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The Economic Argument for Engagement: New Directions for Research

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Abstract

What is the economic argument for public engagement? Around the world, public officials and other leaders have devised new ways to engage citizens in decision-making and problem-solving – but typically they have focused on planning, budgeting, and schools rather than poverty, inequality, or other economic issues. Meanwhile, emerging evidence from Brazil and other parts of the Global South suggests that sustained patterns of engagement builds social capital, which in turn has an impact on a range of indicators, including economic inequality and the distribution of wealth. This article summarizes several disparate areas of research on the connections between engagement and inequality, and suggest new questions and directions for innovation.

Author Biography

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Keywords

When people have a say in the decisions that affect their lives, they will be better off economically as well as politically. This idea has intrigued community development experts, foundation executives, public officials, and academic researchers for many years. It has also animated some of the work that people and governments are undertaking to address inequality, both in the United States and (especially) in the Global South. But *can* participatory democracy have positive, equitable economic impacts?

This is an ambitious and complex question. There are at least four ways in which participatory democracy may directly or indirectly affect our economic fortunes:

- Achieving greater political equality (meaning that everyone has meaningful opportunities to have a voice in public decision-making and a hand in public problem-solving), which can make for fairer economic rules of the road;
- Providing more economic opportunities more directly (ensuring that people's chances to make a decent living are more equal and less dependent on the "accident of their birth") by raising social capital within and across communities;
- Realizing greater economic equity overall (achieving a more even distribution of household incomes, more evenness in quality-of-life measures, or greater fairness in public expenditures on services for different groups of people); and
- Generating greater economic growth overall.

To make the question even more challenging, these outcomes are at least potentially interconnected: one may lead to another, and it is possible that they all rise together. Furthermore, different advocates of participation make different economic arguments, and some do not mention any kind of economic outcome as an explicit goal of their work.

This article will pick apart some of these knots, and explore the possibilities for an economic argument in favor of constructive, interactive, sustained public engagement. It will describe the state of engagement today, present some of the existing data on economic effects, examine engagement in the community and in the workplace (and in examples from Minnesota to Brazil), discuss the role of race in engagement, consider different hypotheses on why engagement matters economically, and suggest directions for future research.

Engagement Today

The practice of engagement, and the trends driving it, have changed dramatically in the first part of the 21st Century. Over the last two decades, we have witnessed a quiet revolution in how governments and other institutions interact with the public (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). Public officials, technologists, engagement practitioners, community organizers and other leaders have developed hundreds of projects, processes, tools, and apps that boost engagement.

Some of these new democratic tactics produce engagement that is "thick," in that it is intensive, informed, and deliberative. Organizers assemble large and diverse numbers of people; give participants chances to share their experiences; present them with a range of views or policy options; and encourage action and change at multiple levels. Other tactics produce "thin" engagement, which is faster, easier, and potentially viral. It encompasses a range of activities that allow people to express their opinions, make choices, or affiliate themselves with a particular group or cause. One way of summarizing the difference is to say that thick engagement empowers small groups, and thin engagement empowers individuals. Both can, in the right circumstances, affect public policies and other major decisions. Thick participation opportunities are more likely to be face-to-face, and thin ones are more likely to happen online. However, many thick processes include both online and face-to-face elements, and some examples of thin participation (signing a petition, for example) certainly existed long before the Internet. Thick and thin forms have different strengths and limitations, and they complement each other well—the term "multichannel" is sometimes used to describe participation that includes both kinds of opportunities (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

Most of the engagement efforts that happen in the United States are undertaken in order to defuse tensions, inform citizens, and produce smart policy decisions on issues such as education, health care, race, budgeting, and public safety. In most cases, the desire to achieve greater political equality has been only a secondary goal or part of the backdrop, and potential economic benefits have rarely been mentioned at all.

But the fact that these efforts *do* address political inequalities has been integral to their success. While they differ in many ways, these strategies and resources have one common thread: They treat citizens like adults rather than the clients (or children) of the state. Most of the older, more conventional forms of public engagement, like the typical public meeting where citizens have two to three minutes at an open microphone to state their concerns before public officials,

embody a parent-child dynamic: Citizens have a very limited opportunity to speak; the open comment period may come at the end of a very long meeting; in most cases, officials are not allowed to respond; and even the room layout, with officials on a dais, with name plaques and comfortable chairs, emphasizes the power imbalance.

