Participation Study Group

June 18, 1997

Meeting Packet
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AGENDA
CHARTER REFORM COMMISSION
STUDY GROUP ON PARTICIPATION

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18, 1997
6:30 p.m.

Water and Power Building, Room 1559
111 North Hope Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012
Contact - Raphael Sonenshein, Study Group Staff - (213) 367-5234

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1. **Roll call**

2. **Discussion of assignments and discussion of criteria for evaluating participation proposals and problem definition in the area of participation**

3. **Comments by Commissioners on subject matters within the Study Group's jurisdiction**

4. **Comments from the public on non-agenda items within the Study Group's jurisdiction**

Note: The next Participation Study Group meeting will be held on Wednesday, June 25, 1997 at 5:30 p.m. at the same location.

MINUTES
CHARTER REFORM COMMISSION
STUDY GROUP ON PARTICIPATION

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 11, 1997

6:30 p.m. or at the conclusion of the Commission meeting
Water and Power Building, Room 1559
111 North Hope Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012
Doris Isolini Nelson - Study Group Leader
Contact - Raphael Sonenshein, Study Group Staff - 213/367-5234

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1. Roll call

   Present: Marguerite Archie-Hudson, Andrew Henderson, Jose De Sosa, Stewart Kwoh, Doris Nelson, Sharon Schuster, and staff -- Raphe Sonenshein and Jason Parry

2. Discussion of organizational matters for study group, legal parameters for local participation, and possible criteria for analyzing policy options.
   - Doris Isolini Nelson suggested objectives for the study group
   - Raphe Sonenshein recommended role of staff and reviewed meeting materials
   - The group discussed various criteria and definitions relating to participation
   - The group established that three commissioners comprise a quorum
   - Sharon Schuster was elected Study Group Vice-Leader by voice vote
   - Raphe Sonenshein reviewed assignments for next meeting

3. Comments by Commissioners on subject matters within the Commission's jurisdiction

   None

4. Comments from the public on non-agenda items within the Commission's jurisdiction

   - Ron Ingram expressed dissatisfaction with a lack of coordination between appointed commission and elected commission

STUDY GROUP OUTLINE

Participation criteria noted in 6/11 Study Group Meeting

- Individual empowerment
- Access to government
- High neighborhood participation
- Real responsibility and decision-making power
- Higher voting rates
- Making government matter
- Clarity of representation
- Immigrant involvement
- Diversity
- Local autonomy
- Community interaction
- Government responsiveness
- Efficiency
- Accountability

Based on these criteria, what are the problems of participation in the City of Los Angeles?

What is the purpose of city government?

How do the concepts discussed in The Rebirth of Urban Democracy relate to our discussion?

The Rebirth of Urban Democracy

Discussion Outline

Background: Defining Key Terms

Representative Democracy: A system that depends on the election of people entrusted to make decisions in government, but ultimately accountable to voters. Built into the founding of the American system of government. Low "participation costs." Durable, stable, widespread.

Direct Democracy: A system first implemented by Progressive reformers, between the 1890's and the 1930's in order to resolve the power of special interests to subvert representative democracy. Also relied on electoral mechanisms, but allowed the voters to use the ballot to directly intervene in the government. Medium "participation costs." More common in the western states, where Progressive movement was strongest.

Participatory Democracy: An outgrowth of the social ferment of the 1950's and 1960's. A system that treats participation itself as a value, and that is suspicious of large electoral mechanisms. Emphasizes face-to-face decision-making, drawing on the "town meeting" model of a smaller-scale democracy. Widely discussed in the 1970's, but only a bit of research available on it today. High "participation costs." No particular regional pattern.

See also the attached reading assignment from John J. Harrigan for a concise history of participatory programs in cities, from 1950 to the present.

Chapter 1, Participation and Democracy: Why are we now discussing participation?

Declining public role in the democratic process

Decreasing voting rates
Narrowing view of civic participation (voting only)
Low vitality of government
Need for communal action
Need for governmental responsiveness

The authors profile some cities that have instituted "face-to-face democracy" at the neighborhood level

Birmingham Dayton Portland St. Paul San Antonio

★★★The authors found that the participation systems in these cities have not functioned at the expense of governability, and participation is more oriented toward community and political issues than in other cities.★★★

Chapter 2, A Legacy of Failure

Past efforts to integrate participatory democracy into institutional processes have failed

- Power relationships of current political system have muted administrative reforms.
- This failure suggests that reform of the political system is necessary to facilitate participatory democracy.

