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PREVIEW

**CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN ADMINISTRATIVE POLICY MAKING:
BUREAUCRATIC IMPEDIMENTS AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION--
IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY**

by

Ethel Hill Williams

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Political Science

Under the Supervision of Professor Robert D. Miewald

Lincoln, Nebraska

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Citizen Participation in Administrative Policy Making: Bureaucratic

Impediments and Social Construction--Implications for Democracy

BY

Ethel Hill Williams

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

**CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN ADMINISTRATIVE POLICY MAKING:
BUREAUCRATIC IMPEDIMENTS AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION--
IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY**

Ethel Hill Williams, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1996

Adviser: Robert D. Miewald

Citizen participation is an essential part of the democratic process. All citizens, according to democratic principles, should have equal access to the decision making structures of government, and should have equal opportunity to participate in public decision making. The concept of citizen participation and the manner in which participatory mechanisms have been implemented are very different. Who participates and the profundity of their involvement appear inconsistent with democratic requirements. Historically, some group or groups of citizens have consistently been left out. Those citizens who are involved are usually not representative of the demographic make-up of the larger population, may not be representative spokespersons for the needs and desires of those citizens for whom policies and programs are being designed, and often have little impact on what is decided. Citizen impact on decision making appears to occur only when the citizens represent groups that are socially constructed positively and their ideas closely mirror those of bureaucrats involved in the process. The reasons for lack of participation generally, and lack of substantive participation

specifically, have focused on citizens. Little if any attention has been focused on the role government administrators play in both defining participatory processes and bringing citizens into them.

This dissertation suggests that both the inclusion and exclusion of citizens from the policy making processes is a result of (1) requirements and attitudes generated by a bureaucratic structure, and (2) characterizations of population groups held by decision makers. These assumptions were tested in a study of a statewide planning and policy making project. A triad of data collection techniques was employed including a mail survey, a telephone survey and personal interviews. Models of social construction and bureaucracy were used to analyze the findings.

The findings demonstrate that lack of participation by groups such as minorities, the poor, those classified as dependent on government services, and those characterized negatively by bureaucrats may be purposely excluded from participatory mechanisms. They also show that target populations often do not make substantive contributions to the policies that affect them. The implications of these findings for both democratic theory and practice cannot be ignored.

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Chapter One

A. Introduction

Citizen participation is an essential part of the democratic process. According to Marvin Olsen (1982, 18), "traditional democratic theory rests on the assumption that all citizens are--or should become--essentially equal in both their concern with public issues and their competence to make decisions concerning these issues. Consequently, all citizens should participate equally in public decision making and should exercise relatively equal amounts of influence in the political system." In the 1990s this issue is of extreme importance. The lack of individual and/or collective control by citizens of government has precipitated a movement to return government to the hands of the people, enabling them to have more power in decision making. The era of the "devolution" of the federal government is aimed at putting problem solving closer to the problems--in the hands of states and localities and ultimately into the realm of citizen decision makers.

The right to participate, and often the mechanism for participation, has existed since the founding of this country, however, the term citizen participation has become increasingly popular since the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 (Langton 1964, 404). The use of the term, although popular, varies. It has been used to describe any activity associated with citizens interacting with government. When reviewing the history of the United States, a problem in understanding what citizen

participation actually is, has existed. Over time, the definition and operationalization of the term have varied.

Despite its importance to the decision/policy making processes of government, understanding what actually constitutes citizen participation--its definition as well as the constituent make-up of who actually participates--has been difficult. Numerous studies have addressed both issues but results of these studies rest with an account, descriptive rather than normative, of the findings. Few studies have addressed the implications of who participates either for democracy or the question of "who gets what, when, and how." These questions have particular significance for both the study and practice of democracy. This dissertation will explore these questions. It hypothesizes that all citizens do not participate equally, neither are all citizens given equal opportunity to be involved in the decision making processes of government, especially when the decision making arena is the bureaucracy. Those citizens who are involved are not representative of the demographic make-up of the larger population and, more importantly, may not be representative spokespersons for the needs and desires of those citizens for whom policies and programs are being designed. Throughout the history of America some group or groups of citizens have consistently been left out of the government policy making processes. While existing research tends to point to the lack of interest among certain citizens, this study argues that citizen groups may be "hand-

picked," negating the democratic assumption of equal access of all citizens to direct public decision/policy making.

