. (2009) and Jenssen (2009), broach the issue of the acceptance of modern instruments for participatory decision-making by the public, but their findings relate to single instruments. Pedersen and Johannsen (2015) also address public participation and the increased potential to undermine representative governments. However, the focus of their work lies exclusively on the perceptions and assessments of one stakeholder group, namely, civil servants. Nevertheless, one implication of their work for future studies is to focus on research that sheds more light on the political logic behind future developments. Vogt and Haas (2015) and Walther et al. (2016) use a comparable approach and address the question of the impact of stakeholder groups. They examine administration professionals and citizens, thereby providing a conceptual research framework. However, the central stakeholder group of policy-makers is not addressed in their studies, although they suggest the analysis of this perspective as a task for future research. With our study, we tie in to the works of Vogt and Haas (2015) and Walther et al. (2016) and assess the future of public participation from the perspective of policy-makers. Table 1 shows the most relevant studies that contribute to the stream of research that we examine in our work.

The aim of our study is to investigate how future developments in the field of public participation, such as those discussed in the literature, are evaluated from policy-makers' perspectives, and whether policy-

makers will promote or impede such developments. Furthermore, we will determine whether these policy-makers can be distinguished from each other based on certain characteristics. Supplementary to the works of Vogt and Haas (2015) and Walther et al. (2016), our work provides a valuable addition to the research data about the stakeholder group of policy-makers. This supplement allows for a holistic consideration of the topic from different perspectives while examining various incentive structures for future studies. Therefore, our study provides interesting information and guidance for policy-makers and civil servants alike. The results obtained are not only of interest to German policy-makers and administration professionals; rather, they provide a general view of the possible developments in democratic countries with elements of public decision-making.

To obtain adequate knowledge to close the previously described research gap, we use primary data from a web-based, real-time Delphi survey from 2012. The survey was conducted with selected experts from local German politics. Ten projections about the future of public participation derived from the literature were discussed and assessed in an iterative, sequential process. The Delphi method provided the appropriate methodology for structuring and analyzing the expert opinions to ensure the anticipation of future developments (Landeta, 2006). The question of the future of public participation is a subject that especially strongly depends on the current participating agents and is influenced by them. The subject matter treated in our work is an area of the Social Sciences that is influenced by great emotions and differing incentives. The complexity resulting therefrom requires a methodology that is capable of creating a picture that is as valid as possible, while also taking all circumstances into account. The Delphi method appeared as best suited for our research project, since it provides, as described by Landeta (2006), reliable and valid results, if the given weaknesses of the methodology are faced accordingly.

By complying with Landeta's notes on the successful and constructive implementation of a Delphi-study, we can utilize the strengths of the methodology and reduce weaknesses with appropriate measures.

Thus, we could generate a highly involved panel of experts for our study. Moreover, we have assembled a qualified research team as a further measure for quality assurance. This team consists of scholars with great experience in the use of the Delphi-methodology as well as of experts from political consulting with key activities in public participation. In addition, as required by Landeta (2006), the employed future projections were generated on the basis of intense literature research and refined in expert workshops.

2. Projection development, methodology and survey procedure

To achieve our primary goal of accurately simulating the future structure of public participation, the first step in our study is to define projections for its future. Therefore, we refer to 10 projections about the future of public participation in Germany developed by Vogt and Haas (2015). In their study, Vogt and Haas (2015) conduct a comprehensive literature review. The projections derived from the literature review consider currently discussed and established theories regarding the development of public participation. Vogt and Haas (2015) focus on evaluating the results and findings of current international research. The studies used in the analysis in this paper were identified via manual inquiries in research databases and libraries and have only been used after thorough examination. The references used for the analysis were thematic research papers and articles from specialists' books. The identification of relevant sources was performed in a standardized manner and with methodological rigor. Hence, the reliability and validity of the data collected can be guaranteed for the formulation of the Delphi survey (Von der Gracht and Darkow, 2010). The results of this process were discussed with German experts in political science and political practice. As a result, 10 projections were formulated. Afterward, the projections were examined with regard to their accuracy and specificity on the basis of the acknowledged literature on the Delphi procedure and

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