By contrast, when done well, both thick and thin forms of engagement foster an adult-adult dynamic. They do this by:

- Providing factual information – as much as people want;
- Using sound group process techniques;
- Giving people a chance to tell their stories;
- Providing a range of potential solutions for people to weigh and discuss;
- Giving participants a sense of political legitimacy—a sense that they have a valued role in public decision-making;
- Supporting people to take action in a variety of ways;
- Making participation enjoyable; and
- Making participation easy and convenient, especially in thin engagement.

This final attribute of an adult relationship is often in tension with the rest: There is an obvious trade-off between convenience and the benefits people receive. Thick forms of participation, which are most likely to treat citizens as adults in other ways, require a greater commitment of time and energy. Thin forms of participation, which usually offer fewer of the other attributes, are generally the easiest and most convenient. But whether thick or thin, the principles behind these practices embody and enable greater political equality.

Evidence from Brazil

While thick and thin forms of engagement have proliferated in many parts of the world, the evidence of their economic impacts is most striking in Brazil and other parts of the Global South, where engagement has been built into the way that many cities operate. These instances of sustained engagement include citizen-driven land-use planning exercises in India, local health councils in Brazil, ward committees in South Africa, "co-production" in the Philippines, and annual Participatory Budgeting processes in hundreds of cities (Spink & Best, 2009; Peixoto, 2014). In addition to promoting political equality, many of these examples name economic equity and growth as high-profile goals.

The best-documented cases come from cities in Brazil, where Participatory Budgeting (PB) and other innovative forms of engagement were introduced after

the end of the country's military dictatorship in 1989. Democratic governance had become possible, but most Brazilians had neither faith in government nor any experience with democracy in practice. The members of the Workers' Party who prevailed in the 1989 municipal elections in Porto Alegre and other cities wanted a tangible way to show citizens that the changes were real – that the new local regime would not just be responsive to their interests, but would also give them a meaningful measure of power and authority (Abers, 1998; Wampler, 2007).

When embedded as a regular, annual feature of local democracy, PB can grow steadily over time. In Porto Alegre, for example, participation estimates range from 17,000 to 35,000 people per year, and a World Bank (2008) survey found that almost 20 percent of the population had participated. This scale and staying power may account for some of the more eye-opening characteristics and impacts of PB (Peixoto, 2012):

- Unlike almost every other example of public participation, PB in Brazilian cities has attracted low-income, less-educated people at rates that are equal to, and sometimes even higher than, richer, better-educated people (Pateman, 2012).
- In cities using PB, public resources are more likely to be spent in low-income neighborhoods with fewer public amenities—and, perhaps as a result, PB is "strongly associated with a reduction in extreme poverty and increased access to basic services" (Baiocchi, Heller, Chaudhuri, & Silva, 2006).
- Cities that have used PB for at least eight years have spent more on education and sanitation than other cities and have collectively reduced infant mortality rates by over 20 percent (Touchton & Wampler, 2014).
- When identified through a PB process, government-funded projects are more likely to be completed and efficient, and less likely to run over budget (Schneider & Goldfrank, 2002).
- PB cities have fewer instances of corruption (Touchton & Wampler, 2014; Zamboni, 2007).
- Residents of PB cities are less likely to evade taxes, and, consequently, local tax revenues are higher (Baquero et al., 2005; Cabannes, 2004; Zamboni, 2007).
- Elected officials who support or initiate PB processes are 10 percent more likely to be re-elected than local officials who do not (Spada, 2010, 2012).

Scholars are still discovering and debating many aspects of democracy in Brazil. But most are convinced that these outcomes are a direct or indirect result of sustained engagement, not just typical signs of a developing nation (Wampler & Touchton, 2014).