This dissertation presents the argument that citizen participation efforts excludes those individuals or groups viewed negatively by government decision/policy makers. The characterization of individuals in either a positive or negative manner is known as social construction. Research on this concept has mainly been the focus of sociologists, however, studies in this area cross numerous academic and professional disciplines (Bumiller 1988; Donovan, 1993; Moody-Adams, 1993; Miller and Holstein, 1993; Pollock, Lilie, and Vittes, 1993).

Citizens participating in government decision making processes represent groups that are favorably constructed or characterized by government administrators (bureaucrats). They (citizens) represent groups or individuals that will be:

1. Less argumentative and more willing to go along with the ideas posed by bureaucrats.
2. Familiar with government processes and operations. Usually citizens who are asked to participate are involved in a number of participatory mechanisms including voting, serving on committees and/or advisory boards, etc.
3. Individuals from racial majorities rather than minority groups.
4. Individuals with socioeconomic characteristics similar to those individuals more likely to vote (higher levels of education, middle-class or above, non-minority).

This dissertation further postulates that citizens provide little or no significant input into the decisions that are made even when they participate. Their individual or

group beliefs and concerns may be ignored if they vary from those of bureaucrats. This seems especially true when citizens come from negatively constructed groups, have lower levels of education, and are poor and from minority groups.

The unit of analysis for this study is the citizens participating in the initial two phases of a four-phase statewide planning/policy making effort known as Nebraska PACT. This project was a federal-state initiative designed to "empower communities to reduce crime and violence. Through it, the state and federal governments would assist communities as they built coalitions to develop broad-based, fully-coordinated initiatives to reduce violence by and against youth" ("PACT Final Report," 1994). This project was selected based on its reputation for being "grassroots and bottom-up" ("PACT Final Report," 1994). The hypotheses will be tested using a model of social construction developed by Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram.

Specifically, administrative rather than legislative policy making will be observed. Legislative policy making sets the parameters within which agencies operate, but policies made at the agency level define and shape programs having a profound impact on "who gets what, when, and how." Agency administrators, both at the appointed and career service levels, have a tremendous impact in both policy making and policy implementation. This study alleges that these bureaucrats also define which citizens are given the opportunity to participate in certain government processes.

The perception of citizen participation and the understanding of who should participate has changed over time and continues to be a topic of debate by researchers and bureaucrats. The manner in which citizens should provide input is also disputed. This study contends that government has put limits on its efforts to bring all citizens into its decision making processes. While direct participation by all Americans may be impossible from a practical perspective, broad representation from all segments of society is not. According to Arnstein (1969, 216):

Participation of the governed in their government is, in theory the cornerstone of democracy—a revered idea that is vigorously applauded by virtually everyone. The applause is reduced to polite hand claps, when this principle is advocated by the have-nots. And, when the have-nots define participation as redistribution of power, the American consensus on the fundamental principle explodes into many shades of outright racial, ethnic, ideological, and political opposition.

The importance of involving the groups alluded to by Arnstein has frequently been ignored. Schneider and Ingram assert that the social construction of target populations¹ has a powerful influence on who gets what, when and how. "This sends messages about the reasons for differing levels and types of participation among target groups, and the role of policy in democracy" (1993, 334). This study follows the same paradigm to understand citizen participation. These decisions made by individuals or groups as a part of the policy process determines who gets what from government. What are the ramifications of citizen participation efforts if these endeavors have been socially constructed to include only those groups favorably perceived by bureaucrats?

