

## Introduction

### Innovations in Citizen Engagement and Empowerment: Beyond Boundaries

Cheryl Simrell King & Alicia Seegers Martinelli  
The Evergreen State College  
Olympia, Washington, USA  
kingcs@evergreen.edu  
aliciaseegers@hotmail.com

This special issue had its genesis in a conversation with Eleanor Glor, Editor in Chief of this journal, at an American Society for Public Administration ([www.aspanet.org](http://www.aspanet.org)) conference. The mission of *The Innovation Journal* is to encourage innovation that improves the quality, efficiency or effectiveness of government administration and policy. Eleanor thought, rightfully so, that a great deal of innovation in the public sector currently revolves around the roles and responsibilities of citizens and their governments and that this is an important topic for the journal to take on. In particular, we were interested in how citizen-based innovations are contributing to better governance.

We certainly can't claim that the current citizen engagement/empowerment movement is anything new under the sun: in the U.S., it rises directly out of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society Programs and other social change movements of that time and indirectly out of our history of populism. Still, there's something interestingly organic, and inexplicable, about the current movement. There doesn't seem to be any particular catalyst, event or movement, per se, that can be linked to the international attention focused on these issues. We began to see innovative practices in engagement and empowerment in the early 1990s (some arising out of established institutions, including governments; some arising out of new institutions or citizen movements) and scholars began to write about them soon thereafter. Now, it's difficult to open any publication about public administration, public policy or governance and NOT see something about citizen involvement. This is the case in both the U.S. and abroad. It seems ubiquitous. Something is up.

In the U.S., it's fairly easy to trace the lineage of current citizen participation and engagement movements. We've always had populist leanings (at least this is what de Toqueville tells us about ourselves from his visit in the mid-1800s) but the current citizen-centered movements come out of a number of intersecting forces, three of which are discussed here.

***Awakened citizenry:*** while there have always been pockets of citizen activity (and, particularly with those citizens being oppressed by people and governments), it seems as if the citizenry of the United States was awakened from our slumber in the 1960s and beyond. While fear has put a number of us back to sleep, blind trust in government is no longer a common trait among us. The Vietnam War, Watergate (and every "gate" scandal since), the civil and women's rights movement – all changed the face of government and citizenship for better and worse. We no longer believe we need to be faceless "subjects" of government, irrespective of which direction we lean on the political spectrum. We believe we have the power (empowerment?) and right, to use favored words of our current president, to freedom and liberty and we get to decide what that means (not some faceless government entity nor a petty bureaucrat).

***Anti-government movements; Neo-conservatism:*** the awakened citizenry lead directly to a virulent anti-government movement that began in the 1970s and continues today. This movement has taken many different forms over the past three decades but, at heart, are the following: 1) Dismantling of “New Deal” and “Great Society” notions of government. Our current administration seeks to move us even further away from a dependency society (or, put another way, a communal society) to an “ownership society” where governments’ main role is to lightly manage the invisible hand that keeps us all individually viable in the marketplace. 2) Downsizing of governments and divestiture of activities to private and non-governmental organizations. Here, then, the focus is on bottom line performance (have we spent tax dollars efficiently and effectively) in much the same way private businesses measure their worth in terms of profit and loss. No matter that, by basic definition, public goods always run a loss. 3) Anti-government, and anti-bureaucrat attitudes in both citizens and political officials. While Jimmy Carter was the first president to run on a “cut government waste” platform, Ronald Reagan promised that the “Potomac would run red with the blood of bureaucrats.” Governmental service is no longer an honorable duty. Alongside of politicians are citizen-driven anti-government movements taking the form of groups such as the “citizen-militias” that were active in the late 1990s and citizen initiatives designed to limit the power of government to tax and spend.

***Postmodern, de-centering movements in theory and practice:*** contemporary theoretical and philosophical movements (Postmodernism; Critical Theory; Pragmatism; Social Constructivism; Liberation Theory, Quantum Physics, etc) took “science” off its pedestal and showed us that the truths we felt to be self-evident may not, actually, be truths. Doing so opened up innumerable possibilities for rethinking how and why we practice governance the way we do. Popular education and liberation movements in both developed and undeveloped countries led to people taking control of means that were, in the past, typically government controlled and maintained (water supply; agricultural and development policy and practices, etc). As validation of alternative ways of knowing spreads, so does “empowerment.” If you no longer have to believe that expertise can only belong to a certain group (with certain credentials), then possibilities expand.

