

**Reimagining Local Government Conference
Chapman University**

**Civic Engagement: Contrasting Input and Participation
By Rick Cole**

The difference between input and participation can be compared to ham and eggs. The chicken gives her input. The pig participates.

Practically every local government pays lip service to the right of citizens to be involved in decisions that affect them. Officials strive to go beyond the letter of the law, encouraging both ‘input’ and ‘participation.’ These words are often used interchangeably, but they signify radically different frameworks for local democracy and the concept of citizenship.

Let’s parse the differences.

‘Input’ is just that – the right of every American to have his say – a right enshrined in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution: “*Congress shall make no law . . . abridging . . . the right of the people . . . to petition their government for a redress of grievances.*” Freedom of speech is so fundamental to our concept of our rights as Americans that we routinely attribute the legitimacy of public policy to its origins in the free expression of public opinion. The scope and role of “public opinion” has been the subject of fierce debate at least as far back as John Locke.¹ The Founding Fathers were generally suspicious of the shifting emotions of vox populi and tended to prefer the model of the Roman Republic to Athenian democracy. Over time, however, Americans have come to embrace not only government *for* the people, but *of* and *by* them as well.

During the Progressive Era, “direct democracy” came to be seen as essential to overcome the shortcomings of what was often decried as the evils of “unrepresentative democracy.” The primary, recall, initiative and referendum were all embraced as progressive reforms, especially in Western states – and with particular gusto in California. As mass media came to shape popular opinion, Walter Lippmann wrote a seminal and prophetic critique of what he warned could become “the manufacture of consent.”² Yet even he accepted that however subject to distortion popular sentiments might be, they formed the cornerstone of rule by the people.

The most significant limitation on framing public policy on the basis of popular opinion, however, is not limited to traditional concerns about its volatility, its manipulation by special interests or even the difficulty in accurately divining it. The greatest defect in relying on “input” in the function of local government is the essential passivity of its expression. Henry David Thoreau criticized his fellow New Englanders for confining their distaste for slavery to abstractions – “Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence,” he urged.³ America has a long and vibrant tradition of expecting more of its citizens than to simply register their opinions – whether to a pollster or at the ballot box. From the Founding Fathers through Martin Luther King, we inherit a legacy of those willing to stake “their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor” to the greater good. “Ask not what your country can do for

you,” President Kennedy said in calling on Americans to endure sacrifices for the cause of freedom, “ask what you can do for your country.”

Obviously the operation of local government seldom involves the clash of great moral principles (although the scandal in Bell reminds us that this is not altogether absent from either our times or our region.) Yet at its core, both local government and the citizenship that underpins it requires a greater commitment from citizens than simply to express their opinions, register their complaints and cast their ballots. Going back to the origin of American local democracy in the New England Town Meeting, there is a *responsibility* to actually *participate*.

It is the core value of *responsibility* that is lost when ‘input’ is conflated with ‘participation.’ As we know from our increasingly balkanized, politicized and polarized public discourse, expressing one’s opinions increasingly comes with an entitled expectation that since “we” are the voice of the people, elected (and appointed) officials should affirm our expressed judgments or face the wrath of “we” voters. That the government should take the long view, reconcile conflicting viewpoints through compromise or honor the concerns of those not in the majority – all these are increasingly seen as bogus, illegitimate or even tyrannical.

These are the very philosophical concerns that disturbed the Founding Fathers about “mob rule.” Not only were they fearful of the lower orders violating the property rights of the landholding and wealthy elite – they were also mindful of history and the short life of undiluted democracies. Obviously they failed to recognize the inherent rights of women, slaves, Native Americans and those who did not own real property. But despite their short-sighted and self-serving limitations on the franchise, they generally accepted the responsibilities of “noblesse oblige” to practice “enlightened self-interest” on behalf of what they saw as the greater (and enduring) good. We may freely fault them for their hypocrisy and blind spots. But we are short-sighted ourselves if we turn our back on their ethic of public service.

“Participation” in a local democracy, in practical terms, cannot translate into a literal translation of the New England Town Hall ideal into the governance of a city the size of Los Angeles – or even Santa Monica. It must, however, be central not only to the concept of individual citizenship, but also to the modern forms of representative democracy. It is fitting that “*participation*” is derived from Latin. It means *to take part in, to share*. It is in its essence communitarian rather than individualistic. Decisions arrived at through participation are not derived from a mechanistic counting of raised hands or ballots. Participation involves a level of *give and take* that is absent from undiluted ‘input.’ It opens the door to what pollster Daniel Yankelovich calls “the magic of dialogue” that can “transform conflict into cooperation” by fostering mutual “respect and acceptance of others.”⁴ In place of demonizing those who disagree with one’s opinions, participation invokes a willingness to roll up one’s sleeves and find solid, common ground.

So in the real world, how can ‘input’ and ‘participation’ be distinguished? In our often poisonous atmosphere of distrust not only of government, but of “special interests” (often broadly denoted as any organized group holding different opinions from one’s own), is it naïve to think that participation can push back the tides of rancor and calumny? And is it possible at a

time when simply getting people to vote seems increasingly challenging to rally people to enlightened dialogue and responsible citizenship?

Hard questions. Let me start to answer by tracing my own education in the distinctions and possibilities for reinvigorating local democracy.

