

# Representation in Public Participation: Rethinking the “Ladder” of Citizen Participation

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## Introduction

Early public administration scholars intentionally isolated the bureaucracy from the public out of a belief that over reliance on the public will would create massive inefficiencies. It was feared that the inefficiencies of allowing the bureaucracy to be intertwined with politics would result in a fundamental inability to act and damage the legitimacy of the government. Thus, scientific management evolved to manage public programs based upon the “expressed” will of the public via their representatives in the legislature. Over time, however, the increasing complexity and responsibilities of the bureaucracy have called this politics-administration dichotomy into question.

By the 1940’s prominent scholars were questioning the ability of hierarchy alone to secure bureaucratic legitimacy. In contrast to orthodox theories that relied upon a belief in a single public will, Friedrich and Mason (1940) argued:

At best, responsibility in a democracy will remain fragmentary because of the indistinct voice of the principal whose agents the officials are supposed to be—the vast heterogeneous masses composing the people. Even the greatest faith in the common man (and I am prepared to carry this very far) cannot any longer justify a simple acceptance of “the will of the people.”

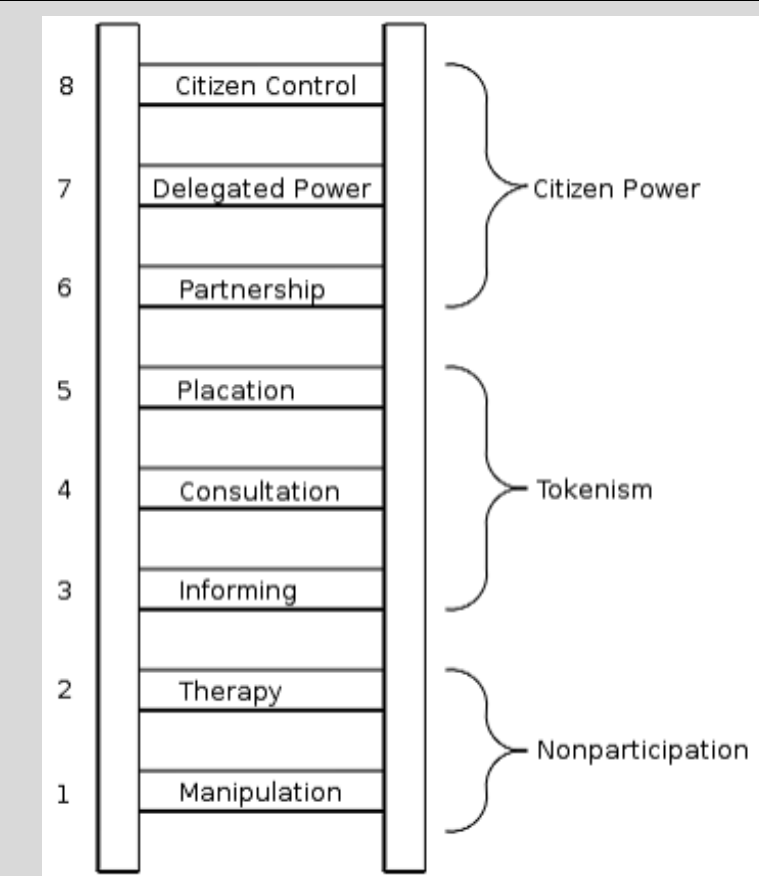
Because there is no universal public will, hierarchy alone could no longer hold administration accountable to the public principal (Friedrich and Mason 1940). The 1960’s and 70’s saw the height of this move toward participatory processes even making “maximum feasible participation” into a statutory requirement (Economic Opportunity Act of 1964). How to go about responding to this push for participation, however, has been unclear. Both bureaucrats and grassroots organizers have continuously struggled with determining the appropriate mechanisms for incorporating public input into policy development. At times, the methods of incorporating citizen input on offer from scholars have proven unsuitable for the realities encountered by actors—both citizen and expert—involved in the process.

## Existing Typologies

Seeking to identify the necessary and appropriate components for a successful participatory push is made difficult by the fact that very few efforts have been made to systematically categorize the well over one hundred methods currently documented across a variety of literature bases (Rowe & Frewer 2005).