### **Definition of Citizen Engagement and Empowerment**

It’s probably time to define the terms we’ve been using so cavalierly. Citizen engagement, by our definition, means something other than citizen involvement or participation. The difference lies in the production model of governance. Citizen involvement or participation happens in a traditional production model of governance where citizens are actors or stakeholders who act in a consultation role to and with established institutions. Citizen engagement comes out of a co-production model of governance where citizens are an essential part of the production process. Engaged citizens are, in theory, committed to some larger sense of the “common good” beyond their individual and independent selves. They practice, in Ben Barber’s words (1984), “we-thinking” instead of “I-thinking.” Theoretically, engagement efforts foster a sense of citizenship that extends beyond what individuals get or own to some larger notion of the roles and responsibilities of individuals as part of a collective.

Empowerment is a term that is an irritant, but we've yet to find an adequate replacement term or concept. It means, of course, taking or realizing power where power is due (or can be due). It is often used in a patronizing way in that those in power claim to "empower" those not in power. As if power is a good of which there is limited quantity and can be given, traded, bought or sold as a commodity. An old simile is fruitful: power is like a candle. It does not lose any of its light by lighting another candle. In fact, illumination is improved for all when more candles are lit. Empowerment, in our view, is more of an organic notion; people come to recognize the already existing power needed to do what needs to be done; it's a matter of harnessing that power. When we think of empowerment, we think of our friend Joe Gray's words. Here, he's talking about the work he did in Orange County, Florida as part of their (dismantled) Targeted Community Initiatives (TCI) programs:

Once you go in and empower communities, they don't become un-empowered. Once you go in and really create a situation where you engage citizens in working with their government, then government has to change because government is us, right? And if you start changing all the people that make up the other side of the counter, then those folks are going to demand a different level of service and accountability from government. This is what transforms government. An example: I got a call last week from the Orange County planning department requesting that my firm come and do neighborhood plans for them. They realized they can't do things the way they used to. It is not the same communities they were working in before. These communities are insisting upon being at the table. We transformed communities during our TCI work and that community is forcing a transformation on the county (Joseph Gray in King and Zanetti, 2005).

When the county, under new leadership, had to work with these neighborhoods, it didn't matter that the county no longer wanted an "empowered" citizenry. Power changes communities and governments, by definition, must follow. Therefore, engagement and empowerment go hand in hand.

Following Joe's words, in our call for papers we specifically asked for submissions that addressed the following three elements of citizen engagement and empowerment:

- 1) The political-citizen interface (politics) such as effective techniques and tools;
- 2) The bureaucracy-citizen interface (administration) such as citizen engagement and empowerment in policy development and priority setting; and,
- 3) Government accountability, such as citizen engagement in improving government performance and accountability for processes and results.

### **The Special Issue**

The issue that emerged from this call for papers is diverse and interesting. One of the key strengths is the ways in which the papers cut across traditional boundaries: sectors, nation states and ideas of governance. One of the important lessons to learn here is that innovations are often found at the in-between spaces of those things we thought, heretofore, to be separate.

Several of our papers are Canadian; a few cross over international boundaries. Most are from U.S. scholars and practitioners, probably reflecting the country of origin of the co-editors.

There's much to be learned from innovative practices and perspectives from across the globe. While the contexts within which engagement and empowerment are radically different depending upon the style of governance practiced in one's nation state or locality, important issues are uncovered when we examine what people are doing in other places and think about what this means for us. Here in the U.S. (no one will be surprised to learn this), we can be quite egocentric about how citizen engagement "belongs" to an American-style democracy when, in fact, this is simply not the case. In fact, one could argue that our capacities for citizen engagement and empowerment are much more limited in the U.S. than they are in Canada and in European social democracies such as Denmark, Sweden, the U.K. and the Netherlands. In the U.S., when we think of the word, "state," we think of government. In other social democracies, when citizens think of the word "state," they think of themselves as, to use Ralf Brand's words, "citizen-innovators" (see his article in this issue), or "everyday makers" (Bang and Sorensen, 1999). People in the U.S. don't see themselves as a separate but equal unit in the governing relationship the way folks do in other places (we've not yet grown full enough with our empowerment). The irony is that everyday makers and citizen-innovators are found in the places where social and economic security nets are firmly in place. One may argue that these cultures are government-dependent (not "ownership societies") and, therefore, not capable of citizen-based innovation. To the contrary. Some of the best examples of citizen innovation come from strong social democracies.

