

ARE WE ALL TOUCHING THE SAME CAMEL? Exploring a Model of Participation in Budgeting

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Theory offers a vast quantity of normative prescriptions concerning citizen participation in budget decisions. Yet cities struggle with this activity and report unsatisfactory outcomes. Why does this occur? It may be because, similar to the parable of the blind men describing the different parts of the camel, the extant literature suggests so many variables but does not integrate what we know to see the whole picture, nor does it eliminate variables having little explanatory value and there has been limited systematic testing of hypotheses in this area. To manage the complexity caused by a multiplicity of variables, the authors test a causal model with four different factors (structure, participants, process, and mechanisms) thought to influence effective citizen participation outcomes on cases of two mid-western cities. In this limited application, the model shows promise for predictive validity.

Keywords: *citizen participation; local government budgeting; municipal government*

How best to involve citizens in government decision processes has been a concern since the creation of the nation, when the founding fathers struggled with questions of representation. Participation is an intermediate outcome thought to lead to increased satisfaction with and trust in government when the input is used to align citizen preferences with decisions made by their representatives. Berman (1997) finds that participation reduces cynicism about local government, thus providing some understanding of the perceived value of this practice.

Theory offers many normative expectations and prescriptions to guide the practice of citizen participation in budgeting. Yet, in practice, cities struggle with this activity (Ebdon, 2002). Cities have tried different ways to gather input but report weaknesses with each, such as being nonrepresentative, too costly, and time consuming. City officials further suggest that they institutionalize few mechanisms (Franklin & Ebdon, 2004) and can seldom point to budgetary outcomes that are direct outgrowths of their citizen participation efforts. So although the literature is nearly unanimous in concluding that participation is valuable, in practice, the value is unproven.

Given persistent scholarly and practitioner interest on this topic, this research article poses the question: What factors make citizen participation in budgeting decisions effective? Reviewing the vast body of literature suggests that we have been describing different aspects of causal relationships, but as in the parable of the blind men who do not compare their knowledge to realize that they are all talking about different parts of a camel, little is being done to integrate our understanding. Some authors emphasize the nature of the participants

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as playing a key role in participation effectiveness (Boschken, 1992, 1994; Franklin, 2001). Others argue that, to have effective participation, public officials must pay attention to the mechanisms used to gather input (Bryson, 1995; Simonsen & Robbins, 2000). Still others claim that citizen input is valid only if participants have ranked their preferences and indicated their willingness to pay (Glaser & Hildreth, 1996; Wilson, 1983). Our review of the literature aggregates the various prescriptions into four groups of factors thought to influence effectiveness: the structure of the city, the types of participants, the mechanisms used to foster participation, and the process itself.

To answer the research question about what factors make citizen participation in budgeting decisions effective, we start by reviewing the literature in these four areas. Next, we apply these factors to the cases of two midwestern cities to see how robust the fit is between theory and practice. This analytical exercise is also useful for identifying areas where cities can make targeted changes to different variables to enhance the outcomes from participation in budgeting. We suggest that changing some variables would entail a great deal of time and effort by certain actors for little change in outcomes. On the other hand, administrative actors can more easily change some variables and the results could exceed the costs. The contribution of this form of analysis is that we can test the predictive validity of the extant literature by organizing it into the four factors. We can use the resulting model not only to explain why a city achieves a certain level of outcomes but also to suggest where they can target interventions to improve outcomes from participation processes.

NORMATIVE CONCLUSIONS REGARDING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN BUDGETING

Citizen participation in budgeting is a topic receiving much attention in the literature. Empirical findings and normative prescriptions have simultaneously reached both complementary and contradictory conclusions. This section reviews literature on the four factors commonly described as influencing the effectiveness of citizen participation.

City Structure

Theorists claim that there are several characteristics of a city that make it likely that city officials view citizen participation as a valuable activity. Three factors related to city structure have received the most continued attention in the literature: the size of the city, the form of government, and the legal requirements governing formal opportunities that a city must provide for citizens to speak about the budget. Concerning the size of the city, Ebdon (2002) finds that larger cities are more likely to provide formal opportunities for citizen input than are smaller cities. Part of the explanation for this practice may be that officials in smaller cities have more opportunity to interact with citizens during informal activities, such as social club meetings or school activities (Saltzstein, 2003). Professional organizations such as the International City and County Management Association (ICMA, 1999) and the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA, 1999) have long touted the importance of citizen participation, no matter the form of government. However, Kweit and Kweit (1981) suggest that the city manager form of government, with the presence of a full-time professional administrator, is more likely to seek citizen input than other forms of government. Nalbandian (1991) confirms this with his conclusion that the manager has a "commitment to

[seeking] a broader array of community values” (p. 167). State statutes or city charters typically mandate public hearings allowing for citizens to discuss the budget (Roberts, 1997). One drawback is that this input often comes after city officials have made key decisions regarding the budget (Franklin & Ebdon, 2004), so the concern with the timing of legal requirements and their impact on participation practices is important.

Based on these normative conclusions, we predict that citizen participation will be formally encouraged when (a) the population of the city is large, (b) the city has the council-manager form of government, and (c) legal requirements mandate opportunities for input before city officials make budget decisions. When these conditions exist, then cities will be more likely to institute citizen participation mechanisms to build bridges between political leaders and citizens and to increase the likelihood that preferences will be aligned.

