

11-2016

# Saving America: A Guide for Public Administrators

Keri N. Gardner

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Professor Name [Last, First] *	Wyatt, Kandis		
Program Name * <a href="#">See list</a>	Public Administration		
Keywords [250 character max.]	Saving, America, Guide, Public, Administrators		
Passed with Distinction * Y or N	Y		
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SAVING AMERICA: A GUIDE FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS

A Master Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

American Military University

by

Keri Nichol Gardner

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Public Administration

November 2016

American Military University

Charles Town, West Virginia

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, children and family for their unending support and patience throughout this process. Thank you for tolerating my absences, physical and mental, and encouraging me every step of the way. You have motivated me to continue working beyond what I thought possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank all of the professors who have added to not only my knowledge of the Public Administration and National Security fields, but to my daily life. The outstanding faculty of American Military University has imparted their mastery and experience to every class I have had the privilege to be a part of. For this thesis in particular, I thank the IRB Board for their direction with numerous revisions. I appreciate the ongoing support and guidance of Dr. Kandis Wyatt, who always promptly answers my infinite questions with patience and encouragement.

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

### SAVING AMERICA: A GUIDE FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS

by

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American Military University, November 2016

Charles Town, West Virginia

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Public participation is a critical element for America's foundation of democratic strength. To see growth in the number of citizens who are more engaged in the political process, steps will need to be taken to restore confidence in the United States government and its leaders and make the democratic process more accessible to citizens. As it now appears, the looming edifice of American government is an intimidating and unwelcoming labyrinth. Through communication with citizens directly, the government and public administrators can understand the priorities and values that will increase public participation and create productive solutions. The components to this process are: 1) a more trusting relationship between government and the public, 2) making government processes more transparent, 3) providing education where needed or desired and 4) empowering citizens to become engaged. This research study used a survey aimed at citizens from diverse backgrounds that determined current satisfaction with the government and agencies, how deeply the respondents have participated in the democratic process, and explored what would motivate them to become more involved. The study also gathered information from an

interview with a current member of the United States House of Representatives to observe public participation from a legislative perspective. Exploring the issue from the varying viewpoints allowed the researcher to determine commonalities and avenues that may lead to more successful collaboration.

*Keywords:* public participation, citizen engagement, public involvement

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	11
Barriers to Public Participation.....	11
Restoring Citizen Confidence in Government Leadership.....	16
Encouraging Public Participation.....	18
III. METHODOLOGY.....	25
Sample and Participants.....	26
Instrumentation.....	26
Data Collection.....	27
Data Analysis.....	28
Limitations.....	28
Theoretical Framework.....	29
IV. RESULTS.....	34
Quantitative Data from Survey.....	35
Qualitative Data from Survey.....	38
Qualitative Data from Interview.....	39
Summary.....	41
V. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION.....	42
Discussion.....	43

Limitations.....	48
Recommendations for Future Research.....	49
Conclusion.....	51
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	53
APPENDICES.....	56

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE

PAGE

1. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation.....29

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
1. Age Ranges of Survey Participants.....	34
2. Political Affiliations of Survey Participants.....	34

## I. Introduction

The United States is beset with an array of unprecedented threats from a lethargic economy, terrorism throughout the world and diminishing global influence. Some scholars have argued that America is in a state of decline or at least, the world is becoming “flat” or more equal and without superpowers (Friedman, 2007). The American people expect that our elected leaders have almost super-human abilities to address these issues but unfortunately, we observe politicians and their all too human weaknesses, frequently unable to act in any decisive manner.

The nation faces an internal crisis of extreme politicians and polarized parties that have immobilized the decision-making process to respond to any of these myriad difficulties effectively. Society is ever more cynical and skeptical that our government is capable of agreeing on any solutions. In a recent Gallup poll taken in July 2016, Congress had a miserable 13% approval rating by the American people (Gallup, 2016). The dissatisfaction of citizens is also seen in the declining voting rates over the last several decades in both Presidential and Congressional voting years. In 2012, only 61.8% of the eligible population voted in the Presidential election and only 41.9% of the population voted in the mid-term Congressional election in 2014 (Census, 2015). These statistics speak volumes about the current state of the nation’s democracy.

With the increasing diversity of society, it is difficult to see how our elected representatives are able act on behalf of the spectrum of concerns and values. It is obviously beyond the realm of politicians alone to orchestrate legitimate progress. In this desolate environment, it is difficult to see how the nation can unify and perpetuate our position of domestic and international strength. The source of potential answers is not limited to those that hold office. They may spring from any level of government, non-profit organizations, advocacy

groups or America's true foundation of power, the citizens. Unfortunately, many elected officials see citizens as voters, not partners.

An area of opportunity in the situation rests with encouraging citizen involvement in the democratic process. In regenerating society's commitment to public participation, it is possible to develop resourceful and innovative solutions for our most daunting problems. In 1923, the brilliant management theorist, Mary Parker Follett wrote, "It is indeed true that with so much crystallized conservatism and chaotic radicalism we need leadership and a constructive leadership, but the doctrine of the democracy is that every man is and must be a creative citizen" (Follett, 1923, p. 335). M.P. Follett's prophetic quote remains true almost a century later. The true democratic power lies with the people, which recently has become somewhat latent. Leadership is needed to inspire and organize the citizenry for collaboration with the government. Public administrators are ideally positioned to understand the capacities of government and also the potential of the citizens. Public administrators can assist in building a strengthened America through engaging, educating, and empowering citizens to become more involved in governance.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Often we see civic movements after something negative has transpired that results in reactive protests and demonstrations. The government and administrators need to harness this energy in a proactive way and enlist the citizens to partner in creating new policies and institutions. Although this seems to be a monumental task, it is achievable when broken down into stages. First, the government must address what the citizens perceive as barriers to public participation. Second, the government and administrators must work to restore lost trust and confidence of the citizens. Lastly, public administrators must be trained in specific skills such as communication and leadership and commit themselves to honesty, integrity and truly serving the

public. By investing resources in these initiatives, the government can connect and collaborate with citizens to discover remedies to our most pressing societal needs.

The first step to increasing public participation is to assess what is preventing citizens from engaging in the democratic process. In speaking with the public, we should begin to see obvious and common themes. In a nation where only a little over half the citizens vote, there must be similar explanations for the lack of participation in a population of millions. Previous research has identified a few barriers to increased public participation, including the government's distrust of citizens' capacity to make decisions, lack of legitimate participation opportunities and poor communication. However, as researchers we must establish dialog with the citizens directly to address their real and perceived obstacles. It will not assist to focus on theoretical impediments if the citizens do not recognize them as the same deterrents.

The next step is to repair government and citizen relations. There is little communication with government offices that would be considered actual dialog. Citizens often feel that the government passes policies and legislation with no input from the public. This leaves them believing that their opinions and ideas are insignificant. By opening communication channels where citizens' comments, suggestions and feedback are meaningfully considered, progress can be made to establish a connection between government officials and the public. If citizens are continually made to feel powerless, they will not be inclined to engage in the political process. The public must have confidence that they are partners with the government to advance the common good together.

The final step is to empower the public to participate in the democratic process. The government must provide opportunities for citizens to become involved with real decision

making power. This is where public administrators can facilitate engagement by developing a design for participation, such as a citizen advisory board or with participatory budgeting.

Administrators are also integral in educating the citizens on technical topics and assisting them in understanding the options and possible outcomes of each. In turn, the administrators can advise government officials of the citizens' perspectives on issues, decisions and concerns. These may be very different from the government's perspectives but this can only be discerned with deliberative discussion.

If the government is to uphold democratic ideals, they must recognize, in word and deed, that the true power rests with the citizens of the United States. Integrating the people in the policy-making process with legitimate influence may be challenging but worthwhile. Starting with identifying and addressing the obstacles to further public participation, then repairing the fractured connection between citizens and government by opening lines of communication, building trust and establishing confidence in similar objectives. Finally, using public administrators to empower the citizens with technical expertise, education and a design to focus their energies. Even with these steps in place, not all citizens will be motivated to become more engaged but it is the duty of government to provide platforms for interested citizens to exercise their influence.

### **Background & Need**

In the past, meager attempts have been made to eradicate the barriers to public participation. President Jimmy Carter even went so far as to mandate public involvement and ordering government agencies to consider the public's opinions. The text of Executive Order 12044 states:

(c) Opportunity for Public Participation. Agencies shall give the public an early and meaningful opportunity to participate in the development of agency regulations. They shall consider a variety of ways to provide this opportunity, including (1) publishing an advance notice of proposed rule-making; (2) holding open conferences or public hearings; (3) sending notices of proposed regulations to publications likely to be read by those affected; and (4) notifying interested parties directly (Executive Order 12044, 1978).

More recently, another obstacle that has recently been minimized is the availability of information with computers. Technology like comment boards, email and social media have allowed government offices to solicit the public for comments and concerns. It has also increased transparency by enabling citizens to access documents, the legislative process and gives access to a front row seat in public hearings. Although this is progress in the right direction, true engagement needs to go much deeper than making information accessible and allow the citizens to actually influence the decision or outcome.

