

Book Review

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ENSURES PARTICIPATORY
GOVERNANCE: TRUE INDICATORS FOR UNITED STATES**

Ayesha Ali

Project Manager
Higher Education Commission

Book: Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy (2015) by Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger, (Hoboken, NJ : Jossey-Bass). 368 pp. ISBN: 9781118688403.

Abstract

In this book, profound past, present and future references to analyze the notion of civic participation and infer insights for upcoming times have been employed. Nabatchi and Leighninger have expressed their acumen in the development of case on civic engagement, globalized patterns and contemporary affairs to emphasize community service focusing on action-oriented approach.

Keywords

Participatory Governance, democratic representation, citizen participation, governance, civic behavior.

Book Review

The very title of the tome represents the notions of network governance and representative democracy: *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* - which speaks volumes about the authors' statesmanship and political acumen. The book has been built upon the theoretical framework of democracy with experiential learning in the discussion on civic participation by explaining the case of democratic governance being practiced in United States. Here, the style of writing suits the purpose as public participation is very well depicted through case and illustration.

The book carries profound insights for practitioners, academicians, professionals and statesmen. The argument is established owing to writers' command on collaborative governance, administration and public policy which is also reflected in authorship of various writings on the subjects of public administration, governance, representative democracy and community participation.

The strength of the argument lies in the attempt to challenge the existing political systems and processes for the good of all while simultaneously identifying the embedded hurdles. The wishful thinking becomes obvious in the desperation for active citizenship at the collective level to attain the utopian world. Active civic engagement is taken as an inclusive word to include all the social, civic and political voices and actions aimed to bring the common good. Only through the mass participation can the voice of the *haves-not* reach the high walls of *haves*. In modern era, voting behavior and free expressions can ensure the democratic governance which works for the public.

There are three sections of the book. The first section “Participation in a Rapidly Changing Democracy,” highlight the three types of participation and their progression in the case of United States. The scholarly contribution is evident while describing the conventional citizen engagement as a mode to enforce checks on government, since they clearly indicate its inability to deliver for public and administrators.

Other two mode of participation for people and the government have also been discussed in the book. The thin engagement provides the public with opportunity to express their thoughts and voices through hitting likes and signing petitions on Facebook within no time, whereas the thick participation through detailed deliberations offers powerful public participation which requiring more time.

The next part is “Active Contribution in Action” where public participation in basic necessities of life including policy, planning, educare and healthcare at the level of federal and state governments in United States have been highlighted. The new empirical approach of the section lies in presenting three sections- structure to delineate the evolution of civic involvement in state matters, its parameters and effectiveness.

In part 3, “Participation for Democracy, Present and Future,” the futuristic approach towards adopting frameworks and strategies for an enhanced citizen involvement at the local level for all practical reasons has been stressed upon. It is acceptable to appreciate the scientific rigor of the book for its comparison of the opportunities at hand and opportunities yet to be exploited for an increased community participation which also furthers the scope of the book.

A prescription for practitioners and administrators by developing the notion of collaborative governance which includes procedures, strategies and organizations aiming at integrating citizens to resolve problems and make collective decisions has also been given in the book. The whole system stands upon information, linkages, decision making and implementation. These components are extracted from governmental functioning and mass practices.

The authors pave way for further research and exploration regarding the mode of functioning and impact of public involvement whether in the form of democratic reforms or institutional innovations. Mostly, the case is related to United States which limits the scope and adds weakness in argument which should be rectified on the pattern of literature found in “57 Democratic Innovations from Around the World” making it global in approach.

However, the vitality of the concepts presented in book would not have been neglected. It was also supposed to be kept in mind that the participatory democracy or collaborative governance requires mature minds and intellectuals. Further, the provision of infrastructure to

Book Review

promote public engagement needs to be updated. Thirdly, the global movements, information explosion and technology advancement – all render crucial role. Nevertheless, these can be harnessed to maximize the mass involvement in democratic governance by also capitalizing upon the mass thinking, decision making, public money and settling the emerging problems of cultural diversity and ethnicity.

Practically, the authors have employed subjective evidences to establish the case which seems weak as a usual methodology to discuss public involvement. As the subject is theoretically and comparatively underdeveloped, therefore, it utilizes case studies. The case is explained in four chapters by mentioning policy matters, federal and state governments.

The book refers to leaders and linkages for civic engagement in academic sector by elucidating the role of teachers' union and administrators. Then, a section is dedicated to health sector to discuss the role of involving community in policymaking. The authors have given instance of Congressmen organizing meetings to restructure health sector in 2009 which proved a disaster due to the lack of creative and social input.

In this context, examples are cited from Georgia and others to emphasize the practices where public participation is used to gather multitude of wise observations and decisions as well as to conceive, plan, formulate and implement well integrated community projects.

Contribution of the book in building upon the exiting narrative of representative democracies cannot be underestimated, however, a global perspective to civic behavior might have been better served if comparative case was strongly taken up.

The qualities and abilities required to implement and practice community involvement have also been enlisted in the book. The authors have also suggested solutions for taking maximum benefit from the citizen participation which encompass public discussions, wider contributors and social actions to generate ideas and implement plans.

The literature on representative democracy and collaborative governance is rampant and discussions are never ending. In this context, original ideas and comprehensive modules on civic involvement and community engagement have been offered in the book. As a textbook each section carries content for adequate class discussion and training exercises. For a practitioner, it can act as a complete guidebook for practical implementation.

The redeeming factor in the book is the debate on the weaknesses, strengths and opportunities that need focus to mainstream the active contributions of citizen involvement. These are the sections which also need updating in the book especially in the post-Trump era and the challenges posed by pandemic-Covid-19.