Citizen involvement in public life is vital to the vibrancy of any metropolitan region. It expands the breadth and range of ideas, preferences and interests included in public debate, which, in turn, improves democratic governance and accountability. But all public participation is not created equal—most local governments in the United States accept testimony from citizens and may occasionally seek broad citizen input, but it is rare for elected officials to delegate much real decision-making authority to citizens. For the past 20 years, there has been a growing international trend that seeks to increase citizen participation in government policy-making by giving citizens direct control over budgets (participatory budgeting), randomly selecting citizens to help governments decide how to make tough decisions (citizen juries) and involving citizens in monitoring government expenditures (participatory audits).

TBR Research presents insights and excerpts from peer-reviewed scholarship.

The Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, or COMPASS, is an example of a local government agency that seeks to incorporate citizen input into public decision-making as a means to improve the scope and quality of its projects. COMPASS is a metropolitan planning organization that prioritizes major transportation projects that will cost in the hundreds of millions dollars in coming years. The agency is responsible for a wide range of planning activities in Southwest Idaho, including infrastructure improvements, long-term planning (e.g., Communities in Motion 2040) and encouraging air quality and traffic congestion improvements.

For more information on participatory democracy:

Participedia
National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation
Innovations for Scaling Impact

In order to receive federal funding, COMPASS is obligated to involve citizens in regional transportation planning. Over the past decade, the agency has done an admirable job of it. COMPASS won a series of national, regional and local awards as
it creatively incorporated citizens into its incremental planning processes. COMPASS planners used innovative programs including a Community Café, a Meeting in a Bag and Communities in Motion workshops. A common feature of these programs is that COMPASS provides information to the public, which is followed by an effort to help clarify citizens’ understanding of the issue. The final step is that COMPASS receives input from citizens regarding what should be done. Despite the efforts of COMPASS staff to encourage participation, there are several factors that dramatically limit citizen participation. Although there are hundreds of millions of dollars at stake during the next 30 years, public participation is better described as anemic.

Read a response to this article by COMPASS Executive Director Matt Stoll.

My research over the past decade on participation demonstrates that there are four crucial components which encourage participation in public life: voice, vet, vote and veto. Citizens have voice and they can vet COMPASS plans, but there is no real vote or veto. Voice consists of the ability of citizens to express their ideas and policy preferences in public forums. Vet allows citizens to use information to assess the government’s activities. Vote is the process of exercising a binding vote on specific policy issues. Veto allows citizens to formally block government initiatives.

WE THE PEOPLE

Direct citizen involvement in local politics predates the U.S. Constitution, as states and cities across New England experimented with new forms of incorporating citizens directly into public institutions. The famed New England “Town Halls” brought citizens together to publicly make decisions regarding how limited public authority and resources should be used. These small town meetings were developed in the 17th and 18th centuries and continue to be used today. Currently, citizens in the U.S. and across the world are being incorporated into formal policymaking venues in order to design cities, plan long-term transportation, monitor government spending, oversee police activities and help allocate public resources. There is a growing recognition that improving democratic governance involves promoting transparency, accountability and citizen participation.

What is COMPASS?
The Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho is the federally mandated metropolitan transportation organization for the Treasure Valley, a council of elected officials in Ada and Canyon counties that votes on transportation priorities. A five-year transportation budget and long-term transportation plans are essential steps for securing federal funding for state, county and local transportation agencies.
However, it is very difficult to motivate citizens to participate in public life for a few basic reasons. People have busy lives, they don’t see how their participation would have any meaningful impact, they hate conflict, they don’t have an easy affinity with either of the two major political parties and they feel that they lack the knowledge to contribute. Ongoing participation is easier to sustain when individuals are intensely passionate about issues, especially social issues like abortion, gun rights, marriage and privacy.

In order to better understand the nature of public participation in Southwest Idaho, a research team at Boise State University held a series of focus group meetings in 2010 and 2011, with citizens who had participated in COMPASS meetings. We found that their principal criticism of COMPASS was a lack of feedback; citizens who made the effort to participate didn’t know if their efforts had any impact on the decisions made by public officials. Although our research project focused on COMPASS, we should note that this criticism could be made of most public agencies which seek to incorporate citizens. The federal, state and local governments often use consultative formats that allow citizens to express voice as well as to vet government programs, but they don’t allow citizens to exercise a vote or veto.

Although COMPASS has made considerable effort to incorporate citizens, most of the citizen participation involves citizens listening to COMPASS officials or citizens providing feedback. Citizens are not empowered to directly decide what COMPASS should do, and COMPASS hasn’t been able to systematically provide citizens with any real responsibilities.

It is unsurprising that elected officials in modern representative democracies are not interested in supporting policies that would increase the decision-making power of citizens. After all, elected officials came to power through the rules and principles of representative democracy, which is a political system designed to limit citizen participation to a clearly marked calendar and to grant elected officials considerable leeway to make decisions on behalf of their constituents. One of the most important policy innovations of the past 15 years is the creation of new participatory institutions that complement representative democracies. Public officials delegate certain parts of policy and budgetary processes. The parameters of the authority exercised by citizens is thus set by government officials. When politicians want to mobilize citizens, it is often because they are political outsiders who are trying to build a new political coalition or they are ideologically committed to empowering citizens.

