

Citizen Engagement as Well-Being

A Discussion Paper by

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More and more communities (as well as governmental jurisdictions, agencies, and programs) are adopting an outcomes/results approach to determining goals, planning strategies for progress, and evaluating activities on behalf of citizen well-being (Schorr, 1994, 1997; Melaville, 1997; Carnevale & Johnson, 1998; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1999; Epstein, Wray, Marshall, & Grifel, 2000). Typical lists of outcomes/results communities select include the bread-and-butter issues of health, safety, school success, and economic self-sufficiency. Sometimes they also embrace the quality of the natural environment, or even the sustainability of the human/natural co-existence (e.g., Sustainable Seattle, 1998). Generally, if these outcomes-frameworks acknowledge citizen engagement, it is to identify the roles citizens have in seeing that communities achieve such outcomes (Epstein et al., 2000). While acknowledged as a “principle,” important or even essential, rarely is citizen-engagement-in-itself declared to be an outcome on par with others.¹

Process or Outcome?

Indeed, some identify citizen engagement clearly as a *process*, distinct from an *outcome* (“a state of well-being”), and would argue that to elevate engagement to an outcome is to fall prey to the old preoccupation with activity, procedure, and strategy, with which the outcomes-/results-based accountability movement explicitly contrasts itself. In this view, to focus on engagement is to muddle the field and to distract from what really matters.²

But is it that simple? The debate *is* about means and ends. As others have pointed out, one potential danger of the focus on outcomes is that considerations of process (including fairness, equity, and respect) are slighted (Schorr, 1997). *How does it matter how we achieve the outcomes, as long as we get there?* is the question that is easily raised and just as easily rejoined. The worry, of course, is that the ends will be used to justify the means. One way to guard against that “outcome,” is to make the *means* (in this case citizen engagement) one of the *ends*.

In a democracy, citizen engagement *is* an end—a goal, a condition of well-being—in the same sense that *children ready for school*, or *youth making healthy choices* are outcomes. Imagine a community where citizens are *unengaged*, cynical or at best apathetic, resigned to a state of powerlessness over community conditions. Few would disagree that this describes an unhealthy community, destined to become even more so. Conversely, a community of citizens whose engagement in civic life is various, robust,

¹ One notable exception is the Sustainability Indicators Project of Hays, Travis, and Williamson Counties [Texas], 2000.

² However, for a contrasting view see Cochran, 1992.

and spirited is a healthy community.³ Citizen engagement is not simply a means to other ends.

New Imperatives for Engagement

Several features of the contemporary context carry with them an assumption, more or less explicit, of citizen engagement. One is represented by the “reinventing government” movement, a feature of which is to recast the citizen as “customer.” In this view, citizens-as-customers demand, appropriately, that government deliver value (i.e., outcomes/results) for reasonable cost, reduce “red tape” and other inefficiencies, and in general treat citizens as valued resources and intelligent consumers of information. The emphasis on outcomes or results, instead of procedures and activities, is itself another aspect of “reinvented” government (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Outcomes are framed in terms that reflect broadly shared public values (e.g., “all children succeed in school”), and such outcomes, by their nature, are not achievable by institutions and professionals alone, but require the contributions of ordinary citizens as well (Mathews, 1995-96).

Another trend that drives new forms of citizen engagement is the development of the Internet as a great “leveler” of old hierarchies of knowledge and, to some degree, power, as ordinary citizens gain not only access to vast amounts information but also to the capacity to organize and communicate (including with their government representatives) in new and more immediate ways (Harris, 1999).

A third trend, “devolution,” purports to move real decision-making (e.g., for flexible deployment of resources, for rule-making, and so on) down to “lower” levels of government—from federal to state, county, and in some cases regions or communities. This process can only work well, however, if citizens take meaningful roles in shaping local solutions attuned to local conditions (Yankelovich, 1998).

Contrasting Reports on the Status of Citizen Engagement

These trends notwithstanding, many observers believe citizen engagement, at least in some of its forms, is in crisis. Alarm about the nature and extent of citizen engagement in this country is not new, but the voices are becoming more numerous, more various, and increasingly informed by data. For example, a distinguished panel, headed by Paul Volcker, former chair of the Federal Reserve System, issued a 1999 report for the National Academy of Public Administration, stating that “many Americans participate minimally, if at all, in the democratic process.” The panel reports that while a majority of Americans claim satisfaction with our system of government, their knowledge of the process of government, and of public issues is appalling. They conclude, “civic ignorance is a conscious choice for many Americans.” (Panel on Civic Trust and Citizen Responsibility, 1999). Along with these deficits, public trust in government has been declining for several decades.

³ Cf. Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1981) concept of “exosystem,” according to which the degree of influence one has on systems outside one’s immediate experience, but impacting on it, importantly affects human development

More than a third of Americans believe that politics and government are too complicated to understand, and more than 40 percent believe their own families have no say in what government does (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997).