In order to restore the confidence of the American people in the government, a few steps have been taken. Elected representatives are more approachable, with sometimes several offices in their state or district and full time staffs that assist the public. Also, in order to promote open and accountable government, President Obama recently signed into law the Freedom of Information Improvement Act of 2016. This gives the public access to more government documents and transcripts, establishes a centralized portal that processes all FOIA requests and minimizes agencies use of reasons to deny requests (S. 337, 2016). Actions like these certainly increase the public's opinion that the government is acting in a transparent and accountable

manner but still do not create legitimate platforms for the public to participate in government processes.

One of the few ways citizens can have their concerns heard is in community hearings, school board or commission meetings. However, this may be a sore spot with many citizens who have attended these forums. Generally, there is a limitation on how long or even what topics can be discussed at these gatherings. Citizens who attend are often either the “usual suspects” or those that are particularly incensed about a matter (Leighninger, 2013, p. 3). In some cases, attendees are angry, outspoken, and rude. The officials may not consider any of the comments, valid or not, because they have already decided the issue and hold the hearing as a mere formality. This example is hardly an idealized form of citizen involvement yet it is all too familiar and played out in cities across the nation weekly.

In contrast to the previous scenario, there are also encouraging examples at the local level of projects that have included the community residents in decision-making. One in particular that has shown positive outcomes is participatory budgeting. This gives the local government the ability to present the revenue and budget-making process to the citizens and give them a certain amount of funding to spend on community projects. Citizens are given the opportunity to submit proposals, discuss the options and then vote for the plan of their choosing. It also has the added benefit of drawing the community together for volunteer projects and networking.

The actions that have been taken definitely are necessary to pave the way to increased citizen involvement. Attempting to increase agency cooperation with citizens, open communication through technology and make government more accountable to public oversight are all pieces of the puzzle that create a picture of democratic participation. In spite of these efforts, with exception to participatory budgeting, further initiatives need to be taken.

Unfortunately, few of these undertakings establish obvious ways that the citizens can have influence on the results of government decisions.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to gain insight into both citizens' and government officials' perspectives of public participation and encourage further collaboration between the groups to promote the democratic process. The American people are an untapped source of innovative ideas that could assist in solving some of the most complicated problems facing our nation. In order to uphold our Constitutional Republic's democratic principles, government officials must acknowledge the power of the citizens and give them a platform to become legitimately engaged. By keeping the public uninvolved, the citizens will remain distrustful and disconnected.

The researcher employed a survey to determine what the participants feel are barriers to public participation and how this is affected by their opinion of the government and its agencies. The researcher used an interview protocol to question a local Congressman to determine the best avenues for public participation and how the government could make improvements. The researcher used a sample group of one hundred voluntary participants for the survey portion of the study. The researcher collected the survey data in aggregate form to compile totals and translate them into percentages for analysis. By comparing the survey data and responses of the Congressman, the researcher found several areas of common ground that may be developed for successful public participation in the future.

The researcher expected to find that a citizen's lower opinion of the government resulted in less participation. The higher the opinion of the government, the more likely the citizen is to become involved. High or low opinions may be the direct consequence of an experience with

government agencies or officials. After interviewing the Congressman, areas of cooperation were revealed and may be built on to encourage citizen involvement for future projects.

### **Research Questions**

In order to substantiate the positions for both the government and citizens' perspectives, the researcher has identified the following research questions to be answered by the study:

1. What are the impediments citizens perceive as preventing further involvement in the democratic process?
2. How does the public's opinion of government and its representatives affect citizen participation?
3. How can citizen engagement be promoted with public administrators acting as facilitators?

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study ideally will assist those that take part in the survey in considering their participation and how they can promote engagement. It is imperative that both government and citizens understand the importance of public participation to our communities and nation. The citizens are a rich resource to all levels of government, not an annoyance to merely placate. Government agencies and officials need to reconsider policies that prevent increased involvement, like those that dictate commission hearings. The researcher also aims to encourage the public to find opportunities to become involved and be integral to building their community, state or nation, not rely on elected officials to make decisions in their place.

### **Definitions**

For the purposes of this research study, public participation is defined as citizens

collaborating with government to achieve stated objectives or goals, where their efforts have a legitimate influence on the outcomes of the project or decision. In their book, *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*, Nabatchi and Leighninger define public participation as a “term that describes the activities by which people’s concerns, needs, values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues” (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 14). In another interpretation by C. Gibson in *Citizens at the Center: A New Approach to Civic Engagement*, she states public participation is, “the ability and incentive for ordinary people to come together, deliberate, and take action on problems or issues” (Gibson, 2006, p. 2). This study also uses the terms public engagement, public involvement, citizen engagement and citizen involvement interchangeably.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study are concerned primarily with the sample size and external validity of the research. When working with human subjects, the range of backgrounds, opinions and perspectives is considerable. It may be difficult to determine constant trends for generalizability. It is certainly possible that citizens choose not to participate in government processes and activities for a host of reasons that have little to do with their opinion or experiences with government and its agencies. Despite the potential drawbacks, the researcher is still convinced of the significance of fostering discussion and dialog about this topic and stimulating further research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All attempts were made to ensure that the research conducted for this study took every precaution to uphold the strictest ethical considerations. An application with the survey and interview questions, consent forms, data destruction form, survey recruitment script, and the

researcher's Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program completion certificates were submitted for the approval of the Institution Review Board of American Military University prior to conducting any research with human subjects. The researcher has the approval of the faculty advisor for this research as well. The consent form was explained and given to all participants prior to beginning the survey. The researcher explained the data destruction policy and made this form available upon request. The researcher also informed the individuals taking part in the survey and interview that they could choose to respond or pass over any questions they were uncomfortable with. They were also welcome to end the survey or interview at any time.

## **II. Literature Review**

Many authors have theorized about citizen engagement and how to inspire the masses to engage in the democratic process. A few writers get bogged down with definitions and what to even title public participation. Some focus on what the government could do to facilitate the process and create an environment more conducive to public involvement. Several are academics with little experience in the bureaucratic realm and minimal practical knowledge. Many writers offer analyses into the obstacles that prevent the people from becoming more involved. In investigating the rather voluminous literature on this topic, one glaring piece of the puzzle is missing. The researcher could not find a single article that considered any input from the very people that are so integral to this equation, the citizens. If we want to find out what will rouse the public's democratic enthusiasm, we must present this question to them. We must examine what scholars have theorized and then determine the next steps to practical application with the highest probability for successful results. The first segment of this literature review will address current issues that impede public participation. The second section discusses how public administrators can assist in building the trust of American citizens so they will know their involvement is valued. Lastly, the third part describes various steps that have been proposed to increase citizen's engagement in government processes.

### **Barriers to Public Participation**

Few will disagree that our society is continually becoming more complicated and diverse. This makes it increasingly difficult for our representative government to address the concerns of every segment of the population. It also presents a litany of reasons why citizens do not participate more in the democratic process. There exists a spectrum of causes that the public declines to involve themselves, including skepticism that their contributions carry any weight, distrust of government officials, lack of opportunities, and a deficit of information, to cite a few.

Without addressing these obstacles, little progress will be made toward including citizens in the political process.

One of the most basic reasons for minimal public participation is presented by the former President of Harvard University, D. Bok, who concludes that citizens are simply not motivated to become involved. Bok (2001) lists in his book, *The Trouble with Government*, numerous reasons that society feels disenfranchised from the political process. He is critical that society demands their voice be heard but people do not want to be inconvenienced when it comes to committing time and effort, even with local undertakings which generally impact their communities more directly (p. 390). He states that when citizens fail to participate and even vote, this leaves a vacuum for the influence of political action groups and lobbyists, which turns off the public from the political process even further (Bok, 2001, p. 395). The author suggests that in order to repair the problem of “disengagement and apathy,” we must highlight civics education in schools and offer tools for all ages that emphasize responsible citizenship (Bok, 2001, p. 405). Another step is to encourage media to focus on unbiased and objective information about politics, not just salacious scandals, which erode public trust (Bok, 2001, p. 411). While these proposals may assist in enhancing public participation, it may still not be enough to encourage the citizens to participate.

Building on the ideas of Bok, in his report, *A Public Voice That’s Missing*, D. Mathews asserts that citizens do not feel connected to the objectives of government or the democratic process (Mathews, 2016, p. 7). After being alienated from decision-making activities, the government must reestablish an authentic link to the citizens. Public administrators can become involved by communicating how certain policies and projects affect citizens and their

communities. Only when the citizens understand how certain decisions will directly impact them, will they be prompted to engage in the process.

Another critical facet of citizens' interaction with government is distrust. In the article, *Public Administrators' Trust in Citizens: A Missing Link in Citizen Involvement Efforts*, the writer asserts that government officials and administrators do not trust the citizens to make educated, deliberative decisions and believe the public has limited expertise and knowledge about complex issues. The author, K. Yang, states that only in an environment of mutual trust can citizen involvement thrive (Yang, 2005, 277). Alongside soliciting the public's contributions, information and education about the topic must be made available. It is imperative that not only participation opportunities be constructed but that a substantial effort is undertaken to establish an environment of mutual trust and dialog between citizens and administrators.