Can the process be accepted as democratic? The requirements for a democratic government is to provide equal access to government decision making to all citizens (as discussed in the following chapter). Socially constructing who participates negatively impacts that standard. The extent and usefulness of participative efforts that fail to include various groups continues to be debated by those exploring citizen involvement in government, and especially by those studying the policy process. What is the impact of these efforts on the theory and practice of democracy?

The debate about citizen participation goes beyond who participates, which is the topic of much of the citizen participation literature. Research focusing on the substance of citizen participation has indicated that even when citizens are involved, they are not the actual decision makers in the policy process. Citizens are allowed "to exercise only reactive, suggestive, or advisory roles, not actual decision making" (Olson 1965, 27). They are, more often than not, planned for rather than included in the planning and decision making process. The real decisions—those that ultimately become policies and programs—are made by government actors. In other words, citizen efforts may be more symbolic than substantive. According to Oppenheimer, "urbanized society is the history of man's increasing alienation from decision-making processes...the institutions that have freed him from the 'idiocy of rural life' have at the same time subjected him to organizational structures farther and farther removed

from his immediate control" (1971, 271). This raises questions relative to the "democracy" of our democratic system.

The terms "maximum feasible manipulation" and "pseudo participation" have been used by Arnstein (1969) and Walker (1975) to capture the essence of a significant number of `citizen participation efforts. Previous studies have indicated that even with sincere efforts to bring about substantive participation, citizens merely rubber stamp the decisions made by government employees (Arnstein 1969; Stenberg 1972; Walker 1975; Thomas 1995). This has important implications. If citizens have little or no voice in government decisions, is the American system of government really a democracy? If unelected decision makers have so much control over government decisions, how responsive is government to citizens?

The existing structure of government, known as a bureaucracy, opposes the notion of popular sovereignty in a number of ways. The fundamental assumption of bureaucracy, based on Max Weber's definition, connotes the formation and execution of policies by experts who are trained for their function and who conduct their work within a hierarchical division of labor according to prescribed rules without arbitrariness or favoritism (Beetham 1987, 12). The administrative structures of government are, therefore, designed to have decisions made not by citizens but by those elected or hired. Kweit and Kweit (1980) argue that the norms of bureaucracy conflict with having citizens given direct input. The research by Berry et al. supports this

premise by concluding that "citizen participation is something about which agency officials might be said to be less than enthusiastic.... the resistance of administrators is one of the most common explanations of the failure of citizen involvement programs to make a difference" (1989, 83). Citizen participation may be burdensome and an impediment to the daily operation of government. Government bureaucrats and political officials believe it is their responsibility to make decisions and design policies and programs for their constituents based on their elected position, their expertise, and their roles as either career civil servants, political appointees, or representatives of the American populace. The attitude of bureaucrats, based on both the nature of their work and the structure of government, may be obstacles to participation. This raises further questions relative to the "openness" of administrative policy making to input from citizens. If bureaucrats fail to involve citizens then decisions are being made by people who are not directly elected representatives of the people. According to Scott (1969), the direction and control of power in public organizations is devolving upon an administrative elite. Hart expands this argument by stating, "... the presentation of power becomes monolithic, and... the ability of the individual to affect decisions bearing on his life diminishes rapidly. In a democracy power should not be concentrated in the hands of a few (1994, 471).

The argument supporting diverse citizen representation and the argument for substantive participation are mutually supportive. If citizen input does not make a

difference or impact in policies then it makes no difference who participates. On the other hand, if democracy requires citizens to have a voice in determining the distribution of "benefits and burdens" through policies then all citizens, especially those directly affected, should have equal access to participation.

This study attempts to address questions concerning the democratic process that have not been answered in previous research. By focusing on who participates and the extent of their participation in administrative policy making, it is believed that the following questions will be addressed:

1. Are citizens in the participative process representative of the larger population, especially those for whom subsequent policies are designed to serve--target populations?
2. Is there evidence supporting the notion that citizen involvement may be socially constructed--as indicated by the inclusion of positively perceived individuals or groups and the exclusion of negatively perceived individuals or groups?
3. Do citizens make meaningful/substantive contributions to policy making decisions?
4. What are the implications of the findings for both democratic theory and understanding who benefits and who loses in the policy making process?

