CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MOTIVATIONS: UNDERSTANDING WHY SOME DO AND SOME DON'T

JAN SCHLUPP
University of Oklahoma

AIMEE FRANKLIN
University of Oklahoma

This research explores what motivates citizens to participate on local government boards, committees, councils and commissions. We find that the everyday citizen's definition of civic engagement includes more than service on government boards, committees, councils, and commissions. Participation in charitable and religious organizations is also identified as civic engagement. Personal affiliations are as motivating as the expectation of building social capital. Non-participants, on the other hand, suggest that they do not participate because they dislike the way elected officials behave and want to avoid a similar experience. Participants have positive, yet pragmatic, perceptions of the outcomes of civic engagement. The ability to generalize the results from this study is limited by the sampling strategy employed and number of respondents. In the conclusions we identify future research areas that can overcome the explorative nature of the study and hypothesize which can be confirmed in a follow on study with a larger and representative sampling.

INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarly research reports on outcomes that arise from citizen participation in government processes (Bryson, et al. 2013; Davis 2014). Most studies of citizen participation examine episodic opportunities for individual citizens to provide input on a specific issue, such as a public hearing preceding the annual budget vote. There remains, however, a lack of empirical evidence on what motivates some citizens to become engaged on city boards, committees, councils, or commissions (collectively labeled boards). Citizens who serve on boards have an opportunity to provide direct and "official" input into the public policy decision-making done by the city's elected officials. As a result, they can be quite influential in articulating the multiple preferences held by citizens about policy issues and preferred courses of action for government. They also provide additional discussion on topics than what is possible in traditional city council/commission meetings that feature long agendas on a wide range of policy issues.

Citizen participation on boards is quite different from other participation mechanisms since these activities are official city appointments that require ongoing engagement on a specific city function. This type of civic engagement often creates a pathway to elected public service. To address gaps in our knowledge, we explore from the citizen's perspective, how Oklahomans define civic engagement activities, what factors are influential in deciding whether someone will become engaged in these activities and their perceptions of the civic engagement experience.

The research can be informative for local public officials as they struggle to include citizen input in their decision-making, a trend that is strengthened by the current fiscal conditions facing governments. The current conditions of fiscal stress, low levels of trust in government (Pew Research 2013) and high polarization in the political process challenge community identity and drain social capital. Our research uncovers strategies for engaging citizens as active community stakeholders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extant empirical research tends to focus on three specific components of citizen participation: the process, the participants, and the outcomes (Moulder and O'Neill 2007; Yang and Callahan 2007). Scholarship on normative theory has considered the implications of these components. In 1969, Sherry Arnstein sparked scholarly discourse about the construct of citizen participation in her article: "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." She arranges citizen participation on a ladder with the bottom rung denoting making information available to citizens and the highest rung representing participant decision-making power. Arnstein finds that the least enfranchised and those most impacted by government activities should be more involved in participation activities that delegate decision-making control. The same article also elaborated a very contentious normative issue: prior research measured participation as a dichotomous variable (Yes or No). Using the ladder analogy, she argued, would get at the nuances embedded in participation since participating by getting information did not necessarily infer decision-making power. In pointing out measurement limitations, Arnstein drew attention to the stark differences between giving citizens control versus merely providing citizens with information.

Having the ability to participate is important, but actual civic engagement occurs when participants are empowered to make decisions. Episodic, single-topic participation opportunities are a form of citizen participation near the bottom of Arnstein's ladder. Service on boards, on the other hand, gives citizens decision-making authority and thus deserves a differentiated label such as civic engagement. Contemporary scholars (Dryzak and List 2003; Mikels 2011; Paley 2004) support this prescriptive view on the potential for deliberative democracy to go beyond citizens just getting or giving information. Despite Arnstein's observations in 1969, much of today's citizen participation activity occurs in the one-shot single topic participation category. Our research examines longer-term civic engagement to find out how it may differ in terms of the value of decision-making responsibilities.

Other scholars attempt to avoid this complicated normative question and offer, as an alternate, empirical work that documents "…why and

when certain citizen participation mechanisms might be used" (Stewart 2007, p. 1069). Stewart decries this scholarship as well, arguing that purely positivist (as opposed to normative) approaches provide no means by which to test theories. As a result, one is left with a disconnect between those who emphasize the documentation of participation mechanisms (Berner 2003) but can only speculate about governance outcomes and those who emphasize the norms of democratic efficacy but offer scant guidance on how this is accomplished (Ball 2005).