In agreement with Yang, K. Ruscio also claims distrust is an inherent reason that the public is disinclined to participate and details why so many citizens do not trust government agencies. His article, *Trust, Democracy, and Public Management: A Theoretical Argument*, describes how distrust systemically invades every aspect of our political structure including elected officials, lobbyists, and agencies. He goes on to recommend that trust will only be rebuilt when citizens believe that government desires to collaborate with the public on shared goals for the common good (Ruscio, 1996, p. 461). This is a realistic and practical part of the solution when so much of the nation believes that government officials and employees are self-serving and indifferent to the best interests of the public.

Investigating a different barrier to increased citizen involvement, the authors of the article *New Public Management and Substantive Democracy* contend the New Public Management style of operating government agencies may be particularly detrimental to public participation.

Performance measures that are based on economic efficiency, minimizing the size of government agencies and keeping administrators out of the policy-making process all discourage engagement with citizens (Box, et al, 2001, p. 611). This argument begs the question, are efforts in the name of efficiency and austerity, costing us the nation's democracy? If our current management theories are deterring citizens from participation, the approach must change if democratic principles are to be upheld and supportive of more public engagement.

Brugué and Gallego also consider the current bureaucratic management structure and its influence on public participation in their article, *A Democratic Public Administration?* They state the public sector is constructed to prevent collaboration and communication. Government employees are very much confined to a specific field of knowledge, duties and assignments. This discourages the staff from going outside of their "administrative kingdom" to coordinate or interact with other sections, divisions or agencies. If bureaucracies were more open and communicative, this would smooth the path for increased engagement with the public (Brugué & Gallego, 2003, p. 434). The authors make the argument that if agencies already have a difficult time in cooperating with one another, it is not possible for them to open collaborative avenues with citizens.

In another direction from the organizational styles analyzed by both Box and Brugué and Gallego's articles, P. Levine argues that the government does not give citizens genuine opportunities for participation and then goes on to give very specific guidance about how this could be remedied. In his book, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America*, Levine argues there is little opportunity for citizens to become

meaningfully engaged. In other words, government does not give the public a sufficient platform for involvement. As part of the solution to advance more public participation, Levine suggests that interested citizens must be organized to stay focused and gain credibility. Operating in a diverse “network” of associations will increase collaboration and influence. Mr. Levine recommends these “coalitions” for civic engagement have three priorities, which are to 1) stimulate debate, 2) increase communication, and 3) coordinate advocacy (Levine, 2013, p. 187-190). He goes on to present several strategies that the government should take to encourage participation such as focusing on one large issue, passing legislation for fair campaign contributions, expanding organization like Ameri-Corps, and emphasizing civics education through national programs (Levine, 2013, p.190-192). It is important that government procedures and regulations be examined if the goal is to further public participation.

These articles discuss several of the most pronounced factors that obstruct citizen involvement in government processes. While there is an infinite range of reasons that citizens may choose not to participate, we must focus on the specific concerns of those that are stakeholders in each project. Most authors and scholars will agree there is no panacea that will inspire all citizens to become more involved but even a few small steps would be considerable progress. It will take time, persistence and several successful projects for the public at large to believe that their contributions can make a difference in government.

### **Restoring Citizen Confidence in Government Leadership**

Unfortunately, some public administrators confuse authority with leadership and do not consider these areas are mutually exclusive. Although public managers may have a significant amount of authority, this does not directly translate to effective skill as a leader. Public administrators have been called professional citizens and if this is truly the case, we must not hoard our skills but propagate our knowledge to society at large. Sharing expertise with the public does not diminish the administrator's power or necessity. In order to usher in a new era of cooperation between administrators and citizens, public managers must earn the trust and confidence of the public. This can be initiated by training public administrators in leadership skills such as communication, critical thinking and mentorship. A skill set that includes an array of leadership abilities will be necessary to facilitate public participation and communicate well with citizens.

More authors than it is possible to count have written about leadership and the specific skills required for government employees to engage the public. In the article, *Transformational Stewardship: Leading Public- Sector Change*, the authors discuss the need for "transformational stewardship" as a new style of leadership. In a list of characteristics, Kee, Newcomer and Davis (2007) assert that this type of leader is "ethical, empathetic, accountable, empowering, power sharing and creative" (p. 158). These are a few of the leadership qualities that citizens would expect to be present when working with public administrators but are often disappointed. Administrators must realize how critical effective leadership abilities are when dealing with the public and work toward learning and utilizing these skills.

Stivers (1994) is more specific about a particularly needed leadership trait within public service. In her article *The Listening Bureaucrat: Responsiveness in Public Administration*,

Stivers asserts learning to truly listen more effectively will create a better relationship between citizens and administrators. She suggests that administrators listen to citizens deliberately instead of forming a response while the other person is speaking. More effective listening leads to better understanding, beneficial communication and a more responsive bureaucracy (Stivers, 1994, p. 367). One of the specific issues that citizens have with the government in general, is the lack of communication. The public must listen to government officials frequently but there are few examples that would be considered dialog between citizens and government. To have administrators genuinely listen to the public would make huge strides in the direction toward more citizen involvement and is a key factor in understanding the concerns of the people.

In addition to obtaining new skills, the Denhardts introduce an entirely new management style for government agencies. Janet and Robert Denhardt recommend in their book, *The New Public Service: Serving, Not Steering*, that a systemic overhaul for bureaucracy take place. New Public Service emphasizes service to citizens and not treating them as customers as the current popular structure, New Public Management, suggests. The New Public Service theory advocates that government begin serving the public in a democratic way instead of managing the citizens. The authors state there is a spectrum of participation that is as simple as an exchange of information and ranging to an integral part of policy-making (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015, p. 199). They propose that public administrators, in particular, can facilitate engagement with citizens (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015, p. 124). No matter what techniques are used or objectives sought after, administrators play an important role to enable the desired outcomes of public participation. Applying New Public Service principles will also further this objective but does not offer to solve every dilemma.

The authors of *The Price of Citizenship* take issue with the Denhardt's concept of New Public Service. Candler and Dumont concede that while New Public Service is more consistent with a democratic public administration, it lacks guidance on exactly how to encourage the public to participate. Administrators may follow the advice on facilitating participation but with ample amounts of pessimism and distrust, the public may still be disinclined to become involved (Candler & Dumont, 2010, p. 172). Like, Stivers they urge that more focus be put on communication stating that creating a dialog will allow for understanding of differing perspectives and increase the confidence of the citizens that their voice is being heard (Candler & Dumont, 2010, p. 187). Once the public feels that government truly understands their concerns, they may be inclined to take part in public projects.

A central piece of encouraging citizen involvement is to have trusted public administrators and project managers. If the managers are impersonal, condescending and insensitive, the public will not waste their energy. In order to fill a leadership role that motivates the citizens, we must accentuate managerial and mentorship traits and train administrators to use communication and facilitation skills. There is a wide spectrum of knowledge that will contribute to a public administrator's capabilities but the most important idea to gain from this research is that managers must be trustworthy, ethical, work with integrity and able to assist people at the citizens' level.

### **Encouraging Public Participation**

Strategies to encourage civic engagement have long been debated and proposed. This is a vast area of study and many authors will admit their ideas are not flawless or perfect for every circumstance, as stated by authors such as the Denhardt's. This is because all backgrounds, situations, resources and objectives contrast greatly. When dealing with the public, no two cases will

be exactly alike due to the range of perspectives of the parties involved. That being said, there are a few tactics that many authors agree upon to cultivate public engagement.

First, we must address why government should devote ample resources to involving the public in decision-making and policy planning. One factor to consider is the impossibility of our representative democracy being capable of acting on behalf of society's diverse values. Next, is the limited availability of resources to manage an increased demand for government services. In a handbook drafted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the author contends, "Governments engaging citizens in active participation in policy-making is the most advanced way of strengthening government-citizen relations" (OECD, 2001, p. 60). In our democratic government structure, the power is held by the people and our elected officials are granted conservatorship of that power. Due to this balance, it is difficult to determine what legitimate reason could be given to exclude citizens from political processes.

As recommended by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Mary Parker Follett, the well renowned theorist, offers great insight into the contributions of citizens and how to strengthen the association between government and the public. She saw the value of public participation for government, public agencies and democracy as a whole. Some of the origins of our modern thinking on public administration come directly from Follett. M.P. Follett believed that "good citizenship" began with a fundamental understanding of democratic processes to be instilled in both school and at home beginning at a young age. A life-long commitment to learning must be impressed so adults also continue to understand the matters that affect them and our nation. She eloquently describes citizen engagement in writing, "Democracy does not exist unless each man is doing his part fully every minute, unless everyone is taking his share in building the state-to-be" (Follett, 1923, p. 335). With so much of our society disengaged

from political processes and even voting, it is paramount that the values of productive citizenship be regenerated and the public view that citizenship as a responsibility.