A very real problem faced by COMPASS is that the elected officials working in a regional planning context have few incentives to promote new policies that might empower citizens. In addition, political competition between the elected officials from different jurisdictions also discourages public participation. For example, the mayors of Boise, Meridian and Nampa, who all sit on the COMPASS board, have different interests and bases of support, which makes it more difficult for them to cooperate.
When there is limited cooperation among partners, it becomes very difficult for them to develop the necessary policies that would increase citizen participation.

A classic problem related to citizen participation is that a small number of socially and politically powerful citizens capture the participatory venues. In 2011, our research team administered a survey to a random sample of COMPASS participants. In comparison to the general population, COMPASS participants are much more highly educated and with higher levels of income. Political scientists have demonstrated that political organizing to protect one’s interest is more easily done by middle and upper middle classes because they have the necessary skills to overcome the “collective action problem.” Basically, people don’t participate because they don’t want to be the “sucker”—giving their time or money when everyone else “free rides.” Better-off individuals tend to be better connected and are more likely to have their voices heard, which reduces the likelihood that they will be a “sucker.” COMPASS appears to be falling into a trap known as “elite capture” whereby it is the best organized and well-situated members of a community who have the most influence over citizen participation processes.

A final reason why citizen participation is anemic is because long-range planning is slow and painful, often taking decades to accomplish. Participants need to be committed to a process that won’t bear fruit for 20 to 30 more years.

TOWARD A SOLUTION
What might be some basic solutions to encourage more robust forms of citizen participation at local, state and federal levels?

First, government officials would need to make citizen participation more meaningful by creating formal mechanisms that give citizens vote and veto. Rather than having amorphous “input processes,” government officials would create new policy processes that include binding votes on resource allocation, allow citizens to vote on policy proposals from a list established by COMPASS or have citizens vote on general priorities (protecting green space, building more roads, etc.) Governments increasingly use sophisticated sampling techniques to invite representative samples of citizens to participate or they focus on issues that are of the greatest concern to citizens as a means to motivate participation.

Second, in order to determine which types of participatory mechanisms could be used, government officials need to refine the “so what?” problem. What policy or social issues would motivate people to attend meetings? To volunteer their time? To engage in deliberation with their neighbors and fellow citizens? Once the “so what question” is better refined, it becomes possible for government officials to devise new policy processes to address these problems.

Third, once the issues have been identified, government officials need to overcome the “elite capture” problem by reaching out to individuals who are less likely to participate (e.g., lower levels of wealth, income and education, or non-native English speakers). Citizens who are less likely to participate are also likely to have lower
levels of trust, which will make it more difficult for government officials to get them to participate. Successful strategies to induce increased participation by the politically disinterested and excluded include allocating greater resources to the problems faced by these groups, allowing these citizens to exercise a meaningful vote on a policy problem that can be solved in the short-term and connecting them to public servants who can help them solve other issues. This is a major challenge because elected officials generally have limited political incentives to motivate the participation of inactive citizens.

A clear problem faced by these institutions is having self-interested, uninformed citizens dominate these processes. The current “town hall” format being employed across the country often allows the individuals and groups who yell the loudest to have their voices heard. Moving beyond participation that only includes voice induces citizens to work together to find meaningful solutions to shared problems. Thus, the passions of angry citizens can be directed to find solutions that address the demands and needs of multiple groups.

Expanding citizen participation is often driven by three sources. Civil society organizations—social movements, non-profits, non-government organizations, churches—may seek to mobilize citizens as a means to expand their influence over public policy or to shape other citizens’ attitudes. Idaho Smart Growth and the Boise Bike Project are two examples of local organizations that seek to build citizen engagement. A second source involves entrepreneurial politicians seeking to build new bases of support. Thus, elected officials might promote citizen participation as a means to better understand citizens’ policy preferences and to simultaneously build support among participants. We might expect a political outsider or a new generation of political leaders to be more interested in engaging citizens as a means to broaden their political base.

A final source of reform involves a policy-making institution, such as COMPASS, that seeks to draw a broader range of ideas into the policy debate. It would need to reach out to citizens, to retrain technical experts to work with citizens and identify which types of authority could be decided by citizens. Developing better working relationships with the public has the potential to increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of government activities.

Participatory democracy complements representative democracy as it expands the breadth of ideas in the public debate and increases the authority given to citizens. But citizens’ authority remains within parameters established by representative democracy. These involved citizens are accountable to elected officials who are still accountable to voters. Participatory democracy broadens the surface area of representative democracy, allowing citizens to have a more meaningful engagement in public life.
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- See more at: http://thebluereview.org/participatory-democracy-planning/#sthash.tcA0mQme.dpuf