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Citizen Participation in the Age of Contracting: When Service Delivery Trumps Democracy

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Citizen Participation in the Age of Contracting: When Service Delivery Trumps Democracy examines how and why public and private managers look to engage citizen participation in contract governance. Beginning in the 1960's two trends emerged: government contracting with the private sector for social services delivery and opportunities to engage citizens in governance. The authors' study focuses on the nexus of these trends by examining the use of citizen participation in social service contracts. The authors' literature review makes up the first two chapters. They summarize their methods in the third chapter, presenting them in greater detail in the appendices. They discuss the study's results in chapters four through eight. The authors' overall conclusion is that contract managers have not effectively engaged citizens in contract governance.

The authors arrived at their overall conclusion using information from 93 semi-structured interviews of government, not-for-profit, and for-profit contract managers selected from a sample of six counties across four states in the Northeast United States. The managers oversee contracts for delivery of human and social services between the counties and private contractors. The 93 interviews included 55 private managers and 38 government managers. The authors conducted telephone interviews using one of two question sets depending on whether the subject was in the private or public sector. They coded and analyzed the transcripts using qualitative analysis software based on the major and minor themes found in their extensive literature review.

I consider the literature review the strength of the book. Chapter one presents a comprehensive examination of the evolution of citizen participation in the United States. The authors take readers on a tour of U.S. history paralleling the evolution of citizen participation and the development of public administration. They describe the formative years as one dominated by wealthy landowners. Jacksonian Democracy provided citizens with increased access to government decision making and employment. The start of the industrial revolution and the growth of the nation saw the rise of a Progressive Movement and focus on a professional administration. Next followed a period emphasizing democratic ideals and the

use of mechanisms designed to collect and use citizen feedback to manage government programs. New Public Administration (NPA) dominated the next period in U.S. history. The highlight of the NPA period included Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the rise of the human and social service programs that are the focus of the authors' research. New Public Management (NPM) became the next major period with a focus on efficiency and effectiveness. During this period, citizen participation was deemphasized at the federal level but became a more dominant feature of local governance. The authors assert that NPM gave way to New Public Service after the work of Denhardt and Denhardt (2000). The focus of this period is on citizenship, community, and civil society. The authors finally arrive at the present, labeling the first 20 years of the 21st Century as the Age of Contracting.

The authors present a review of the literature focusing on citizenship in action in the second chapter. The authors choose to apply a broad view of citizenship in their study. One that includes behavioral, social, economic, and demographic characteristics. The authors next describe five roles citizens play in a democracy: acting as mere subjects, voters, customers or clients of services, interest group memberships, and more involved activism. They posit that citizenship is not static but dynamic. A citizen's characteristics and the types of issues influence the degree or level of their participation and its intensity. The authors assert that organizers need to consider this when deciding on the methods of citizen participation to employ. The traditional mechanisms of participation named by the authors include public hearings, community meetings, citizen advisory boards, surveys, and citizen-initiated contacts. Using their interviews of government and private contract managers, the authors look to understand how privatization or contracting of public services influences citizen participation, both the level and intensity, and whether contracting results in the use of non-traditional mechanisms of participation.

The authors conclude that citizen engagement is valuable but limited by the choice of engagement mechanisms and their focus. The authors reveal in chapters four and five that public and private contract managers make limited use of innovative engagement techniques. The authors also point to the limited amount of empirical research available focusing on the effects of mechanisms and the extent and intensity of participation. In chapter six, the authors address the cost of engagement. Citizen engagement in contracting has high transaction costs associated with a perceived loss of managerial control over the program and longer decision-making windows. Other challenges include the citizen's willingness to engage in and whether they have enough knowledge about the services. The authors also note that prior research reveals that citizen motivation to engage is based on self-interest rather than the public good. The focus of chapter seven is on the motivation of managers to engage citizens. The authors note the prevalence of certain motivating factors, including the desire to engage citizens on treatment decisions, improving administrative processes, and program promotion. The authors conclude that engagement is more symbolic than operational or strategic. In chapter eight, the authors note that their interviews revealed contract managers focused more on customer service issues such as service quality and offerings rather than sharing in governance issues. Managers, they conclude, are missing an opportunity to engage citizens more deeply in governance instead of merely meeting managerial goals and objectives.

The findings from the interviews illustrate that engagement of citizen participation in contracts for social services is underutilized. Private and public managers use citizen input mostly for program delivery issues such as the quality and variety of services offered, effectively reducing the input to 'customer service' evaluations. Managers are not using citizen engagement effectively in strategic planning and decision making. This missed opportunity points to a need to focus attention on how to move beyond the more traditional mechanisms used to obtain citizens' inputs and increased innovation on how it is employed. There are several thoughts left for the reader to consider. There is still much to learn about citizen engagement and participation, and what we know comes exclusively from the management or program side of the equation. Little of the research looks at engagement and participation

from the citizens' point of view. Practitioners need to think creatively in their efforts to engage citizens in contract governance. I highly recommend the book to practitioners and students because of its thorough literature review and interesting conclusions. It will not surprise anyone who reads it but should encourage students and practitioners to think 'outside the box' on citizen engagement.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Author Biography

Carl J. Gabrini is an assistant professor at Dalton State College. He holds a PhD in Public Administration from Florida State University, a master's degree in taxation from the University of Central Florida and holds an active CPA license issued by the State of Florida. He has held various professional positions over 25 years prior to entering academia.