This study fills a gap in extant research in the following manner:

1. Research to date has been inadequate in linking participation public policy making and the allocation or distribution of resources defined in policies.
2. Much of the research on citizen participation has focused on models or forms of participation, who participates, and the factors that precipitate political involvement. Little has been written linking citizen involvement to the allocation of policy benefits and/or burdens.

3. Many of the studies on citizen participation have focused on voting behavior, and the representation process exclusively and failed to recognize the importance and impact of direct participatory processes.
4. Understanding the link between who is involved and policy formulation is important in helping to "explain why some groups are advantaged more than others independently of traditional notions of political power and how policy designs can reinforce or alter such advantages" (Schneider and Ingram, 334).
5. It has not been disputed that citizens provide an additional dimension to the issues involved in policy making. These issues and concerns may be overlooked by policy makers (Kraft 1988; Fiorina 1989; Renn et al. 1993).
6. Most of the research on public policy and citizen participation has ignored the importance of target populations.
7. The question relevant to the "social construction" of citizen participation efforts has not been fully explored, as well as the implications of social construction for democracy.
8. Studies of citizen participation present varying findings relative to the evidence of substantive participation (Arnstein 1969; Walker 1975; Kweit and Kweit 1980 and 1993; Olsen 1982; Thomson 1989). There is a need to explore the question of whether citizens are actual decision makers—both defining and developing ways to address the issues—or whether citizen participation is merely "smoke and mirrors" with government representatives making the real decisions.
9. Most of the literature regarding citizen participation dates back three decades to the era of maximum feasible participation. The type of policy making indicative of this era, when certain citizens or groups of citizens were given almost free reign in defining and implementing policies, no longer exists. However, the need to include previously excluded groups remains. There is also a need to determine whether the bureaucratic structure and government decision makers are an impediment to citizen participation.

B. Operational Definitions

1. Citizen Participation

There are a number of definitions for citizen participation, some of which will be explored in Chapter Two. The definition of citizen participation applied in this study attempts to embrace both the requirements put forth by a democratic form of government and the expectations of citizens within a democracy. While it is a composite of many explanations found in the literature, the bulk of it comes from Sherry Arnstein (1969). "Citizen participation is the means by which citizens provide substantive input and influence in the decision making processes of government. It is the strategy by which individuals and groups join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out."

2. Public Policy

The term public policy has been used in numerous ways. Generally, it has been described as both a process (the mechanism through which most of the decisions of government are made), and the outputs of a political system. Anderson (1994) suggests that policy is a purposive course of action taken by a combination of both government and citizen actors to deal with societal issues, problems or matters of concern.

3. Substantive Participation

Substance is not determined solely on the basis of individual contributions, but by using four criteria developed by the National Citizen Participation Development Project. It was determined that citizen participation which includes these criteria makes the difference between "window dressing and substantive policy making" (Thomson 1987, 199). The criteria are:

- a. **Effective Outreach.** Does the citizen participation effort provide a realistic opportunity for large numbers of community residents of all demographic and/or socioeconomic backgrounds to participate?
- b. **Equal Access.** Does the effort provide participation opportunities to all residents on an equal basis, especially those who would benefit or lose by the policy decision?
- c. **Significant Policy Impact.** Does the effort provide an effective avenue for participants to have a significant impact on policy decisions?
- d. **Enactable Policy.** Does the participation effort address a specific government policy or program decision being made?

The manner in which these variables will be measured will be explained in Chapter Four.

4. Diverse Participation

This term is used to define citizen participation efforts that include representation from all groups found within the community. It means that participation varies by race, age, gender, income, and profession. When referring to socially constructed groups the term is used to include representatives from both positively and

negatively constructed groups as well as groups in both strong and weak positions of power.

