Participatory urban democracy: Levels of Institutionalization in Master Planning Processes in Flint and Detroit

Abstract

Public participation in urban governance is on the rise across the United States and around the world. From participatory budget exercises, to town hall style planning meetings, these processes offer the possibility to include citizens in decision-making outside the realm of electoral politics. This research offers a comparative examination of the participatory mechanisms used in master planning processes in Flint and Detroit. While significant scholarly research has focused on the intergroup dynamics and power relations among citizen participants, less research has been done on the political mechanisms through which citizen input is or is not incorporated into policy.

These questions are increasingly important as participatory processes exist alongside strong critiques of downtown-centric planning in cities like Detroit. How has a process that included hundreds of resident meetings and thousands of hours of local participation resulted in a plan that appears to instantiate the interests of elites over those of everyday citizens? Does Flint’s plan, led by the local government rather than private and non-profit interests – as is the case in Detroit – better reflect the democratizing potential of participation?

Drawing upon qualitative data, this research examines how urban planning decisions are made and the interactional and institutional patterns that emerge between stakeholders and everyday citizens. Given Flint’s city-led creation of its master plan, I hypothesize that more serious attention was paid to community participation, versus the privately-led Detroit Future City initiative. To examine these questions, semi-structured interviews will be conducted among three groups: elite stakeholders, leaders of community based organizations, and everyday residents.


**Literature review**

In the last two decades, participatory mechanisms in urban governance have been implemented in cities around the world. Constitutive of a broader shift toward inclusive policy-making, multi-lateral institutions, global NGOs, and local governments alike have designed and carried out participatory processes characterized by community input and democratic deliberation (see for example Calhoun 2015; Lee 2015; Dagnino 2008; Eliasoph 2011). In cities in particular, participatory mechanisms that are not exclusively oriented toward electoral politics offer a potentially democratizing check on longstanding sociological theories of urban development. Such theories have traditionally criticized the collusion of governing officials, real estate developers, and local elites in service to pro-growth strategies (Molotch 1976) aimed at securing higher land values over the everyday “use values” prioritized by residents (Logan and Molotch 1987; Stone 1993).

The recent restructuring plans of rustbelt cities such as Detroit and Flint have relied upon such participatory models and mechanisms (Hackworth 2015; Clement and Kanai 2015; Kirkpatrick 2015). Major city documents outlining growth have put community engagement and democratic deliberation at the center of future-facing planning documents, such as Detroit’s 50 year blueprint, *Detroit Future City* and Flint’s *Imagine Flint* master plan. Historically, scholarship in the social sciences has embraced mechanisms for incorporating citizen deliberation and participation as a form of “deepening democracy” (Fung and Wright 2001), while potentially producing more sustainable and innovative policies (Fischer 2006; Schmitter 2002).

On the other hand a diverse group of scholars have recently called attention to the limited and sometimes contradictory nature of participatory processes in urban governance. According to these critiques, citizen participation occurs within a dominant technocratic and market-oriented straightjacket, in which smaller issues can be resolved through deliberative practices, yet core structural features of governance remain unchecked by citizen input. This form of “post-politics” (Swyngedouw 2007), or “post-democracy” (Swyngedouw 2011) coexists with formal democratic
structures and elections, yet serves to legitimize elite dominated decision-making, leading many citizens to view participation as incapable of meaningfully resolving problems (Lee 2014; Dagnino 2008; Rosol 2012; 2015).

For example, despite widespread acclaim among city boosters, critics have called into question Detroit’s urban redevelopment plans, suggesting they are downtown centric (Silver 2015; Akers 2013), unrealistic (Kirkpatrick 2015; 2015a; Eisinger 2014) and at risk of perpetuating institutional racism by ignoring social and environmental deficits in predominantly African American neighborhoods (Kinder 2014; Lacy 2015; Eisenger 2015). How has a process that included hundreds of resident meetings and thousands of hours of local participation resulted in a plan that appears to instantiate the interests of elites over those of everyday citizens (Clement and Kanai 2015)?