Follett also wrote expansively about the necessity for neighborhood involvement, a view that is similarly mirrored in Svara and Denhardt's article, *Connected Communities*. This article attributes decreased participation to a deeper matter, asserting that society has lost much of its sense of community. This directly leads to citizens who are less involved with their neighbors, school districts, communities, states and beyond. They write "It is hard to have citizen engagement without a sense of community, and it is hard to fashion a sense of community without citizen engagement" (Svara & Denhardt, 2010, p. 7). When the public is not given the opportunity or avoids participation, disconnect from the government and their community takes place. Engagement is an important factor to strengthening not only our local communities but our nation.

Departing from focusing on the ideas of strengthening citizenship and a sense of community, in the book *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*, Nabatchi and Leighninger look at encouraging public participation from the government's perspective. The authors' key point is for the government to build more "participation infrastructure." They reason there are too few opportunities to become involved in a meaningful way and that public administrators need to develop specific skills in order to further engagement (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 6-7). During a webinar with the authors, the researcher had the opportunity to ask how public administrators, specifically, could encourage more public participation. Ms. Nabatchi replied that public administrators were an essential part to citizen involvement but additional skills were needed, especially in the areas of facilitation, conflict resolution and design of participation strategies.

Like Nabatchi and Leighninger, the authors of the article *Modernizing Democracy: Innovations in Citizen Participation* agree that it is the place of government to make opportunities for involvement available to the citizens. In fact, Buss, Redburn and Guo propose a new federal organization be created that would take the lead with citizen participation. In the past, the government has required citizen participation mandates that usually are included in funding packages for various programs and agencies but there are few results to show for these initiatives (Buss, Redburn & Guo, 2006, p. 24). However, mandating civic engagement in the democratic process seems to be a bit of an oxymoron. The authors suggest that the government does need to expand areas for public involvement, especially through technology, but additional steps need to be taken to evaluate the progress and effectualness of the citizen participation programs. Evaluating the programs for effectiveness is essential to analyze if efforts to engage with citizens are successful and productive.

Contrary to Buss, Redburn and Guo's opinion of creating a new government agency, M. Leighninger discusses in his article, *Teaching Democracy in Public Administration*, the idea of "collaborative governance." He puts forward the idea that all types of agencies and organizations should come together to promote citizen involvement. This includes public interest groups, the private sector, government, citizens, non-profits and non-governmental entities coming together to attain a common goal (Leighninger, 2010, p. 4). This would not leave public participation entirely in the hands of a government agency but allow all stakeholders to contribute. He also goes on to recommend that a new generation of administrators need to be taught how to facilitate more civic engagement. This may be a tall order because many of the public administration programs may not be familiar with the concepts or desire to include this thinking in the

curriculum (Leighninger, 2010, p. 12). Strategies to collaborate with the public must be taught and developed. Public administration programs should offer courses to individuals that are interested in furthering public participation because it would be a rare individual that would intuitively know how to smoothly coordinate with citizens and other entities to meet shared objectives.

Offering an alternative method to the previous two authors, another strategy to increase participation is with specific designs that include the public. There are various frameworks that allow for the public's involvement in the decision making process. In an article written by R. Bull, he proposes that citizen advisory committees are a particularly advantageous method of public participation. This method ensures that the citizens are represented by those with an interest in the proceedings who are educated on the topic and then deliberate on solutions. The members may also consider information and opinions from citizens who are not on the committee themselves. Committees may be formed to solve a specific problem or for a length of time to address several issues (Bull, 2013, p. 611). Mr. Bull cautions that this technique may not fit all situations, especially due to the potentially high cost, but is one tool in a catalog of possible strategies.

Like Bull, understanding that there is no single design for public participation that functions well in all instances, A. Fung has researched various models for participation and found that in most cases there are consistent components. In his article, *Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance*, he asserts that all public participation designs are broken down into three basic parts comprised of;

- 1) the contributors
- 2) the methods of communication and decision-making process

3) what results may be achieved (Fung, 2006, p. 66)

By modifying these three areas, a public participation design may be tailored to different groups, scenarios and goals.

Agreeing with the perspective of A. Fung, the authors of *Designing Public Participation Processes*, provide specific information on planning for citizen involvement. The article concurs that every design must be adapted to the needs and requirements of each project (Bryson, et al, 2013, p. 25). The authors then list guidelines that will create a fluid plan for public participation. These steps include identifying the problem, constructing a flexible course of action which can be modified as needed, determining who the stakeholders are, gathering resources and recruiting skilled leadership (Bryson, et al, 2013, p. 24- 31). This article is a practical and realistic guide to take theory and actually implement it into practice.

In the course of investigating the literature and studies in this area, many authors agree on a few fundamental steps to encourage public involvement. These approaches include the need for organized leadership, legitimate opportunities for participation (“infrastructure”), accessibility to objective information in plain language, availability of education, and a strategy that must be tailored to the specific situation. Although many scholars, experts and authors offer various ideas about encouraging citizen participation, the missing part of this formula is direct input from the citizens to inquire what will motivate them to participate. Referring back to D. Bok’s book, the author eloquently writes, “Democracy is a collective venture which falters or flourishes depending on the efforts citizens invest in its behalf” (Bok, 2001, p. 420). When it comes to citizen participation, no single entity is responsible to bridge the gap between government and citizens. Ultimately, the ideal answer as to who is responsible for promoting public participation is that we all are, including non-governmental organizations, academia, grass roots movements,

bureaucrats, elected officials and society.

### **Summary**

Government can present the opportunity for citizen participation, train administrators and make information readily available but unless the citizens trust that their contributions will be valued, they may not become involved. This is why it is so imperative that we discuss participatory impediments with citizens directly. Their concerns are the issues we need to make a priority and address immediately. The best theories and concepts are just that until they are put to the test and show positive results. Even when the best strategies and participation opportunities are ready to be undertaken, there is no guarantee the public will participate or make any sort of contribution at all. That being said, if public administrators are to uphold the democratic values of our constitutional republic, then we must make the platforms available to those that desire to become engaged.

### **III. Methodology**

With America's ever increasing diversity, public participation is imperative. It is almost impossible to think that elected officials can represent the distinct range of people and interests in their state or district. Citizens must be willing to act on behalf of their ideals and our democratic government must give them opportunities for participation. The most obvious group to encourage public participation are those in government with direct interaction with citizens, public administrators. Public administrators are ideally situated to act as liaisons between government officials and American people. Public administrators are citizens hired by government organizations to conduct government operations and business within the policies and laws set by elected officials, often communicating personally with the public. They are also known as public or civil servants but unfortunately, this title seems outdated, as much of the "servant" aspect of this has been lost. The humanity of public service is being lost. The work being done between public servant and citizen is no longer interaction between two human beings, it is only an impersonal mechanism of bureaucratic industry. A concerted effort to regain the "service" element of the job title should be made. Public administrators have the technical expertise and professionalism to educate and empower citizens for greater engagement in the governmental processes. If there is value in collaborating with citizens, how can this be achieved? This was investigated in this mixed methods research study and addressed the following questions:

1. What are the impediments citizens perceive as preventing further involvement in the democratic process?
2. How does the public's opinion of government and its representatives affect citizen participation?

3. How can citizen engagement be promoted with public administrators acting as facilitators?

In order to answer these research questions, the researcher examined several different perspectives, using a survey and interview to gain information from different segments of society. The research utilized a mixed methods style, comprised of the quantitative numerical data derived from the survey and qualitative information obtained during both the survey and interview.

### **Sample and Participants**

The participants of the survey were a representative, convenience sample of voluntary and available participants from the researcher's community. The target number of participants was approximately one hundred, as large a group as was feasible. The researcher distributed surveys to a wide range of men and women, ages, races, socio-economic groups, backgrounds, and political party affiliations to encompass as many perspectives as possible. All individuals were 18 years of age or older, since the survey asked specific questions about voting and voting history. The only demographic information collected was age and party affiliation in order to analyze any trends that take these two factors into consideration.

### **Instrumentation**

The survey and interview instruments used for this research study were developed by the researcher. The confidential, voluntary survey, titled "Public Participation in the Democratic Process," consisted of sixteen questions and included closed questions with multiple answers, questions answered by rating, and simple open-ended questions. The questions ask about voting history, knowledge of government procedures, and opinions of government branches and agencies.

For the interview component, the researcher conducted a discussion by telephone with Congressman Jody Hice. The Congressman was gracious in granting the researcher approximately thirty minutes to discuss public participation and how it may be encouraged in the future. The interview included five questions that aimed to explore the viewpoint of government officials on public participation and how these ideals may be furthered.

In order to ensure validity and reliability, the researcher performed a pilot test to be certain that the survey and interview questions were applicable to the research questions. The questions were not changed but after analyzing the data, it was apparent that a few questions could be added that would allow for a more expansive study. The addition of a few specific questions would not change the validity or reliability but would have given the study more unique elements to investigate how public opinions of government are formed.

### **Data Collection**

The survey and consent form were handed to voluntary participants in person, in paper form to be completed. The researcher personally described the rationale and objective for the survey and explained the consent form. Once the participant had finished the survey, the researcher collected it for data analysis. A few respondents wished to discuss public participation and elaborate on their answers and perspectives. This gave the researcher some additional information to consider. The researcher scored the individual surveys and organized the qualitative data from the open-ended questions so analysis could be performed on this type of response separately from the accumulated quantitative data from the survey.