From a practical perspective, this disconnect may be related to the apparent tension between citizens attempting to expand their influence and professional administrators who can view this involvement as directly challenging their own sphere of authority. In many situations, research has found that citizen participants are motivated largely by self-interests with a low willingness to pay for their preferences (Glaser and Hildreth 1999; Simonsen and Robbins 1999; Simonsen and Robbins 2003). Callahan (2000, p. 396) provides a compelling example in a case study of a citizen budget advisory committee:

> The finance director, Arthur Miller, was particularly hostile to the citizens. He saw the citizens' involvement as an intrusion, and he questioned why they should take such an active role in the budget. After all, he was the professional. "I hate wasting my time with these do-gooders. They don't understand government budgeting." Miller was not shy to share this opinion with the other department heads.

This tension is not simply the result of entrenched attitudes, but also reflects a real difference in the way that the administrator and the citizen see participation. Social scientists argue that increased participation by citizens will lead to an increase in effectiveness, higher accountability, more efficient resource allocation and an improvement in the perception of government (Callahan 2002). On the other hand, professional administrators do not always see citizen engagement as a normative good, but rather as an invasion of unskilled and untrained, but highly opinionated clients who make demands that benefit their own interests (Ohren and Bernstein 2001). Of particular concern to such administrators are uneducated citizens who are not aware of their lack of knowledge (Berner et al. 2011).

In the face of these challenges, administrators assume a pragmatic posture (Yang and Callahan 2007). Administrators willing to implement suggestions coming from citizens are faced with challenges related to giving citizens the type of control envisioned at the top of Arnstein's ladder. (Yang and Panday 2011) suggest that more research is needed to get inside the black box (Easton 1965) of policy implementation where we can see how inputs are transformed into outputs and policy success occurs.

From the literature, we might expect that a wide variety of opportunities to participate are necessary to foster citizen engagement that is representative of the community. Participation will naturally be self-interested: a specific issue-based concern is necessary to motivate citizens to commit the time necessary for civic service (Glaser and Hildreth 1999). Public administrators can design the process to assure that participants set aside their own self-interests and consider the interests of the community. Next, we compare these literature conclusions to what citizens define as civic engagement and what influences their decision to become civically engaged.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Our empirical results are derived using a grounded theory. The hallmark of grounded theory is that the researcher does not begin with causal assumptions about relationships between variables. This is a deductive approach that often features hypotheses to be tested in order to explain social phenomenon. Instead, the research employs an exploratory approach to uncover what variables are important. The ground theory approach relies on speaking with the "natives", or those who are engaged in the social phenomenon that is being studied, and finding out their perspectives on causal relationships. Building grounded theory is an entirely inductive process; the theory evolves and "builds" as the research progresses (Abrahamson 1983).

Since this study is exploratory, we employed purposive and convenience sampling strategies. Convenience sampling occurred by selecting a research setting in a mid-sized city in Oklahoma where the researchers lived. Purposive sampling involved a review of the rosters of those who have served or who were nominated to serve on boards

in this city and contacting these people to invite them to participate. The non-participants were selected purposefully to provide a diverse mix of interviews on gender, age and educational level. Selection bias may be a threat to the validity of the research because the researchers have lived in this community for many years and have observed the actions of the boards and board members. However, we purposefully selected potential interviewees so that they represented a wide range of boards and there were not multiple respondents from the same board.

Three types of interviewees are included in the research sample: 1) *non-participants* are those who have not participated on a board; 2) *nominees* refers to the interviewees who have applied for or been nominated to serve on a board, but have not done so; and 3) *participants* are those who currently are or have served on a board.

Data were gathered using a 30-minute, semi-structured, face-to-face interview protocol. There were three main domains that were used in the interviews: 1) how the interviewee defines civic engagement; 2) what motivated them to become involved; and 3) their impressions of the experience with prompts for each interview domain. Follow-up questions were asked for clarifying information.