While PB began as a purely face-to-face process, and still usually relies on in-person meetings, many cities have added technology-based elements. One of the first was the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, which launched an online budgeting platform in 2006 that allowed participants to discuss and vote on how to spend the equivalent of $11 million (U.S.) in public works funding. Almost 10 percent of the city's population took part (Peixoto, 2008). In a number of cities, citizens can vote by texting with their cellphones. PB advocates now champion the use of "multi-channel" approaches that encompass a variety of online and offline opportunities (Peixoto & Weber, 2012).

What about the United States?

Brazil's capacity for online and multi-channel engagement makes it seem more like the United States than Americans might expect. What are the other similarities and differences between the two countries, and how might they influence the potential of engagement to produce similar impacts?

There is a strong tradition in Southern democracies of citizens rolling up their sleeves and adding their own effort and ingenuity to public problem-solving. This impulse mirrors U.S. efforts that mobilize citizen action on priorities like racial justice, crime prevention, and education. In Canada and Western Europe, on the other hand, participation efforts are more likely to be narrowly focused on actions to be taken by government. This is a hypothesis deserving of further comparative research; it may reflect different assumptions about governance, from the European/Canadian emphasis on government as the main public problem-solver to the assumption in the United States and Global South that a wider variety of actors are needed to address public challenges.

On the other hand, one of the key differences between Northern and Southern experiences with engagement (and, at least to some extent, among Southern experiences) is how the leaders and organizers present themselves politically. In some Southern cases, participation initiatives are presented as "pro-poor," or as explicitly favoring causes and policy ideas on the left side of the political spectrum. Some of these efforts ensure that the "marginalized" or "under-represented" members of a community constitute the majority of the voices at the table. The assumption here is that the voices of the powerful, and those who benefit from the status quo, are already well-represented in public life and decision-making, and so any attempt at broader engagement should favor populations who have not benefited—typically the poor, people of color, and youth. John Gaventa of the Institute for Development Studies, who has worked extensively on civic engagement efforts in the Global South, argues that much of

this work relies on "creating situations where a public official or some other leader is in a room with people who are poor and disadvantaged, and has to listen carefully to what they are saying" (quoted in Leighninger, 2010, p. 11).

Does the fact that addressing political and economic inequality is more of a background goal, rather than a front-and-center priority, make it less likely that United States participation processes will have the kinds of inequality-reducing effects as their Brazilian counterparts? Tiago Peixoto of the World Bank is concerned that it will. He argues that participants in PB processes should focus their ideas on low-income neighborhoods, and that the data on local inequality should be made public. Peixoto points to the fact that Brazilian local officials and PB organizers emphasize those numbers, and are therefore better able to ensure that the process reduces inequality. While participatory budgeting has been proliferating across the United States, the role of inequality data is not as strong in the American processes. "What often happens is that cities try to implement participatory budgeting without using the 'redistribution formula' and then find out that they're not getting the same results Brazil had," Peixoto says (Napolitano, 2015)—another hypothesis for research to explore

Can Short-Term Engagement Yield Long-Term Impacts?

Another important difference between the two countries is that PB in Brazil is part of a much more robust "civic infrastructure" than we have in most American cities. Brazilian cities have local health councils, states like Rio Grande do Sul have large-scale participatory policymaking exercises such as "The Government Asks" (Peixoto, 2012), and the national government has federal policy conferences that have engaged tens of thousands of people (Pogrebinschi, 2014). In other words, people in these places have a wider variety of ways to participate on a broader range of issues and decisions. Their chances for engagement include online opportunities as well as face-to-face meetings. Many are social events as much as political ones; people participate because they get to see their neighbors and feel like they are part of a community, in addition to being able to weigh in on a public decision.

The fact that engagement in Brazil tends to be more holistic and citizen-centered than it is in the United States is important to keep in mind. The Brazilian political system is closer to a participatory democracy than the American system, which is essentially a republic with occasional, isolated chances for public engagement. These characteristics may help produce more demographically diverse participation and greater political equality. Many scholars argue that as a result, public policies have been more likely to benefit poor and previously marginalized

people, and that, over time, this has helped create economic opportunities and shift economic inequities (Wampler & Touchton, 2014; Heller & Rao, 2015).

Most of the engagement work in the United States and other countries of the Global North have come in the form of temporary efforts to address a public issue or policy decision. They have produced outcomes of their own, but due to their short-term nature, they seem unlikely to have shifted long-term challenges like economic inequity. But this is a hypothesis rather than a well-supported conclusion.