See also the attached reading assignment from John J. Harrigan for evidence of the earlier problems facing participatory mechanisms.

Why is participation back on the radar? Who is raising the issue, and what are their various concerns? What is the problem?

Chapter 3, The Potential for Success

Key to success in profiled cities

1. Strong political motivation to make participation work
2. Initial design of participation system
   - Small, natural neighborhoods
   - Citywide system from the beginning (everyone has a stake)
   - Political innovations regarding outreach and communications
   - System designed so that it cannot be captured by partisan politics
3. Each system was able to attain high participation before financial and/or political reversals (greater stake)

Participation systems succeed when they involve both breadth and depth of participation.

Breadth of participation: Extent to which every community member is given an

opportunity to participate at every stage of the policymaking process.

Indicators:

1. Access
2. Information and Outreach

Depth of participation: Ability of those participating to determine final policy outcomes.

Indicators:

1. Opportunity to affect citywide budget priorities
2. Opportunity to affect neighborhood allocations
3. Ability to define the decisionmaking process
4. Strength of program administrator involvement
5. Control of staff

Chapter 4, More Participation?

Have participation systems resulted in greater participation?

- No -- perhaps too demanding, but there may be a promise of improvement for low/mid income-earners.
- System can be structured so that bias of *who* participates will not be amplified by participation reforms, but these systems have yet to overcome pre-existing bias.

Do these systems change the nature of citizen interaction?

- Yes -- more communal and cooperative activities there than in cities that do not have citywide participation systems.

Suggested readings for next meeting: The "conclusion" sections of chapters 5-12 in The Rebirth of Urban Democracy, and the attached excerpt from John J. Harrigan's Political Change in the Metropolis.

Proposed staff report: What are the problems that are perceived in various quarters regarding participation in Los Angeles? Who are the participation "stakeholders" and what are they saying?

POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE METROPOLIS

FIFTH EDITION

John J. Harrigan

Hamline University

HarperCollinsCollegePublishers

dressed successfully. Some steps were made in this direction in many cities during the 1970s—especially in curbing the functional fiefdom of urban renewal. Indeed, by the 1950s the mayor's office had become a much more prestigious place than it had in the past, often attracting dynamic candidates who were able to use the city as a stepping-stone to higher office. For example, San Diego's Pete Wilson and Indianapolis's Richard Lugar moved up to the United States Senate, and Wilson went on to the governorship of California. Today's mayor is likely to move on to higher office as a governor or United States representative. An interesting phenomenon in recent years has been the number of women elected mayor of major cities.

ANTIDOTE FOR NONRESPONSIVENESS: DECENTRALIZATION

Charges of Nonresponsiveness

In addition to coping with the demands and interests of powerful functional fiefdoms, city governments must also cope with the demands and needs of unorganized citizens, of smaller and less powerful groups, and of newly emerging power centers. When the urban political process is viewed from the perspective of these factors, it is often portrayed as something beyond the influence or even the understanding of ordinary citizens. Michael Parenti studied three unsuccessful attempts of the Newark Community Union Project (NCUP) to obtain major gains for the residents of a poor, black neighborhood in Newark during the mid-1960s.[77] NCUP was organized by local black militants and white members of Students for a Democratic Society. Over a three-year period, NCUP attempted to get the city government to enforce the city's building codes and to install a traffic light at a particularly dangerous intersection. When these attempts failed, NCUP tried to elect new black candidates to the city council and the state legislature. But this attempt failed too. Throughout these efforts, the tactics employed by NCUP ranged from traditional voter registration and electioneering to protest activity and agitation that involved rent strikes, sit-ins, and blocking traffic at the intersection where the traffic light was desired. Although NCUP held together and persisted in its efforts for three years, none of its three major projects was successful.