At a time not altogether dissimilar to the current economic climate, I served on the Pasadena City Council at a time of deep division in the community over the issue of growth and development. In the early Nineties, a long-dominant camp rooted in the more conservative, business-oriented elements of the city actively championed building high rise offices and multifamily condominiums. They pointed to the wealth, jobs and prosperity they argued flowed from both construction and enlargement of the workforce and resident populations. A looser coalition of neighborhood activists, historic preservationists, environmentalists and progressives rejected these arguments and opposed the expansionist land use policies of city government. The battle reached a showdown between a citizen initiative placed on the ballot via petition and an alternative put on the ballot via a vote of the majority of the Council. I was among the minority on the Council who personally favored the citizen initiative and opposed our colleagues. The citizen initiative passed handily and the Council measure was soundly defeated. But that was hardly the end. Growth supporters allied with representatives of minority groups to challenge the citizen initiative on the grounds that it would thwart the aspirations of the city's poorer residents. They seized on a potential technical flaw in the initiative language to persuade the Council majority to agree to scrap the citizen initiative if the citizens would vote in favor of a new plan which in theory would win majority support at the next election.

This was hardly a propitious backdrop for collaborative governance. To the extent that forces on both sides were actively participating, it was not on behalf of an abstract greater good. They were forwarding their by now firmly-established opinions with little room for compromise, let alone reconciliation and they were bitter about the other side's tactics which they saw as the source of all the turmoil the city was enduring.

Recognizing the futility in perpetuating this chronic conflict, I reached out to a member of the dominant Council faction who was set to assume the role of Vice Mayor on the same day I was scheduled by seniority to assume the role of Mayor. It was precisely the imperative of participation that we appealed to in asking citizens to step back from their entrenched opinions to collectively "imagine a greater city" – and to work together to write a new general plan to guide future growth and development in Pasadena.

We began by reframing a key question that so sharply divided the community. Instead of asking citizen opinions of whether they supported or opposed growth, we asked them what kind of growth they supported and where it should occur. While this might at first appear to be sleight of hand, in California it made sense to accept that some kind of growth was quite likely given market forces and population growth and a more productive discussion could be had in determining how to target growth to produce broadly accepted community goals.

In fact, "the magic of dialogue" produced just such results. It became clear that instead of starkly divided binary camps, there was broad agreement that appropriate levels of growth made

sense near future light rail stops, in neighborhoods that had not benefitted from recent investment and in Downtown. There was equally strong consensus that rapid and/or out-of-scale construction did not have support in established healthy residential neighborhoods or in thriving neighborhood commercial areas.

The form of participation varied sharply from the usual avenues for input. Instead of “public hearings” where citizens line up to (often) shout or spew extreme expressions of their opinions, participation took the form of workshops where small groups of citizens discussed relevant topics in depth over an hour with facilitators charged with drawing out quiet participants and curbing the influence of domineering personalities. The results of these in-depth dialogues were conveyed to the larger gathering and collected across every neighborhood in the city. Groups that seldom worked together were encouraged to collaborate on workshops in tandem to foster greater engagement of contrasting opinions. We also built in a safety valve to our synthesizing of varied perspectives through a mechanism we called, “Did we hear you right?” At each stage of the evolution of the plan, we checked in with members of the public to see if the distillation of the views that had emerged was indeed reflective of their deliberations – not necessarily their individual opinions.

We also stressed the importance of participating over the year-long process, emphasizing it was an iterative one, starting with basic principles and building toward a common vision and ultimately a sophisticated framework for bringing that vision to life through public policy choices and a specific framework for implementation.

The results spoke for themselves. Two years after rejecting the City Council’s blueprint for managing growth, the citizens by a nearly identical 60-40 margin ratified the new plan that they had participated in shaping. More than 3200 citizens had actively enlisted in the effort, representing a diverse cross-section of the community’s demography and political perspectives.

In the years since, I’ve watched the lessons learned from this experience play out in hundreds of forums in every kind of community in California and beyond. I’ve learned that ‘input’ is easily solicited – and just as easily dismissed. Participation, on the other hand, though more difficult to engender, has a far more enduring impact. I’ve learned it is more naïve to believe that our conventional models of public involvement will reverse the steady erosion of public trust in government than it is to invest in time and resources in rebuilding trust through more collaborative models of civic engagement. I’ve also learned a paradoxical lesson that mirrors the experience of contemporary religious institutions – that the less you ask of people, the less they are willing to give. Mainline denominations which asked little more from members than weekly church attendance have seen precipitous declines while megachurches have grown exponentially by enveloping members in an array of engaging activities.

True, it requires a significant commitment for people to take an active role in participatory civic meetings that take place over a span of months or even years. It is also true that it doesn’t take much to cast an absentee ballot automatically sent to your home. But the paradox is that if a citizen experiences the elusive quality of *agency* – that their involvement has made a meaningful difference – they are far more likely to cast their ballot than someone who is simply exposed to

well-intentioned exhortations to vote. So while it might seem more difficult to recruit pigs than chickens to make ham and eggs, it is the very act of commitment that draws in citizens to feel their contribution has genuine value.

Churchill famously said, “Democracy is the worst form of Government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” His sardonic observation is particularly apt when democracy is debased to ask of citizens nothing more than the expression of their opinions – or often simply their unthinking prejudices. Yet local government offers a more uplifting opportunity for citizens to exercise the responsibility of citizenship, which entails far more active involvement in actual *problem solving*. It has also been said that we get the government we deserve. If we expect more than we feel we are currently *getting*, it is almost axiomatic to re-examine how much we are in fact *giving*.

Fostering an ethic of meaningful citizenship and participation goes beyond paying lip service to government *of* the people. It tasks our citizens with actually doing the hard work necessary to effectuate government *by* the people. That’s a form of democracy even the Founding Fathers would have a hard time faulting.

- ¹ Locke, John. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. *The Works of John Locke in Nine Volumes*. London: Rivington, 1824 12th ed.
- ² Lippman, Walter. *Public Opinion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1922.
- ³ Thoreau, Henry David. On the Duty of Civil Disobedience. *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. New York: NAL, 1960.
- ⁴ Yankelovich, Daniel. *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

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