Citizen Participants

The next group of factors to consider when one is thinking about how to enhance citizen participation outcomes concerns the selection of the participants themselves. The literature concludes that city officials have to consider (a) who will identify and invite the participants, (b) the type of invitation that is extended, and (c) the reasons why citizens become involved. Often, either the city council or a lead city administrator, such as the city manager or the chief administrative officer (CAO), initiates citizen participation because these officials see the benefits of two-way communication (Kathlene & Martin, 1991). A call by elected officials for participation also conveys a desire to gather a wide range of citizens’ views. Next, the format used to invite participation must be purposefully determined (Thomas, 1995). City officials have several choices available. First is to make participation open to anyone with an interest and willingness to invest their time. This is the format typical for city council or commission meetings. Or they can make some form of blanket invitation to special meetings held in a variety of city locations (Simonsen & Robbins, 2000). A third type of invitation would be to invite people selectively based on geographic regions or districts in the city or based on maximizing representation of particular community groups or occupations. Another type of purposive invitation is to invite known political “friends” or else the “usual suspects,” such as those who have been active in this type of activity in the past (Franklin, 2001). Of these four types of invitation methods, theorists favor the third because it strives for a representative sample of viewpoints. The last variable in the participants factor is the reason that citizens decide to participate (whether the city invites them or they self-select). Some positive reasons for participation are that residents have a sense of civic duty or because they are curious about how city officials allocate resources (Mitroff, 1983). On the other hand, participating because of dissatisfaction with the existing or proposed distribution of resources or to influence the decisions city officials make on a single “pet” issue is not desirable (Clarkson, 1995; Ebdon, 2000).

To summarize the participants factor, the invitation to participate, the kinds of citizens involved, and the reasons behind their participation should be carefully considered when attempting to structure effective participation. When the invitation comes from city council members or the city manager/administrator, it suggests a commitment to using citizen input. When decision makers purposefully select the participants and the participants make suggestions in the interests of all the city residents, then decision makers may be more likely to view the input from citizen participation as representative and more valuable.

Mechanisms for Participation

As mentioned before, requirements in state statutes or the city's charter normally give citizens the opportunity to register their budget preferences during public hearings of the city council/commission. Scholars do not view public meetings as very good mechanisms for gathering sincere preferences (Glaser & Denhardt, 1999). Instead, theorists, such as O'Toole, Marshall, and Grewe (1996), recommend providing multiple, interactive opportunities for citizen input. In most public hearings, citizens comment on a reality that city officials have already constructed. There is no guarantee that their input will receive serious consideration. Other types of opportunities feature participation where rather than merely giving input, the council or staff creates a venue to gather specific information with the express purpose of shaping political decisions on the budget. Mechanisms such as this improve access to political decision makers and increase the likelihood that input will be valuable (NAPA, 1999). In addition, timing is important. Other scholars find that, to be valuable, the input must come early in the process, before city administrators or elected officials make initial decisions (Franklin & Ebdon, 2004). Furthermore, they must allow sufficient time for the process, but the time commitment must not be too large (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). Another consideration when designing citizen participation is the scope of the material to be presented. Gurwitt (1992) suggests that citizens will be active when the discussion concerns neighborhood issues. However, because the budget impacts all areas of the city, Mark and Shotland (1985) advise that we should structure stakeholder input to consider larger, societal interests and thus preserve the perceived legitimacy of the results.

Thus, from this literature, we can conclude that we can improve citizen participation outcomes when there are multiple, interactive opportunities for access occurring early in the process and allowing sufficient time for deliberation. The discussion is better when focusing on citywide rather than geographic or single issues. When these conditions exist, then we can foster meaningful discussion and provide valuable input into decision making.

Participation Process

The last group of variables considers the logistics of the process itself. One common barrier to meaningful participation, noted by Frisby and Bowman (1996), is a lack of participant knowledge. When this occurs, participants are less likely to provide valuable information. Simonsen and Robbins (2000) echo this concern with the content of the information being discussed when they recommend paying attention to the amount of information and how it is presented. They recommend using graphs, figures, and tables targeted to the language of the nonprofessional. Another factor that can affect the success of citizen participation is the extent to which we ask citizens to register their preferences. Webb and Hatry (1973) argue that an attempt must be made to determine sincere preferences. Their concern is with measuring desires grounded in the reality of the fiscal situation and to estimate willingness to pay accurately. Although gathering information reflecting sincere preferences is difficult, Wilson (1983) claims it is desirable to structure participation so that participants make some ranking. If they can achieve this condition, then public officials would be more likely to consider these preferences during the decision-making process (Franklin & Carberry-George, 1999).

Designing a process that provides the information necessary to educate and inform the participants, in a language they understand, is an important first step for gathering their preferences. Because the desired result of participation is to produce usable information, the process should culminate with the participants registering their sincere preferences by weighing

the relative importance of a variety of budget items. Then, the input will be more useful to city officials as they make budget decisions.

Determining Effects

The four groups of factors influencing effectiveness—city structure, citizen participants, participation mechanisms, and process—suggest important variables that can lead to a more or less effective participation outcome. The literature also offers a variety of normative conclusions regarding variables that represent the desired outcomes from citizen participation. For this research, we focus on three offering evidence of effective participation outcomes. First, elected officials use the participant's information to make decisions (Long & Franklin, 2004). This is beneficial because participants see that their participation can make a difference. Second, there is feedback from city officials to show that citizen preferences were considered (C. S. King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998). Third, the participants are satisfied that their involvement affected outcomes (Berman, 1997). When these conditions exist, then city officials may consider citizen participation effective and may be more likely to make budget decisions using the input from citizen participation mechanisms to align their decisions with residents' preferences. Table 1 recaps the variables in each factor and identifies conditions supportive of effective outcomes.