Drawing on his observations of these unsuccessful experiences, Parenti describes the urban political process as seen from below. First, "there exists the world of the rulers and the world of the ruled." Second, one of the crucial elements of power is the capacity to set the agenda of the struggle, to determine that certain questions will not come up for consideration by government agencies. These are the so-called nondecisions. "Much of the behavior of Newark's officials can be seen as a kind of 'politics of prevention' . . . designed to limit the area of issue conflict." Third, Parenti rejects the pluralist concept of "latent power," which in this case would imply that the ghetto

dwellers possess a latent or "potential power that would prevail should they choose to use it."[79] On the contrary, the resources of the poor are seen as infinitesimal in comparison to the resources of the interest groups. In contrast to Robert Dahl, who states that power is noncumulative, Parenti maintains that the *lack* of power is cumulative. Ghetto dwellers exist in a state of *cumulative inequalities* in which their unequal status in education, income, jobs, and discrimination all accumulate to reduce their potential collective political efficacy. Because of their cumulative inequalities, they are unable to translate their needs into effective demands. Since politicians respond to *demands* more readily than they respond to citizens' needs, the cumulative inequalities of the poor increase their difficulty in getting the government to meet their needs. Furthermore, politicians who do respond to ghetto dwellers' demands on certain kinds of issues such as building code enforcement "might incur the wrath of high political leaders or powerful economic interests." For this reason, "party regulars have little inclination to entertain the kinds of issues" pushed by organizations such as NCUP, and "they also try to discredit and defeat those reformers who seek confrontations on such issues."[79]

Not all studies of attempts to mobilize the poor have been as totally pessimistic as Parenti's study, but a remarkable consensus exists on the extreme difficulties of organizing the poor to articulate their demands in ways that will oblige government agencies to respond positively. One of the most common political tactics of the poor has been protest activity. But a study of rent strikes and protest activity in New York found that protest as a tactic has severe limitations, particularly over the medium and long range.[80] Protest groups are inherently unstable and difficult to keep together. In order to get the attention of the mass media, protest leaders tend to overstate their strength and their accomplishments, only to lose credibility with reporters when they are unable to produce on the statements and claims they make. In order for protests to be successful, the leaders have to capture the sympathy and often the financial support of third parties, particularly white liberals. This usually involves moderating their position or making compromises that lose them support from other members of the protesting groups. In the Harlem rent strikes of 1963 and 1964, government officials and slum landlords were able to use delaying tactics and wait for the indignation aroused by reportage of slum housing conditions to wane. When public interest declined, the rent strike coalition collapsed.[81]

Although the poor lack many of the resources of power, their powerlessness is not total and the power relations are not static. They do change. Changes have been most obvious in the arena of electoral politics. As noted in Chapter 5, the number of black elected officials increased dramatically from 1469 in 1970 to 7335 in 1990, and most of the cities with large black populations now have black mayors (see p. 30, Table 5.1). Even where blacks did not elect their own mayors, they have seen an increase in their collective political influence.[82]

What conclusions can we draw about this research into the powerlessness of the poor and the racial minorities? Three conclusions are warranted. First

blacks, by engaging in community organization, direct political action strategies, and electoral competition, have been able to get middle-class black leaders drawn into the governing coalitions in most cities where blacks constitute a substantial portion of the city population. Second, despite being able to use this newfound power to make modest increases in black public-sector employment, there is no systematic evidence that black mayors have yet been able to make substantial improvements in the living conditions of the huge black urban underclass.

Third, despite the black success, there still is no systematic evidence that unorganized people, regardless of race, get any more positive reaction from city governments today than they did 30 years ago. Commentaries on certain white ethnic groups, poor white communities, and many big-city residents interviewed sporadically indicate that they also feel powerless to influence city politics.[83] This white powerlessness may not be limited to the poor; there may well be a sense of middle-class powerlessness as well. In Chapter 9 we will argue that this sense of powerlessness within the city is one of the reasons for the white exodus to the suburbs. And for whites who cannot afford to move to the suburbs, there is often a frustrating sense of loss of control over their neighborhoods. In the Canarsie section of Brooklyn, these frustrations often exploded in acts of violence against blacks whom the whites saw as invading Canarsie.[84]

Decentralization as an Antidote for Nonresponsiveness

Given the widespread perception that city governments and their functional fiefdoms are not very responsive to unorganized city residents and their neighborhoods, it is not surprising that the past 30 years have seen a succession of decentralization proposals to give citizens more influence in the programs operated by the functional fiefdoms. To date, urban decentralization has evolved through three stages: (1) the Community Action and Model Cities programs of the 1960s, (2) the community control movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and (3) a continuing emphasis on citizen participation and neighborhood revitalization in the 1980s and 1990s.

