

# The Raffles Review

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## Putting the 'Public' in Public Participation



### SOURCE

[Putting the Public Back Into Governance: The Challenges of Citizen Participation and Its Future](#) is an article by Archon Fung in Volume 75, Issue 4 of *Public Administration Review*.

### KEY POINT

The article assesses claims about citizen engagement, identifies barriers to successful public participation and suggests design principles for more effective collaborative governance.

### BIG IDEAS

- Leaders should view public participation as a potential solution to some of the democratic challenges they face and as an effective way to achieve the aims of good governance.
- Public participation has increased in recent years, but its practice differs greatly. Variations in design (regarding participant selection, methods of communication and decision-making, and intended influence) matter greatly.
- The drivers of participatory innovations have been: the quest to enhance democratic legitimacy, the advancement of effective governance, and the mitigation of structural injustices in governance mechanisms.
- Engagement activities born of coincidence or simple opportunity are a weak foundation for sustainable and scalable participatory governance. Instead, more powerful and systematic incentives for public engagement must be created.
- Lack of consensus on, and understanding of, the impact of direct public engagement has meant that champions of participatory innovation have to explain, justify and convince allies and antagonists alike almost every single time.
- 'Many' is not the same as 'meaningful'. The proliferation of participatory innovation is insignificant if participation is limited to trivial concerns (e.g., choosing the colour of park benches). Meaningful engagements have significant outcomes and advance objectives.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

- Public participation is not just about policy; it is also deeply political. Sustained citizen engagement is about building a "constituency that will not just engage but also defend against efforts to reduce participation." This requires widespread support for the institutions and practices of public engagement.
- Convenors must fully consider participation design choices for effective citizen engagement: kinds of participants; ways of speaking, hearing, and exchanging information; and levels of empowerment—collectively dubbed the "democracy cube".
- Intentions for convening citizens must be clear from the start, and engagement must be designed so that activities clearly lead to achievement of those intentions.
- Outcomes of participation must be meaningful for citizens, or risk feelings of frustration, cynicism or apathy. Engagements will be futile if processes are poorly designed, relevant decisions have already been made, or the choices and stakes are trivial.

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*This weekly offering summarises insights on public service matters to challenge assumptions and question the status quo.*