Scholars have prescribed much in the citizen participation literature, but scant empirical verification exists, in part because of the multiplicity of variables, imprecise measurement, and the suggested complexity of relationships (Franklin & Ebdon, 2004). To address this gap, Table 1 suggests a model that organizes a complex body of literature. We make a preliminary assessment of the predictive validity of the model on the cases of two midwestern cities.

TESTING THE MODEL ON TWO CASES: BURLINGTON, IOWA AND TOPEKA, KANSAS

To test the factors thought to affect participation outcomes, we performed a secondary analysis of case study data gathered by the authors on five midwestern cities: Wichita and Topeka, Kansas, and Burlington, Cedar Rapids, and Davenport, Iowa. These five cities were purposefully selected for a site visit, as they were among the most active and innovative of 28 midwestern cities participating in a survey done by Ebdon (2002). We gathered the case study material (more than 80 interviews of elected officials, city administrators, and citizen participants; surveys; documents; publications; media outlets; videos; and nonparticipant observation) in approximately 1-week visits to each city in 1999 and 2000. The original lines of inquiry for the case studies were: the types of participants involved in city budget development, the perceived representativeness of participants, the mechanisms used to gather input, the degree of and reasons for (non)institutionalization of mechanisms, and the outcomes from participation. Of the five cities in the original study, we limit the presentation here to Burlington, Iowa and Topeka, Kansas because they are the case studies representing the best and worst outcomes from their citizen participation efforts. A narrative description of citizen participation in each city follows.

Before presenting the case descriptions, discussion of the threats to validity caused by the choices made in designing the research must be articulated. Even though the variables and factors were coded and analyzed for all five cities in this study, we have limited the analytical presentation in this article to two cases, Burlington and Topeka. The selection criteria used to

TABLE 1: Factors Supporting Effective Participation Outcomes

<i>Factor/Variables</i>	<i>Description of Supportive Condition</i>
City structure	
Size	Larger cities are more likely to structure participation opportunities
Form of government	City manager will emphasize and council will support participation
Legal requirements	Structured to foster the incorporation of citizen input
Participants	
Invitation	Council or manager encourages participation as valuable interaction
Selection	Purposive criteria to foster opportunity as well as representation
Reasons	Citizens doing civic duty, not because of isolated dissatisfaction
Mechanisms	
Opportunities	Multiple, interactive and institutionalized (good management, not crisis)
Timing	Early in process and more than one-shot but not large commitment
Coverage	City-wide concerns rather than single-issue or geographic focus
Process	
Educates	Provides information on issues to increase knowledge
Format	Presents materials in laymen's terms (tables, graphs, comparisons)
Preferences	Participants register preferences (sincere or relative weights)
Effective outcomes	
Information use	Decision makers use information for stated purpose
Feedback	Feedback is provided on how input is used
Satisfaction	Participants are satisfied and perceive impact

determine which two cases to include was based on a desire to maximize variation on the dependent variable, so that the predictive validity of the model in discerning causal relationships could be initially established. This case selection strategy is common in qualitative research and, in particular, in comparative politics studies that are limited to a few nations (G. King, Keohane & Verba, 1994; Ragin, 1987; Van Evera, 1997). The easiest way to overcome this threat to validity is to replicate the study with more cases, a strategy we strongly recommend for future research. For our purposes, model specification, the presentation of the two cases should be suggestive of future utility.

Citizen Participation in Burlington

Burlington, Iowa has a population of just more than 27,500. Their form of government is council-manager with five city council members elected by district. One council member serves as the mayor and another as the mayor pro-tem. The budget cycle begins at the end of the calendar year, with information gathered from a large-scale (half of the households with city water accounts), biennial citizen satisfaction survey that city officials use to establish priorities. The city council has a work session to review the administration's budget recommendations before setting the public hearing. Staff then prepares a budget in brief presentation and publishes a full-page advertisement outlining the budget in brief. They hold two public hearings in March, with a final vote at the second. State law governs the timing of public hearings and budget approval.

The city has a history of both elected officials and public administrators encouraging citizen participation. In fact, the staff prepared a handout containing procedures and suggestions for speaking at city council meetings. The first line of this tip sheet states, "Your council welcomes all citizen input" (bold and italics in original; City of Burlington, 2001a). The city has

been using a Citizens Budget Education Committee, called the CBEC, since 1996 “to review local economic indicators, the annual financial audit, and expenditure trends and to recommend an educational process that achieves maximum coverage to all social economic groups in the community” (City of Burlington, 2001b). The city manager identifies citizens who are willing to serve after seeking nominations from the city council. The mayor appoints and the city council confirms the selections. This 11-person committee consists of individuals invited to represent a cross-section of the community with representation from the following groups: banks, savings and loans, business owners, community activists, senior citizens, retailers, labor unions, tavern owners, local CPAs, and two interested citizens (City of Burlington, 2001b). Membership has ebbed and flowed over time, with 8 to 11 participants in a typical year.

Discussions with council members, city administrators, and CBEC participants confirm that the CBEC reflects a wide range of diversity in social economic status, satisfaction with the current operation of the city, and expectations regarding city government services. The perceptions of city officials and committee members are that they select people representative of a wide range of interests in the city, and membership successfully serves this purpose.

Beyond the six or so meetings of the CBEC, the city council encourages all city residents to participate in council meetings. Citizens can participate by attending council meetings or by calling in during two time periods designated for public comment during council meetings. The callers receive a response or a promise for a callback by a named city official immediately. This is easily accomplished as the meetings are televised in real time. The city manager also is host of a radio call-in show with a similar format once a month. Finally, city officials will normally hold three or four neighborhood meetings each year to discuss the capital plan or the budget.

