Assembling Participation Infrastructure

In the previous chapter, we examined the scenarios participation leaders commonly face, and described tactics they could use to grapple with those scenarios. For the most part, however, these more productive forms of participation have not been incorporated into the official arenas for participation in education, health, land use, or any other issue. Planners conduct charrettes and then go back to contentious public hearings; healthy communities coalitions advocate healthier lifestyles, even as advisory committees flounder; school districts engage parents on bond issues while PTAs languish.

It is possible to develop a more sustained and productive system for participation on any one of these issues, without thinking of the others—but it would not be wise. Education, health, and land use are inextricably intertwined, and all three issues overlap with and are affected by a host of other issues, such as poverty, environmental protection, public safety, public finance, and economic development, to name but a few.

Citizens care about their children, their health, and their homes—and they care about many other problems and priorities as well. Instead of continuing to view the world through the professionalized, issue-delineated lenses that we first put on in the early 20th Century, we should embrace the holistic, democratic, citizen-centered view that has emerged in the early 21st Century. We can make progress on all these seemingly intractable public issues if we construct, renovate, or knit together a stronger legal, governmental, civic, electoral, and educational infrastructure for participation. This participation infrastructure should sustain and support regular opportunities, activities, and arenas for people to connect with each other, solve problems, make decisions, and celebrate community.
At the very least, we should not attempt to improve participation on one issue without developing some understanding of how these improvements could complement the settings and opportunities available for other issues. Although we may not often be able to create a new “big picture” for participation all at once, we can develop it in such a way that, like starting with the corners and then the edges of the puzzle, they fit together well with other current and future components.

In this chapter, we explore how the pieces of a stronger infrastructure can fit together. Specifically, we describe additional structures and supports that can connect and sustain participation in any issue, suggest some ways of helping people envision a stronger participation infrastructure, and lay out some guiding principles for infrastructure planning.

**CONNECTING THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR PARTICIPATION**

The sections on “Strengthening the Infrastructure” in Chapters 4 through 7, and the corresponding figures within the sections, describe six main building blocks for participation infrastructure: disseminating information, gathering input and data, discussing and connecting, enabling smaller-scale decision making, enabling larger-scale decision making, and encouraging public work.

Some of the settings and processes that can support these building blocks already exist in many communities. For example, we explored and suggested ways to improve participation in parent-teacher conferences, school boards, and PTAs and other parent groups (Chapter 4); patient-caregiver interactions, advisory boards and commissions, and healthy community coalitions (Chapter 5); public meetings, planning commissions, and neighborhood and homeowner associations (Chapter 6); and in legislative and agency actions and decisions at the state and federal levels of government (Chapter 7). We also described a number of more cutting-edge vehicles and tactics for participation in education, health, and land use, as well as in state and federal government. These examples of democratic innovation are inspiring, but tantalizingly isolated from one another. Taking stock of the civic assets within a community and deciding which work well, which exist but need to be upgraded, and where there are gaps, is a practical way to approach infrastructure planning. There are also some obvious “universal pieces” that can support and connect participation infrastructures in many different issue areas. We described three of them extensively in other chapters:
- **Hyperlocal and local online networks.** This category of infrastructure is already rapidly growing, and holds great potential for connecting participation in many different issue areas.

- **Buildings that are physical hubs for participation.** The political philosopher Hannah Arendt is said to have remarked that “Democracy needs a place to sit down.” Communities need accessible, welcoming, wired public spaces for participation on a range of issues.

- **Youth councils.** Perhaps the most undervalued of our civic assets, youth leadership should be cultivated and supported in settings specifically for young people.

One final universal piece that can support and connect participation in different arenas and issue areas is the use of participation commissions.

### Participation Commissions

A local participation commission (or advisory board) can advise a community on the design, implementation, and evaluation of public participation tactics, and more broadly on building and embedding a sustainable participation infrastructure. Such a commission could be an official body constituted by local government, or a stand-alone entity recognized and supported by a range of community institutions, such as foundations, governments, school systems, Chambers of Commerce, and interfaith councils and faith institutions. At the state and federal levels, participation commissions could assist local efforts, support state and federal participation, and connect the work of people and groups inside and outside government.