5. Social Construction

The social construction of target populations refers to the cultural characterizations or popular images of persons or groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 334). It is the same as stereotyping individuals or groups. This study will focus on those populations negatively perceived by both decision makers and/or the larger society. It includes at-risk youth, families or family members with at-risk youth, gang members, ex-gang members, and members of minority groups.

6. Bureaucrat

This term is defined by Wilson as individuals "whose occupational incentives come entirely from the organization" (1989, 60). For this study, it includes political appointees, agency heads or their designates, and any other public employees in decision making roles.

C. Outline of the Dissertation

The outline and chapter synopsis of this dissertation are as follows:

Chapter Two is a review of the literature relevant to citizen participation. Specifically it will focus on democratic theories as a means of understanding and implementing citizen participation. It points out the flaws in the theory, research, and

practice of citizen participation in light of democratic requirements and the resulting implications for the understanding and exercise of democracy. This chapter also reviews the literature relevant to substantive participation in the policy process. It summarizes the difference between meaningful participation and what has been observed as citizen manipulation or co-optation.

Chapter Three provides a framework for understanding the barriers to participation created by bureaucratic structure and requirements, and those emerging as a result of social construction. Emphasis is placed on the importance of including target populations in the policy making process and the implications for democracy that the social construction of target populations may have. It addresses how citizen groups may be socially constructed to exclude essential elements of the population from the decision making processes of government.

Chapter Four describes the research design and methodology used in this study. A combination quantitative and qualitative design is applied. The quantitative measures will be used to identify the numbers and characteristics of the citizens participating in the issue identification, issue prioritization, and strategy formulation stages of the policy making process. The qualitative design employs personal interviews combining both closed and open-ended questions used to ascertain the extent or substance of citizen participation in the project as perceived by both the project designers/managers and those participating in the project.

Chapter Five presents the actual data and gives an overview of the significant findings of the study. It presents the empirical results of who actually participated in the policy process based on demographic characteristics, urban versus rural locus, and positive versus negatively perceived citizen characteristics. It also analyzes the responses to interview questions to ascertain whether substantive participation by citizens occurred.

Chapter Six discusses the findings of Chapter Five in light of suggestions for future research and possible implications for citizen participation and democratic theory.

Citizen participation, as required in a democracy and as perceived by the majority of citizens, goes beyond the electoral process. If citizens are indeed the "life-force" of a democratic system, then citizens should participate or have input in administrative/policy making processes as well. Participation should not be limited to an elite few but should be inclusive of all elements of society. This study will observe efforts to "include" citizens and the barriers constructed to exclude them in this process.

Notes

1. Target populations have been defined as those individual or groups selected for behavioral change by public policy initiatives. These are the people who are expected to comply with policy directives or who are offered policy opportunities. (Ingram and Schneider 1991, 334)

Chapter Two

A. Introduction

Chapter One presented a brief overview of the issues and possible problems associated with understanding and implementing citizen participation. This chapter reviews the literature to ascertain the basis for the American perception and resulting enactment of citizen participation in the policy process.

B. Citizen Participation: The Problems with Empirical Research

Initial dilemmas stem from the definitions of policy making found in the literature. As stated in Chapter One, there are numerous approaches to both defining and understanding the concept of public policy. Chelf describes it as the result of governmental responses to public problems (1981, 2). Dolbeare (1982) simply defines it as "what a government does" (1982, 1). Eyestone defines it as "the relationship of a government unit to its environment" (1971, 18). Dye writes that policy "is whatever government chooses to do or not to do" (1978, 3). Similarly, Lynn defines public policy as the incorporation of "meanings or interpretations ascribed by various affected publics to identifiable sequences of governmental actions based on the perceived or anticipated consequence of these actions" (1987, 30). These definitions tend to limit policy making to actions taken by government actors. The inclusion of citizens or the