The interview with Congressman Jody Hice was a semi-structured, non-manipulative telephone interview and lasted approximately thirty minutes, using the developed interview

protocol. The researcher took extensive hand written notes throughout the interview and verified direct quotations. Due to the range of information gathered, the material originating from the interview was analyzed qualitatively.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected from the completed surveys was categorized to correspond to each individual research questions. The researcher examined each survey by hand and compiled the total number of responses to each question into number of participants and percentages. The researcher used these percentages as descriptive statistics and displayed them in a graph format, when appropriate, to easily visualize the data and illustrate the measure of spread. The researcher also translated the number of representative participants' responses as inferential statistics to apply to the population at large for generalizability.

The information gathered from the interview was also organized according to the responses applicability to the research questions. The researcher used direct quotations to emphasize particularly relevant information. The interview information and data from the survey was compared for common themes and concepts. Trends and mutual objectives were quite obvious where areas of collaboration between government and citizens may be most successful.

### **Limitations**

This research study also has limitations. One limitation is the relatively small sample size may limit external validity. When surveying human subjects, a spectrum of circumstances forms their outlook on government, bureaucracy and the political process. It is possible that with such a broad range of perspectives, it may be difficult to see constant trends about whether or not an individual participates in the democratic process. There is also the alternative that no matter what a citizen's opinion, they would not engage in government matters because of time, energy,

disinterest or other obligations. Ultimately, the researcher found this not to be the case with a majority of the respondents and many citizens would like to exercise their democratic rights but are prevented from doing so for solvable reasons.

### Theoretical Framework

Perhaps one of the best known theories regarding the various levels of public participation was conceived by Sherry Arnstein in 1969 with her concept of the Ladder of Citizen Participation. Each “rung” on the ladder describes a degree of citizen participation (p. 217). She does caution that there is a large range of participation even within each rung and these are generalized categories. Many scholars since have used this concept as the foundation or at least an element of their own research. However, the levels of participation are only one aspect to this research study.

The first area that must be examined are the impediments to participation. Although there is no single prevailing theory regarding why American citizens do or do not participate more deeply in democratic processes, the researcher has identified several similar concepts. There are innumerable barriers to increased public participation, as explained by the following authors. Described in articles by both Yang and Ruscio, mutual distrust between the government and citizens is commonly believed to equate to less participation (Yang, 2005 & Ruscio, 1996). An alternative reason for minimal

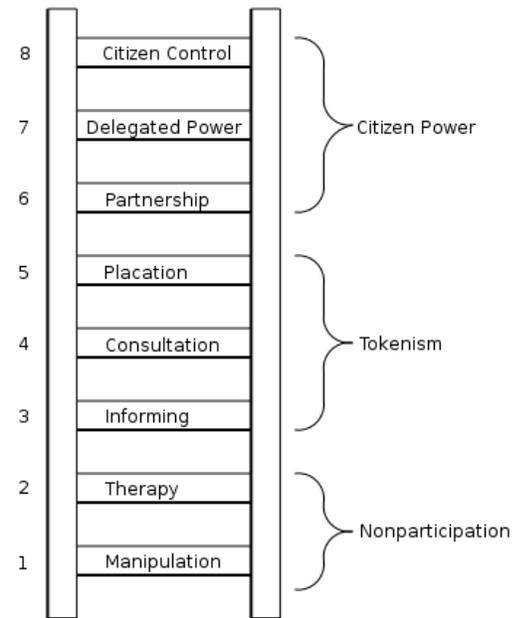


Figure 1. Ladder of Citizen Participation. Source: Reprinted from *Journal of the American Planning Association*, by Sherry Arnstein, July 1969, retrieved from <http://www.participatorymethods.org/sites/participatorymethods.org/files/Arnstein%20ladder%201969.pdf>

government involvement with citizens is explained by Brugué and Gallego. They state that the structure of bureaucracy is not helpful to participation because it minimizes communication between agencies and divisions, do not delegate well or promote cooperation (Brugué & Gallego, 2003). Going into more detail about how agencies discourage citizen participation, Box, Marshall, Reed and Reed, write that the organizational style and New Public Management, specifically, is averse to citizen participation. The authors base this concept on the premise that New Public Management promotes cost efficiency, a small staff, and minimal interaction with “customers,” which are all contrary to the needs of citizen involvement (Box, et al, 2001). Yet another well-established barrier to participation are the few opportunities given for legitimate, meaningful engagement, as detailed by Levine (Levine, 2013). An additional explanation proposed by Mathews, is that citizens do not understand the value that decisions or the political process have on their community or how it will impact them (Mathews, 2016). A more critical examination by D. Bok, asserts that citizens are merely apathetic and do not want to go out of their way to devote time and energy to public participation. These are all valid reasons for lack of citizen involvement and must be addressed, when necessary, to encourage further engagement.

The second problem that must be evaluated is the restoring of citizens’ confidence in the government, it’s agencies and employees. This will require building leadership with skills that empower and inspire the people to become more involved. This can be measured in several ways such as analyzing performance results, soliciting feedback from employees and the public and during supervisor evaluations. Kee, Newcomer and Davis (2007) recommend that effective leaders encompass strong ethics, responsibility and innovation (p. 158). Another critical skill that is generally lacking in many government offices is communication. In articles by both Stivers and Candler and Dumont, they emphasize that communication and two-way dialog is sorely

missing from government and citizen interactions. Strengthened communication would reassure citizens about the motivations of the government and increase understanding of differing perspectives, easing cooperation for all participants (Stivers, 1994 & Candler & Dumont, 2010). Lastly, the Denhardt's present in their book, *New Public Service: Serving, Not Steering*, the idea that to promote democratic principles, government and its agencies commit to serving citizens and not managing customers (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). These are all steps necessary as a collective effort to bridge the disparity between government and citizens.

Finally, methods that will motivate the public to become more involved must be analyzed. Scholars and experts present a range of ideas that they believe will motivate the public to engage in government activities. The renowned Mary Parker Follett (1923) claims that participation is the duty of all citizens and are the key to a strong democracy and society. Svara and Denhardt (2010) follow that line of thought and go on to suggest that a sense of community must be reinforced so people are compelled to invest time and effort into government projects that support their community and values. Exploring another avenue to increase participation, Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) advocate that the "participation infrastructure" be reconstructed to afford citizens more opportunities to become genuinely involved. In order to accomplish this, the authors of *Modernizing Democracy: Innovations in Citizen Participation*, suggest that a new federal agency be formed to organize and oversee public engagement activities (Buss, Redburn, Guo, 2006). Contrary to Buss, Redburn and Guo, M. Leighninger (2010) recommends that all sectors, public, private and citizens collaborate to achieve common goals. Deviating from the previous strategies, the authors of three separate articles, have concluded that more attention be paid to the specific design for participation and tailored to the purposes of each situation (Bull, 2013; Fung, 2006; Bryson, et al, 2013). These are just a fraction

of the various strategies that may be employed to encourage and organize citizens for effective participation but are still just one facet of empowering the public.

In reviewing these theories and ideas, a significant area absent from the existing literature are citizens' ideas about what would motivate them to further participation. There is extensive literature regarding various models and designs that allow for increased public engagement. However, even with the most organized and best intentioned participation programs, citizens may still be indifferent. Researchers must first investigate perceived impediments, such as distrust, misinformation and lack of education, from the citizens themselves. If these issues are not addressed, no matter what efforts the government or public administrators go to in order to facilitate participation, they may not be effective. By surveying the opinions of citizens and understanding their viewpoints, we can begin to collaborate and develop participation programs that will produce legitimate results.