Community Action and Model Cities Programs The Community Action programs (CAPs) were created by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, and the Model Cities program was created two years later. Although important differences existed between the programs, they had three similar objectives: (1) to provide and improve public services for the poor, (2) to mobilize both public and private resources to cope with the problems of poverty, and (3) to engage the maximum feasible participation of the poor in carrying out the programs.

Participation of the poor was most advanced in the Community Action programs. Community action agencies (CAAs) were created to implement the Community Action programs. The CAAs were originally made independent of the city government, and neighborhood representatives dominated their

boards of directors. But as time went on and as the federal funding agency the Office of Economic Opportunity was terminated, CAAs became highly dependent on local city halls for their survival. Although many cities have continued to fund their own CAAs, the CAAs now function more as an arm of city hall rather than as independent political organizations for the poor. Whatever merits they may have today in terms of delivering public services to the urban poor, they are clearly no longer a major force for decentralizing political influence to bring it to the neighborhood level.

Community Control A second prescription in the 1960s and 1970s for making urban governments more responsive to the citizenry was that of sharing control over governmental services between centralized bureaucracies and community residents who receive the services. A wide variety of control-sharing schemes was advanced under a bewildering array of labels as diverse as community control, consumer representation, decentralization, little (neighborhood) city halls, neighborhood advisory councils, and neighborhood corporations. Each of them is based on different assumptions about the nature of urban government and each would have different results in dealing with the problem of bureaucratic unresponsiveness. In all community control plans, an important distinction must be made. Does the control sharing plan simply decentralize the *delivery* of services? Or does it decentralize *political control* as well? [85]

There have been many instances of practical attempts to achieve decentralization of political control and/or delivery of services. Three of these have evoked the most interest among observers: (1) decentralization of education, (2) decentralization of city hall and public services, and (3) neighborhood advisory committees or councils.

Decentralization of Public Education In central cities with large numbers of poor children or racial minorities, the public school systems have been resoundingly criticized as being unresponsive to children's needs.[86] Because of residential segregation, big-city schools have traditionally been racially segregated in fact, even though there may have been no laws demanding their segregation. Schools for the racial minorities were also commonly the oldest, shabbiest, and most poorly supplied with facilities. Teachers with enough seniority to have a choice tried to avoid teaching in the minority neighborhoods.

Black leaders attacked these problems for many years by seeking more school integration, but in few cities were they successful. Consequently, when the concept of decentralizing control over schools was advanced in the mid-1960s, it quickly won acceptance from those blacks who despaired of ever getting truly integrated schools and at the same time deplored the inferior quality of the black schools. Local control of schools was also consistent with the then-growing philosophy of black separatism. Two of the most noteworthy experiments in decentralized control of schools occurred in New York City and Detroit.

In three of the most impoverished neighborhoods in New York City, the board of education established locally controlled demonstration districts to experiment with locally controlled schools. A local governing board was created in each district, and the members were chosen by popular election by residents of the district.

In the Ocean Hill–Brownsville district, an explosive controversy soon developed between the local governing board, the school bureaucracy, and the teachers' federation. When the governing board attempted to transfer some teachers out of the district and replace them with others, it ran into the solid opposition of the United Federation of Teachers. Since some of the teachers to be transferred out were Jewish, the local blacks were accused of anti-Semitism, even though it should be noted that most of the retained teachers were also Jewish. A long, drawn-out struggle ensued in which the schools were closed by a teachers' strike and the police had to be brought in to protect the peace. There was little popular support for the demonstration district's side of the strike outside the black community, and even among blacks barely a majority supported it.* The strike proved so unpopular and divisive that the demonstration district experiment was brought to an end by the New York legislature in 1970. In its stead, 32 local school boards were created whose authority was sharply limited.[87]

In Detroit, the attempt to decentralize public schools also developed into an explosive controversy.[88] In 1969 the Michigan legislature passed a bill that created new local school boards that would be subordinate to the citywide board. The citywide board was dominated by liberals who were determined that decentralization would not be allowed to impede their plans for school integration. Consequently, they drafted a plan for local school boards in which about 9000 pupils would be bused across local boundary lines in order to accomplish integration.

