

## Fairness and Competence in Citizen Participation

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*The titles published in this series are listed at the end of this volume.*

# **FAIRNESS AND COMPETENCE IN CITIZEN PARTICIPATION**

## **Evaluating Models for Environmental Discourse**

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utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical,  
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retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner.

We dedicate this book to all the citizens who, at the bidding of researchers, have taken uncertain chances by agreeing to experiment with new forms of public participation. They have contributed enormously to the development of better models for citizen participation. Without them this book would not have been possible.

This book is also dedicated to Susan Hadden, one of the contributing authors. Susan did not live to see this in print. She was a leader in the study of public participation, a woman devoted to science and to environmental and social justice. Her untimely death is a loss to us all.

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# *Foreword*

*Ortwin Renn*

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In late July of 1992 the small and remote mountain resort of Morschach in the Swiss Alps became a lively place of discussion, debate, and discourse. Over a three-day period twenty-two analysts and practitioners of public participation from the United States and Europe came together to address one of the most pressing issues in contemporary environmental politics: How can environmental policies be designed in a way that achieves both effective protection of nature and an adequate representation of public values? In other words, how can we make the environmental decision process competent and fair? All the invited scholars from academia, international research institutes, and governmental agencies agreed on one fundamental principle: For environmental policies to be effective and legitimate, we need to involve the people who are or will be affected by the outcomes of these policies. There is no technocratic solution to this problem. Without public involvement, environmental policies are doomed to fail.

The workshop was preceded by a joint effort by the three editors to develop a framework for evaluating different models of public participation in the environmental policy arena. During a preliminary review of the literature we made four major observations. These came to serve as the primary motivation for this book. First, the last decade has witnessed only a fair amount of interest within the sociological or political science communities in issues of public participation. Most of the recent literature has focused either on specific case studies or manuals for conducting practical applications. Second, the traditional forms of public participation – hearings and advisory committees – certainly have advantages, but are not able to fulfill popular demands for widespread and meaningful citizen involvement in environmental decision making. Third, there is a perceived need for new models of participation that enhance decision making competence and legitimacy through more meaningful participation by citizens. Several analysts and

practitioners have experimented with novel models. Fourth, a systematic framework for evaluation on any but the most abstract level is completely absent. This is needed if those who implement participation are to appropriately match purpose to method. Such an evaluation would have to define and defend normative ends that public participation aims to achieve. This cannot be done without taking a position in the debate about how much citizens should be involved in governance. The evaluative framework would have to provide assessments of each model's scope of application, potential benefits and drawbacks, most-suited problem type, and transferability to other cultural contexts.

In early 1992, we met several times to develop a common framework for reviewing and critiquing participation models. As explained in Chapter 3, this framework is highly influenced by critical theory, in particular the theory of communicative action developed by the German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Thomas Webler, who was basically responsible for this part of the work, adopted Habermas's theory of communication and applied it to the concrete situation of citizen involvement in environmental decision making. Habermas's ideas of the ideal speech situation and communicative competence became the guiding principles of an evaluative framework. Since Habermas is rather vague about providing clear instructions of how to define an ideal speech situation or communicative competence, we developed a list of criteria and indicators in the spirit of his work. At the same time, however, we restricted our scope to citizen participation in environmental decision making and we departed from Habermas in two ways. First, we included rational strategic actions by individuals and parties as an unwanted, but nevertheless realistic behavioral assumption in any type of discourse. Second, we were more skeptical than Habermas about reliance on the lifeworld as a reservoir of rules and selection principles for redeeming cognitive claims. Although our framework is clearly inspired by critical theory, we believe that the resulting criteria and indicators have a validity of their own. Even those participants at the Morschach workshop who were not sympathetic to critical theory could agree with our criteria.

Next we identified models of participation that represented a wide variety of formats and contacted leading proponents and critiques of these models. We invited a proponent and a critical reviewer of each model to Morschach. Both the reviewer and the proposer received our framework with the criteria for review. We asked the proponents to make an argument for how well these criteria were met by their models. To balance the analysis, we asked reviewers to make more critical assessments using our criteria.

During the workshop, both the proponents and the reviewers made claims and counterclaims and the whole group discussed each argument in detail. Workshop sessions scheduled for two hours ran several hours over time and – most surprisingly for the editors – all participants attended all sessions without any exception. The result of the workshop was twofold. Proponents acknowledged the limitations and problems of their models, but were also reassured about the specific merits that their approach encompassed. Many critical remarks turned out to be based on misunderstandings or the application of the method to a problem unsuited for such a method. In essence, the workshop succeeded in meeting the most important objective: to define the legitimate scope of each model and to evaluate its relative advantages and drawbacks.

After the workshop, the participants composed their papers based on the discussions and the commonly agreed directions. Papers were reviewed by the editors and two independent reviewers. In addition, the whole manuscript was reviewed by two outside reviewers chosen by the editorial team at Kluwer. The authors were asked to use the reviews while writing a second draft.

