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Teaching Democracy in Public Administration: Trends and Future Prospects

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Teaching Democracy in Public Administration: Trends and Future Prospects

Abstract

Over the last century, the skills, ideas, and values upheld within the field of public administration (PA) have undergone several major shifts. We seem to be in the midst of another such transition, as PA schools react to new perspectives about the state of democracy and citizenship. Most of these arguments focus on the more participatory aspects of democracy, and emphasize the need for governments to work more directly and interactively with citizens. “Democratic governance” is one term used to describe this set of ideas. This article explores the relationship between PA and democratic governance through interviews with professors and other observers of the discipline. The picture that emerges is that of a field in flux, spurred both by theoretical claims and by the practical needs of administrators, being pushed from a narrow focus on management to a broader conception of governing.

Keywords

public administration, democratic governance, collaborative governance, democracy, citizenship, public engagement, citizen involvement, participation

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Over the last century, the skills, ideas, and values upheld within the field of public administration (PA) have undergone several major shifts. We seem to be in the midst of another such transition, as PA schools react to new perspectives about the state of democracy and citizenship. Most of these arguments focus on the more participatory aspects of democracy, and emphasize the need for governments to work more directly and interactively with citizens. “Democratic governance”² is one term used to describe this set of ideas.

This article explores the relationship between PA and democratic governance through interviews with professors and other observers of the discipline. The picture that emerges is that of a field in flux, spurred both by theoretical claims and by the practical needs of administrators, being pushed from a narrow focus on management to a broader conception of governing. The arguments made by these interviewees are by no means entirely new: scholarship in public administration has, to varying degrees in its history, always been concerned with citizen participation in the work of government, and a considerable amount of research has been generated on the topic. For example, Nancy Roberts’ (2008) edited volume, *The Age of Direct Citizen Participation*, presents a wide variety of arguments in favor of engaging citizens more directly in governance. Authors in that volume argue that citizen participation can facilitate public learning, build community, improve responsiveness, serve and empower citizens, build trust in government, increase citizen efficacy, promote a

¹ This article was adapted, with permission, from an essay for Rosemary O’Leary, David Van Slyke, and Soonhee Kim, eds. (2010) *The Future of Public Administration Around the World*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. See <http://www.press.georgetown.edu/detail.html?session=1c5219204933d5488e954273c24aed90&id=9781589017115>

² The word “engagement” is often used in a general way to describe formal interactions between government and citizens. It has a bad connotation for many public managers, who think back to poorly planned, poorly structured, legally mandated meetings that were unsuccessful for both officials and citizens. For other practitioners and researchers “engagement” has a more positive meaning. I have tried to make clear what kind of engagement the interviewees are referring to, and I have also used “democratic governance” as a term to describe the more successful forms of engagement. The Democratic Governance Panel (a body of 30 mayors and city council members) of the National League of Cities defines democratic governance as “The art of governing in participatory, deliberative, and collaborative ways” (NLC, 2004). Finally, the term “citizen” often seems inappropriate, since it is sometimes used in a narrow sense: encompassing only those residents who are U.S. citizens. In this chapter, the term will be used, as a synonym for “residents” or “the public.”

shared conception of the common good, and generally reduce citizen discouragement and apathy, among other reasons.

The people interviewed for this chapter have taken these arguments a step further, describing the ways in which administrators in the field are now driving these changes, and pointing toward new priorities for teaching and research. The interviewees are: William Barnes, National League of Cities; Patricia Bonner, Environmental Protection Administration; John Bryson, University of Minnesota; Barbara Crosby, University of Minnesota; Angela Eikenberry, University of Nebraska-Omaha; Archon Fung, Harvard University; David Kuehn, Federal Highway Administration; Gary Marshall, University of Nebraska-Omaha; Tina Nabatchi, Syracuse University; John Nalbandian, University of Kansas; Leanne Smith Nurse, Environmental Protection Administration; Rosemary O’Leary, Syracuse University; Pete Peterson, Pepperdine University; John Stephens, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; and Camilla Stivers, Cleveland State University.