Besides these formal opportunities for input, most council members also noted the fact that they talk to their constituents “around town” as they conduct their business and attend social, political, sporting, and religious events. As they describe, “This is the advantage of a small town. Everyone knows you, and they are not afraid to stop you on the street to let you know how they feel about city issues.” Perhaps the most compelling example of this is the reference made by many interviewees, council members, city administrators, and CBEC members alike to the diner owned by the mayor and the degree to which citizens contact him at his business with their concerns. A common concern expressed about the CBEC process is that their input comes too late in the process. Instead of suggesting priorities for allocating limited resources, city staff has mostly consulted the group about the presentation of the budget. For example, they will make suggestions about the public information that the city distributes to explain the composition of the budget and the changes they are proposing.

The final factor, process, is one area that receives much attention in Burlington. As mentioned above, one primary function of the CBEC is to help craft the budget-in-brief message so that it is accessible to citizens. To do this, they pay careful attention to the format and content of the message. First, they make sure it is in lay language. They also try to provide snapshots of key indicators to assess city performance as well as information on important issues that must be considered during budgetary decision making. The city publishes this message in the local paper, and it is incorporated into a Powerpoint briefing presented as part of the city council budget work sessions. The issues in the briefing are of citywide concern, but they do not ask the CBEC to rank alternatives.

Citizen participation produces mostly positive or effective outcomes in Burlington. First, the city council uses the information. Both elected and appointed officials confirm this fact. CBEC members feel confident that the information is valuable as well, noting how much

they learned about the budget because of their CBEC involvement. In addition, the CBEC members note that they get rapid feedback regarding their input, with city officials making final decisions on their suggestions before the next CBEC meeting. This feedback leads to satisfaction that the council valued, seriously considered, and, in most cases, adopted their input. The only minor source of dissatisfaction noted by participants was with the timing of their meetings. They felt that the meetings occurred too late in the process to allow for real innovation to occur.

Citizen Participation in Topeka

The population of Topeka is approximately 126,000. The mayor is elected at large, and nine council members are elected by district. The city has had a strong-mayor and chief administrative officer (CAO) form of government since the mid-1980s. The city uses a calendar fiscal year. State law requires that the city council hold one public hearing after publication of the maximum amount of the budget and the tax levy. Typically, these maximums are set in council hearings in July and the budget is adopted by mid-August, with the public hearing occurring somewhere between these two dates.

In recent years, the mayor of Topeka has invited a select group of citizens to participate in a focus group to review and advise on selected issues in the budget. The perception among the people we interviewed is that these citizens were selected based on partisan support. Other citizens who are active in the process noted that they must go to the council hearings to express their dissatisfaction with specific line items in the proposed budget. For example, when we visited the city, a contentious issue was proposed cuts in social service funding. This issue drew more than 100 citizens to speak at a council hearing that lasted more than 6 hours.

The public hearing is the primary mechanism used to gather public input in Topeka. They have tried other mechanisms, like the mayor's focus group, a citizen satisfaction survey, and open forum meetings, where they invited participants to indicate their concerns regarding the budget. They have not institutionalized any of these mechanisms, in part because of a lack of interest by the city council. These mechanisms do not foster two-way interaction between citizens and the council or city staff as the council does not always attend the meetings and they do not indicate how, or if, they did or will use the input. Furthermore, the timing of the public hearings is poor because the maximum levels of the budget and tax levy have been set before they gather any citizen input. As evidenced by the public hearing and confirmed in interviews with key informants and in newspaper coverage during the site visit, citizens were primarily concerned with one issue—the threatened elimination of a small pot of social service funds. All of the speakers at the public hearing on the budget pleaded for restoration of the social service funds.

Turning to consideration of the participation process, the council, during their public work sessions, often reviews the proposed budget at the line-item level. During our visit, one line item extensively discussed by the city council was the amount spent for food by each city department. Interviewees describe discussions of this and other single line items as the norm during budget review. Because they gather input at public hearings that are not interactive, little opportunity exists for the education function. Furthermore, the information is not presented in lay language because the councilor's discussion and comments are made in reference to line items in the proposed budget document. The budget is available at city offices and at the library if citizens take the initiative to request it; however, the city does not distribute any information on the proposed budget in a format that will reach a wide audience (such

as a flyer in the city utility bill or a newspaper article or ad). Finally, the comparative weighting of preferences on multiple issues is not possible in public hearings.

The outcomes that emerge from the Topeka participation process are less than effective. Although the city council did reincorporate the social service funding into the budget, based in part on the strong citizen reaction evidenced at the public hearing (others suggest that the cut was a political ploy and they expected it never to come to fruition), there is no evidence that other issues brought forth by citizens are considered. The council generally does not interact with the participants, and the citizens do not perceive that their input is used in the budget process. Instead, in this city, a recurring theme is the political bickering between the councilors themselves and between the mayor and specific, individual council members. When this occurs, council actions are perceived as political power plays rather than attempts to serve the interests of the city as a whole.

ANALYSIS OF THE FACTORS AND VARIABLES

In this section, we analyze how each city fares on each variable. Because we are using qualitative data, which is not amenable to higher-order levels of measurement, we rate the performance of each city as representing one end of a continuum and score each variable as either positive, meaning it is a condition supportive of what is prescribed in the literature, or negative, signaling that the condition is not expected to lead to effective participation outcomes. We then combined the scores on each variable within a factor to give a summary score for the factor (similar to the process for creating an index score). This allows us to reduce the number of variables from 15 to 5, a number more amenable to future statistical testing. We use the Ishikawa diagram to assist in diagnosing and analyzing each city and for suggesting remedies.