We might shed light on this question by assessing the long-term impacts of such processes—for example, efforts like the "Horizons" project, which took place in seven states (Washington, Montana, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa) and involved more than 100,000 people in more than 300 small towns with poverty rates between 10 and 78 percent (Morehouse, 2010). Horizons was initiated by the Northwest Area Foundation in 2005 to help rural residents build civic participation and leadership skills. Each of the small towns followed a sequence of deliberative public engagements, a structured community leadership program, and a broad-based action-planning phase. As of 2010, most of those communities showed outcomes from the engagement, including more inclusive decision-making processes, participants who won election to public office, and a wide variety of citizen-driven activities. Evaluator Diane Morehouse found that 63 percent of participating communities reported more people taking individual actions to help those living in poverty and that 40 percent of communities are working on systemic poverty reduction efforts (e.g., jobs creation, skills training, micro-enterprise, or business development). Moreover, 34 percent of participating communities reported that people new to leadership roles have been elected to public office, and in 39 percent of the communities, more people have joined local boards, clubs, service or other organizations. Seventy-five percent of the Horizons communities report that decisions about what happens in the community now involve more people, and 77 percent report that there are now more partnerships among local community organizations.

> When asked to name the 'most significant continuing activity,' [respondents] could seldom confine themselves to one, and named 77 activities they considered significant, including community gardens and farmer's markets, parks, trails (one with a $1.2 million grant), and recreational opportunities, community and community resource centers, scholarships for low income children and families for daycare, after school programming and recreation, including Boys and Girls' clubs, car repair and home maintenance programs,

and in (at least) five communities, the establishment of community foundations (Morehouse, 2009, p. 2).

One limitation of these findings is that they are based on self-reporting by participants and do not show whether poverty rates or other measures of economic opportunity or equity were affected by the project. But the focus on broadening local leadership offers ample ground for scholars who, like Hahrie Han (2016), are interested in how collective models of engagement produce and support community activists and organizers.

A second large-scale project inspired by Horizons, called "Turning the Tide on Poverty," applied a similar approach to communities in the Southeast. In that process, 65 percent of the post-survey respondents reported that they had volunteered to help with an identified community activity (Beaulieu & Welborn, 2009). A subsequent evaluation showed that 81 percent of respondents who had participated in at least four sessions reported joining an action team; 39 percent of respondents volunteered after participating in three or fewer sessions. Moreover, 15 percent of all the volunteers indicated that this was their first time taking action in the community (Beaulieu & Welborn, 2012).

Have these kinds of outcomes been sustained over the last several years? Is it possible that they have moved the needle on poverty rates and economic inequities? Further research on these projects is a potential source of insights on the connections between deliberation and action, and on the economic impacts of engagement.

Do Stronger Networks from Sustained Engagement Boost Economic Opportunity?

Some scholars and advocates of participation believe that when more people have a voice in public decisions, the resulting policies will be more equitable economically. But if engagement does indeed have economic impacts, either in the Global South or in the United States, it may be that policy changes are not, in fact, the reason. The "social capital" effects of sustained engagement may be creating and strengthening networks that broaden economic opportunity.

This hypothesis was proposed most famously by Robert Putnam (1995) 20 years ago, when he asserted in "Bowling Alone" that social capital was related to political stability and economic success. It may be that sustained engagement, because it strengthens community networks, makes it easier for people to find jobs or find supports that help them work, such as child care or transportation.

There is at least some agreement among labor economists that networks are critical for job-seekers (Kwon & Adler, 2014).

One of the most ambitious attempts to test this question was the "Soul of the Community" study, supported by the Knight Foundation and the Gallup Corporation (www.soulofthecommunity.org), which tested Putnam's thesis through a methodology based on random telephone surveys in 26 U.S. communities. While the institutions that Putnam originally identified as bastions of social capital did not seem to have substantive economic impacts, the study did find a strong correlation between general feelings of "community attachment" and economic growth. Furthermore, the researchers believe that this is a causal relationship—stronger feelings of citizens' attachment to the place where they live drive economic growth and prosperity, not the other way around.