Most of the interviewees are public administration professors who address issues of democratic or collaborative governance in their teaching and research. Barnes, Bonner, Kuehn, and Nurse bring the perspectives of leaders outside the field who benefit from PA research and are potential employers of PA graduates.

Why Should Public Administration Educators be Rethinking Their Approach to Democracy?

First and foremost, the interviewees saw the teaching of democratic skills in public administration as “a response to how things are” (as John Stephens put it). They either view democratic governance instrumentally, as an important tool for administrators facing new expectations from citizens, or idealistically, as a way to reverse the decline of democracy and public life. Both responses reaffirm the strong and essential role of public administration educators in working for the improvement of governing practices.

The instrumental responses: Adapting to the needs of administrators today

Some of the interviewees, including all of the non-academics, stressed the idea that many administrators have already changed the way they interact with the public, and that public administration as a field is struggling to catch up. “What it takes to run a government has changed,” said Bill Barnes of NLC. The interviewees named seven reasons for this shift in the citizen-government relationship:

- The erosion of trust in government.
- An increasingly diverse population.

- Recognition that government alone cannot solve public problems.
- The decentralization of many public decisions.
- Less hierarchy within and among organizations.
- Greater capacity of citizens to disrupt policymaking.
- Citizens enjoy being involved.

Several interviewees emphasized the last two arguments in particular. On the one hand, citizens today seem more willing and able to insert themselves into the decisionmaking process, whether or not public administrators planned to give them a role. This is partly due to the continuing development of the Internet, which is “empowering small factions of people with greater levels of information and easier methods of connectivity to others,” said Pete Peterson. But when these opportunities are meaningful and well-organized, citizens value them intrinsically, not just as levers for affecting issues and decisions, argued John Nalbandian. He sees engagement as a logical response to modernization and homogeneity, a way for citizens to establish and safeguard their identity, “a way of claiming what is mine, yours, and ours, a way of saying ‘we are unique.’”

This rise in citizen engagement work by governments, in turn, creates a new hiring need. There is a rising demand for public administration schools to produce graduates who are prepared to work more closely with citizens. “We are looking for graduates with these skills in many different fields,” said Leanne Nurse, “and not finding many.” It also means a higher demand for training and learning opportunities for mid-career administrators.

The idealistic responses: Creating new arenas for public life

Other interviewees justified their teaching and research in this realm not just as a reaction to what is already happening, but as a proactive way of helping to revitalize democracy. This view is rooted in the idea that “Democracy is an end in itself” (Camilla Stivers) and that politics can be a fundamentally valuable human activity, not just a way to make decisions and allocate resources.

Rather than starting with the immediate needs of current administrators, this view seems to take its cues from ideal visions of community as expressed in political theory. The “job of academics is to transfer these ideas into practical usable programs,” said Tina Nabatchi. Our intent, argued Angela Eikenberry, should be to “create spaces where the public sphere might exist.”

There seemed to be much more agreement than disagreement between the instrumental and idealistic responses to the question, but the idealists are somewhat concerned that public administration not become too narrowly focused on the needs of managers. “We’ve lost the public-regarding dimension of PA,” said Gary Marshall. Tina Nabatchi worried that “the field of PA is guided to look at deliberative democracy as a potential problem,” not as an achievable goal.

But regardless of whether they are motivated by compelling theory or changing practice, the interviewees all seemed to agree that PA is facing a tremendous generational opportunity. “The baby boomers are retiring,” Tina Nabatchi pointed out. “We have to train a whole new generation of public servants, and we can’t just teach them traditional managerial skills; they also need new skills in democratic governance.”

Is “Collaborative Governance” Broadening to Include (Or Evolving Into) “Democratic Governance?”

The interviews shed some light on the ways in which different intellectual strands in the PA field weave together and influence one another. Some of the interviewees identified with the term “collaborative governance,” the idea that governments, nonprofits, businesses, advocacy organizations, and other groups should work together to make public decisions – where possible, by consensus. Collaborative governance recognizes that governments need the active support of other organizations in order to control or solve public problems; it began to gain credence in the 1970s, partly because of the work of state and federal agencies in environmental policymaking. Many scholars are now motivated by the belief that “collaborative solutions are generally better, more durable, and more iterative,” said John Stephens.