The Ishikawa fishbone, or cause-and-effect, diagram is a conceptual map designed to stimulate thinking about the factors that enhance or impede desired outcomes and to assist in problem solving (Huddleston, 2000, p. 39). Creating a cause-and-effect diagram does not identify primary problems or solutions but instead aggregates the measures of individual variables to make a group and then to compare the effects different factors have on the outcomes. Doing so allows one to focus discussion and initiate a process for weighing causes comparatively and identifying remedies. The fishbone diagram reminds us that some factors are controllable and others are not and we should devote our efforts to the controllable factors. Using the cause-and-effect diagramming technique, we created conceptual maps of citizen participation in each city.

Overall, the results suggest that the effects of the four factors on the participation outcomes are as predicted. Greater levels of positive ratings for the variables within the factors do lead to higher levels of effectiveness of citizen participation. Nevertheless, the diagrams suggest that each city has room for improvement. Concluding the city-by-city comparisons are observations about what they could change in various controllable factors to improve citizen participation outcomes.

City Structure

Rating the variables for Burlington in the city structure factor, we rate size as a negative as it is significantly less than 100,000. Scholars view the council-manager form of government as positive in leading to effective participation outcomes, giving a positive rating on this

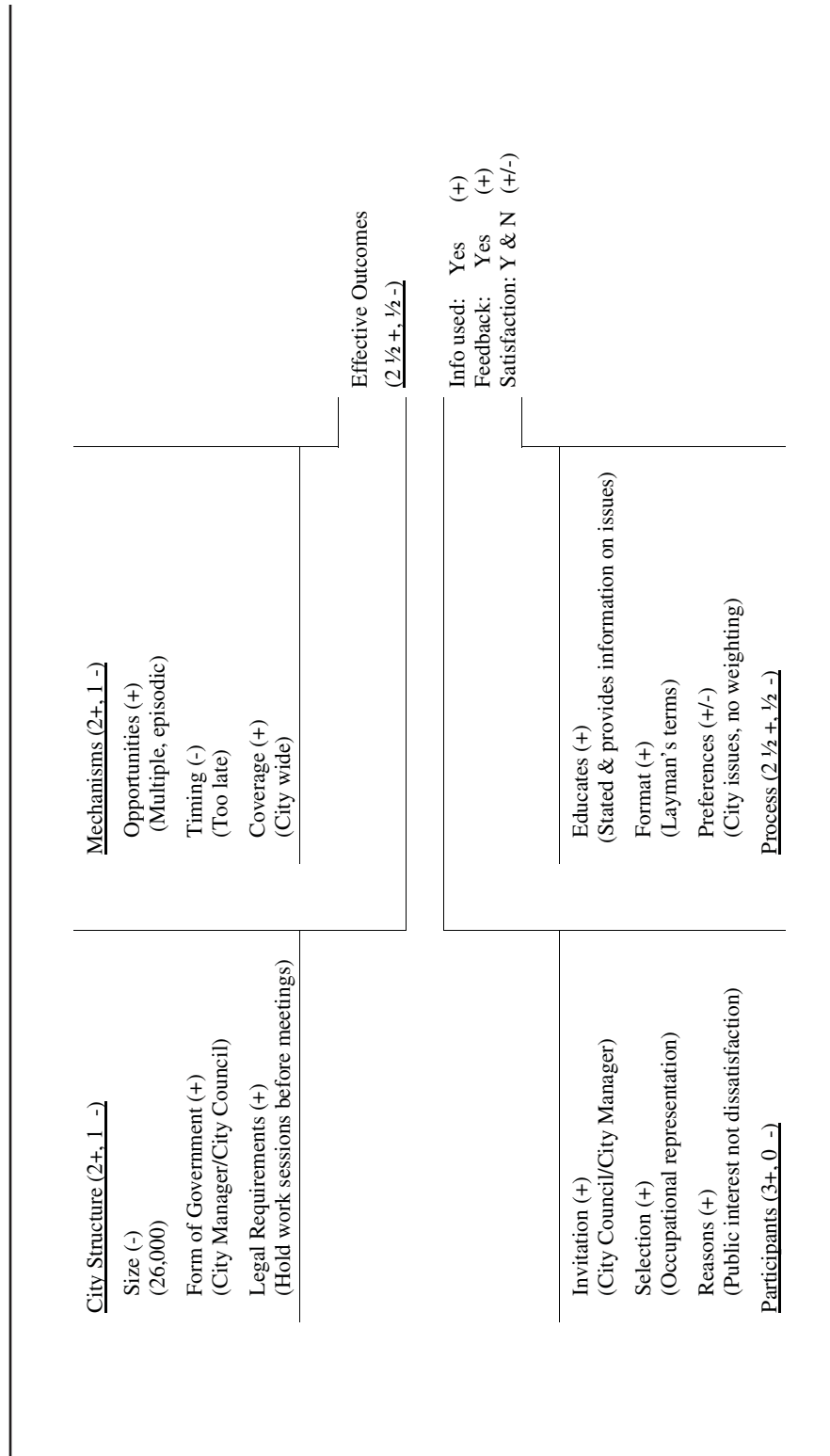


Figure 1: Cause-and-Effect Diagram for Burlington's Citizen Participation Outcomes