A commission or board could have one or more of the following responsibilities:

1. Develop and propose a multi-year plan to guide public participation activities, programs, and policies;

2. Develop guidelines and recommendations for inclusive, effective public participation;

3. Provide advice and recommendations regarding the implementation of public participation guidelines and practices;

4. Establish participation measures, publicize and review the results, and help people use the results to improve participation policies and practices; and/or

5. Provide an annual report regarding the status of public participation activities.
A public participation commission or board ought to be constituted in a way that ensures geographically, demographically, and ideologically representative membership. It should adopt its own rules and bylaws, mirroring successful participation practices and including ways for larger numbers of citizens to contribute to the work of the commission (Working Group on Legal Frameworks for Public Participation, 2013).

One way for participation commissions to connect people working in different neighborhoods, communities, and issue areas—and to raise the profile of participation itself—would be to hold a large-scale deliberative process every year. This expectation could be codified in a local participation ordinance, or it could simply be part of a long-term participation plan upheld by a range of local institutions (for more information on public deliberation, see Chapter 8).

SYSTEMIC SUPPORTS FOR PARTICIPATION

In previous chapters, we discussed a number of systemic supports that can be incorporated into participation infrastructures. Here, we identify three additional supports that can buttress participation by helping people develop their skills for organizing, facilitating, clarifying, and measuring it.

Local Participation Ordinances

As we noted in previous chapters, most of the laws governing public participation are at least thirty years old; one of the most notorious, California’s Brown Act, just turned sixty. Because these laws predate not only many of the innovations in face-to-face engagement, but also the Internet itself, it is unclear how they apply to:

- Social media platforms used by public officials and public employees;
- Participation by public officials and public employees in neighborhood online forums, email listservs, and other online arenas;
- Participation by public officials and public employees in small-group dialogue and deliberation as part of larger public engagement efforts;
- Use of online tools to announce and proactively recruit for public meetings (rather than the old formula still found in many laws, which require governments simply to post a notice about a meeting in a city bulletin); and
- Collaboration between public institutions and private, nonprofit, charitable, and faith-based institutions in organizing and supporting public participation.
In all of these scenarios, our laws ought to uphold the values of participation, transparency, privacy, inclusion, fairness, and freedom of speech. But in many cases, it is now difficult to decipher the letter or intent of the law.

One reason why there is more sustained participation in some countries in the Global South may be that they have newer constitutions and a more open‐minded approach to the legal framework for participation. Participatory budgeting in Brazil and the Gram Sabha reforms in India have made productive participation a legally accepted and supported part of politics (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

In the United States, a working group that includes representatives from the International Municipal Lawyers’ Association, International City/County Management Association, American Bar Association, National League of Cities, National Civic League, Policy Consensus Initiative, National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, and Deliberative Democracy Consortium has worked to produce new legal tools, including a model local ordinance for public participation (Working Group on Legal Frameworks for Public Participation, 2013). The model ordinance is intended to allow innovation, not require it. “We took as our inspiration the laws on alternative dispute resolution (ADR) enacted during the 1980s and 90s,” says Lisa Blomgren Bingham (Working Group on Legal Frameworks, 2013: 6) of Indiana University, a public administration scholar who took the lead drafting role for the working group. “Simply by authorizing public agencies to use mediation, facilitation, and other ADR processes, those laws resulted in a dramatic proliferation of these practices at every level of the legal system.”

Citizens’ Academies and Other Participation Training Programs
To be successful, most of the building blocks described in this book require that the people developing and staffing participation activities have certain skills, many of which are described in the Participation Skills Module (see www.wiley.com/go/nabatchi). In many cities, the participation “skill base” is not deep enough to meet this challenge. In other places, the skills are there but so diffused throughout the community that it is not easy to find the people who could be helpful. Within city hall, these capacities are sometimes limited to a small cadre of public employees working out of departments for neighborhood services or human relations.

Many communities have “citizens’ academies” or other training programs that are designed to boost public participation. However, these programs are often limited to informing participants about “how government works”—for example, how to apply for a zoning variance or how the police department deploys officers
(Morse, 2012). These may be important facts for citizens to know, but they are insufficient for supporting robust public participation.