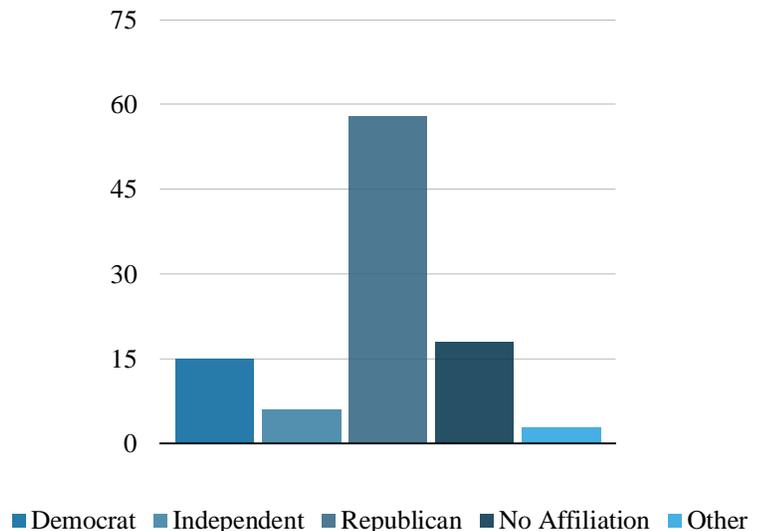
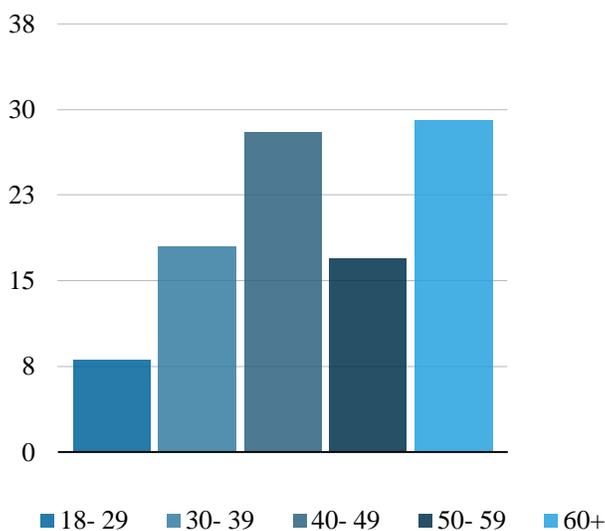
The hypothesis tested in this research study is that citizens who have a less favorable opinion of the government, agencies and employees will be disinclined to participate in government processes. Citizens with a positive attitude toward the government will be more eager to engage in government activities. This is important to determine because as long as the public has a negative outlook on government and its agencies, it is unlikely that they will be persuaded to become involved. If the hypothesis is proven correct, this will give a starting point to discuss with citizens what steps can be taken to repair the disconnect. This is a particularly unique opportunity for public administrators because they have the governmental expertise, yet also work with the public and understand their perspectives. When citizens and public administrators can coordinate to recognize and work toward the same goals, the public will be inspired to participate.

**Summary**

This research study attempted to answer what citizens view as barriers to public participation, if disapproval of the government contributes to low participation rates and how to promote citizen involvement with public administrators acting as facilitators. The researcher used a survey and interview protocol as instruments to collect information that answer the research questions. Using various types of questions in the instruments and scoring them individually, showed trends that partly prove the hypothesis. These results have been analyzed carefully to show the correlations. Some of the participants in the study made it clear that they are disinterested in government processes for different reasons altogether. The available literature shows a lack of input from citizens about their reasons for not participating in the democratic process and as such, theories about effective participation designs may not be successful. Only through communication with citizens directly can the government and public administrators understand the priorities and values that will increase public participation and create productive solutions.

**IV. Results**

The researcher utilized a survey for this study that was completed by one hundred voluntary participants. The researcher recruited them by speaking with neighbors, co-workers and people throughout the community about the goals of the study and then asking them to participate in the survey. The respondents were asked to complete the survey based on their backgrounds, experiences and opinions. The researcher attempted to have a diverse pool of participants with a range of ages, histories and political beliefs. The demographic information of the survey respondents is displayed in Tables 1 and 2. As anticipated, the survey results were interesting and varied. The quantitative results from the survey have been analyzed and organized according to the results that correspond to each research question. The qualitative portions of both the survey and interview are detailed separately.



**Table 1: Age Ranges of Survey Participants**

**Table 2: Political Affiliations of Survey Participants**

**Quantitative Data from Survey**

**Research Question 1:** What are the impediments citizens perceive as preventing further involvement in the democratic process? In attempting to answer research question one, several questions asked about participants' formal education and comprehension regarding government and the political process. This section also asked how the respondents searched for information on government issues that interested them. This particular line of questioning tried to gain insight about what avenues the participants used to learn about matters that were important to them. These questions were 1, 2, 3, 10, 11 and 12.

When asked about the respondents' experience in school, over three quarters (77%) of the participants had taken some sort of civics or government class, besides history, while in primary school. Interestingly, almost a quarter (23%) of participants had never taken any type of government-oriented class before college. In another question along a similar line, an overwhelming majority of 95% of respondents believe that more emphasis should be placed on teaching about government and political processes in elementary, middle and high school. The survey highlights the need for more intensive political science courses as only 16% of those taking the survey reported understanding government procedures very well, while 43% answered they understood them well, 34% reported their understanding as average and 7% stated they did not understand government procedures well. Surprisingly, 84% of participants of all ages stated that they would use brief and objective educational resources to understand government procedures and legislative processes.

To determine how the volunteers continue to educate themselves, question 10 asked how frequently they searched for information. When asked how often participants looked for details about political issues that were important to them, 31% replied they looked for information daily, 28% responded with weekly, 24% answered monthly, 8% stated yearly and 8% answered they

never looked for information. Another significant part of understanding the respondents' quest for information was in evaluating the sources they went to. Many replied they looked in multiple areas and the vast majority (72) stated they looked for information on nationwide media websites such as CNN and Fox News while 52 respondents watched various television programs, 48 people went to social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, 41 participants read printed newspapers or magazines and 30 replied that they looked on government websites.

**Research Question 2:** How does the public's opinion of government and its representatives affect citizen participation? In order to investigate research question two, the researcher attempted to look at the opinions of the participants and how those opinions were formed. This topic was addressed by survey questions 6, 7, 8 and 9. A critical part of this was ascertaining the participants' current perceptions of the various branches and agencies within government and asked the respondents to rate the performance of each category.

In attempting to determine the participants' opinions of President Obama, 4% answered he was doing an exceptional job, 6% rated his performance as above average, 29% answered his performance was average, 28% as below average and 33% as poor. These results may be at least partially explained by the high rate of Republicans (58%) participating in the survey and are more likely to have an unfavorable opinion of a Democratic president. It is worth noting that President Obama's approval rating for his second term averages 47% (Gallup, 2016). The participant's opinions of Congress did not fare much better with only 1% answering that Congress was doing an exceptional job, 4% responded with above average, 36% answered average, 28% stated below average and 31% answer poor. As with the particularly low approval of President Obama's performance, the approval rating for Congress is substantially higher than

the current national average of 20% for the month of September (Gallup, 2016). This result is most likely due to a more favorable opinion of the Republican majority in Congress by the higher number of Republican survey participants. In rating federal agencies in general, the survey participants put no responses in the exceptional category, 10% responded that the agencies were above average, 57% rated them as average, 22% answered with below average and 11% responded with a poor rating.

In questioning the participants' interaction with segments of government, more than half (55%) of respondents have never contacted their local, state or federal elected officials while 45% stated they had contacted their representatives. Surprisingly, less than half (40%) of respondents stated they have had direct interaction with federal agencies while 60% had not. Of those reporting phone or face-to-face interaction with government agencies, 52.5% stated they had been treated very well, 27.5% answered they had been treated well, 15% replied they had been treated average and only 5% answered not well or very poorly.

**Research Question 3:** How can citizen engagement be promoted with public administrators acting as facilitators? By speaking with citizens, it may be determined what steps public administrators can take to assist the public in reaching mutual objectives. Because public administrators often have direct interactions with citizens, they can be prepared to provide objective information, educational resources, and contacts for various programs. A key factor in determining what will encourage citizens to become more engaged is to find out in what ways the participants are already involved in the democratic process. The researcher also attempted to discover the methods of engagement that the participants have utilized. The questions that addressed the respondents' level of participation were 4, 5 and 13.

A total of 78% of respondents stated they had voted in their last local election while 22% did not. A similar statistic was reported for the 2016 Presidential Primary Election with 81% voting and 18% not voting. It appears that a majority of the respondents vote regularly, which is a substantially higher number than the national average. For the 2016 Presidential Primary Election, only 28.5% of eligible voters cast ballots throughout the United States (Desilver, 2016). When looking at involvement through a political action group or party, only 37% of respondents stated that they were a member or contributed to organizations like Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Association of Retired Persons or the Democratic Party. A majority (63%) did not have a membership or donate to any political associations.

### **Qualitative Data from Survey**

At the end of the survey, question 14 requested that the participants list anything that would encourage them to participate more in the political process. Not all respondents wrote in the space provided but 47 participants did note their opinions. As would be expected with an open-ended question, a range of possibilities were listed. It was interesting to see a few common trends emerge that were consistent with many of the responses. These were the most frequently addressed issues:

1. *Candidates*. One of the most prominent issues addressed was the desire for “better” candidates or more to choose from. A few respondents stated that the two-party political system should be done away with entirely.
2. *Honesty*. Six participants brought up the need for more honesty, accountability and transparency. They asserted that they would be more encouraged to participate if government departments and agencies were more open with their policies, procedures and any misconduct.

3. *Information.* Five replied they would like access to more unbiased and objective information. Many respondents were concerned about the factualness of what they heard from the media and government sources and desired an outlet for impartial reports.

4. *Education.* Several wrote about the need for more education about our government procedures in schools. Not only is a better understanding of government needed for our complex administration but this would hopefully encourage younger people to take part in the democratic process more deeply.

5. *Voting.* A few expressed concerns about the accuracy of voting practices and possible fraud. With several recent accounts of problems with voting machines and negligence by election staff, respondents were concerned that their votes would not be counted accurately.