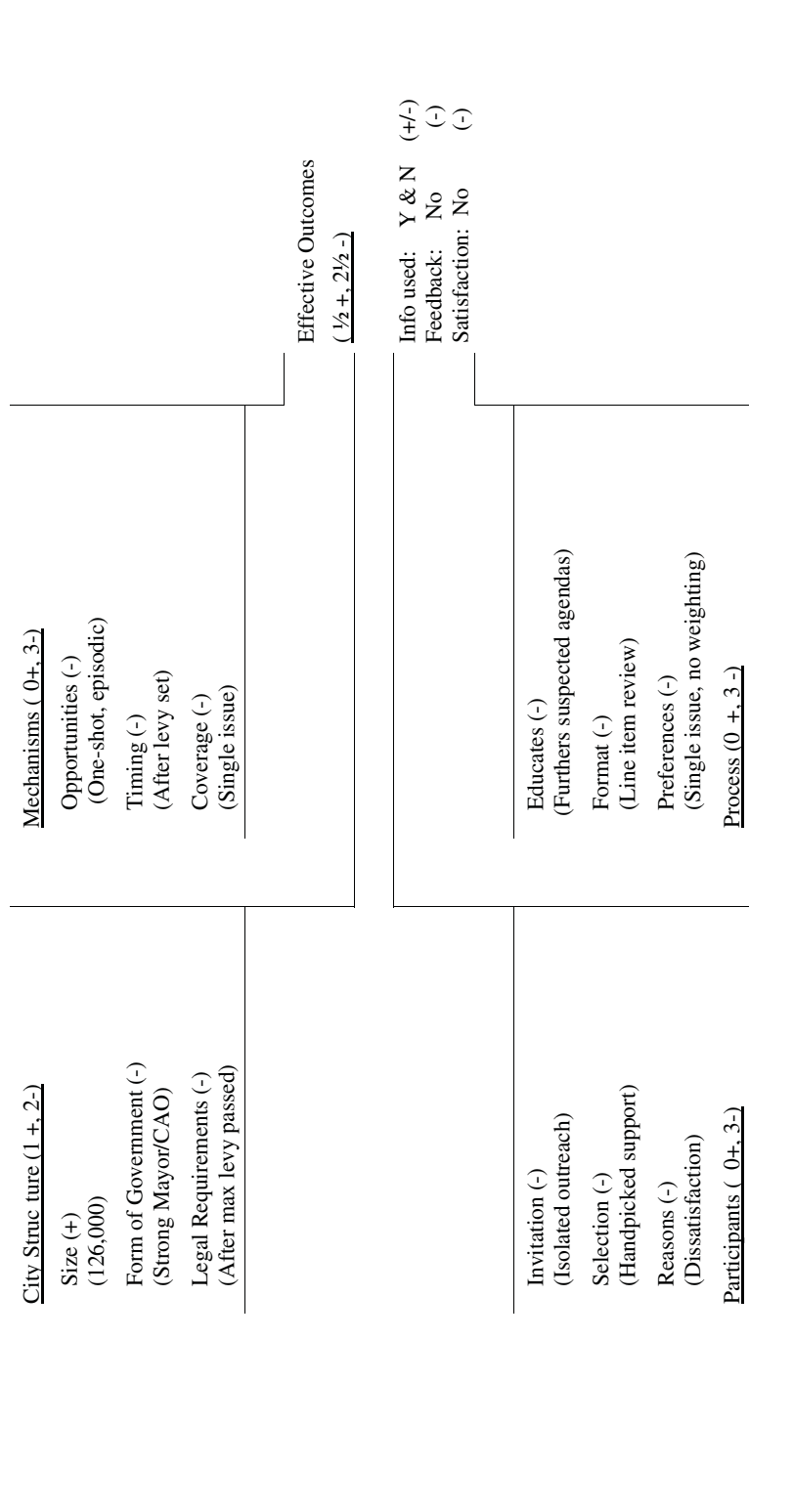


Figure 2: Cause-and-Effect Diagram for Topeka's Citizen Participation Outcomes

variable. We rate legal requirements positively as well, as they hold work sessions before they convene public hearings to consider the budget. Overall, then, the city structure factor has a rating of two positives and one negative. (City structure = 2+, 1-).

Because the population in Topeka is more than 100,000, we rate size as a positive in terms of fostering effective participation leading to desired outcomes. The form of government is a negative factor because it is strong mayor rather than council-manager. We give a negative rating for legal requirements as well because they have passed the budget and tax levy maximums before the public hearing. Overall, then, the city structure factor has a rating of one positive and two negatives. (City structure = 1+, 2-).

For city structure, city size holds Burlington back from the highest positive rating. Topeka has multiple structural problems, including the form of government and legal requirements that may lead to less-than-effective outcomes. None of these variables will be easy to change, as they would require major structural changes that would have to be initiated by elected officials (or a majority of residents) and approved by the voters. Thus, variables in this factor are among the least controllable, and we do not recommend any remedies for either city to consider that may improve the effectiveness of their citizen participation outcomes.

Citizen Participants

The final tally for the participants factor in Burlington is three positive and no negative values. We score invitation positively because it comes officially from city officials after interaction between the council members and the manager. Citizens are purposefully selected to represent key occupations in the city, so the selection variable is positive. The primary reason citizens participate is out of a sense of civic duty—even though they may be dissatisfied with some aspect of city operations, giving this variable a positive score as well (participants = 3+, 0-).

Because the invitation to participate in Topeka comes as an open invitation to a public meeting or directly from the elected officials but only to select citizens who others view as nonrepresentative, the invitation and selection variables in the participants factor are rated negative. Most citizens that participate usually do so out of dissatisfaction with a single issue, leading to the negative rating on the reasons variable. The causes for participants to become involved, then, are all negative with no positive ratings. (Participants = 0+, 3-).