Nevertheless, citizens’ academies and other training programs have huge potential for supplying the kinds of skills and supports needed for a sustainable participation infrastructure. Specifically, they could be used to inform citizens about why participation is important, issue areas where participation could be useful, and skills that are necessary for improving participation in practice. Moreover, these training programs will work best when:

- They are provided as part of an ongoing program that can train large numbers of people over time.
- Participants are recruited proactively, with a special emphasis on reaching segments of the community that historically have been marginalized or underrepresented.
- The curricula and content are publicly available online and in the different languages spoken in the community.
- They help prepare and recruit citizens for membership on public commissions and advisory boards.
- Citizens, public officials, and public employees take part in the trainings together (sometimes as trainers, sometimes as trainees) so that they learn the same skills and build relationships with the other participants.

**Online Participation Dashboards**

In Part Two of this book, we discussed the use of online dashboards for sparking participation on numerous issues; however, online dashboards can also be used more broadly as supports for participation infrastructure. Specifically, they can be used to track data like turnout, demographics, and participant satisfaction and to make that information publicly available online. In doing so, dashboards can help organizers and participants measure the quality of participation efforts and decide how to improve them.

Some state and local governments are already using performance dashboards to help people visualize spending and program performance by agencies and departments. These online platforms show “how we can much better evaluate and communicate government programs,” writes Pete Peterson (2013). There also dashboards for civic indicators, such as state and local versions that use the Civic Health
Index methodology created by the National Conference on Citizenship (2010). These indices take some of the “meta-data” about citizen engagement, such as rates of voting and volunteerism, and track them over time. Although these kinds of dashboards are valuable and revealing, they would be even more helpful if they allowed communities to track finer-grained data about particular participation efforts.

One of the biggest challenges to evaluating public participation efforts is gathering the data, even on simple measures like turnout. But by following the approach and using some of the technological tools inherent in online platforms, communities can tap the capacity of citizens to contribute. “An online platform to evaluate public participation can provide benefits to all the involved parties by lowering the costs of data collection and data sharing,” write Mariana Becerril-Chavez, Katharyn Lindemann, Jack Mayernik, and Joe Ralbovsky (2012: 23).

ENVISIONING STRONGER PARTICIPATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Grand plans are made of small elements. Like arraying puzzle pieces on a table, identifying potential building blocks and systemic supports makes it possible to envision how participation infrastructure might actually look and work.

Many different and complementary visions are possible at all levels of government. For example, in Bringing Citizen Voices to the Table, Carolyn Lukensmeyer (2013) suggests several infrastructure components that support national democracy, including: (1) a legislative mandate for participation, (2) safe, accessible physical spaces, (3) broader access to technology, (4) a facilitation infrastructure, (5) an organizational infrastructure, (6) a trustworthy, fact-based media, and (7) robust civic education. Similarly, many things can be done to support the creative process of envisioning a stronger local participation infrastructure. Here we suggest five: making it clear that participation is a cross-sector priority; using plainer, more compelling language; encouraging both progressive and conservative visions of and prescriptions for participation; providing visual aids, like charts and maps; and encouraging artistic expressions of future forms of democracy.

Making It Clear That Participation Is a Cross-Sector Priority

In Chapters 4 through 6, we described the official, governmental settings for public participation in education, health, and land use, and suggested ways to improve them. We also pointed out that many organizations and networks have a current or potential role in public participation. On almost every issue, from public safety
to public finance, one could assemble similar lists of extra-institutional allies with a stake in participation.

It should be clear from these descriptions that public participation is more than a governmental responsibility. A strong, healthy local democracy is something that benefits every community member, every organization, and every local leader. City hall can play a key role in improving and sustaining local democracy, but it should not dictate the plan and it cannot bear the whole burden of implementing it. The Institute for Local Government (n.d.: 3–4) urges public officials to develop “mutual partnerships” by engaging with “neighborhood and community organizations to involve their members, or through these groups to involve the wider community, in appropriate public engagement activities over time. In some cases this may include structured relationships/agreements between neighborhood associations or community groups with . . . local government departments.”