As we noted above, non-participants were purposefully chosen to ensure socio-demographic diversity since the researchers could not control the characteristics of participants nor nominees. Table 1 below confirms this diversity. Non-participants were the most highly educated, followed by participants and nominees. The higher education level is reflective of the setting of the research in a college town. None of the nominees held graduate degrees, unlike the other two categories. The age range for non-participants is the greatest at 22 to 92. The ages of participants and nominees tend to be middle age. The three groups of participants had similar marital status; however, when it was discovered that nominees, as a group, did not have children at home, the non-participants were selected to leverage the number of children in the home. The non-participants raised the average years of residency but this may be an artifact of selection to provide the greatest age range.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

	Non-Participants (n = 7)	**Nominees** (n = 5)	**Participants** (n = 9)
Education	Highly educated	High school and some college are common	High school, some college and graduate degrees
Age	Ranges widely from 22 to 92	Young adult to late middle age	Older on average, 48 to late middle aged
Marital Status	All married or in a committed relationship	Married respondents also outnumber the single respondents	All but 1 of the respondents are married or widowed
# of children in household	None, for 4 people, one child for 2 and one with 3 children	None have children still living in their household	Most have children still at home
Residency Employment Sector	20 to 50 years Evenly split, public and & private sector	3 to 40 years Evenly split, public and & private sector	2 to 25 years Slightly biased towards public sector, especially teachers

RESULTS

The first research question explores the definition of civic engagement activities reported by the interviewees. The results in Table 2 below suggest quite widely-ranging definitions. The non-participants often mentioned engagement activities that are not traditional kinds of

citizenship activities; instead these are social bonding activities with non-governmental organizations. Nominees report a mix of religious and traditional civic duty activities. Participants provided the narrowest definition of civic engagement (perhaps because we told them they were selected for an interview based on current board membership.)

The second row of the table asked about pathways to participation. Differences emerged in these responses. An elected city official had invited all who are currently serving on a board to participate. These people generally have also been engaged in civic activities, formally and informally, for a most of their adult life. The nominees agreed to serve as a result of a specific issue-based interest or activity with a relevant interest group. Those who did not serve saw it as an affiliation-based possibility. If someone they knew had asked them to serve, they would be likely to have done so. Overall, the relationships that one has within the community through friends, work or relationships with current participants tend to be good predictors of the interviewee's willingness to serve.

From these interviews it appears that when you are surrounded by people who are already active, you are more likely to be active yourself. Additionally, once civically engaged, people tend to stay civically engaged. The finding that one of the best predictors of future participation is past participation is not very surprising, but it suggests an underlying pattern. Those who have overcome initial barriers to civic engagement stay involved more easily. This finding is similar to what Bryer concluded in research on Los Angeles citizen collaborations in 2009.

In the third question in this table, we also explored the amount of time board service is expected to or does require. Here we find a surprise: non-participants hold vastly inflated estimates of the time necessary. While the average length of service from those currently participating is five hours per month, non-participants think it would take two to four times longer. Although, it certainly would be possible to devote up to 20 hours per month on a board, participants report a time estimate that is dramatically less. Participants also note, however, that there are times when they voluntarily increase their service hours because of a specific issue/event that is before the board. Even with this expanded activity level, the time served is nowhere near the 20 hours per month estimated by non-participants.

Table 2
Civic Engagement Descriptions

Question	Non-Participants	Nominees	Participants
What kinds of civic activities do you participate in?	Religious and charitable organization involvement is a strong substitute for civic engagement.	Religion is a major substitute for civic engagement. Voting is very important to these respondents.	Narrower, more specific view of civic engagement – performing a general public service on their board, after being asked. Or, engaged as advocates for a specific cause. In this case, they self-nominate.
Did anyone ask you to become involved in civic activities?	No. But willing to become engaged: "*Maybe if I had more friends who were involved it would be a good impetus to get involved.*"	Most people in this group are self-motivated: *"[J]ust volunteered, heard through email at employment.*"	All invited to participate. Many of these people had direct contact with city officials. *"[Councilor] knew I had been involved through Sierra Club and asked me to be on this new committee.*"
What kind of time commitment did you think this activity would be?	Almost unanimously extremely high, ranging from meetings each week to 10-20 hours per month.	Responses to this question were varied, but closer to reality with estimates of 2-5 hours per week.	Varies widely on type of board and can be episodic. But in no case was it more than an average of 5 hours per month. The general consensus is that one can spend as much or as little time as one wants.

Note: Interviewee's comments in italics

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MOTIVATIONS

In the second research question, we explore what motivated someone to become involved on a local board. Non-participants offer several distinct reasons for their lack of direct government engagement. The most common reason is a lack of time. This is particularly true of individuals with families, who often see time spent in civic activities as competing with family time. "*Time constraints. I work for ~60 hours a week, then spend time with family. [There is] no time for really anything else at all, no matter what.*" And this comment: "*After I got married, [finding] both the time [to participate and the money [to pay for child care] was mysteriously harder.*" When presented with more realistic estimates of the time necessary to serve, non-participants are more open to service. The second most popular reason for not participating is that interviewees feel that they are already engaged in their community through their participation in religious and charitable organizations. This finding merits further confirmation with a larger number of participants.