The Census Bureau reports that voter turnout in the 1998 elections was at an all-time low. An especially disturbing trend is that this decline has been greatest among young people (ages 18-24) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Young people's knowledge of civic issues and responsibilities has also drawn concern. A third of the nation's high school seniors fail tests of "basic" civics knowledge, such as the Constitution's protection of minority rights against majority will (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Others argue that while traditional political participation is down, particularly when it comes to national races and issues, more "grassroots" forms of citizen engagement, such as volunteerism, are alive and well. For instance, the National Household Education Survey of 1996 found that 59 percent of adults belong to community or professional organizations, 50 percent attend religious services at least monthly, and 39 percent participate in ongoing community service activities (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). Among youth, more than half say they participate in community service during the school year (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2000). Of course, these statistics, particularly those tracking membership alone, say little directly about citizen engagement.

Indeed, there are other signs that neighborhoods and communities are suffering from a loss of a number of informal social networks that formerly reduced isolation, promoted mutual aid, and provided avenues into more organized forms of community engagement. One humble indicator of this trend is the demise of Welcome Wagon, formerly an entry-point for newcomers in many communities. Welcome Wagon, founded in 1928, provided home visits and gifts to new arrivals from their neighbors for 70 years. In its peak, during the 1960s, Welcome Wagon made 1.5 million visits; by 1998, those had fallen to a half-million. As of 1999, Welcome Wagon no longer makes door-to-door visits; instead, it mails a directory of coupons—essentially, it has become another "junk mailer." The reasons behind this transformation are the same as those behind the erosion of other neighborhood institutions, from PTAs to civic associations such as the Elks (Putnam, 2000)—few people have time to devote to volunteer activities, particularly those that compete for prime workday hours.

Nevertheless, there are unmistakable signs of new forms of citizen engagement in our communities. One is the "self-advocacy" and "family empowerment" movement, centered around informed advocacy and decision-making by the clients (and their family members) of a number of service systems—health, mental health, special education, public assistance, and so on. Fundamentally, this trend rests on the presumption that simply ceding to professionals decisions about whether and how services are delivered is not only inherently undemocratic but also ultimately inefficient, since those who receive services generally are better positioned to make decisions that "work" for them (Hooper-Briar & Lawson, 1994).

Another powerful trend is to provide opportunities for youth to participate meaningfully in community and civic life. The youth development literature identifies meaningful involvement in such activities as an important protective factor in the lives of young people (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Young people are taking leadership roles in schools, in advocacy organizations, in youth-serving agencies. They are acquiring skills

not only for personal development, but for creating significant community change (Pittman, Ferber, & Irby, 2000). As youth move into more power-sharing relationships with adults, they challenge communities to reframe traditional notions of inclusion, and require that adults themselves learn new ways of interacting with and supporting younger people.

Miranda Jones, of Monkton, Vermont, is one of two student members of the State Board of Education:

Previous to my placement on the board, I knew very little about state government and the State Board of Education. In all honesty, I didn't then, nor do I now, want to work in either field, but I did recognize the importance of the position and of being involved in what affects what we students do daily (go to school).

This position requires someone who has a strong voice and the desire to make a difference in students' education. Within the first week of my appointment to the board, I was bombarded with more mail than I had received in my 17 years of existence. The novelty of receiving large tan envelopes has worn off, but the enthusiasm I have for what is inside of them has grown. I admit that being on the board has been time consuming. I miss, at the very least, 1 day of school every month, and unfortunately it has often fallen on the day of my rehearsal, game, etc.

However, I have not met a teacher or coach who has not been supportive of my responsibilities. They are always eager to encourage and assist students who are trying to become engaged citizens. I have turned my position into an Independent Study (for which I receive credit). I spend up to four hours of school time per week working on the reading, the calling, and the researching that I do to prepare for meetings and to gain knowledge about decisions that I will make.

Through my involvement with the State Board of Education, I have gained an outlook on education that I did not have before. I now understand and appreciate the value of many things that students are required to do. This is not to say that I agree with every policy or idea presented to the board. It means that I now have more of the necessary knowledge, along with the experience of being a student, to take positions at meetings that represent the students' perspective.

Through my involvement with the State Board of Education I have become more active in my community and school, as I've realized the impact that students can have. When students realize that they have the ability and support of adults to affect what they care about, they will become involved in their communities. Involved students will grow up to be engaged citizens.

Choosing Indicators

If it is acknowledged that citizen engagement is in fact a legitimate outcome/result of well-being, and that there are a number of signs, both negative and positive, of its role in communities, then how best should it be measured? This area, in general, lacks established indicators, in part because it is inherently difficult to quantify, but also because of the newness of some of this work (family empowerment, youth participation). Also, it is in the nature of this work that the best indicators may be those that are locally developed, so that they authentically reflect the important modes of citizen engagement that may vary from place to place.

