

6-4-2016

Review of Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy by Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015)

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Recommended Citation

Peltz, Elie (2016) "Review of Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy by Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015)," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol12/iss1/art9>

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Abstract

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Public institutions often extol their commitment to engagement practices, pointing to established methods of including citizens in decision-making. Yet, as has been frequently documented, citizens now feel as disconnected as ever from government. Matt Leighninger and Tina Nabatchi in *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* confront this paradox head on. Nabatchi and Leighninger argue that when it comes to public engagement, intent so frequently misaligns with outcome because the current American political reality is stuck with outdated 20th century public participation practices.

Nabatchi and Leighninger have skillfully compiled a detailed account of the field of public participation for practitioners and students alike, laying out future directions for engagement within public institutions. The book is primarily practical in nature aimed at professionals working with citizens on public issues. Yet the authors recognize that tactical shifts in policy and practice will require a deeper changed cognitive outlook among public administrators and citizens. As such, the book also engages in conceptual analysis and vision building, crafting a text that is both aspirational and pragmatic. In the words of Nabatchi and Leighninger, this book “encourage[s] people to look at their political systems with clear-eyed, hard-headed utopianism” (p. 9).

The authors point to two problems at the heart of the conventional participation system the US. For one, those in power have overlooked how improved education, technological progress, and interconnected communities have generated a citizenry more equipped to take on pressing public problems. Instead, institutions still largely view Americans as uninformed, disorganized and antagonistic. In turn, citizens see government officials as distant bureaucrats. The dominant participation infrastructure, according to Leighninger and Nabatchi, has not acknowledged this changed relationship marked by severe mutual distrust.

In parallel, public participation has failed to incorporate the slew of innovative engagement techniques developed in recent years by a budding community of scholars and practitioners committed to utilizing expanded citizen political capacities. Applied mostly in small localized contexts, these newfound approaches draw on an integration of more substantive and prolonged citizen-government interaction, or “thick” tactics, with more scalable “thin” approaches. Thick strategies include deliberative forums and citizen juries, whereas thin participation experiences have traditionally utilized simple and fast actions such as signing petitions and filling out surveys. Civil society actors are championing this new movement, yet government has been slow to integrate these approaches into its participation repertoire.

In proposing participatory reforms, Nabatchi and Leighninger devise a list of six key building blocks for successful public participation: disseminating information, gathering input and data, discussing and connecting, enabling small-scale decision making, enabling larger-scale decision making, and encouraging public work. Yet at the root of Nabatchi and Leighninger's analysis is a realization that systemic support must complement tactical readjustment from the ground-up in order to curb the institutional and resource maladaptation to a changing civic sphere in decades past. These systemic changes include incentives for participation leaders, skill development training, adequate financial resources, and reliable benchmarks that will "enable people to take on new roles, connect different activities to one another, and institutionalize and sustain their efforts" (p. 67).

Part one of the book introduces the reader to the trajectory of American public engagement work, outlining the historical roots of citizen-centered politics in the US and the lead-up to today's broken participatory infrastructure, as mentioned above. In chapters four, five, and six, Nabatchi and Leighninger highlight participation developments in three policy domains: education, health, and city planning. In each chapter, they explore how all six building blocks can be bolstered along with the systemic changes that ought to accompany such tactical modifications

In chapter seven, the authors move beyond how specific policy issues are addressed in local communities to discuss how government bodies at the state and federal levels, often the face of political activity for most Americans, ought to improve engagement capacities. The soaring rhetoric in 2008 of then-Senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama in defense of an expanded notion of American democracy gave rise to the impression that government was now more attuned to the needs of its citizenry. Nabatchi and Leighninger, however, downplay such optimistic assessments, emphasizing that time and again political rhetoric has not translated into serious change. Most participatory reform within the federal government following Obama's election as well as in state governments have focused on rudimentary information dissemination. Moreover, many agencies are still bound by legal restraints that mandate conventional participatory practices. As a result, "unfulfilled promises have made Americans even more dissatisfied with political processes" (p. 196). To remedy the situation, government should partner with existing networks such as non-profits, universities, and media institutions that have made headway in public participation work.

Some of Nabatchi and Leighninger's most revelatory insights come from their deep understanding of the wealth of options provided by technology for democracy practitioners. Yet their forward-looking commentary does not come at the expense of a rigorous analysis of the historical roots of participatory democracy in the United States. In one of its most incisive moments, the book invokes the writing of Thomas Jefferson on interconnected hyper-local political ecosystems, or what later theorists have termed "microdemocracies." Bridging past and present, Nabatchi and Leighninger aptly connect colonial democracy centered around town meetings and neighborhood associations with a contemporary political landscape marked by a myriad of democratic experiments in communities across the country. Despite public problems becoming more regional and global, participation remains largely localized. This phenomenon is largely due to the ease with which local projects can recruit participants and induce citizen optimism in the potential for change.

The book, despite its many virtues, does not address one pressing topic that is becoming a growing point of conversation within the deliberative democracy community—the growing professionalization of public engagement specialists. While Nabatchi and Leighninger repeatedly point to the explosive growth of organizations and individuals in the private sector specializing in participatory action, they do not acknowledge the simultaneous ossification of a public engagement field becoming more top-down, monetized, and, in the words of Caroline Lee, "industrialized." This worrying trend should prove especially difficult if public institutions begin looking to models of successful citizen activity in the civil society sector only to find a stilted professional space no longer responsive to changing community needs.

As we progress further into the 21st century, Nabatchi and Leighninger lay out key trends in democratic life that will shape whether an aging public participation infrastructure can adapt to changing times. First, the relationship between people and information is evolving. Conventional participation has prioritized information dissemination, seeing the need for people to become informed before becoming involved politically. With information readily available through the internet and the omniscience of institutions increasingly questioned, politicians, journalists, and institutional leaders must see citizens as producers and not just consumers of knowledge. In addition, with growing concerns around fiscal stability due to recent fluctuations in the economy as well as the global success of participatory budgeting experiments, public institutions will be expected to give citizens more oversight over the allocation of resources. Adjusting to "a world where people have become accustomed to choice" citizen involvement in resource allocation can enable participatory democracy to be "institutionalized successfully

in what is conventionally seen as an expert, technical area” (p. 314). And lastly, as America grows ever more culturally diverse, communities will require ways to interrogate the relationship between social identity and political life. Public participation must make space for affirming the different needs and narratives behind the complex identities of 21st century Americans.