Other interviewees identified more strongly with terms like “deliberative democracy” or “democratic governance.” These concepts emphasize:

- Involving large numbers of ordinary citizens, not just organizations
- Creating arenas where citizens compare experiences and consider a range of policy options, and
- Encouraging action by citizens and citizen groups, in addition to gathering input for the policymaking process.

Some of the democratic governance adherents felt that the differences between the two concepts need to be acknowledged and examined. They pointed out that collaborative governance is all about institutional relationships, and that “citizens are generally excluded as stakeholders in these network relationships,” as Tina Nabatchi put it. “A lot of the writing about collaborative governance has to do with how you manage the relationship of organizations in a network – this doesn’t have democracy at its heart,” argued Camilla Stivers.

The two ideas do seem to be in flux, however. John Bryson felt that “the collaborative governance people are receptive to citizenship arguments, and are starting to explore them.” Barbara Crosby pointed out that collaboration in practice brings up questions of citizenship, representation, and participation. “There is definitely an evolution going on here,” said Rosemary O’Leary. John

Nalbandian saw it as a coherent progression, as the perspective of PA scholars broadens “from [a focus on] institutions to stakeholders to engagement.”

And in any case, no matter whether scholars are more interested in collaboration between organizations or collaboration that involves ordinary citizens, there doesn't seem to be a real competition between the two strands of thought. Both collaborative and democratic governance “share some core values,” said John Stephens. They also share “overlapping skill sets” (Nalbandian); Pat Bonner and Leanne Nurse agreed that all these skills are becoming more and more necessary and valuable.

To What Extent Is Democratic Governance Being Addressed in the PA Curriculum?

The distinction between collaborative and democratic governance may, however, affect how professors view the prevalence of these ideas. The interviewees who come out of the collaborative governance tradition were more likely to feel that significant progress has been made, while the ones who identified more with democratic governance saw the glass as (at best) half empty. Barbara Crosby and Rosemary O'Leary reported that collaborative governance concepts have been “mainstreamed” into some of the required courses at their schools. “One of the things that has changed over my career,” said John Bryson, “is that people have changed their definition of what counts as ‘real work.’ It used to be that ‘talk’ didn't count – but our students now understand this kind of dialogue, deliberation, and stakeholder analysis is actually real work.”

Interviewees who identified more closely with deliberative democracy or democratic governance were more frustrated with their lack of progress. “There are a few pockets” of interest and activity, said Angela Eikenberry, “but we're on the margins.” Archon Fung, a public policy professor, said that he “doesn't see discussions of participation being very prevalent in any of these fields” [PA, public management, or public policy].

Some interviewees worried that the management orientation of many PA schools may even be turning the tide against a focus on democracy and citizenship. One sign is the titles of the programs: “More and more PA schools have changed their names,” said Camilla Stivers. “They used to have words like ‘citizenship’ and ‘public’ in the titles, and they've taken them out.” As a field, Angela Eikenberry argued, PA is not encouraging the growth of democratic governance through accreditation or other means.

Perhaps the bleakest picture was painted by Pat Bonner and Leanne Nurse, who said they don't even look to public administration schools for graduates with the skills needed at the EPA. “When someone is a PA graduate, for EPA purposes I'm not sure what we can do with them,” said Bonner. “The matrix for preparing

people for public service is an outdated Progressive Era model,” said Nurse, “and nothing that I’ve seen in the degree programs seems to be changing that.”

David Kuehn reported that the Federal Highway Administration has reacted to this challenge by “increasing the number of mid-career hires, who as a group have more experience with public engagement.” Both Federal Highways and the EPA now run internal training programs that focus on collaborative and democratic governance skills.

What Preparation Do PA Students Need To Be Competent in Democratic Governance?

Virtually all of the interviewees voiced the opinion that, in training students for democratic governance, the overall mindset is as important as the individual skills. Three elements of this “democratic mindset” emerged from the interviews:

1) *A new definition of leadership that embraces and explains democratic governance.* “Cross-boundary leadership now has more legitimacy in PA schools,” said Barbara Crosby, “but I think now we need more skills in the person who is trying to inspire and mobilize others and the person who is trying to be an engaged follower.”