It may be that community foundations, along with other nonprofit groups that have a long-term stake in the community and are above the political fray, are best positioned to convene infrastructure planning efforts (Gibson & Leighninger, 2013). In any case, planning for stronger participation infrastructure should be a cross-sector, collaborative endeavor.

Using Plainer, More Compelling Language

“Participation infrastructure” is a dry and abstract-sounding term. Furthermore, the term “public participation” is often used interchangeably with many other civic synonyms, such as public engagement, democratic governance, citizen participation, participatory democracy, civic engagement, public involvement, citizen-centered work, public work, and public deliberation (Lee & Polletta, 2010; Nabatchi, 2014; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014; Thomas & Leighninger, 2010). None of these terms is likely to grab the attention of the average person, let alone serve as a rallying cry for change. Participation leaders can use plainer, more compelling language to describe the potential features and benefits of a more participatory community. The “Civic Utopia” example in Box 9.1, which was developed by the Community Matters Partnership convened by the Orton Family Foundation, is one example of how to do this.

Encouraging Both Progressive and Conservative Visions

Participation is often stereotyped as a “liberal” project, despite the fact that some of the most interesting innovations, such as the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly, came from the imaginations of right-of-center public officials—and despite the fact
Box 9.1. Civic Utopia Combining Democratic Innovations to Create the Community We Want

A Vision Statement from the Community Matters Partnership

What is the future of civic engagement and local democracy? Two years ago, a set of organizations convened by the Orton Family Foundation began meeting around this question. All of the groups were involved in helping communities engage citizens or build community, but in very different ways—from online engagement to face-to-face dialogue, from public deliberation to community development, from grantmaking to placemaking.

Through these conversations, the organizations realized that our different perspectives and areas of expertise could be combined into a common, compelling vision about the kinds of communities people want. We formed the Community Matters Partnership to help communities work on their own visions:

- Imagine living in a neighborhood that had inviting public spaces, indoors and outdoors, attracting all kinds of people.
- Imagine going to a city council, school board, or zoning meeting and spending most of the time in a small-group discussion where you were able to learn, listen, talk—and feel like your views would contribute to policy decisions.
- Imagine living in a community with a steady supply of small grants available for teams of everyday people to work on local problems.
- Imagine living in a city where your ideas and projects were considered when shaping the city budget.
- Imagine being part of an online neighborhood network you could tap into quickly and easily to ask questions like: “Who can recommend a good plumber?” “Who has a canoe I can borrow?,” “What is in the school system’s redistricting plan?”
- Imagine being able to report public problems—from potholes and graffiti to low test scores at the grade school—in a way that captured the attention of public decision-makers and that gave you opportunities to help solve the problem.
- Imagine having an easily accessible map of your neighborhood that showed what new buildings were being proposed, what zoning issues were on the horizon, and how you could take part in those decisions.
- Imagine a school in which you and other parents met regularly with the teacher to discuss how things were going in the classroom.
- Imagine living in a community with a system of youth councils that gave students the chance not only to learn leadership skills for the future, but to exercise leadership in the present.

For more information, see www.communitymatters.org/
that evidence about the aggregate impact of thick participation on public opinion does not suggest a left-leaning bias (Weiksner, Gastil, Nabatchi, & Leighninger, 2012). Nevertheless, the language used to advance participation is commonly associated with “liberal” or “left-leaning” terms and goals, such as equality (of voice and opportunity), concern for the disenfranchised, and appeals to consensus and community. Participation can also be articulated in “conservative” or “right-leaning” terms and goals, such as non-governmental action, local authority, and the power of citizens to control public decisions and spending. Prime Minister David Cameron’s vision of the “Big Society” in the United Kingdom could be considered a conservative picture of civic infrastructure (Peterson, 2010).

Both as an inspiring vision and as a practical plan, the need for stronger participation infrastructure should be couched in both progressive and conservative ways. We should describe the challenge in ways that invite responses and prescriptions from all political parties and across the ideological spectrum (Nabatchi, 2014).