But the project, which is no longer gathering data, was unable to show what kinds of participation activities and projects most profitably affect community attachment, pointing instead to increased "social offerings," positive views of a community's "aesthetics," and a general sense of "openness" to different cultures and groups as the main factors in driving attachment and therefore growth. Furthermore, Soul of the Community did not delve into whether the economic growth brought by attachment was particularly beneficial to low-income people. In short, many important research questions remain.

Does Engagement in the Private Sector Boost Local Economies or Public-Sector Engagement?

Though most of the attention on engagement has focused on processes aimed at public decision-making, workplaces have also used participatory tools and strategies to help people learn, connect with colleagues, make decisions, and improve work processes. This trend is largely attributed to the influence of Japanese management models, such as Total Quality Management, starting in the 1980s. These examples of workplace democracy run the gamut from large corporations where workers get together to improve procedures on the factory floor to worker collaboratives where the employees are the owners and sole decision-makers for the organization. One of the central ideas in workplace engagement is that businesses can tap into more of the skills, ideas, and energy of their employees by giving them more autonomy and responsibility.

In the early 1990s, these more participatory management practices were introduced to many governments as part of the wave of reforms referred to as "reinventing government" (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). They involved techniques

such as facilitated small-group discussions that mirror successful public participation tactics, giving some rank-and-file public employees a greater voice in how to increase organizational productivity (Cohen & Brand, 1993; Cohen & Eimicke, 1994). Like some of their counterparts in private companies, some government employees gained at least a small degree of democratic control within the workplace.

In some cases, high levels of engagement in unions and in the workplace seem to have spilled over into the community, creating "more robust forms of community engagement" (Friedman, 2009, p. 58). In an in-depth study of employees at a power plant in Conesville, Ohio, Will Friedman found that:

> [H]abits learned during the working day create deep patterns that are unlikely to be totally confined to the environment in which they are set and there may very well be strong and interesting links between workplace and community democracy. Those with significant, authentic employee involvement experience appear likely to take an approach to community politics that is inclusive, participatory, empowering, and deliberative. (p. 65)

It is even possible—though it was beyond the scope of Friedman's study – that these experiences in the workplace helped produce greater political equality in the community.

Some business and union leaders clearly feel that workplace engagement enhances the productivity of their firms and the well-being of their workers. Does it also enhance the state of the local economy? Should we be considering engagement in the private sector as we explore ways to advance it in the public sector? Can governments and community organizations encourage workplace democracy and economic growth? Would they lead to more equitable outcomes?

Naming and Addressing Issues
of Race, Immigration, and Cultural Difference

The question of whether more equitable participation leads to more equitable outcomes has also been central to discussions of race and difference. Economic opportunity and inequality tends to follow the lines of race, ethnic identity, or immigrant status. Is it even possible to address inequality without talking about race and other kinds of cultural difference? And does raising these issues have long-term or even short-term economic impacts?

Many engagement processes, especially in the United States, have focused on the role of race in public life, especially in areas like policing and immigration. In fact, the need to address cultural differences has been a key driver of innovation in public participation. The projects that emerged in the 1990s after the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson controversies helped set the template for engagement on all kinds of issues. They confirmed the importance of giving people a chance to share their stories and experiences, reinforced the value of impartial facilitators, demonstrated how network-based recruitment could bring in people from populations that were previously considered "hard to reach," and established that many citizens wanted to plan for action in addition to taking part in dialogue. And while many of these projects were prompted by obvious cases of racism and bias, participants showed an appetite for delving into more complex theories of institutional and structural racism. Engagement projects focused on race led to changes large and small, from adjustments in hiring policies to new economic development plans, from new extracurricular activities to the construction of public schools, and from police-sponsored basketball leagues to new police substations (Leighninger, 2006, 2010; Walsh, 2007).