2) *A theoretical and political analysis of how democratic governance fits.* “Administrators need a skills base, and a theory base, but also a politics base,” argued John Stephens. “Why does this work make sense politically?”

3) *Visions of how democracy can work when the right principles and strategies are applied.* Rosemary O’Leary felt that students (and others) have an outdated picture of public participation, one that emphasizes “stale, old-school” methods like public hearings. “We need to educate people about what we mean.”

Pat Bonner described the necessary mindset more simply: “I just want employees who can approach the public without assuming, right off the bat, that they [citizens] are wrong. I want them to be able to look at a conflict or tension with the public and say, ‘It might be our fault, not theirs.’”

Helping students see this bigger picture can be done in a number of ways – John Bryson pointed to specific tools like stakeholder analysis as well as a more theoretical grounding in the “meanings of democracy.” But all the interviewees seemed to view this line of thinking as part of an ongoing, career-long education. Angela Eikenberry asserted that “Our students will be good public administrators if they’re also good citizens, with the skills to participate in public life. If they can think critically and apply some of these ideas, all the more specific skills (like participatory budgeting) they can pick up later.” Bill Barnes agreed that “One of the functions of school is to set your brain up so that you can learn more. We need to tease out these underlying issues and help people see what is at stake so that

they can wrestle with it a little bit. They will be wrestling with it the rest of their lives.”

The interviewees also generated a list of democratic skills that PA graduates need. Several were named by most of the interviewees:

- The ability to work in teams – particularly teams that include citizens, and those that include representatives from different governmental jurisdictions (this was mentioned by most of the interviewees).
- Exposure to the “broad repertoire” (Fung) of newer citizen engagement processes (also mentioned by most of the interviewees). John Stephens said that “Most situations need something beyond the standard public hearing and same old political meetings.”
- Conflict resolution, facilitation, negotiation, and collaboration (mentioned by most of the interviewees).

The other skills on the list included:

- Ways of facilitating or moderating more effectively, even in the more traditional kinds of meeting formats. Bill Barnes asked for “Eight ways to deal with the obstreperous citizen at the public meeting.”
- The ability to document, follow up, and evaluate both the impact and the quality of engagement processes (Kuehn).
- How to understand when, and on what kinds of issues, it makes sense to engage larger numbers of citizens, and when it may not be helpful or appropriate to do so (Peterson and Nabatchi).
- Stakeholder analysis (Bryson).
- E-government tools, including “a sense of how expanding information technology influences citizen participation” (Crosby).
- “Political skills to help the administrator survive when other powers are opposed to an engagement process” (Fung).
- Policy ethics. “In general, we emphasize individual professional ethics like how to judge conflict of interest,” said Tina Nabatchi. “We need to also emphasize how policy decisions affect issues such as social equity, justice, participation, and intergenerational issues (to name a few).”
- “Organizing for engagement on an issue vs. creating sustainable structures for engagement” (Nalbandian).
- The ability to “assess community needs, values, and opportunities/challenges – without making sharp distinctions between officials and employees” (Stephens).

How Should PA Schools Teach Democratic Principles and Strategies?

The interviewees' responses to this question ranged from opportunities within the PA curriculum to various other kinds of learning opportunities, on and off campus, for students and faculty. Most of the academics mentioned the potential of producing democratic governance 'modules' that could be easily incorporated into existing PA courses (as well as courses in other disciplines). "These could take different forms: one third of a course, one quarter, and so on," said John Nalbandian. "But each would provide the necessary resources, articles, discussion questions, and assignments."

Several interviewees felt that modules were useful, but not sufficient. Gary Marshall envisioned a course specifically on "working with the public." "There is a need for stand-alone courses because there are so many skills to learn," said Camilla Stivers. Understanding how to engage citizens productively in budget decisions, for example, may require a different kind of preparation than working with the public on crime prevention, or on racism and race relations.