The participants factor shows the most variation between the two case cities. Burlington has positive ratings for three factors, reflecting a well-designed invitation process that leads to the selection of participants representing a wide range of city interests. Furthermore, citizens get involved out of a sense of civic duty rather than dissatisfaction. For Burlington, we do not suggest any remedies. Topeka, with only negatives in this category, does have several options for changes they could make on the controllable factors. They would perhaps have better outcomes if they made a stronger effort to invite a more representative group of residents to participate. The invitation would be better if it came from a city administrator after a nomination process including both the mayor and the council. Although the city may wish to include residents that express dissatisfaction with specific city services, they should also seek participants that do not have an “axe to grind” and would perhaps focus more on citywide concerns.

Mechanisms

Looking at the variables in the mechanisms factor for Burlington, we find that two variables are positive and one is negative. The negative score in the mechanisms factor is for the timing of the input, as CBEC members commented that it comes too late in the process. On the positive side, the city provides multiple formal and interactive opportunities for input, giving this variable a positive score. And, because CBEC members are purposefully drawn from key groups across the city, the coverage variable is positive (mechanisms = 2+, 1-).

Given that the opportunities for citizen participation in Topeka are few and the interaction is one-way, this variable is negative. Generally, the timing is after tax levy maximums are set, leading to another negative score. Finally, they structure the mechanisms so that participants generally register their preferences on a single issue rather than addressing issues with city-wide coverage, resulting in a negative score for this variable as well. So the three variables in the mechanisms factors are all rated negative (mechanisms = 0+, 3-).

Both cities have shortcomings in the timing of the citizen participation input because it is gathered after they have made preliminary decisions. We suggest that a suitable remedy would be for city staff to schedule opportunities for participation earlier in the process. City staff in Topeka could take steps to improve the opportunities and coverage variable as well by offering to administer multiple citizen participation events in the city so that they would reach a wider, more representative group of citizens. At these meetings, they could provide a budget briefing in an attempt to frame the discussion so that it is about issues facing the city as a whole. Because variables in the mechanisms factor are, to some extent, controllable, this is an area where devoting staff resources may yield big rewards in terms of improving participation outcomes.

Process

Burlington's score on the process factor is 2 1/2+ and 1/2-. They design the budget to educate on citywide issues and use an effective format suggested by the CBEC and published in the newspaper, giving two positive scores. However, for preferences, the score is split because the issues are citywide and not geographic, but there is no weighting of preferences (process = 2 1/2+, 1/2-).

For Topeka, all three factors in the process factor receive a negative rating. They do not try to educate participants about the wide range of issues the city faces. This would be difficult because they only publish the budget in line-item format. By allowing line-item budget review, issues are considered sequentially and there is no attempt to weight the relative or sincere preferences of the citizens that do participate and no consideration of the preferences of those that do not participate. Thus, all three variables are negative (process = 0+, 3-).

Examining what can be changed in the process factor, each city receives negative ratings for the preferences variable, as participants are not asked to indicate preferences. This factor is controllable. City staff can incorporate a ranking exercise into their participation events. This will be more difficult for Topeka staff because the format of the budget is line item. They will also need to change the presentation of the information to make it more educational and to be in lay language. These changes can make the budget document more user-friendly and could make it easier for participants to register preferences, leading to more useful input for decision makers.

Effective Outcomes

Outcomes in Burlington are mostly effective. Decision makers use the information generated by the CBEC in the publication of the budget in brief and newspaper articles explaining the budget. There are two-way communications between the council/staff and the CBEC. This provides feedback on how city council uses the input, giving the city a second positive score for the outcomes factors. The only shortcoming in the outcomes is the sense of dissatisfaction about the timing of the CBEC meetings. Because the CBEC members think that the council uses their ideas, the satisfaction score is split (effective outcomes = 2 ½+, ½-).

In Topeka, interviewees do not think that issues brought by citizens receive consideration by the council; however, the council did restore the social services funding so information use is scored as ½+ and ½-. Participants never receive feedback from council or staff, resulting in a negative score on this variable. Nearly unanimously, interviewees from all three groups of actors reported dissatisfaction with the citizen participation process and could not point to input having any influence on outcomes, leading to another negative score for satisfaction. So we rate the Topeka outcomes as mixed in terms of using information and negative for feedback and perceived effect on budget decisions (effective outcomes = ½+, 2 ½-).

Looking at the effectiveness of outcomes, the main area for improvement in Burlington is improving the satisfaction of the CBEC regarding the timing of input. Outcomes in Topeka, on the other hand, have vast room for improvement. Scant evidence exists suggesting that decision makers in Topeka use input from citizen participation to make budget decisions, nor do they interact with participants to provide the feedback necessary and improve satisfaction. What causes this gap lies in the participation, mechanisms, and process factors as described above. With three negative scores in each of these factors, it is not surprising that the outcomes are the lowest of the five cities we visited.

Since our visit, Burlington has expanded the use of the CBEC to assist in developing citizen-initiated performance measures that will be incorporated into the budget document. They, along with several other Iowa cities, are participating in the Citizen-Initiated Performance Assessment Project, with facilitation by researchers at Iowa State University, supported by a grant from the Sloan Foundation. Because of this time commitment, the CBEC has not participated in creating the budget in brief or the newspaper ad. Other participatory activities continue in this city, with the exception of neighborhood meetings related to capital improvement plan (CIP) review; this change resulted from a dramatic reduction in CIP funding due to the state's fiscal crisis. Topeka still uses a citizen review committee for the social services block grant funding distribution but otherwise relies on the public hearing for budget input from citizens.