### **Qualitative Data from Interview**

The researcher was very fortunate to secure a telephone interview with Congressman Jody Hice who represents the Tenth District of Georgia. As a former pastor and radio show host, he is very well spoken and gives honest, thoughtful responses. When asked about what could be done to encourage citizens to participate further, he listed several important aspects, such as disseminating information, focusing on education and making elected representatives more accessible and gave realistic solutions to accomplish these goals.

Dispersing information is a valuable step in contributing to participation. Representative Hice stated that social media such as Facebook and Instagram gives insight to what issues are important to constituents with their feedback, which can include comments but may even be as simple as clicking on the “Like” feature. He went on to say this is a particularly effective avenue to connect with younger people and involve them in current political matters.

Another crucial facet of encouraging public participation is to include and educate younger generations. Congressman Hice stated that our nation “rises and falls with education” (interview with Congressman Hice, September 16, 2016). Unfortunately, little focus is concentrated on civics and government in school curricula. It is integral to the future of our nation that the next generations are knowledgeable and inspired by our nation’s history, politics and obstacles. In order to interest and involve America’s youth, Representative Hice and Congressional members across the nation host art competitions and Military Academy days. Mr. Hice makes personal appearances at schools throughout the district in every grade beginning with kindergarten through high school, teaching them about government from an insider’s perspective.

Finally, connecting with constituents can be difficult, considering Georgia’s Tenth District consists of approximately 800,000 residents and covers 25 primarily rural counties. Meeting with citizens in an area of this size is exceedingly difficult but technology has made this challenge more manageable. Frequent tele-town hall meetings are a great way of educating and informing the public but also allow the Congressman to be more approachable. This system allows many of the residents to understand what is going on locally and in Washington DC, ask questions and voice their concerns. The Congressman states, “The people have to know that their voice is significant” (interview with Congressman Hice, September 16, 2016) which is why having accessible representatives is so important.

### **Summary**

It is intriguing to see that there are obvious parallels between the responses of the survey participants and Representative Hice. In many ways this specific Member of Congress is delivering what many survey respondents claim to want. If citizens continue to voice their

concerns which can then be addressed by their representatives, the public and officials will be in a more optimal position to determine and collaborate on mutual objectives.

## V. Discussion & Conclusion

The United States of America is currently confronting a host of conflicts. Even our most brilliant elected leaders find it difficult to recommend solutions to the complicated problems both domestically and globally. It is unlikely that without exceptional creativity and innovation will we make progress to strengthen our nation on all fronts. A valuable source of these talents can be found in America's citizens. All levels of government can organize the public to bring forth ideas and increase participation. In his book, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America*, P. Levine (2013) asserts:

“Unfortunately, genuine civic engagement is in decline, neglected or deliberately suppressed by major institutions and ideologies and by the prevailing culture. Our motivation to engage has not weakened, but we have lost institutionalized structures that recruit, educate, and permit us to engage effectively” (p. 3).

Through speaking to citizens, understanding barriers to engagement and restoring confidence in government, participation can be promoted.

The most direct way to determine what is preventing the public from more involvement in the democratic process is to speak with them candidly. This will facilitate substantive dialog and also determine areas to be resolved that prevent engagement. By implementing a survey and interview protocols, the researcher examined various perspectives on public participation from both citizens and an elected representative in Congress. This produced results that allowed for analysis of trends and common objectives that may provide a foundation for increased citizen involvement.

### Discussion

The results from the survey consisted of the responses of one hundred voluntary

participants from the researcher's community. The survey was composed of sixteen questions that asked about the respondents' perceptions, opinions and history with voting and democratic participation. The researcher also interviewed Congressman Jody Hice, who represents the Tenth District of Georgia and asked questions about how public involvement could be increased from the government's viewpoint. During analysis, the researcher observed several parallels between the two positions. The researcher always kept in mind, that with the range of opinions and persuasions when investigating human subjects, that trends and themes may be difficult to ascertain. In a book published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2001) titled *Citizens as Partners*, the author humorously cautions, "The golden rule in information, consultation and active participation is: if you invite citizens to say what they think then do not be surprised if they end up doing exactly that" (p. 98). Of course some citizens have no desire to participate at all in the democratic process for an array of reasons and this was the case with several of the respondents of the survey. As proven by the survey results, no particular method or steps will ensure all citizens will become engaged in government processes. However, the opportunity must be given to those that desire it and to encourage civic engagement in future generations.

**Barriers to Public Participation.** In attempting to answer the first research question about barriers to public participation, two topics became very clear. From the results of the survey, the responses show that there is a lack of both education and factual information available to the public. When asking questions about the survey participants' educational history and civics classes taken in school, most had taken a course like this prior to college but many had not. This may explain why almost all the respondents said that more emphasis should be placed

on government classes during primary school. This information may be directly attributed to how the participants responded to questions regarding their comprehension of government and legislative procedures. Almost half of respondents rated their understanding of these processes as average or not well. In a nation rich in resources and able to provide exceptional education to everyone, America is falling behind in this area. This is particularly discouraging because, as shown by the survey results, many adults may not fully understand how the government operates and that little is being done to encourage proficiency and active participation with younger generations. If this is not remedied, there may be generations of people who have no interest in working in government, running for office, becoming involved in their community or even voting. It is very encouraging, however, that a large majority of participants of all ages and political affiliations stated they would use brief and objective educational resources. As the intricacy and complexity of our political system grows, it is critical that the citizens have ongoing access to resources that explain current rules, regulations and procedures.

Another concerning trend that became visible during analysis was that many respondents rely almost completely on the press to educate and inform them about issues that they are interested in. Almost all participants noted that they viewed multiple media sources when trying to find information on issues that were important to them, showing a desire for information and facts within the stories. However, only a minority of respondents went to government or other websites to look for factual information. When depending on the press for information, it is sometimes difficult to determine what is factual and objective and what contains elements of bias or opinion. Because the press is a profit-making business for the most part, they are by nature providing a product to a specific segment of the population or “core audience.” When discussing political or government issues, many outlets are not neutral and offer a subjective version of

information or events. This opinion is then projected to the viewer who may not even be aware of it. It is critical that impartial and factual resources be available to the public so they may fashion their own opinions without undue bias. Society must be allowed to think for themselves and develop critical thinking skills that can discern the difference between fact and narrative.

**Restoring Citizen Confidence in Government Leadership.** Research question two investigates how the confidence and opinion of the citizens in the government impacts public participation. The survey responses display that a substantial majority of respondents have a low opinion of all branches of government, as is consistent with national polls and surveys. Previous research and literature has explored the depths of government and citizen interaction and has consistently found a missing element of mutual trust. This may be a key factor in establishing a cooperative and productive relationship that public participation requires to thrive. K. Ruscio (1996) writes in the article *Trust, Democracy, and Public Management*, “But trust can be granted only when citizens seek a public interest and believe that public officials seek it with them” (p. 461). Trust may be one of the most significant factors but it is just one component of the complex relationship between citizens and government.

The collected data showed that many people have not had any interaction with elected office holders or federal agencies but in large part maintained a low opinion of both. In fact, of the respondents who answered that they had direct interaction with federal agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service, Veterans Administration and Department of Homeland Security, almost all reported being treated average, well or very well. Just a few stated that they had not been treated well or very poorly. It was very interesting to conclude during data analysis that the respondents’ opinions of elected officials or government agencies was not based on their own negative personal experiences. It remains to be explored how citizens form their opinions about

government if they do not originate from the respondents own contact with the organization. A possible answer may be from the experiences of family and friends but perhaps even more so from the media, as discussed previously.

**Encouraging Public Participation.** Research question three asks how the public can be encouraged to participate further but there must be a baseline from which to measure. In order to further the goals of public participation, it is important that an effective participation design meet people where they are within their communities, backgrounds and past involvement. This is a critical part of tailoring a design or project to reach the people that will be most positively affected by the outcomes. This is also where public administrators may be particularly useful. The authors of *New Public Management and Substantive Democracy* (2001) write:

“Substantive democracy involves rekindling a public discourse about the purposes of collective action, accepting a role for citizens and public administrators in shaping the future. Public administration must be a key actor in any effort to rediscover substantive democracy because of the complexity of providing public services in contemporary society” (p. 611).

In some cases, citizens choose not participate at any level, including voting. This was also the case with almost a quarter of survey participants who had not voted in the last two elections. In contrast, a majority did vote in both the most recent primary and local elections showing at least some interest in participating in the democratic process. The researcher was surprised to discover that the respondents’ membership rates and contributions to political organizations such as the National Rifle Association or American Legion was less than anticipated. Approximately two-thirds of survey participants did not belong to or give donations to politically active associations.

Based on these results, it is possible that citizens do not know *how* to become involved. They may not be aware of opportunities available or how their participation could impact a decision. By communicating with elected officials, volunteering in their local community, or joining an association that speaks for their beliefs in an organized way, are all avenues to become more engaged. Public administrators could rather easily make information available about participation in events, hearings, meetings, forums or other opportunities involving their agency. Administrators could direct citizens to educational resources, contacts and information about topics that their department is concerned with. These are just a couple ways public administrators can assist in facilitating public participation without expending much in resources.