The public reaction was swift. Behind the leadership of a conservative board member who opposed the integration, protests and demonstrations erupted. Under local pressure, the state legislature quickly revoked its 1969 law and passed a new law that outlawed such busing of students and mandated the decentralized school boards to be organized on the basis of neighborhood schools. That obviously meant that the schools would not be integrated. In addition, the new law gave each of the eight local school boards one representative on the previously at-large, citywide board of education. A recall petition was filed in June 1970 and, in a special recall election, all the liberal members of the citywide board of education were removed from office and replaced with conservatives. The former conservative member who had

*Louis Harris conducted a survey of New Yorkers in April and May 1969. On a question of whether the teachers' federation was more right or the demonstration district governing board was more right, the percentage favoring the teachers versus the percentage favoring the governing board was 63 to 8 among Jews, 48 to 9 among Catholics, 35 to 20 among white Protestants, 21 to 12 among Puerto Ricans, and 14 to 50 among blacks (Louis Harris and Bert E. Swanson, *Black-Jewish Relations in New York City* (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 132).

led the anti-integration demonstrations was elected board president. Local neighborhood boards were given extensive sway to establish policies as they saw fit. In a black district, a principal was removed. In another district, the local board was permitted to refuse to administer a statewide achievement test to students. And a district in a white region was allowed not to implement voluntary desegregation guidelines that had been established.

The decentralized schools in Detroit seemed to come much closer to the neighborhood government model of decentralization than did those in New York. Their net impact, however, was to impede integration in Detroit, inflame latent racial tensions, and cut back educational programs. They also failed to increase the representation of the poor or the minorities in school policymaking. As in New York, Detroit's local school board members came largely from middle-class professional, technical, and managerial positions.[89]

Perhaps in reaction to the experience of New York and Detroit, school decentralization efforts elsewhere have shied away from granting political control to subdistrict units. Instead, the tendency has been to expand the use of community advisory councils that give parents input into decision-making on some curriculum matters and certain federal programs.

After the New York and Detroit experiments, most movement toward further decentralization stopped until the 1980s. During that decade, several prestigious national commissions sharply criticized the nation's public school system, the Reagan and Bush administrations pushed for voucher plans to help more children go to private schools, and some governors initiated highly publicized public school reform plans that included elements of decentralization. Chicago sought to rejuventate its poorly thought-of system by created local boards similar to those used in New York City and decentralizing substantial authority to individual school principals and their staffs.

Little City Halls A second approach to decentralization has been to establish little (neighborhood) city halls throughout the city. A little city hall is simply a mayoral branch office that seeks to expedite the provision of city services in neighborhoods and to improve ties with neighborhood residents. Little city halls were strongly recommended by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders[90] as one means of lessening citizen alienation from the government. Some form of decentralized delivery of services has been found in at least 75 cities, and in at least 25 of them are significant enough to be called little city halls.[91]

Neighborhood Advisory Councils Similar to the little city halls are neighborhood advisory councils (NACs), established in St. Paul, Minnesota; Washington, D.C.; New York City; and many other cities. The NAC plan typically divides a city into small geographic districts (17 in St. Paul, 36 in Washington, and 59 in New York City), provides funds for a neighborhood office and a full-time district manager, and allows for an elected or appointed representative board. Typically, councils are responsible for advising the central city government on land-use decisions, budgeting, and the delivery of ser-

vices in the neighborhood. Where the NACs are elected, as in Washington, voting turnout rarely exceeds 20 percent of the registered voters,[92] and where they are appointed, as in New York City, there are inevitable complaints that the appointed board members do not reflect neighborhood views.[93]

Decentralization in the 1990s

By the late 1980s much of the thrust for community control had dissipated. The most advanced form of community control was that of Milton Kotler, who advocated dividing cities into neighborhood governments that would have legal authority to handle all neighborhood-level governmental issues.[94] But Kotler's model was not adopted anywhere.