Examining international perspectives on citizen engagement and empowerment is particularly important at this moment in time because Americans are, apparently, doing a booming business in exporting our particular brand of democracy irrespective of the overwhelming evidence that it is not wanted. According to a recent *Newsweek International* article (Moravcsik, 2005), the American dream used to be a global fantasy. No more. As Moravicsik states,

Countries today have dozens of political, economic and social models to choose from. Anti-Americanism is especially virulent in Europe and Latin America, where countries have established their own distinctive ways – none made in America... The failure of the American Dream has only been highlighted by the country's foreign policy failures, not caused by them. The true danger is that Americans do not realize this, lost in the reveries of greatness, speechifying about liberty and freedom.  
(<http://www.commondreams.org/cgi-bin/print.cgi?file=/headlines05/0125-01.htm>; accessed 1/25/05).

What can be learned when we look across national boundaries at innovative citizen engagement and empowerment efforts? In particular, two of our authors take this question one step further and ask what can we learn when we also cross the public/private boundary:

Richard Bissell's work with private financial institutions working in development focuses on, in his words, "how a highly diffuse process of growth has, in fact, developed feedback mechanisms among citizens and institutions to accelerate the growth in effectiveness of citizen engagement."

Ralf Brand examines the role of uses in innovation processes of new products, “whether it is feasible to transfer and adapt these findings from the context of corporate product innovation to public innovations in infrastructure, policy, ordinances, etc.” In his work, he introduces us to the topic of “citizen-innovators.”

Eleanor Glor, writing from Canada, reflects on how different perspectives on the notion of “empowerment” yield very different approaches. Those who have authority or control (employers, governments, etc.) tend to see empowerment as a technique for securing *buy-in*, *engagement* and *commitment* from others to support their goals and objectives. Those who are not in power (employees, citizens) see engagement and empowerment as being about seeking and acquiring the tools, resources and authority to access and use power and to make a place/guarantee a place at the decision making table. This is particularly important as we begin to turn our attention to seeking empirical data on public sector innovations in engagement and empowerment. Our methods tend to focus on administrators as the unit of analysis; citizens are not included. Thus, we are already narrowly framing the discussion.

Other articles report on the state of engagement and empowerment in the U.S. Ross Prizzia reminds us that much can be learned from work in environmental movements as many innovations in citizen engagement have their roots there. Prizzia discusses community-based Restoration Advisory Boards (RABs) and examines the intersections of (empowered) citizens and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the development and evolution of community involvement plans.

Kathe Callahan and Kaifeng Yang’s empirical research examines the changing roles of public administrators and citizens and the training opportunities available to both as they assume new roles as collaborative administrators and engaged citizens. Valuing participation and engagement is one thing; are we training folks to be facilitators/collaborators and to share power? Their research reports on a national survey on civic participation as well as interviews with city and county administrators and managers.

As indicated in our call for papers, we are very interested in the intersections between citizen engagement/empowerment and accountability/performance measurement. While it may seem as if the two are diametrically opposed (one is about moving toward more collaborative governance; the other is about running government like a business), they are deeply related and finding the spaces of relation is likely to serve citizens and the citizen engagement movement. These issues are important in the U.S. and also in other countries where neo-liberal and neo-conservative reforms are significantly altering the way we govern.

Marc Holzer and Kathryn Kloby report on work funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation in the U.S. The Sloan Foundation is particularly concerned with ensuring that “what is measured and reported is what matters to citizens and that the data are not corrupted by the natural tendency of officeholders and government professionals to report favorable outcomes.” Holzer and Kloby identify the most important factors associated with sustainability by focusing on the continued efforts of citizen-driven performance measurement initiatives funded by the Sloan Foundation. Their analysis brings a series of sustainability issues and questions to the forefront with some recommendations intended to facilitate widespread implementation of similar endeavors.

Pamela Gibson, Donald Lacy and Michael Dougherty provide us with five examples of U.S. states and localities involving citizens in planning processes. Citizens are involved in the processes of planning, budgeting, and evaluating progress and each of the efforts has identified new governance processes in which citizens are improving governmental accountability through their participation.

