

Abstract of the Dissertation

Citizen Participation:

The Utilization And Effectiveness Of Citizen Advisory Committees In Local Government

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Statement of the Problem: The concept of appointing citizens to serve on public committees was part of the good-government movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Conceived by reform-minded citizens during the progressive era, the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process was seen as a way to improve public policy deliberation by reducing the influence of partisan politics. Along with civil service reforms and the city-manager form of government, citizen committees were perceived as a way to make the public sector more democratic and competent.

Although appointed committees are widely accepted at every level of American government, there is little empirical data about the characteristics, contributions and effectiveness of these voluntary committees. Through a better understanding of what makes some committees more effective than others, recommendations can be made that will improve the productiveness of this type of citizen participation. More effective, or productive, citizen participation can ultimately improve the level and quality of municipal service provision by making services more responsive to the needs of citizens.

Research Questions: Incorporating qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, this research addressed the following questions:

- How are citizen advisory committees utilized?

- What influence do citizen advisory committees have on the planning and decision making process of local governments?
- What variables influence the effectiveness of citizen advisory committees?
- What obstacles prevent meaningful citizen participation from taking place?

Methodology: An in-depth case study was developed utilizing participant observation, focus group discussions, document review and interviews. The findings of the case study were used to develop a survey instrument. General descriptive statistics were computed; cross tabulations were calculated to determine how response rates varied across sub-groups of the total sample population; frequency distributions were run to identify the major obstacles to citizen participation. Seven hypotheses were tested using multivariate regression analysis.

Findings: The results of the regression analysis indicated that having clearly stated goals and objectives for advisory committee members, elected officials and municipal managers was a significant predictor of effectiveness. A democratic appointment process is also a significant predictor of effectiveness for citizen advisory committees.

Resources, staff support, form of government, consistent attendance by citizens, and consistent attendance by the governing body representative were not significant predictors of effectiveness. Obstacles to effective citizen participation include poorly defined goals and expectations for the advisory committee, the desire of elected official to control the agenda and lack of communication between the governing body and the advisory committee.