In evaluating the role of participatory governance, scholars have called for the disaggregation of the “communicative dimensions” of participation from the “empowerment dimensions” (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014). In other words, research on community participation, they argue, has focused on communicative aspects alone – the processes, settings, and inter-group dynamics that take place in participatory contexts such town hall style planning meetings (e.g. Forester 1999; Umemoto 2001). According to this perspective, these past studies have missed the empowerment dimensions of such processes, defined as the scope and importance of these forums in government decision making. The empowerment dimension includes the regulations, rules, and frameworks for incorporating citizen decision-making into actual policy (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014: 39).

**Contribution**

In addressing such critiques, this research aims to bring together an important yet disparate set of insights generated by political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists. In short, how can researchers understand the growth of discourses of democratic participation alongside a set of outcomes in which urban policies have purportedly become more unequal, less democratic, and
increasingly exclusionary (Lee 2014; Calhoun et. al. 2015; Fraser and Kick 2014; Goldsmith and Blakely 2010)?

Given the relative novelty of these debates, few empirical studies have attempted to understand how participatory politics are incorporated into urban planning policy through empirical research in US cities. This task is especially urgent in cities in which master planning documents are reshaping the basis of urban governance and its territorial organization. The recent and ongoing efforts to include residents in urban planning decisions in both Flint and Detroit represents an important case study for understanding the empowerment dimensions mentioned above.

While much sociological research has focused recently on Detroit’s – and to a less degree Flint’s – restructuring (e.g. Hackworth 2015; Silver 2015; Smith and Kirkpatrick 2015; Clement and Kanai 2015; Indergaard 2015), little scholarship has centered upon the role and impact of such participatory practices. Doing so requires untangling the mechanisms through which inequitable outcomes may coexist with participatory input. From this perspective, understanding the local adoption of these policies represents not merely an intellectual exercise, but is also a matter of urgent political import in terms of how scholars and community groups conceive of more democratic urban futures.

Differences between these two cities offers a unique opportunity to engage in a study that is both comparative (investigating processes across different political contexts), as well as longitudinal, insofar as these processes have evolved through different stages, some of which are ongoing. In doing so, it also opens up the opportunity to move beyond research on the interpersonal dynamics of participatory processes, to include the divergent effects of different regulatory structures (i.e. the rules of the game) comprising government policy and mechanisms for civil society input. In examining these questions, it necessary to perceive the mechanisms through which stakeholders and government officials aim to manage these processes. This research seeks to study the relationship between citizen input and policy implementation, to understand how policy is shaped and enacted.
**Purpose and Problem Statement**

This research will focus on the creation and implementation of participatory forms of politics, in order to (1) shed light on the range of contemporary policy paradigms and strategies of governance policymakers and local elites adopt in these cities, (2) to examine the contradictions of participatory processes and the limitations of narratives of inclusivity in the context of constrained city budgets and, (3) to explore the rules-based boundaries that limit participatory action and the subsequent processes of citizen demobilization.

**Objectives**

To understand these processes, this research explores the mechanisms through which participatory practices influence and/or are limited in their influence over urban policy and planning outcomes in order to:

1. **Assess the degree to which participatory processes have resulted in equitable outcomes (as perceived by residents and community leaders, and manifested in the allocation of scarce city resources)** in these two contexts. This first objective of this research is to investigate the following hypothesis: participatory processes have had only modest impact on urban planning strategies and agendas conceived by officials prior to such participatory processes.

   To investigate this hypothesis, I will conduct interview based and archival research on the aspirations, intended and unintended outcomes, and planning models designed by city officials, urban planners, and business/non-profit stakeholders (these groups are referred to as “elite stakeholders” hereafter), as well as leaders of community based organizations (CBOs) that have been engaged through participatory processes. I will use a snowball sampling process that aims to result in a sample of 30 (n=30), divided between CBOs and elite stakeholders in the following way: 15 “elite
stakeholder” interview and 15 CBO interviews. These interviews will be conducted between July 2016 and May 2017.