Table 2 suggests wide variation between the cities in the positive and negative ratings on the four groups of factors. However, Burlington consistently scores higher than Topeka on each factor and has higher effectiveness in participation outcomes. Although the fit between the categories of causes and the effects is not exact, the Burlington case does seem to support the notion that more positives within the four categories does lead to more positives in desired outcomes. The reverse holds true as well; Topeka, which has many negative scores for the factors in each of the four categories, also has many negative participation outcomes. From this, we conclude that the model does have some predictive validity. Unfortunately, the limited number of cases limits any assessment of model robustness.

TABLE 2: Summary of Citizen Participation Factors for Burlington and Topeka

	<i>Positive and Negative Ratings for Causal Factors</i>				<i>Participation Outcomes</i>
	<i>City Structure</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Mechanisms</i>	<i>Process</i>	<i>Effective Outcomes</i>
City	+	-	+	-	+
	-	+	-	+	-
Burlington	2	1	3	0	2
	1	2 ½	½	2 ½	½
Topeka	1	2	0	3	0
	3	0	3	½	2 ½

NOTE: A rating of ½ indicates that there was a mix of positive and negative causes or a mix of outcomes (yes and no).

Threats to Validity

We have presented a model that, although elegant in its simplicity, is threatened by its reliance on subjective evaluation of each of the variables in the four factors. Variable scoring in both of the cases cannot avoid being based on subjective evaluation of the processes occurring in each city. Researchers can never set aside their values but can purposefully attempt to identify where their analysis may be influenced and take steps to limit this eventuality (Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1990; Stone, 1997). To mitigate this threat, we consciously attempted to triangulate our conclusions by testing our preliminary findings against multiple data sources in each city. In this exercise, the varying perceptions of each respondent, as well as the evidence from written documents and public meetings, guided us.

An example of this may be instructive. In both cities, there is evidence that citizens were “hand picked” for a specific participation opportunity: In Burlington, it was the CBEC, whereas in Topeka, it was the mayor’s focus group. In scoring the variable selection, in the participants factor, Burlington received a positive score and Topeka’s score was negative. We assigned these scores based on three pieces of evidence. First, Burlington used preset criteria to establish an ongoing participation mechanism. They wanted broad representation and specified the types of individuals who would comprise the group but not the specific individual that would be selected. In Topeka, the focus group was a one-shot participation opportunity, with individuals selected based on criteria that was not articulated beforehand. Second, there was variation in the number of actors who played a role in selecting participants. The council, city manager, and chief finance officer interacted in Burlington to propose and select participants. In Topeka, the mayor was acting alone. We reason that the involvement of multiple actors increases the likelihood that preferences will differ and the resulting participants will represent a wider range of views regarding city budget recommendations. Third, in reviewing the interviews from the council, city staff, and citizen participants, we find congruence in the perception that the CBEC members in Burlington did, in fact, bring forth varying and often divergent perceptions during the group’s deliberations. In Topeka, on the other hand, many interviewees suggested that focus group participants all came from the same social clique and merely served to ratify the mayor’s suggestions. So, even though an objection can be raised that a bias may exist toward cooperative (or even, some may argue co-opted; Selznick, 1949) participants versus dissatisfied citizens, where participation is scored positively and negatively, respectively, in this case we assert that the facts of the case support

our rankings. Deductive testing of the model, such as factor analysis, can validate the operationalization of this concept.

One could also raise questions regarding the reliability of coding and analyzing the primarily qualitative data used to develop the case studies. Different evaluators may obtain different results. In part, this may be because of the large number of variables and their imprecise measurement but also because this is not a comprehensive list of all variables that may be important. We have operationalized the factors based on our subjective understanding of the literature. The precision of measurement can be enhanced through the development of quantitative measures that allow for differentiation in variable categories.

Another limitation is that it may be a mistake to posit an additive rather than some other mathematical computation effect, such as weighted or multiplicative for the variables in each factor. Because this research is exploratory, we thought that the additive approach was the most conservative. Other means for creating an index value must be explored in future research. In this analysis, we do not try to measure or control for interaction effects. This represents another threat to the validity of the findings. It is highly likely that different combinations of the four groups of factors cause variation in the dependent variables. For example, a process that is well designed may also improve the mechanisms to assure that there is coverage of citywide issues. A large-scale survey that ensures sufficient variation in the independent and dependent variables can address this and many other limitations.

Despite threats to the validity of the finding, we can use this causal model to organize and begin testing our knowledge on a very important, but also very complex, topic where there is a desire to improve practice (Senge, 1990). This is not an exceptionally complex model that strives for comprehensiveness. We can easily modify this model to include variables or factors thought to offer more powerful explanations. The value lies in the presentation of a model that we can deductively test and falsify, or verify, thus offering a means to further theory development (Kuhn, 1996; Popper, 1934/2002).

CONCLUSION

Using extant literature, this article organizes existing theory and identifies four categories of factors that can affect participation outcomes: city structure, participants, mechanisms, and process. Variables in each category are presented, and we identify conditions supportive of effective outcomes. Using details from case studies of two midwestern cities, we assess the predictive validity of the model and suggest how the model has utility for practitioners looking for ways to improve their citizen participation process. A particular strength of this model is that we can modify it by using other variables identified in the literature but not included in our analysis. This will further the systematic testing of causal relationships thought to be important when designing citizen participation. We also discuss future research strategies designed to overcome the limitations of this analysis.

We think that both the model and the cause-and-effect diagrams are powerful tools for systematically analyzing why citizen participation suffers in practice despite a large body of normative prescriptions. These tools remind us that some factors are controllable and others are not and that energy should be focused on the variables that can yield results with “low-cost” remedies. Ideally, this exercise will spur the next generation of theories (hopefully, integrative rather than compartmentalized). Concerning citizen participation, we clearly need a systemic (and systematic) approach that offers a more integrated view of our world.

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