# PARTICIPATING IN PARTICIPATION: POLITICS AND CITIZEN POWER

## SEETA PEÑA GANGADHARAN

This paper applies a seminal critique of participatory politics written in the 1960s in relation to modern day experiences of citizen participation. Arnstein's writing on "participating in participation" unmasks the superficiality of online participatory projects and practices.

Participating in participation: Politics and citizen power

In the United States, the past decade been marked by an optimistic discourse about the technologies of political participation in American government. But what power have these tools created? Drawing from earlier criticisms of participatory democracy, this paper provides evidence that citizens are doing little more than participating in participation. Until innovative participatory designs happen alongside commensurate changes among political powerholders, online participation will represent more of democracy's failures than its achievement.

A new wave of optimism

In 2009, the Obama Administration arrived to Washington, D.C., amid a wave of optimism about tools for online participation. Throughout the 2008 election, the Obama campaign developed MyBarackObama.com, a social networking platform designed to engage interested voters and provide them with tools for enlisting volunteers and generating support (Kreiss 2010). In the months before taking office, President Obama and his transition team launched a *Citizen Briefing Book*, a website that invited ordinary citizens to register their hopes and proposals for the Obama Administration and rank individual entries. Shortly after taking office, President Obama declared: "My Administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government." [1]

Illusory involvement

The zeal with which the Obama Administration has embraced online participation is an invitation to reflect on when and whether participatory designs equate with citizen empowerment. As early as the 1960s, observers questioned the gap between participation and influence, suggesting that citizens and communities would remain disempowered if powerholders simply celebrated participation as having happened. Among the most persuasive of these was Sherry Arnstein, a health policy expert involved in community development projects around the country.

In 1969, Arnstein synthesized her experiences into a short critical essay. *A Ladder of Citizen Participation* looks at the palliative effects of participatory projects. According to Arnstein, a significant problem with designs for participation is that they are more concerned with offering participation than taking citizens' concerns seriously. She described that most citizens are invited into policy debates for their appearances rather than for their ideas or to move along debate and influence outcomes. Participants in these scenarios are manipulated by "powerholders... [who] "'educate' or 'cure' the participants" (Arnstein 2003, p. 246) of their problems. As a result, "What citizens achieve in all this activity is that they have 'participated in participation.' And what powerholders achieve is the evidence that they have gone through the required motion of involving 'those people'" (247).

By contrast, Arnstein said that the most laudable form of participation occurs when "have-not citizens obtain the majority of decision-making seats, or full managerial power" (Arnstein, 2003, 247). In other words, successful participation is measured by the extent to which outcomes reflect the concerns, arguments, or proposals of citizens. Arnstein's critique focuses on the substance of citizen participation and the ability for citizen input to move public policy. From her vantage, citizens require a direct means of transforming political outcomes. Failure has scarred "every other means of trying to end the powerlessness" (Arnstein 2003/1969, 246).

When viewed in relation to the routines and demands of American society, Arnstein's push for direct democracy is far from pragmatic. As Young (2006, 2000) argued, the complexity of modern society deters the kind of decision making that Arnstein envisioned. The type of direct democracy implied by Arnstein's critique entails coordination and cooperation of a degree that large, diverse countries like the United States would find nearly impossible. Modern democratic societies demand a system of political representation so that citizen *ideas* and *arguments* have power within political discourse and influence political outcomes. Nevertheless, modifying Arnstein's call for direct democracy does not diminish the persuasiveness of her main argument: participation which is staged for performance, for ticking off a box that indicates participation has happened, does nothing to change structures of power in the political landscape.

Participation's promises and failures

The problem of "participating in participation" unmasks the superficiality of much of the promise of online participation in electronic government. One example of the illusory participation are the "reboot" efforts of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The FCC is the premier regulator of media, communication, and information in the U.S. It creates policies related to the management, ownership, and operation of wireless and wireline communication systems.

When Chairman Julius Genachowski was appointed to the head of the FCC, he pledged to fight for consumers and transform the agency into an "21st century agency for the information age" (Genachowski 2009, 3). He focused participatory reforms on creating new online tools to welcome citizens to the virtual front door of the agency. Soon after his appointment, the agency set upon a path to reform of the electronic means for public participation. From live-streamed, captioned video of its public meetings to a redesigned entire website, to staffers' blogs about their work to a YouTube channel and Facebook page, the FCC broadened its online presence. The agency also created mobile apps that users could install in order to test home broadband speeds began tweeting announcements of its most controversial policy proceedings. Improving public access was paramount in agency that had "communications" in its middle name, according FCC managing director Steven VanRoekel (Howard 2010).

The comprehensiveness with which the FCC has gone about implementation of new forms of online participation is impressive on paper. Within two years, the agency has cultivated a set of digital tools to push and receive information to ordinary individuals and communities. It drew accolades from technology-focused blogs and news services, like *O'Reilly's Radar* and *Ars Technica*. On its own blog, the agency boasted of its innovative efforts, stating that the FCC was "[p]utting citizen skin in the game to make FCC.gov work better for users, and holding us accountable to continual improvement." [2]

Apart from accolades, however, the FCC's record on serving citizens and consumers reflects very little of its talk about empowerment of the non-expert, lay participant in communication policymaking. The

most controversial decisions that have come before the agency since 2009, when Chairman Genachowski came to power, are an ode to conventional, "inside-the-Beltway" policymaking than transformation of FCC culture. The FCC's *Open Internet Order* (2010) concerned the extent to which telecommunications carriers can discriminate in how it manages data traffic over the internet. The decision handed down by the agency excused mobile carriers from anti-discrimination measures, paving the way for price changes in mobile internet access.

The proceeding saw more than 100,000 commenters, many of whom included citizens and their representatives, such as media reform groups, public interest organizations, and community associations. As Arnstein would have predicted, these commenters were recognized not for the arguments they registered with the agency but for the fact of having happened. The final report and order made little attempt to extricate the complexity of the opinions and arguments raised by ordinary opinions. Neither did it seek to answer explicitly to a discourse of concern over industry-friendly internet regulation.

An announcement by Meredith Atwell Baker, one of the commissioners who had voted for lenient internet rules, suggests that participatory reform was a weak proxy for citizen power. Four months, Baker left the FCC to become the chief government relations person for NBC-Comcast, a major supporter of lenient data traffic management rules. Before it had merged with NBC, Comcast led a legal battle to weaken the FCC's ability to institute anti-discrimination rules for internet providers. Baker's move evidences the extent to which government and corporate powers mutually support one. The nexus between state and market deters the ideas of ordinary people and their hopes for how democratic society ought to be governed from having a fair chance of being heard and influencing political outcomes.

We participate, they profit

In the original 1969 publication, Arnstein accompanied her critique with an image of a poster taken from the 1968 student uprisings in Paris. Translated into English, the poster read, "I participate, you participate, he participates, they participate, we participate... they profit." In an era where digital tools for participation abound, government and corporate powers are still profiting from the citizens' involvement in decision making. It legitimates their activities, shows that participation has happened as a matter of procedure, and masks the need to engage with the proposals or demands contained within citizen expressions. Until state and market actors transform how they interact with one another and either intentionally or unintentionally collude to minimize the power of citizen voices, American politics will fail to live up to basic democratic ideals.

**References and Notes:**

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[1] See www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/Citizens_Briefing_Book_Final2.pdf. Also, http://www.whitehouse.gov/open.

[2] See http://www.fcc.gov/blog/delivering-our-open-government-promise