In order to reach survey goals, I will use a list of the involved organizations provided by the Master Plans themselves. I will code these different groups based on whether they represent a business, government or political interest (“elite stakeholder”) or whether they are composed primarily of ordinary residents or grassroots interests (CBO). Outreach will be conducted through a range of contacts cultivated in the not-for-profit, government, and community-based sectors through attendance at meetings and “cold” outreach to such individuals. Snowball recruitment through these individuals will strive for representativeness in qualitative research (Small 2009) by engaging a cross-section of major stakeholders. By asking an initial round of interviewees who they believe to be significant stakeholders in this process and seeking out such interviewees as part of the sample, this research follows a qualitative research design that focuses not merely upon the convenience of pre-existing contacts but also an “inconvenient sample” (Duneier 2011).

Research with both groups will consist of semi-structured interviews meant to last roughly 45 minutes. Questions will consist of a) attitudes toward the process, b) urban planning and community goals for elite stakeholders and community leaders, c) satisfaction with the results. Interview guides appear in the following section.

In terms of secondary and archival research meant to provide context and background to the plans, I will be using data from the US census and the American Communities Survey (2014), as well as the master plans themselves. I will conduct a preliminary analysis of the allocation of resources and the overall spatial conceptions, taken-for-granted urban processes, historical patterns of neighborhood change and their relationship to the master plans. Significant variables here include housing stock erosion and loss, population changes, and socio-economic status of residents in different districts of these cities according to census data.
2: Determine how if at all the citizen input is institutionalized in decision-making and whether this diverges in the Flint and Detroit cases. In other words what are the “rules of the game” that underpin participatory mechanisms and in what sense are they the same or different across the Flint and Detroit urban planning contexts? How if at all are these processes binding, sidelined, or partially and/or strategically taken into account? To what degree do final results of planning processes resemble initial strategies and models ideated by city officials and elites prior to engaging in participatory processes?

My hypothesis is that there are weak and poorly institutionalized strategies to systematically integrate public participation due to non-binding mechanism to include such processes in policy. Given Flint’s government-led creation of its master plan, I hypothesize that more serious attention was paid to community participation, versus the foundation-led Detroit Future City initiative.

In addition, I will examine the archived agendas of the City Planning Commission (CPC) in Detroit, as well as documentary material of prior community meetings, transcripts (when available), and the chronological development of master plans in both cities.

3: Scrutinize the individual and collective strategies that participants have employed in order to determine the mechanisms through which these strategies influence policy and planning outcomes.

Discourse in the public sphere is an important aspect of how any plan gains or loses legitimacy among the public and other stakeholders. This aspect of the research seeks to understand how participants and local elites seek to frame participatory process, their role in such a framing, and the legitimacy this does or does not provide the final result of an urban planning document.

In addition to the CBO leaders mentioned in objective 1 and 2, I plan to interview 20 everyday residents identified as participants of participatory planning processes through leaders of local CBOs. These interviews will be conducted between July 2016 and April 2017. Interview questions developed for this group will reflect the following question: How do participants respond
to or resist the constraints and opportunities posed by participation? What strategies do participants collectively use to challenge the pre-determined boundaries of participatory processes and have these been successful? How, according to everyday residents, have elite stakeholders sought to shape or frame participatory processes and how have these framings been challenged?

Finally, as these participatory processes are ongoing, this research will involve participant observation throughout the year of research. I will attend ongoing meetings in both cities that include aspects of the Master Plans in order to, 1: observe resident and elite strategies for guiding participatory outcomes and, 2: analyze strategies of collective representation; meaning the ways in which individuals, groups, and stakeholders seek to construct legitimacy and shape perceptions within the context of participatory processes.

Methodology

As mentioned above, semi-structured interviews will be conducted among three groups: Elite stakeholders, leaders of CBOs, and everyday residents. These informants will be developed through snowball sampling and will be interviewed between July, 2015 and May, 2016. The sample will be as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elite Stakeholders</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBO leaders</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Everyday” residents</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An interview guide is developed below for each group. Questions are meant to be open ended in order to allow informants greater latitude in introducing new themes.