**Using Visual Aids, Like Charts and Maps**

Using charts that describe the kinds of activities that are (or will be) happening in a more participatory community can help supplement and clarify the language of participation. The “Participation Infrastructure” figures in Chapters 4 through 7 could serve as visual aids that elucidate participation activities in different issue areas. Other charts such as the “Spectrum of Public Engagement Activities” produced by the Democratic Governance Panel of the National League of Cities (Leighninger & Mann, 2011) could be adapted to show the range of participatory activities happening in a community.

A second way of providing visual aids is to map the activities taking place in a community. In Chapter 8, we explored mapping as a specific participatory tactic; here, we suggest that mapping can be done more broadly. Interactive maps that encompass a wide range of local information, including opportunities for participation, can be extremely useful for helping people to take stock of the settings, vehicles, and hubs of participation—to see what is available, what is coming, and where there are gaps.

**Encouraging Artistic Expressions of Democracy**

Finally, envisioning a stronger participation infrastructure can be facilitated by tapping into citizens’ creative impulses and encouraging more artistic expressions
of how participation infrastructure might look. A fairly common practice in land use planning and visioning is to invite participants to take photographs or draw pictures of places in their community that they value or that need upgrading. This same approach can be used to more broadly imagine the possibilities for participation infrastructure in communities.

Inspired by the work of artist Leandro Erlich (shown in the bottom right corner), Figure 9.1 uses physical architecture as a scaffold for participation opportunities. Figure 9.2 offers a map of online communities around the world. Both figures provide creative examples of what a civic infrastructure might look like. Another artistic expression, suggested by John Stephens (forthcoming), is to use the human body as a metaphor for the body politic. Using these kinds of analogies, along with their own artistic impulses, people may be able to envision participation infrastructure in ways that are more compelling, understandable, and fun.

Figure 9.1
The Architecture of Participation Infrastructure
Creating grand visions of how participation infrastructure might look, and surveying the potential components of such an infrastructure, can be inspiring but also daunting. Communities ought to embrace this challenge, at regular intervals,
in the same way that land use comprehensive plans are devised and revised every few years. But if this is not possible, all is not lost. The fact is that most of the time, most of us do not have realistic chances to re-imagine how our communities should work—or, at least, we do not have realistic chances to implement those visions. It is much more likely that we can change how participation works in the context of a single neighborhood, a single school, or a single issue area (although we still need to contemplate and understand potential effects on other settings and issues).

Although that kind of piecemeal approach may not be as inspiring, it is also not as daunting. It reflects the fact that most infrastructures, whether they are physical, technological, or conceptual, are not built all at once. They are assembled over time, with different people and organizations taking a hand in different places. One might even argue that the idea of grand plans revisited periodically is itself a relic of early 20th Century Progressive thinking. The 21st Century mode of planning (and replanning), exemplified by shared resources like Wikipedia, is piecemeal, collective, collaborative, crowdsourced, and constant. Instead of a grand plan, we need a series of smaller plans that are united through their common principles and practices—what Abhi Nemani (2014), one of the founders of Code for America, calls a system of “small (city) pieces, loosely joined.” If this book describes more participatory forms of governance—democracy with a small “d”—then perhaps these systems are best constructed in small “d” democratic ways.

What, then, are those common principles of small “d” democratic planning for small “d” democratic infrastructure? No matter what issue or geographic jurisdiction they are working on, planners of participation infrastructure ought to:

- Cross silos within government and between different sets of experts;
- Understand and articulate the broader context and reasons why people might want to participate, going beyond the specific policy decision to the bigger picture;
- Find out where citizens are already assembled, face-to-face and online, and how to tap into those settings;
- Assemble people in new settings and in ways that make further assembly and reassembly more likely;
- Map everything, and make those maps transparent and responsive;
- Build databases and other repositories of information on the community and people who live there;
Facilitate accountability as much as possible—by giving participants decisions to make and/or by giving decision-makers many chances to respond; and
Measure participation in ways that match with other measurement efforts and allow citizens to be part of the measuring.

With these principles in mind, it is also important to remember that participation infrastructure can be built in many different ways. In some places, there may already be so many civic assets and opportunities for citizens that little actual building is necessary; rather, efforts would be focused on improving the settings and opportunities and connecting them with one another as part of an overarching community plan. In other communities, there may be more gaps in the civic picture, and new building blocks must be added to fill them. Some places may be able to create a comprehensive plan for participation infrastructure all at once, whereas other communities may make slower, more incremental progress. Every place is likely to have its own unique culture of participation.