For both the modules and the stand-alone courses, John Bryson felt we need more "examples and cases that show how the big concepts and processes can be accomplished or operationalized using very specific tools. The ideas, processes and procedures, and tools all need to hang together and be illustrated in cases."

Most of the interviewees also emphasized the need for mid-career training opportunities. Archon Fung praised "targeted training modules for professional development." Professional associations like the National League of Cities and the International City/County Managers Association already provide democratic governance workshops, and some federal agencies do as well. "For people we hire directly from school," reported David Kuehn of the Federal Highway Administration, "we try to provide them with developmental details in state and local agencies to give them experience working with stakeholders."

Teaching democratic principles and strategies may not simply be a matter of course content, however. "If we want to teach these concepts," argued Angela Eikenberry, "we professors need to learn them ourselves." She pointed out that professors are generally given very little background in teaching methods, particularly in skills like facilitating class discussion. Democratic governance "challenges the old-school banking style of education," Eikenberry said, and it is hard for the professors who want to break out of that mold to find the resources they need.

Camilla Stivers felt that "engaged learning" ought to be considered the only way to teach civic engagement. "It teaches people that you can learn by doing, and also that ordinary people know something – they know a lot about their lives and they know it in a way that experts don't. This is an important democratic idea: that you have to start from what people already know."

Taking this line of thinking a step further, Stivers, Eikenberry, and others pointed out the irony of teaching democratic skills on campuses that don't

necessarily give students a meaningful role in decision-making. “[The state of] democracy on campus does have a huge effect on how we teach these ideas,” claimed Stivers. However, none of the professors interviewed was optimistic that the traditional mindset of university governance would change quickly. “It makes sense to say ‘We need to do this in our own home,’ and use more of these ideas on campus,” said Rosemary O’Leary, “But I don’t see it actually happening much yet.” “Universities have a long way to go,” agreed John Stephens. “After all, they began as medieval institutions and still have many of those characteristics.”

What Are the Most Promising Ways to Move Forward?

In addition to the suggestions on teaching and learning, the interviewees were vocal about ways to advance the concept of democratic governance within the field. Their ideas could be grouped around three objectives: communicating the dramatic extent of the changes facing administrators today; generating much more comprehensive research that explores what is happening on the ground; and using a variety of supports and incentives, including accreditation, to encourage PA schools in their efforts to teach democratic principles and practices.

Reframing the discussion around the dramatic changes facing administrators today

The non-academics were particularly adamant about the need for change in PA schools. “This is becoming an urgent situation,” said Leanne Nurse. “If we don’t change, institutionally, the way we interact with the public, we will become irrelevant – governance will happen without us. Citizens won’t sit around and wait for us to do this.” These comments from Nurse, Bonner, and other practitioners seem to agree fundamentally with both the instrumental and idealistic rationales for democratic governance, but were couched in more ardent, imperative language. The analyses presented by the other two rationales could be understood as ‘how the world is changing *incrementally*’ (instrumental view) or ‘how the world ought to change *radically*’ (idealistic view). What the practitioners seemed to be suggesting was an analysis that shows how ‘the world *is* changing *radically*.’

As part of this change in outlook, many interviewees felt that it was time to shift from abstract claims about deliberative democracy to more practical and immediate kinds of arguments. “I’m very resistant to yet another article that exhorts people on this topic,” said Bill Barnes. “We’re past that point now. I want either ‘here’s how you do it’ information or research on ‘here’s what works.’” Pat Bonner agreed that she has a visceral reaction to what she calls “Deliberative democracy as theology.”

Instead of a “normative ‘this is the way it should be’ message,” John Nalbandian suggested we move to a “‘this is how we understand this’ approach. We need to place engagement into an intellectual framework that engages fundamental questions of PA – like issues of accountability and legitimacy.”

This approach seemed to suggest a way of combining the idealistic and instrumental viewpoints. “The theory must be embedded into the practice, the ‘green book’ of how you work with the public,” said Bill Barnes. “In that way, it gets built into practitioners’ expectations of how the world works.” One critical contribution, said Archon Fung, would be to foster “a clear sense and courage about when the ordinary, bureaucratic, non-participatory methods for interacting with citizens are not working.”