All non-participants except one suggest that they would be motivated to become involved on a city board by one specific issue. In fact, after reviewing a list of current boards in the city that feature citizen participation, all non-participants were surprised to find one or more boards of which they were not aware. Across the board all non-participants indicated that they would like to find out more about and possibly serve on of these boards.

Nominees (about 50/50 among our interviewees) report that being motivated by a specific issue led to their nomination. For example, we interviewed an avid cyclist who had self-nominated for service on the Bicycle Advisory Committee. As he explained: "*I wanted to do this since I get run down every once in a while. …This town is not bicycle friendly. I wanted to work on the feasibility of getting real bicycle lanes."* Another was asked by the Mayor and agreed since "…*I agree with her outlook. We need a city with a good, fair, balanced outlook.*"

This same sense of altruism is evident among the current participants. When interviewees describe issues that motivated them to become civically engaged, two patterns emerge. First, some choose to participate because they have a long-standing interest or have been active in certain issues specific to the community. As one father explained: "*Kids see [what we do] as a very positive thing and so it has an effect.*

Hopefully, we can teach kids that they don't have to be afraid [after the Newport school rampage], and that there is strength in numbers." In this pattern participants see themselves as advocates. "*I am active in the Sierra Club. It would be wonderful if 100% [of the Sierra Club agenda] was adopted, but I inject ideas and issues that the Commission has not thought about.*"

In the second pattern, participants indicate that they became involved because of a city-specific issue. A retired male respondent shares his decision to become engaged: "*I went to the meeting and asked, 'Can't we do something about the prostitution corner across from our house?'* " Another long-time resident, who lived in a historic neighborhood, explains: *"[People] [n]eed to speak up against things they really don't believe in. Speak up against high-density housing, speak up for neighborhoods, particular issues*." Another participant is motivated by homelessness: "*Police are so ferocious here. They don't even give [homeless people] a chance. They stop and harass them*." And, a nonparticipant shares: "I would have to be both knowledgeable and angry about the issue at hand. I'm always more interested in things that affect me." This selection of interview comments is quite representative of the entire pool of interviewees. Citizens are more willing to become engaged on a specific issue.

Once people get involved, constraints on time no longer are an important issue. Many respondents indicate that they actually gave more time than what was expected. "*It's up to the individual. I became more involved than expected. It is hard not to, I didn't want to say no and saw a lot of need.*" And other confirms: "*My time was well spent. You don't always get that when you work with city things. On many other committees, you can't really see that you have made a difference*." In fact, one participant describes how he took on an extra task, just because his curiosity was engaged by a redistricting decision that was being challenged: *"[A citizen] suggested elitist manipulation. I took time to drive through the neighborhood. I had never done that before. I was shocked at how variable it is. There is an affluent condo community north of the mall, but farther north in the ward it gets to be fairly modest in housing. The new boundary was right at the transition point."* While the number of interviews in this study is minimal, the findings do suggest areas for future research to explore with a larger sample.

THE PARTICIPATION EXPERIENCE

The third research question explores the participant's satisfaction level with their civic participation on boards. As a group, individuals participating on boards felt they are able to contribute on a wide range of issues including: developing a master plan, redistricting electoral wards, allocating social service funding, recommending a new building design, acquiring federal funds for sidewalks in a neighborhood, determining library fund-raising strategies, and envisioning a new public space in a TIF (tax increment financing) district. In their minds, these are very positive outcomes even in those cases where the decision was not exactly aligned with individual preferences.

The sense of accomplishment is evident in this comment: "*If I wasn't there, I would like to think that the things would not have happened. Not because people were being malicious, but the concerns I brought up were not on their radar: things they had not thought about, more than they did not care*." As a member of the Tree Board describes: "*It seems like comments by others, for the most part, are what I would call not for positive growth or smart growth. In some respects we all think the same, but come at it differently, especially ways for drainage and cutting trees down*." This participant felt that even though he does not always get the exact outcome he wants, his input, particularly concerning environmental issues, is valuable to the group. By approaching an issue from a number of different angles, he feels that all participants in the group benefit.

The participation experience is generally satisfactory but there is a noticeable difference between those who serve on boards that have very clear goals versus boards with less clear goals. Boards with clearly articulated goals, or boards that took the time to articulate their goals, seem to have a more satisfactory process. This feeling can be seen in these comments. "*We had a meeting to decide our goals. After that, from the school [my only contact] was the principal, plus the two main leaders of our board just contacted us directly*." This contrasts a member of a different board.

