



# Citizen participation in the age of contracting: When service delivery trumps democracy

Brad A. M. Johnson

To cite this article: Brad A. M. Johnson (2019) Citizen participation in the age of contracting: When service delivery trumps democracy, Journal of Public Affairs Education, 25:4, 558-561, DOI: [10.1080/15236803.2019.1658491](https://doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2019.1658491)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2019.1658491>



Published online: 12 Sep 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 41



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

**Citizen participation in the age of contracting: When service delivery trumps democracy**, by A. A. Amirkhanyan and K. T. Lambright, New York, Routledge, 2017, \$150.00 (hardback), \$54.95 (paperback).

**The professionalization of public participation**, edited by L. Bherer, M. Gauthier and L. Simard, New York, Routledge, 2017, \$165.00 (hardback), \$48.95 (paperback).

Public involvement is an increasingly common endeavor for the contemporary public manager raising important questions about how administrators should navigate these processes. While these tasks have always been inherent in government, their codification and professionalization has neatly aligned with the era of new public management. An emphasis on contracting out functions to external entities has created a tension with public administration values. This tension has led some scholars to argue that the best way to mitigate the issues with privatization is to emphasize democratic values (Bryson, Crosby, & Bloomberg, 2014). The combination of these trends relates to the emergence of an entirely new role: the public participation professional. Along with associated advocacy groups these practitioners have established professional organizations, best practices, and certifications. Public agencies have increasingly incorporated these tools and actors into standard processes for policy debate and implementation. Filling a relatively open space, two recently published books provide insight into how the emerging field of public participation is undertaken and contracted out. As a pair, they provide useful insight into the current state of public involvement, a critical task of both public and nonprofit agencies.

In *Citizen Participation in the Age of Contracting*, Amirkhanyan and Lambright describe the increasingly diverse landscape of citizen participation over time, carefully laying out the role of democratic mechanisms throughout the history of the United States. In contrast to Lambright's more instrumental work in *Public Participation in twenty-first Century Democracy* (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015), the book explores the operationalization of these practices in a contemporary public organization and how they interact with current realities. Using a qualitative review of human services organization contract governance, the text thoroughly looks at the ways in which public participation is being implemented in an American local government system. It is a deep dive into how a subset of public administration has been affected by the desire for democratic accountability. It shows how these interests persist amid a shift to nonprofit and private entities and how the results of these efforts have become increasingly focused on improving the customer experience.

Amirkhanyan and Lambright limit their approach to certain type of process – contract governance – where engagement is relatively circumscribed. One could imagine a text looking at a field more historically associated with public involvement – such as planning – to include a broader set of experiences. However, this is not a limitation but should be appreciated. Public participation has become a significant part of even this type of work and its maintenance as the tasks shift between public, nonprofit, and private actors strikes as a truly honest (if tedious) exploration into the topic. Their study usefully shows the consequences of shifting to external organizations on the public engagement process. Deference is given to public managers which may be a perspective that students share.

First, the book describes the processes of public participation in public affairs through the contracting process: public meetings, surveys, online tools and the like. As a complement to guide to public participation tools and best practices, it instead looks at how the implementation differs between different types of actors. Given the rise of third party organizations to manage and service contracts, a useful contribution is offered by clarifying where public and non-public entities differ in their service delivery. Accepting the common tools of participation as a given, the authors carefully describe how each is affected by a transition to contracting out. In reviewing this corner of participation practice, the authors are also surprised at the limited use of technology. Given the extensive scholarship on the role of e-government tools to increase the role of participation in public processes, they were surprised at its limited penetration.

The book then explores how managers view public involvement and finds quite a divergence from scholarship. While there is a strong interest in democratic values, the use of public involvement is primarily used to improve service delivery at both the macro and micro levels. For the authors, who have written extensively in the public participation space, this seems to come as a surprise. However, it is useful to understanding the motivations and effects of public participation in practice, which has become highly influenced by the customer mindset.

For students interested in the multifaceted nature of public participation today, *Citizen Participation in the Age of Contracting* is a useful introduction. It characterizes the moment as the tension between service delivery and democracy. For managers, an awareness of the aspirational public participation contrasted with the ways that these practices are used helps to refine practice. Public participation professionals have become a thoroughly post-modern administrative practice, emerging in public, private, and other third sector organizations. The nature of the external organization goes a long way in determining the type of public involvement practice utilized. That conflict, however, is important. Despite all of the momentum of public participation in practice, it remains a relatively boutique discipline subject to the whims of public managers and most often used to sharpen service delivery. For a deeper dive into the origins of the profession, a complementary text would be needed as, like many texts of public involvement, Amirkhanyan and Lambright imply that these practices are inherent. For students looking for an understanding of where that motivation comes from another recent text provides a fuller picture.

