

## Book Review

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## Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy

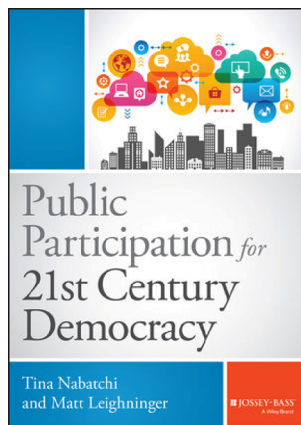
**by: Tina Nabatchi (Author) and Matt Leighninger (Author)**

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Chichester West Sussex PO19 8SQ, England, UK, 368pp**

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*Book presentation from the publishers' webpage*

Written by two leaders in the field, *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* explores the theory and practice of public participation in decision-making and problem-solving. It examines how public participation developed over time to include myriad thick, thin, and conventional opportunities, occurring in both face-to-face meetings and online settings. The book explores the use of participation in various arenas, including education, health, land use, and state and federal government. It offers a practical framework for thinking about how to engage citizens effectively, and clear explanations of participation scenarios, tactics, and designs. Finally, the book provides a sensible approach for reshaping our participation infrastructure to meet the needs of public officials and citizens.

The book is filled with illustrative examples of innovative participatory activities, and numerous sources for more information. This important text puts the spotlight on the need for long-term, cross-sector, participation planning, and provides guidance for leaders, citizens, activists, and others who are determined to improve the ways that participation and democracy function. *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy:*

- helps students and practitioners understand the history, theory, and practice of public participation
- contains a wealth of case studies that explore the application of public participation in different settings
- covers vital issues such as education, health, land use, and state and federal government
- has accompanying instructor resources, such as PowerPoint slides, discussion questions, sample assignments, case studies and research from [www.participedia.net](http://www.participedia.net), and classroom activities.

### *List of chapters and appendices*

#### *Part 1. Participation in a Rapidly Changing Democracy*

- *Chapter 1.* Citizenship, Outside the Public Square
- *Chapter 2.* Good or Bad? Charming or Tedious? Understanding Public Participation
- *Chapter 3.* Pictures from a (R)evolution: The Fitful Development of Public Participation in the United States

#### *Part 2. Participation in Action*

- *Chapter 4.* Participation in Education
- *Chapter 5.* Participation in Health
- *Chapter 6.* Participation in Planning and Land Use
- *Chapter 7.* Participation in State and Federal Government

#### *Part 3. Participation for Democracy, Present and Future*

- *Chapter 8.* Participation Scenarios and Tactics
- *Chapter 9.* Assembling Participation Infrastructure
- *Chapter 10.* Building Democracy

### *Chapter contents*

The book is divided in three parts.

Part 1 is entitled *Participation in a Rapidly Changing Democracy*, and lays out the fundamentals of public participation concepts and trends over time.

Chapter 1, entitled *Citizenship, Outside the Public Square*, discusses the issue of civic participation in public affairs and highlights the fact that public participation constitutes the essence of democratic practices.

In Chapter 2, *Good or Bad? Charming or Tedious? Understanding Public Participation*, the authors give a definition and analyse what they consider as the three types of public participation, namely the thick, thin, and conventional type.

Chapter 3, named *Pictures from a (R)evolution: The Fitful Development of Public Participation in the United States*, presents an historical overview of public participation trends in UDA and how they have changed overtime. The chapter concludes with the analysis of the role of ICT and more specifically the role of social media and their transformative value with regards to public participation.

Part 2 is entitled *Participation in Action*. In this part of the book, concrete domains of the public sphere where public participation is considered as essential are presented, together with specific cases as examples.

In Chapter 4, named *Participation in Education*, the needs for participatory education are illustrated. Schools systems need to be considered as ecosystems where teachers, parents, and other stakeholders involved need to be considered as equal partners in an effort to collaboratively upgrade the educational models.

Chapter 5, entitled *Participation in Health*, discusses the need of the direct involvement of patients in the health policy formulation and raises the issues of collaborative models of co-decision in medical affairs.