**Qualitative Data from Survey.** The qualitative data gained from the survey offered surprisingly common themes. Although only about half of survey participants chose to write statements about what they felt would encourage them to become more involved in the democratic process, these responses were consistent in spite of a range of ages and political affiliations. Many respondents echoed a desire for more and “better” candidates, a commitment to honesty by government officials and employees, and an absolutely accurate voting system. Many more requested that more educational resources be available for all ages and access to objective and unbiased information about political and government issues. These were the main concerns addressed by the respondents but may be resonated throughout the nation as well.

**Qualitative Data from Interview.** The researcher’s interview with Congressman Jody Hice, representing Georgia’s Tenth District, paralleled the trends communicated by the respondents of the survey. Representative Hice viewed making information and education available in a variety of ways that is accessible to all citizens as particularly important. This

includes both formal education in primary schools but also resources for all ages. It is paramount that this information is conveniently located and distributed through different mediums such as social media, newsletters and town hall meetings. These avenues also have the added benefit of making elected officials more accessible to the citizens, which opens communication channels and promotes deliberative discussion.

Overall, the quantitative results of the survey compared to the qualitative elements of the survey and interview were somewhat unexpected. The researcher was surprised to determine that there exist many similar concerns between government and citizens as well as across political parties and generational lines. If public participation is to be encouraged with elected officials, government agencies and diverse groups of citizens all collaborating on shared goals, this common ground must be our foundation to build a participatory democracy.

### **Limitations**

This research study had several limitations. First, the results may not be representative of society at large. Due to the small sample size and infinite range of citizens' perspectives, these results may differ in other settings. A key factor of the data collected may be due to the higher number of Republicans that participated in the survey. Due to the public's opinions of government, elected officials and agencies being inherently political in nature, what party they identify with, if any, may impact their responses drastically. In an area where the political affiliations are more equally distributed or are used as a controlled variable in the study, the resulting data may vary. Second, asking more direct questions about the context about the participant's interaction with government agencies would be helpful. In speaking with respondents after completion of the survey, the researcher learned that the opinion of agencies and how a citizen reports being treated depends greatly on the circumstances of the interaction.

For example, if the participant was seeking employment with a federal agency or taking part in joint training, the contact maybe very different from a citizen acting in the capacity of a customer or requesting services. Lastly, the researcher only interviewed one elected official. It would be beneficial to interview a more diverse range of government employees such as local officials, senior executives and public administrators who work with the public daily. These personnel would be well positioned to shed light on the practicalities and realistic possibilities for public participation.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The above limitations presented in this study provide various opportunities for future research. One area that may warrant further investigation is how public participation is viewed by citizens with differing political ideologies. When attempting to increase engagement, this factor may be significant in determining motivation and design. Another interesting area would be in examining how society's opinions of government are formed. It became clear during this study that citizens generally have low opinions of all aspects of government but had little personal interaction and when they did, were treated well. These conclusions, in theory, would give limited grounds for a poor perspective of government. Determining how the public formulates their opinions may reveal areas of contention between government and citizens that can be repaired. Finally, future research may desire to analyze media influence on public opinion and its impact on public participation. Evaluating media bias may be especially relevant in promoting or deterring citizen involvement.

Three primary conclusions were ultimately drawn from this research study. These conclusions were generated directly as a result of the data gained from the survey responses and interview.

1. Citizens of all ages, political affiliations and backgrounds desire more unbiased information and educational resources.
2. Government officials and citizens share many common goals and ideals.
3. The government must make meaningful participation opportunities available.

All of these factors work together to promote public participation.

The first conclusion of this study is that there is a substantial demand for objective information that does not originate from the potentially biased media. The citizens need an impartial source of factual information that they can depend on to be objective. Related to access to neutral reporting is the availability of free, nonpartisan resources for ongoing education. This would be helpful for all ages if a citizen was looking to learn more about specific government topic or if they wanted to understand procedures more thoroughly by utilizing several lessons on general government or legislative processes.

The second conclusion became clear after the qualitative survey results and the interview data were analyzed. It was interesting to discover that what the survey participants stated would increase their participation levels are the same features elected officials attempt to provide. This leads the researcher to deduce that there is a significant breakdown in communication that prevents the message from getting to the citizens. If elected officials and government employees can better convey that they have similar objectives as the public, participation may be increased. As stated previously, citizens must be made to feel they are partners with elected officials and not merely voters to be pacified at election time.

The final conclusion is that more opportunities and “participation infrastructure” must be made available to interested citizens. It appears that most of the public is not aware of the various

ways they can become more involved, beyond visiting the voting booth periodically. Not only is the government responsible for providing these opportunities, they must advertise them, especially to parties that may be affected by the decisions and outcomes. Public administrators may be particularly well positioned to accomplish these goals because of their expertise and close association with the public. Administrators would excel at explaining the project, providing educational resources and acting as a liaison between citizens, senior executives and elected officials.

### **Conclusion**

The United States is currently facing an array of troubles. From terrorism to economic recession and a deteriorating global position. Government approval ratings are dismal and is proven each election day when almost half the eligible voters don't bother to go to the polls. This presents a bleak forecast for American democratic power. Citizens' trust in the government is constantly eroding, with some justification, as the public is bombarded with stories like the Veterans Administration waiting list tragedies and unethical campaign finance allegations. The first step to strengthen this nation is to inspire citizens to become more involved in the democratic process. Our nation was built on this principle and our Constitution preserves this right. Unfortunately, many citizens do not exercise this democratic prerogative beyond voting and perhaps even take that mandate for granted. In 1920, Mary Parker Follett eloquently stated:

“We are not part of a nation because we are living within its boundaries, because we feel sympathy with it and have accepted its ideas, because we have become naturalized. We are part of that nation only in so far as we are helping to make that nation” (p. 339).

Almost one hundred years later, the same truth in this statement remains. Although the United States is confronting an untold number of threats, the crevasse between the public and the

government may be the most perilous. Studies such as this will assist in identifying the sources of friction, increasing communication and constructing a foundation for collaboration on the mutual objectives of the government and citizens.

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APPENDIX A: IRB Approval Letter

American Public University System  
American Military University  
American Public University

*Institutional Review Board (IRB)*

Application Number: 7-2016-71

Application Title: Public Participation in the Democratic Process

Dear Keri Gardner,

The APUS IRB has reviewed and approved the above application. Date of IRB approval: **8/12/2016**

Date of IRB approval expiration: **8/11/2017**

The approval is valid for one calendar year from the date of approval. Should your research using human subjects extend beyond the time covered by this approval, you will need to submit an *extension request form* to the IRB.

Changes in the research (e.g., recruitment process, advertisements) or informed consent process must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented. Please submit a *protocol amendment form* to do so.

It is the responsibility of the investigators to report to the IRB any serious, unexpected, and related adverse events and potential unanticipated problems related to risks to subjects and others using the *unanticipated problems notification*.

Please direct any question to [apus-irb@apus.edu](mailto:apus-irb@apus.edu). The forms mentioned above are available at <http://www.apus.edu/community-scholars/institutional-review-board/apply.htm>.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Douglas, PhD IRB Chair

August 12, 2016

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## APPENDIX B: Public Participation in the Democratic Process Survey

1) Do you believe more emphasis should be placed on teaching about our government and political processes in elementary, middle and high school?

Yes   No

2) Did you take any type of civics or United States government class (not history) in elementary, middle or high school?

Yes  No

3) Overall, how well do you understand the basic procedures in our government?

Very Well  Well  Average  Not Well  Not at all

4) Did you vote in the last **local** election?

Yes  No

5) Did you vote in the last **primary**?

Yes  No

6) Have you ever contacted any of your elected representatives (local councilman, mayor, Senator, etc.) by calling, e-mailing, or mailing a letter?

Yes  No

7) Have you ever had direct interaction (phone or face-to-face) with a representative of any federal agency or agencies?

Yes  No

If yes, which agency or agencies? \_\_\_\_\_

8) How were you treated?

Very Well   
  Well   
  Average   
  Not Well   
  Very Poorly

9) What is your opinion of the performance of the following offices:

President:

Exceptional   
  Above Average   
  Average   
  Below Average   
  Poor

Congress:

Exceptional   
  Above Average   
  Average   
  Below Average   
  Poor

Federal

Agencies:

Exceptional   
  Above Average   
  Average   
  Below Average   
  Poor

10) Do you  
segments,  
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search for infor-  
etc.) about polit-  
you?

mation (ar-  
ical issues

ticles, news  
that are im-

Never

Daily    Weekly    Monthly    Yearly

11) If so, where do you look?

- Social Media
- Government websites
- National media websites (MSNBC, Fox News, CNN, etc.)
- Television
- Print newspapers & Magazines

12) Would you use educational resources presented in a brief and objective way, to understand government procedures and legislative processes?

Yes      No

13) Are you a member or do you donate to any type of campaign or political action group (VFW, AARP, NRA, political party, etc.).

Yes

No

14) Beyond voting, please list anything that would encourage you to participate more in the political process. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

15) Age Range:

18- 29

30- 39

40- 49

50- 59

60+

16) Party Affiliation:

Democrat

Independent

Republican

No Affiliation

Other (please state): \_\_\_\_\_