Several interesting case studies of citizen engagement and empowerment from a number of different perspectives are included in this issue. Roger Farley, Sylvie Cantin and Shari Silber as well as Deborah Norwood present case studies of citizens in Canada interacting with governments within policy communities, policy networks, and in policy development. Norwood proposes a model of *Continuous Interaction*, which combines social justice and customer focus for citizen empowerment in the dynamics of policy development

Heidi Koenig offers the case of Elgin, Illinois where a number of vectors came together to make for a creatively successful, and sustainable, citizen engagement and empowerment effort.

Alicia Seegers Martinelli writes about our hometown of Olympia, Washington showing how citizen expression can evolve into engagement and empowerment.

For those of us interested in what this means for how we educate or train students and administrators, we offer two cases of university-based education and training programs. Sally Beisser and Stuart Shulman report on how service learning programs can affect empowerment and engagement of current and future citizens. Kathryn Cleever, Robert Clifton and Adon Hogan examine collaboration as a tool to promote innovation and community involvement. The Best and Brightest Internship Program of the Center for NEW DIRECTIONS at the University of Colorado at Denver is offered as a case study of successful collaboration that enhances community involvement and innovation across the state of Colorado.

Finally, we have a few book reviews and one book review essay. Two Evergreen graduate students wrote reviews of books or professional papers germane to our topics. Daniel (Kana) Shephard offers us a view into the lessons that can be learned about citizen engagement and empowerment from native sovereignty movements and Tim Gugerty reviews an American Planning Association (APA) document on E-Government. Donald de Guerre's book review essay examines the intersections of employee empowerment and citizen engagement, reviewing three recent books related to this theme. Don's words are prophetic (and, perhaps, our future marching orders) for closing this introduction:

In this sense, empowerment requires a trans-disciplinary discussion. More inter-disciplinary dialogue and more examples of real empowerment are needed in order to counter a tendency towards temporary or pseudo-empowerment that is more characterized by *laissez-faire* than it is by democracy.

We are deeply pleased to have had the opportunity to be engaged in the process of bringing together this special issue. It reflects, in many ways, our belief, following Don de Guerre, that more work needs to be done (empirical and otherwise) on "real" empowerment in order to counter the tendencies toward seeing this as a fad and to counter temporary or pseudo-

empowerment. We are reminded (per Joe Gray) that once a community finds its power, it's hard to take it away – some evidence, perhaps, that pseudo-empowerment may end up biting the master's hand. Still, we've got a ways to go until we know enough, empirically and in practice, about what works and why. We have a ways to go before there is enough evidence to push beyond the imagined or the fake to the real. The future of democracy depends upon it.

A note of thanks to all involved: authors, peer reviewers and others. All submissions for this special issue were reviewed and all authors participated in a revise and resubmit process. The Graduate Program in Public Administration at The Evergreen State College ([www.evergreen.edu.mpa](http://www.evergreen.edu.mpa)) provided resources to support our work. Students in the program responded to our call for papers. The City of Olympia worked closely with us on developing the Olympia case study. A special thanks to co-editor Alicia Seegers Martinelli who will be in Chile (working for a year) when this is posted. Alicia was pursuing her MPA at Evergreen and took on the co-editing position as an independent learning contract. We couldn't have done this without her – she kept us all well organized and on task and she's a talented researcher and writer (see her article). Thanks, Alicia.

### **About the Editors:**

**Cheryl Simrell King** is a Member of the Faculty at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. She teaches in the Graduate Program in Public Administration and, on a rotational basis, in the undergraduate curriculum. She is co-author, with Lisa Zanetti, of *Transformational Public Service: Portraits of Theory in Practice* (M.E. Sharpe, 2005) and with Camilla Stivers and Collaborators, of *Government is Us: Public Administration in an Anti-Government Era* (Sage Publications, 1998).

**Alicia Seegers Martinelli** is a recent graduate of the MPA program at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. She is currently on a teaching sabbatical in Chile. Prior to taking her post in Chile, she worked as a development officer for the Thurston County United Way.

### **References**

- Bang, Henrik P. & Eva Sorensen (1999). The everyday maker: A new challenge to democratic governance. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 21(3), 325-341.
- Barber, Benjamin R. (1984). *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- King, Cheryl Simrell & Lisa A. Zanetti (2005). *Transformational Public Service: Portraits of Theory in Practice*. Armonk, NY; M.E. Sharpe.
- Moravcsik, Andrew (2005). Dream On America. *Newsweek International*. (<http://www.commondreams.org/cgi-bin/print.cgi?file=/headlines05/0125-01.htm>; accessed 1/25/05).