In Chapter 6, *Participation in Planning and Land Use*, the role of collaborative models for land regeneration is discussed, taking stock of this domain as a typical case of public interest that involves perspectives and viewpoints from a diverse spectrum of stakeholders.

In Chapter 7, *Participation in State and Federal Government*, the authors stress the need for central government representatives to be involved in what they consider as thick participation, namely in a constructive dialogue with citizens in a continuous way using multiple communication channels independently of conventional public procedures.

Part 3 is entitled *Participation for Democracy, Present and Future*, and embarks on a discussion about effective practices and future perspectives for public participation.

In Chapter 8, entitled *Participation in Scenarios and Tactics*, the case of participatory budgeting is highlighted as an indicative example of successful participatory civic engagement and easily replicable participatory model of civic action.

Chapter 9, named *Assembling Participation Infrastructure*, focuses on the value of exploring infrastructures as participatory mechanisms.

In the final chapter on *Building Democracy* the authors conclude that the way ahead in the area of democratic participation is to consider civic action and civic involvement in public affairs as the only possible way to achieve political and social change and innovation.

### *Significance for the state of research and practice*

According to article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN, 1966) every citizen has the right and opportunity to

- take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives
- vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors
- have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his country.

Over the last decade public participation has received increased attention within different academic domains and societal sectors emphasising its power as a key component of democratic societies. It is considered to be a remedy for political apathy, citizens disengagement, as the only way to renew public trust and return credibility and legitimacy to all levels of government.

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2015) “Public participation is the bedrock on which democracy rests. It enriches democracy – including by helping to ensure better decision-making and strengthening politicians’ accountability to the people. It helps build strong democratic parliaments – which in turn play a vital role in ensuring peace, development and respect for human rights worldwide. Taking part in democracy is something that everyone can and should do, at different levels and in different ways”. Or, “for public participation to be most effective, there needs to be space for civil society to actively operate”, as highlighted in the United Nations for Democracy Day 2015.

But what are those characteristics of public participation and how do these manifest themselves in different sociopolitical environments in the 21st century? What does this entail in different sectors of our everyday lives such as education, health, land use, and state and federal government?

*Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* offers a comprehensive overview of the history, the theory and the practice of public participation emphasising on who, what and how when it comes to engage citizens effectively and efficiently in USA. It illustrates and discusses concrete examples of successful public participation. The value and the power of collaboration and partnership is highlighted as cornerstone for the renewal and empowerment of the ‘lost in translation’ much wanted relationship between those who govern and those who are governed. It also raises the issue of designing for public participation processes which according to Nabatchi (2012) can be a very complex endeavor. As Nabatchi notes, “*design choices are not made in a linear fashion*”. Participation processes must fit in the context in which they are taking place.

According to Bryson et al. (2013) effective public participation processes are grounded in analysing the context closely, identifying the purposes of the participation effort, and iteratively designing and redesigning the process accordingly.

### *Significance for managers and instructors*

The discussion on democracy and how to enhance democratic values is today’s timeliest thematic in political and academic agenda. Political discussion has been highlighted by experts as the most valuable democratic tool placing citizens at the centre as the most vital actors for the model of participatory democracy; which is identified as the model which could contribute more to confront the democratic deficit and consequently to lead to good governance (Karamagioli, 2012).

Under this context Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger offer to public officials, civil society actors, community leaders, community developers, and especially policymakers a very useful volume from both a theoretical but also practical perspective that analyses public participation from a holistic and horizontal standpoint. Although it focuses in USA it can be helpful for interested readers from all around the world.

In parallel, thanks to its format that includes PowerPoint slides, discussion questions, sample assignments, case studies and research from [www.participedia.net](http://www.participedia.net), as well as classroom activities, the volume can be a useful manual for students and practitioners and the general public.

The book can be the basis for future research in the areas of policy design for efficient public participation from both a top-down and a bottom-up perspective.

## References

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