*Professionalization of Public Participation*, a collection of essays gathered by Bherer, Gauthier, and Simard, weaves a nuanced story that complements *Citizen Participation in the Age of Contracting*. It details the history and background for how public agencies and advocates constructed the public participation professional in multiple contexts including Europe, Canada, and the United States. Key to the text's perspective is that the public participation professional is a new role that emerged out of a participatory imperative evident in both the militant protest movements of the 1960s and contemporaneous laws in the United States. For the U.S. authors, these concerns were first addressed through the works of Arnstein (1969). In Europe, where regulation had been less explicit, the articles describe a movement that catalyzed policies adopted in the 1990s and 2000s in the era of new public management. Trends in the practice were echoed in the United States. These conversations that translated an emerging participation practice into law that was met by the new professional cohort. The editors further highlight the lost momentum of the 2010s as a crossroads for the young field.

The particularly useful contribution of the text is how the authors' different contexts shape how they explain the emergence of the public participation professional and her role. This is especially stark in offering a unique critical perspective of public participation. In the 1990s theories about dialogue and deliberation had moved public

involvement well beyond the common hearings to more structured strategies designed to encourage full participation. These somewhat rigid dictates were difficult to implement, creating a schism in public involvement practice between idealists and practitioners. Moreover, the professionals themselves were sometimes becoming political mediators (as explored by Escobar in the Scottish context).

In the French context, described by Mazeaud and Nonjon, the militant participation practices that emerged in the 1960s over time became the formalized processes adopted across the country in the 1990s. The story of how that transition is one of encouragement by several scholars of the field who essentially invented a notion of public demand. The authors emphasize a chicken and egg problem that is a subtext of much of the essays: was public participation an inherent demand filled by the new policies and practices, or was it something invented by the new professionals. This transition is further clarified in the editors' essay which describes a situation in Quebec where the public participation professionals have become one of the four categories of practitioner, ranging from the original militant mode to a promoter of an initiative whose only goal is to see a project through.

Similarly, the developing tension between academics and practitioners is evident as the field has matured. Kahane and Lopston explore the different frames academics and practitioners in Canada, following along lines commonly seen in public administration. Throughout the essays, academic support for the democratic values – as seen throughout public administration – is seen as substrate for pursuing strategies of public involvement, while practitioners utilized best practices and emphasized what works. While this is no surprise, it often meant potentially losing track of some of the values of total equitable participation.

Several essays (Chilvers, Amelung and Grabner, Escobar) discuss how the field has developed standard best practices. Amelung and Grabner look at three tools of public involvement to see how they have been adopted through best practices and professional networks to find them applied loosely throughout the profession. Interestingly, practices that Amirkhanyan and Lambricht discuss as part and parcel of the process, are explored for how they grew to be adopted and standardized by the wider field. In this way, the text's multiple viewpoints provide a useful exploration in how professionalization developed. Of particular interest is the role of academics and their research.

All the essays suggest a loss of momentum at the end of the 2010s as many of the original practitioners were departing the field, the profession was calcifying, and early nonprofit organizations were stalling out. In this context, the institutionalization that could be seen as a positive – and leads other authors to simply take the public participation process for granted – poses serious challenges to the dialogue and deliberation maxims the authors seemingly emerge from. Thus, Bherer and Gauthier suggest that the evidence for increasing democratization is mixed, sharing a similar conclusion to Amirkhanyan and Lambricht.

Both texts fill a gap in materials available for public administrators learning about the context of the process of public participation. While there exist relatively substantial materials about the tactics of public engagement (such as the aforementioned Nabatchi and Lambricht text), these books are useful for managers looking to understand public participation as a professional endeavor. The diverse landscape of professionals, academics, contractors, and public administrators presents an interesting opportunity. If a historical perspective on the rise of these entities is required, the professionalization of public participation would be preferable.

For administrators more interested in how the field developed, *The Professionalization of Public Participation* is more useful. It offers a somewhat more skeptical perspective of

the emergence of public participation processes that often suggest that demand for these processes was not natural but instead generated by public participation advocates and organizations. This stands in contrast to many texts, including *Citizen Participation in the Age of Public Contracting*, that these processes are just an inherent part of the work of public administrators. For managers who seek to learn how the complex service delivery modes will affect public participation, the latter text is most useful.

Together, the two books combine to contribute a micro level of the complexities added by contracted public involvement and a macro level understanding of the origins of a new profession. For a public manager seeking to understand the processes of public involvement in their organization, *Citizen Participation in the Age of Contracting* and the *Professionalization of Public Participation* provide a comprehensive picture of the fractured evolving mechanisms that undergird the democratic mechanisms common in the contemporary west.

## Notes on contributor

**Brad A. M. Johnson** is a PhD student at North Carolina State University. His research focuses on the interface between organizations and the public, organizational change, and public sector technology.

## References

- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 35(4), 216–224.
- Bryson, J. A., Crosby, B. C., & Bloomberg, L. (2014). Public value governance: Moving beyond traditional public administration and the new public management. *Public Administration Review*, 74(4), 445–456. doi:10.1111/puar.12238
- Nabatchi, T., & Leighninger, M. (2015). *Public participation for the 21st century democracy*. New York, NY: Josey-Bass.

Brad A. M. Johnson  
North Carolina State University  
 [bajohn22@ncsu.edu](mailto:bajohn22@ncsu.edu)

© 2019 Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2019.1658491>