Voter turnout is probably the most used indicator of citizen engagement. Although voting is by no means the only or the most valid such sign, still most agree on its importance, and the data are readily and consistently available. Yet even here there are opportunities to go beyond the typical reporting format. Describing voter participation as “the proportion of registered voters who go to the polls” ignores the fact that many eligible voters are not even registered. Thus, a more comprehensive indicator of engagement is “the proportion of the voting-eligible population who actually vote.”

Beyond measures of voter turnout, there is little consensus on what are valid indicators of community engagement. Issues of definition arise: What is *community*? What is *engagement*? Within the formal political system one can count the numbers of citizens serving on advisory or policy-making boards (school boards, planning commissions, etc.) or, alternatively, the number of such posts that are unfilled or uncontested. Outside the government sphere, indicators that have been proposed include number of civic associations, membership in these as a percentage of total population; charitable contributions; number/proportion of citizens with library cards, or newspaper subscriptions; number of permits issued annually for block parties; number of community gardens; and so on and on.

Any, even all, of these indicators may be important for a particular community to monitor. But it is likely to remain a locally-determined and –controlled process, precisely because what is meaningful for one community is not necessarily what is important in another. Thus, the burden of implementing and maintaining a homegrown data collection system must temper any of these choices.

However, there are some fundamental issues that recur in every community. One has to do with citizen representation on public boards, including those of public non-profit organizations. Who counts as a citizen representative, a parent representative, a youth representative, a consumer representative? We are familiar with the transparent fiction of professionals claiming they have parent representation on the boards of their organizations, because “we’re parents too.” We also know how difficult it is in practice to achieve even token participation by those who have historically been excluded from such bodies. There is no avoiding the issue; the question here is how honestly to measure progress. One suggestion is to count as “citizen participants” those whose participation (such as attending meetings) is not an expectation of their paid employment. While perhaps not fully satisfactory, since it allows in this category retired professionals, this definition is at least practicable.

An allied issue is that of “consumer” representation, highlighted especially in service systems dealing with people with disabilities (including the poor). In these areas

the consumer/family empowerment movement has justifiably argued that services ought to be designed and delivered, at least in part, by the recipients of those services them (Hooper-Briar & Lawson, 1994). In the mental health field, for example, boards advisory to community mental health centers may be composed of a majority of current or former clients (State of Vermont, Department of Developmental and Mental Health Services, 1998). Similar arrangements can be found in the area of child foster care (State of Vermont, Department of Social & Rehabilitation Services, 1999). It is unclear how to apply this concept to the fields of health care, or education, for example: nearly all community members could be considered current or former recipients of these services. Nevertheless, there is an important intention to be realized here.

Promising Strategies for Progress

Citizen engagement must be nurtured, if it is to thrive and grow. As with any outcome/result, there are strategies, more and less effective, to achieve greater and more meaningful participation. Beyond the examples already cited, a number of models exist for training in community organizing, advocacy, and leadership. Some of these are designed specifically for low-income citizens, for parents, or youth, or other special populations. These teach specific skills, such as public speaking, negotiation, group process, leadership, media relations, and so on, and may also include activities to build self-esteem and help find one's own "voice" (e.g., Vermont Children's Forum, Parent & Community Leadership Training Project, undated). Of course, such curricula must be tailored to meet the unique needs of the target population. In other cases, mentoring relationships provide the basis for learning and exercising these skills. Often, as in the case of developing capacity among youth for meaningful civic roles, it is equally important to work with the existing power-groups (e.g., adults) to prepare *them* for new power-sharing structures.

In many respects, these new forms of grassroots training in participation and leadership have taken the place of the once-common "citizenship" or "civics" classes in high school. More experiential, more practical, and more grounded in people's own communities, these new strategies aim to promote engagement in many forms, and at any point in the lifespan.

Given the early state of development of robust citizen engagement in many communities, it may be appropriate to use as "interim indicators" measures of participation in some of these capacity-building activities.

In Vermont, the Agency of Human Services and its partners on the State Team for Children, Families, and Individuals have adopted nine well-being outcomes. The first of these is "Families, youth, and citizens are engaged in their community's decisions and activities." Under this outcome, we report on several indicators, including "percent of eligible population voting," "parent involvement in schooling," and several measures, frankly experimental, of inclusion of "non-professionals" in community collaboratives.⁴

Perhaps it is the New England tradition of town meetings and the generally small size of our communities that account in part for the value we place on broad-based participation. In any event, it reflects a belief that the civic health of a community is an

⁴ More information on the Vermont Agency of Human Services' work in this area can be found on its web page: www.ahs.state.vt.us.

irreducible element of well-being. While it is indispensable for achieving other quality-of-life outcomes, it is not simply a means to other ends, but is an independent marker of community vitality.

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