Categories such as “elite stakeholders” involve a number of groups: business leaders, government officials, and non-profits. Therefore, the questions posed below are those that would be asked to the broadest cross-section of such informants. More specific questions would be developed based on the individual stakeholder.
### INTERVIEW GUIDE I

**Elite Stakeholder Interview Guide**

1. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing your city?
2. How, if at all, has the Master Plan helped address this challenge?
3. How did you become involved in the Master Plan? Explain your level of involvement
4. To what degree do final results of the plan resemble initial strategies and models conceived of prior to participatory processes? How so? What is the role of participation in the planning process?
5. What is your overall level of satisfaction with the outcome?
6. If involved, in detail, could you describe what took/takes place at neighborhood-based participatory meetings? How was the agenda decided? Was it subject to change?
7. Who were the primary individuals, organization, or government officials you worked with throughout the process? Were these meetings institutionalized in any way? Were they subject to public input?
8. What was your vision for the city going into the master planning process? Did this change as a result of community input? What mechanisms exist(ed) to update this vision as a result of citizen participation?
9. Did you have any other input into the master planning process outside of participatory meetings? Who took part in these processes? What kinds of people or paradigms were most influential do you think in creating the foundations for the Master Plan?
10. Could you describe how you see the mechanisms for incorporating citizen participation into the plan?

### INTERVIEW GUIDE II

**Community Based Organization Interview Guide**

1. What are the greatest challenges facing your organization and constituents?
2. How, if at all, do you hope the Master Plan will be able to help your organization achieve its goals?
3. How did you get involved in the processes? How would you characterize your participation in the process?
4. What urban issues did you hope to resolve through the process? Were these the issues you were able to influence? How so?
5. In detail, could you describe what took/takes place at neighborhood-based participatory meetings? How were topics selected? Would you say the process was democratic?
6. How would you describe the interaction between your group and a) government officials working on the Master Plan and, b) other stakeholder organizations involved in the Master Plan?
7. Have you been generally satisfied with the result of the process? Why?
8. What specific issues do you feel could be integrated into a more comprehensive planning process?
9. Aside from community meetings, how if at all were you able to influence what topics were discussed and/or became part of the master plan? How were you able to influence, if at all, how community feedback was incorporated into policy?
10. How would you say your constituents were included in the process? Was their participation coordinated by your organization or did they engage direct with Master Plan officials? How so?

**INTERVIEW GUIDE III**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Everyday Residents Interview Guide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are the greatest challenges facing your family, neighborhood, community, and city?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How did you become involved in the Master Planning process?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How many community meetings relating to the Master Plan did you attend?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tell me about the meetings. What was your level of participation? What happened at these meetings? Did meeting organizers appear to have pre-conceived plans to share with attendees?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Who decided on the meeting agenda? How did officials solicit or not solicit attendees’ input on the meeting agenda? What did you hope to achieve going into it? Did you achieve what you hoped to by attending and participating in these meetings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What were the three most important issues for you and your community that were addressed by the Master Plan?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What were the three most important issues that may be absent in the final plan? Why don’t you think these were addressed? What opportunities did you have to share these issues with officials?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What contact did you have with city leaders or non-profits working on the plan during these participatory events? What about afterwards?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What contact, if any, did you have with city officials or non-profits working on the plan outside of these meetings? Was there any follow-up with you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. How do you see the future of your community and the future of your city? Are you optimistic?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Archival research and participant Observation**

From July 2016 – April 2017, I will attend community meetings held in order to implement various aspects of the Master Plans. To connect the practices of participation to an institutional history, I will also conduct archival research (mentioned in objective 1 and 2) on the plans themselves, media discourses, statements of policy actors, community groups, and citizens, as well as the official discourses of the city government. In addition to the specific materials mentioned in the objectives section above, I will use the Proquest database as well as the archives of *The Flint Journal* and *The Detroit Press* to compile archival materials.

I plan to submit an Institutional Review Board application for the project during the Winter 2016 semester.
References