Research exploring the lessons, successes, failures, and implications of the work

The interviewees suggested new directions for PA research that would strengthen this “clear sense and courage.” Many of them mentioned the need for more inquiry into the methods, implications, and consequences (both intended and unintended) of involving citizens actively in decision-making and problem-solving. Too little of the research on civic engagement, Gary Marshall pointed out, has focused on “actual participation,” as opposed to voting and volunteerism. The academic journals, agreed Bill Barnes, “ought to take democratic governance more seriously.” Of the research that has been done, too much of it focuses narrowly on what happens inside citizen-government dialogues and deliberations, and not enough on the larger organizing and political context that surrounds an effort.

Several of the academics felt that taking the research in this direction simply means following the traditional PA questions about accountability, inclusiveness, and responsiveness: “These are classic questions we need to answer in a contemporary context,” said John Nalbandian. How are democratic governance approaches – he cited the involvement of citizens in performance measurement – affecting the ways in which needs and goals are articulated in the policymaking process? John Stephens wondered “How inclusive are these efforts to engage citizens? Do they privilege certain cultural understandings, or favor scientific arguments over emotion and passion?”

One of the most critical frontiers in the field – and therefore, a critical question for research – is the challenge of ‘embedding’ democratic principles and strategies into the day-to-day function of public institutions. Most democratic governance efforts are temporary projects that involve large numbers of citizens on particular issue or decision over a limited time period. It is much more uncommon to find durable citizen structures that have been sustained over time. “This distinction between organizing for temporary engagement and organizing

for sustained activity is a central question – an intellectual as well as a practical issue,” said Nalbandian. More work needs to be done on the existing examples of permanent structures, how they differ from temporary organizing efforts, and how the two approaches might inform one another.

Aids and incentives for PA professors and schools

The interviewees listed a number of ways to support PA professors and schools as they incorporate democratic principles and strategies into their teaching and research. Tina Nabatchi commended the syllabus exchanges, case simulation competitions, and case teaching workshops that have been developed recently. (The groups engaged in these kinds of activities include the Collaborative Democracy Network, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, The Democracy Imperative, the Program on the Analysis and Resolution of Conflicts at the Maxwell School, the Electronic Hallway at the University of Washington, and others.)

In addition to all the workshops and training programs offered for mid-career practitioners, Archon Fung emphasized the value of simply “connecting people with others who have done similar things.” A number of organizations do this kind of convening work at the national level; others, such as Common Sense California, have taken on similar roles at the state level. One group sometimes left out of all these gatherings, Tina Nabatchi pointed out, is the “growing set of private-sector consulting firms that conduct public engagement projects” for agencies and governments.

Finally, most of the interviewees mentioned the accreditation process as one important vehicle for changing the expectations of what PA schools ought to teach. “The ‘core’ of what we teach has to expand in response to the complexity of the real-world situations,” said John Bryson. “PA education needs to train the next generation of public administrators to govern, not just to manage,” agreed Tina Nabatchi.

A Changing Field For a Changing World

In these interviews with PA professors and observers of the field, we get glimpses of the changing contours of the field. Whether they were pleased or frustrated with the progress of democratic principles in the discipline, the interviewees described pressures and trends both on and off campus that seemed to be forcing the field in new directions.

The interviewees suggested various ways of transforming the teaching of, and research on, democratic governance from a lively side discussion into a mainstream focus of their field. They proposed new and innovative changes to the PA curriculum, such as placing more emphasis on the concepts and skills of

leadership, facilitation, conflict resolution, deliberation, recruitment, online technologies, and participatory process design. Teaching these new skills may be best learned by doing, for example in case studies, role plays, simulations, internships, and service learning approaches. Others suggested that we should evaluate, and perhaps even accredit, PA programs not only on their traditional skills-based content, but also on their process-and civic-oriented curricula. Taken together, these proposals suggest a major shift in PA education: instead of training their students to be managers, PA schools should prepare the next generation of public administrators to play central, convening, facilitative roles in democratic governance.

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