This book would have not been possible without the support and effort of many people. We are especially grateful to all the contributors who played along in this unique attempt to submit their own thoughts to a common framework. We would also like to thank our reviewers, Dr. Cvetkovich and Dr. Dietz and the anonymous reviewers hired by Kluwer for their valuable comments and criticisms. Thanks are also due to Kathy Plunkett at the State University of New York for her invaluable assistance during the final editing and production of this volume. Finally, we want to express our appreciation for the publishing team at Kluwer, most notably to Ms. Strata from Boston, who has been an ardent supporter of this book project and assisted us in many ways. The project was financed by the Humboldt Foundation (Bonn, Germany) and the Polyproject “Risk and Safety of Technological Systems” of the Swiss Institute of Technology (Zürich, Switzerland). We are very grateful for the generous financial support by these two sponsors. Without it we would have not been able to pursue the elaborate procedure culminating in this unusual book.

Summer, 1994

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# *Preface*

## *Democracy and Science*

*Thomas Dietz*

By 2050, the human population of the earth will double. The per capita level of affluence and resource demand will increase by 50 percent. The result will be a tripling of human activity in the biosphere. Stresses on human, biological and physical systems, already at critical levels, will be greatly exacerbated. In addition, new technologies will make our ability to manipulate biological and physical systems more profound. Evolving artificial life may complement artificial intelligence. We will be able to program genomes and hybridize natural and engineered systems. We are remaking the biosphere through the intended and unintended consequences of our actions in ways unprecedented in human history.

How will we respond to these challenges? How can we shape decent lives for ourselves, our ancestors and the other species that share the planet with us? To meet these challenges, we must improve our ability to answer two questions. One is descriptive: How does the world work? The other is prescriptive: What should we do? These questions have motivated human intellectual activity since our ancestors acquired language. Our success at answering the first question is a major reason to be both fearful and optimistic about the future. It is our understanding of the physical, biological and social worlds that allows the profound and powerful manipulations that characterize the 20th century.

Deciding what is better or worse is the subject of the second question. Our ability to use descriptive knowledge towards good ends depends on answering the prescriptive questions: towards what ends should we direct our efforts? The importance of this problem has never been more evident. But our intellectual progress on this problem has not been impressive. The tradition of democracy is our best hope. Democracy is an ancient mode of societal decision making that has its roots in the fundamental elements of human adaptation – communication and social learning. Democracy is usually

traced to the Greeks, but is actually a heritage from the earliest human social groups. It is at the core of our cultural and biological heritage, and was the mode of decision making for food foraging societies that constitute 99 percent of human history. Humans have evolved to coordinate group action by discussion and shape individual action through social learning and reflection. While the forms of democratic process have been modified throughout history, and must be modified again, the basic concept has very deep roots.

However sound the democratic tradition, it is under pressure in the contemporary world. One source of pressure is the power of science and technology to transform the world. We can produce changes that are not easily related to the daily experience of most people and thus not linked to our moral sense. Most of us lack the moral context to understand the implications of artificial life, genetic engineering or other new technologies and thus have trouble making informed ethical judgments about them. Weber suggested that science has “disenchanted” the world, but in another way, science “re-enchants” by casting a spell of incomprehensibility on much that is important to our lives. Put simply, the implications of our technology are hard to understand.

Another pressure comes from the scale at which democracy must operate. When the U.S. government was founded two centuries ago, the average Representative spoke for about 75,000 people, and reached decisions in a body of only 66 peers. Now, the average member of the House of Representatives speaks for over half a million citizens and must carry out debate with 364 colleagues. The American example of increasing complexity is mirrored throughout the world. The discourse that underpins democratic process is attenuated by problems of scale. And, while in some sense all politics is local – it relates critically to the lived experience of the citizens – all politics is now global. Actions taken in one locale often have profound implications across the planet. So the context in which decisions must be assessed is much more complex.

For several decades, a handful of scholars and activists have proposed ways democracy can cope with these profound problems. Jürgen Habermas provides the most thorough and systematic approach to the issue. Habermas offers a theory of society and of human action. He argues that the rational way to make collective decisions is through fair and competent discourse. But Habermas' opus, while theoretically profound, is not articulate about practice. I have been among a handful of scholars, working at the intersection of theory and practice, who have proposed methods for putting Habermas into practice, in contexts ranging from impact assessment to planning.

This volume is the most important work to date in that tradition. And it is more than that – this is the best extant examination of experiments in democratic process. Instead of cynical complaints about the failures of democracy, the editors and authors take up the challenge of proposing new forms of democratic process and examining how they work in practice. Habermas' theory provides an organizing principle to compare democratic strategy and tactics, allowing thoughtful comparisons across methods and contexts. The result is a volume that is essential reading for anyone interested in the future of democratic process and decision-making.

The discussion focuses appropriately on the toughest challenge facing democracy: problems of environment and technology. Environmental and technological issues are at the intersection of science and politics, involve subtle and uncertain risks, large time and spatial scales and a myriad of conflicting interests and values. It is precisely in this area that traditional democratic process seems to falter. The resulting policies are often inequitable and poorly aligned with science.

Those concerned with environmental and technological policy should read this volume carefully. So should those interested in Habermas' theory and those concerned with the future of democracy. This collection is not the end of the debate on these issues, but the place from which all future work must start.

December 19, 1993

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