Of the few attempts to categorize types of participation, most are one dimensional and often hierarchical. The most well known of these categorizations was created by Arnstein in 1969. Arnstein’s “ladder” of citizen participation (Figure 1) describes the amount and format of engagement in a clearly hierarchical manner with citizen control of agenda setting and policy decisions as the ultimate goal. The eight rungs—manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control—are broadly grouped into three general categories labeled Nonparticipation, Tokenism and Citizen Power. The lower rungs on the ladder—tokenism and nonparticipation—describe types of engagement in which experts and administrators are portrayed as selfishly attempting to retain power for themselves.

Figure 1. The Ladder of Participation



Arnstein’s ladder assumes that citizens want control and participate in consistent ways that will result in the ability of government to rely on such control. It casts bureaucracy as the enemy of public participation. In some agencies this is true. In many it is not. In fact, consistent evidence demonstrates that citizens do not participate politically in representative numbers (Putnam 1999; Zinkin 2007). Much scholarship has been dedicated to researching the variables that influence why and how citizens participate.

Table 1. The Heuristic	Low Institutional Engagement (neither opportunity nor receptiveness)	Medium Institutional Engagement (either opportunity or receptiveness)	High Institutional Engagement (both opportunity and receptiveness)
Low Citizen Engagement (neither interest nor commitment)	Bureaucratic Hierarchy	Informing	Consultation
High Citizen Interest/ Low Citizen Commitment	Manipulation/ Therapy	Tokenism	Placation
High Citizen Engagement (both interest and commitment)	Disruptive Participation	Initial Citizen Participation/ Partnership	Sustained Citizen Participation/ Partnership

## A Multi-Dimensional Typology

As political scientists have noted, citizen engagement can run a continuum from no interest nor commitment to high interest and commitment, with interest but a lack of commitment (what some call “cognitive engagement”) falling somewhere in the middle. Similarly, institutional engagement can be very low, involving very limited opportunity for citizen voice and low receptiveness from institutional actors, or very high. Institutional engagement, however, may fall short on either opportunity or receptiveness; an institution may provide few opportunities to participate but be receptive when citizens provide input or they may provide ample opportunity to participate even when they do not actually want any citizen involvement. These two dimensions, each with varying levels, interact to create nine distinct types of engagement (Table 1)

**Hierarchy**—Clear delineation between citizens, experts, and agency actors.

**Informing**—Mostly traditional hierarchy, but with a clear intention to alert the public to the decisions made by the agency. No attempts to include stakeholders or the general public in decisions or agenda setting.

**Consultation**—Mostly traditional hierarchy, but with at least some attempt made by institutional actors to solicit input from stakeholders or the general public. All decision-making and agenda setting power remains with the institution.

**Manipulation**—Mostly traditional hierarchy, but with efforts made to inform the public with the intent of controlling public perception. All decision-making and agenda setting power remains with institution.

**Tokenism**—Some attempts to solicit information from stakeholders made. Almost all power remains in the hands of institutional agents. There is typically a focus on contacting select “stakeholders”; frequently to the detriment of members of the general public, who may not fall into a stakeholder category.

**Placation**—Agenda setting power remains with the institution. Decision-making power is more diffuse. Participants may be asked to sign off on decisions made by institutional actors or to provide input explicitly with the intent of informing the final decision.