A similar pattern was evident in the 2000s, when an increasing number of local leaders recognized the need to strengthen civic engagement among recent immigrant communities. This led to many different kinds of efforts, including some immigration-focused participation projects that used tactics similar to the processes focused on race. Most of these were one-time efforts, but a few, like the Jane Addams School of Democracy in St. Paul (Leighninger, 2006; Kari & Skelton, 2007), have become sustained elements of civic infrastructure. This work is sometimes described as immigrant "integration." But it became evident that some advocates of integration were making two dubious assumptions: first, that there is already a robust, participatory, empowering civic culture into which we simply need to integrate "those new people"; and, second, that the new people bring nothing to the table, other than perhaps some interesting new kinds of food, music, and art.

The political and cultural traditions that newcomers bring with them, or that already exist in marginalized populations, are sometimes more vibrant, participatory, and democratic than the ones that dominate in American cities. It may be important to understand both the pre-existing economy and civic culture in communities with large immigrant populations, and the economy and civic culture in communities from which immigrants have come, in order to design and sustain engagement in ways that help newcomers and long-term residents build more equitable economies (Mann & Leighninger, 2010).

Has engagement on race and immigration made an impact on economic opportunity or equality? While the efforts to engage citizens on questions of race had many worthwhile outcomes and helped write the playbook of effective participation practices, they did not seem to produce structural changes in how public institutions function. In other words, while they may have affected the decisions made by public officials, school superintendents, and police chiefs, and strengthened relationships between citizens and their public servants, they don't seem to have had lasting effects on the ways that local governments, school systems, and police departments make decisions or interact with the public (Leighninger, 2016). The lack of this kind of progress has become painfully apparent in the last few years, with evidence of entrenched segregation in schools and high-profile incidents of police misconduct. Economically, this work may have had a similar effect of propelling short-term gains but failing to achieve long-term, structural changes. On the other hand, the work on race and immigration may have expanded the sense of "openness" named by the *Soul of the Community* research as a driver of community attachment and economic growth—and may do so in ways that particularly affect political and economic inequality.

To test these hypotheses further, it may be helpful to explore how engagement efforts in other countries have addressed cultural difference. The work of Vera Schattan Coelho (2006), who has studied the development of local health councils among the *quilombolo* (descendents of African slaves) communities of southern Brazil, and Daniel Altschuler and Javier Corrales, who have written about indigenous engagement in Honduran and Guatemalan schools (2013), provide places to start.

Conclusion: Redesigning Systems for Political and Economic Equality

It is vital that we learn more about the economic impacts of engagement, including whether it affects equality of opportunity, equity of outcomes, and overall levels of growth. These are timely questions, not only because the answers may offer useful new strategies but also because they may provide a new economic justification for making governance more participatory and democratic.

Governments certainly could use more reasons to justify their continued existence; there is overwhelming evidence showing that people have lost patience with the parent-child dynamic evident in conventional forms of engagement. Trust in government, and attitudes toward public officials and public institutions, have reached all-time lows (Pew Research Center, 2015). As the relationship deteriorates between the people and their public institutions, the legitimacy and

financial sustainability of governments continue to decline. Many local leaders understand the implications of this shift. They know that the financial pressures facing local governments, school systems, and other public institutions are not just the result of larger economic cycles. "If we think we're going to come out of the economic tough times we're having, and expect everything to go back to normal, we've got another thing coming," says Harry Jones, former county executive of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. "We need to reach out and reframe our relationship with citizens—the people who are the ultimate source of our revenues" (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 25).

Like it or not, our governments may be headed for a drastic overhaul. In terms of their impacts on political and economic inequalities, these changes could be positive or negative—and are likely to be a mix of both. We need to understand how public institutions, including local governments and K-12 school systems, and state and federal institutions, such as Congress, incorporate more productive engagement practices and principles in the way they operate.

We should also recognize that this is not just a question about government, but about governance. A strong, healthy, equitable democracy should benefit every community member, every organization, and every local leader. Public officials and employees can play key roles in improving and sustaining engagement, but they should not dictate the plan—and governments cannot bear the whole burden of implementing it. It is important to explore how governments and school systems can work with foundations, universities, businesses, nonprofit organizations and other groups to support more sustained, efficient, and powerful opportunities for public engagement.

These are ambitious questions. But if we are serious about making our political and economic systems more vibrant and equitable, practitioners and researchers should be taking a broader view of what we are learning about democracy and what we might do to improve it.

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