More enduring were the moderate forms of control sharing. The New York City demonstration school districts, for example, disappeared very quickly when they attempted to exercise real power. The less powerful local school boards created after the Ocean Hill–Brownsville crisis, on the other hand, continue to function. One study of neighborhood programs in four midwestern states also found that neighborhood program participants expressed greater satisfaction with the program if it provided for only moderate levels of participation rather than high levels and if the program was of a moderate scope rather than a comprehensive scope.[95] Neighborhood advisory councils seemed to fit much better into the less militant mood of the 1990s.

Today there is some concern about how to revitalize neighborhoods without turning them into subcity governments. The American Institute of Architects called for a national growth policy based on preserving the quality of life in neighborhoods.[96] Mortgage lending institutions came under attack for the practice of redlining—that is, making it difficult for certain neighborhoods to get home mortgage loans. Federal legislation attempted to curb redlining. Federal community development funds and public housing funds under the 1974 Housing and Community Development Act made it easier to preserve buildings and to restore old neighborhoods of historic interest. This gave an added stimulus to the gentrification process of upper-middle-income people moving back into inner-city neighborhoods.

Decentralization—A Critique

Despite the eclipse of the community control movement in the 1980s, it would be a mistake to write it off entirely as a historical aberration of the 1960s. Some of its more moderate tenets (such as client representation and neighborhood advisory councils) are accepted practices in many cities today. Although these practices have not revolutionized the life-styles of urban dwellers, the practices often have modified the plans of big-city institutions to make them more accommodating to local residents. We will see in Chapter 9, for example, how local groups in Boston and other cities halted the construction of freeways through their neighborhoods. And New York City's Office of Neighborhood Government seems to have had some success in making that

city's bureaucracies more attentive to service-delivery problems at the district level.[97]

Control sharing has the potential to reduce citizen alienation from government. Giving citizens a voice in the management of their neighborhoods gives them an alternative to moving out to the suburbs when they become dissatisfied with the delivery of local public services.[98] Poorly organized or ineffectual control sharing, of course, can easily lead to bitter conflict that reduces confidence in government. But evidence does exist that meaningful and effective participation can also increase satisfaction and trust in local government.[99]

Finally, there is also reason to believe that vibrant neighborhood politics make the city more governable. Matthew A. Crenson studied neighborhood politics in Baltimore and concluded that they made several contributions to the effective government of that city. If neighborhood groups and a system of informal politics can be created, they can often deal with the hundreds of daily problems (such as vandalism, people who fail to maintain their property, trash removal from private property, even snow removal from alleys) that arise in a big city. This shields the central-city leaders from having their energies torn in many different directions at once and allows them to focus their energies on the big problems of the city. By delegating "authority to a host of small-time operators . . . [the downtown leaders] . . . will have more opportunities to behave like big-time operators themselves."[100]

In conclusion, the concept of control sharing was one of the most creative concepts to come out of the turbulent decade of the 1960s. Although much more moderate and much less extensive, the concepts of citizen participation and neighborhood revitalization continue to have meaning in the 1990s. The citizen participation movements have led to political mechanisms and expectations that make it easier for citizens' groups in the 1990s to demand meaningful input into governmental decisions.

BIAS IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN GOVERNMENT

Several themes about contemporary urban government have dominated the foregoing discussions. First, although no consensus exists on whether the elitist or pluralist theories of community power are more accurate, individual citizens are clearly much less influential than institutions. Second, the institutional dominance of cities can be described by the concept of functional fiefdoms. A functional fiefdom consists of an urban agency operating in some general arena of public affairs, consisting of its bureaucracy, its professional staff, its public employee union, and its board or commission of directors; its counterpart agencies in the state and federal government, and the private businesses, labor organizations, and interest groups that serve as a clientele for the agency. Third, the functional fiefdoms pose enormous problems for the exercise of decisive political leadership in large cities. Fourth, the existing structure and organization of power in urban areas, be it pluralist or stratified, is biased against people who are unorganized. This bias is felt more heavily by