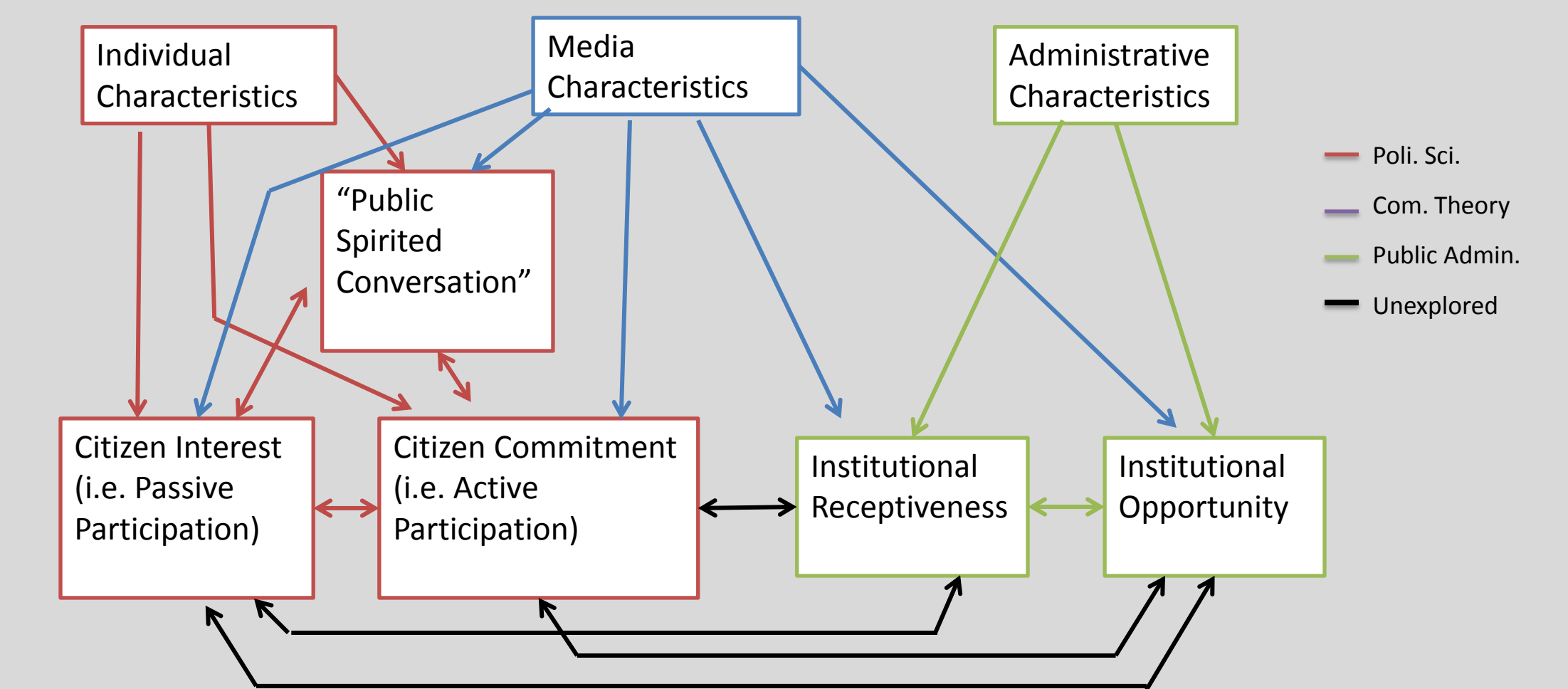
**Disruption** occurs when actors are unable to initiate or maintain meaningful Partnership methods, in which both agenda and decision-making control are diffuse.

## Implications & Limitations

As government continues to grow and address more complex issues, citizen engagement may prove important in policy design and implementation. Unlike Arnstein’s traditional conception, however, this heuristic is not hierarchical. It does not presuppose that total citizen control is always desirable. In fact, the nature of some expertise laden fields may make citizen control an undesirable prospect (Tritter & McCallum, 2006). By highlighting the likely manner in which individual and institutional variables are likely to interact, this heuristic can provide insight not only into what structures are likely to occur in government, but may be used to inform efforts—either internal or external—to alter the level or design of citizen participation.

While research from all relevant fields is intended to inform solutions to participation problems, the varying foci logically suggest divergent actions. By explicitly examining the intersections of these dimensions, the appropriate problems and solutions are made easier to locate from among the vast array on offer. Furthermore, the explicit recognition and investigation into interactions between institutional and individual contexts reveals that the specters of institutional boogymen and phantom publics must be questioned. The reality of citizen engagement demonstrates that, in many cases, problems are not the result of either a completely inaccessible process nor a completely disengaged public. Instead, it is how these two dimensions interact over time that generates the observed type of engagement or lack thereof. Using this heuristic coupled with existing research, it is possible for actors—both institutional and citizen—to identify potential mechanisms for change based upon which of the four outputs they desire to alter (Figure 2). However, the heuristic is potentially under-defined due to the lack of research specifically about the interaction effects of these outputs.

Figure 2. Concept Map of Relevant Literatures



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