But however it is built, however slowly or quickly it develops, and whatever it looks like in the long run, the participation infrastructure has to work—both for the individuals it serves and the institutions it encompasses. Builders of participation infrastructure must periodically ask several questions:

- Why will people care about this?
- How will it serve our needs as citizens?
- Why will people participate?
- How will this make the work of public officials, public employees, and other stakeholders easier, more effective, and more gratifying?

To the extent possible, they must develop ways of measuring and benchmarking their answers to these questions.

Above all, the local infrastructure for participation must reflect the needs and goals of ordinary people. Generating broader public understanding and ownership of participation infrastructure may be important—and may even be absolutely necessary—for building and sustaining that infrastructure. As John Stephens and Matt Leighninger (forthcoming) write:

The democratic principles that animate this work suggest that citizens should, as a matter of right, have a say in how their communities function. If they do not, the design of civic infrastructure could
be yet another aspect of public life that is controlled and concealed by a small elite. In other words, the public should have the opportunity to participate in designing, supporting, and improving public participation.

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter, we made the case for holistic models of participation infrastructure. While it is possible to strengthen the infrastructure for one issue, we argued that communities are better off taking a more multi-faceted, citizen-centered view of participation. Efforts to renovate official settings and create new opportunities for participation should be connected to other pieces, so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

There are no “cookie-cutter” recipes for this work: every community should develop ideas and plans that fit local needs, assets, and goals. To help assemble the participation infrastructure for a community, we identified several “universal pieces” that would help people address many different issues and challenges, including hyperlocal and local online networks, buildings that are physical hubs for participation, and youth councils. The most helpful piece may be participation commissions, which can advise communities and agencies on the design, implementation, and evaluation of public participation tactics, as well as on building and embedding a sustainable participation infrastructure. Next, we turned to some of the systemic supports that are needed for participation infrastructure and specifically examined local participation ordinances, citizens’ academies and other training programs, and online participation dashboards.

With these pieces and supports in mind, it becomes easier to envision how a stronger participation infrastructure might actually look and work. We suggested five ways to support the creative process of envisioning a stronger participation infrastructure in communities: making it clear that participation is a cross-sector priority; using plainer, more compelling language; encouraging both progressive and conservative prescriptions for participation; providing visual aids; and encouraging artistic expressions. Finally, we suggested that more participatory forms of governance are best constructed in participatory ways. To that end, we identified several common principles of small “d” democratic planning for small “d” democratic infrastructure.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the opening of this chapter, the authors assert that more productive forms of participation are not often incorporated into the official settings for participation in education, health, land use, or any other issue. Why do you think this is the case?

2. Develop a plan for creating a participation commission in your community or for an issue. Where would it be housed? Who would be on it? What would be its responsibilities?

3. Do you believe it is important to develop a local participation ordinance? Why or why not?

4. Does your community have a citizens’ academy or other training programs? If so, what is the current curriculum for that program? Does it include participation? How might participation be incorporated into that program?

5. The authors assert that the language of participation is not clear or compelling, and that it fails to capture both progressive and conservative visions. Do you agree with these claims? Why or why not? What are your suggestions for talking about participation in a way that is exciting and understandable to people, regardless of their political views?

6. How would you go about mapping the participation activities taking place in your community? What information, opportunities, and other ideas are available? Where are the gaps?

7. Channel your inner creative genius and develop an artistic expression of a participation infrastructure. Why did you make the choices you made?

8. Some have suggested using analogies to explain the idea of a participation infrastructure, for example, likening it to a human body or to physical architecture. What analogy or analogies would you use to explain participation infrastructure?

9. What do the authors mean by small “d” democratic planning and small “d” democratic infrastructure? Do you agree with the common principles of democratic planning for democratic infrastructure? Why or why not? What would you add or eliminate?
10. What are the tradeoffs between grand visions and piecemeal approaches to developing a local participation infrastructure? Which approach do you think is better and why? How would you go about engaging others in discussions about developing stronger participation infrastructure in your community?

References