> *They do not tell new members what exactly they are supposed to be doing. Some thought we should be contributing to the cause, others thought we were there to decide the budget, others thought we would fix certain parks and some knew we would be revising the Master Plan. To find out, in the first two or three months, I went in to [city staff] to ask.*

The board goals can be challenged when membership changes. "*The nature of the committee changed. This may have been due to hard times or new members. A few on the committee were using it as a steppingstone to another position in the city*. When that happened, it is perceived that: "*These people tended to want to run the show to benefit their preferred groups*."

As a group, participants describe the role of city staff as supporting board logistics and providing technical information. As one participant explains: "*Our board did not have real staff, just two half time positions. But, really the board did not have day-to-day activities. Instead, there were projects. So, the staff just did the communication with the board to let them know of meetings and send out packets*."

Beyond logistics, legal and technical issues also require staff involvement: "*They explained certain aspects not apparent to me. … The most interesting thing, and this was unique to my commission and I did not know it beforehand, was the state laws regarding this whole thing*." These comments suggest that there was not a lot of member education; instead staff interactions are infrequent and mostly facilitative for the boards' decision-making activities. However, board member education may not be critical if participants are already knowledgeable about and active in the issue area before joining the board.

As predicted in extant literature, there are times when board members experience resistance from city staff. "*Before I found out that precinct lines may change, I asked early on for information by precinct and got shut down. This was an example of serious gamesmanship and bush league politics of city staff*." A participant on the library board had this experience: "*We had more interaction with the library director and this was more push and shove, than give and take*." While these interactions are not always smooth, which can indicate that professional administrators do not always value input from boards, it does suggest that the structure works well. Board members are able to get in contact with the staff so the board can be effective.

Surprisingly, people other than city staff seldom contact the citizens participating on boards. When we specifically probed for interactions with city council members, lobbyists, or citizens, we learned: "*There wasn't much overt effort by council or prospective councilors. [Council member] did attend our public hearings. He was my council member and asked a question about something affecting his district. 'Why this and not something else?' He was ok when*

it was explained to him." This comment highlights two very different facets of citizen participation. On one hand, the city council members respect the independence of the citizen board and the formal channels for incorporating feedback from the board work efficiently. On the other hand, this could suggest that elected officials, as more powerful political actors, are too little concerned with the boards' activities. However, this conclusion is tentative based on a single study. An alternate explanation may lie in the degree of individualism of the administrators, council and board members. Future research could be designed to explore this condition more in-depth.

DISCUSSION

Participants' perceptions of their experiences on a board or committee or council or commission are generally positive. While there are a few problems, they generally feature the kind of unavoidable interpersonal conflict that occurs anytime human beings are involved in decision-making. As described above, participants feel a sense of accomplishment. They also suggest that participant is empowering. As one participant described: "*I have broader vision of my impact, it is real."* The general theme in almost every interview is that being involved in something, and seeing the concrete results of that involvement, are the driving forces behind their positive perceptions of engagement.

When considering these results, we acknowledge a possibility for self-selection bias. Those motivated enough to participate might naturally see their involvement in a positive light to justify the time and energy they have spent. Non-participants hold noticeably different perceptions about the process and outcomes. They perceive potential negatives. To document this finding, we simply yield the floor to statements from the non-participants:

- *Give and take seems like the party politics negotiations that must go on all the time. There is a lot of ego-based dissent.*

- *Lots of negotiating and political BS. So much so that technocratic processes are overwhelmed by political considerations.*

- *Lots of politicking, which hurts the end result. Not technocratic, but political.*

- *Manipulation is huge. Even at the city level, lots of deals etc. go on. There is not always the best outcome, because certain people have to approve and might have other agendas.*

- *I moved here in 1958. Ever since then, the city council has not represented the people. Council represents those with money and entrenched interests. This is hard to change because good people are forced out of government.*

- *I don't think it's a very clean process. Very dirty at the federal level, and probably does not get much better at other levels, so it's hard to say.*

From these comments, one gets a sense that there is a political insider-outsider view among the non-participants. As one describes: "[*When serving, you must resort to] lying, flattering, voting, contracting yourselves into a nutshell of civility."* The negative sentiments about serving carry forward into non-participants' answers to the question asking: "What do you think about the amount of given and take required to make government decisions?" Five out of seven people hold views like this: "*Give and take? Government is not interested in people*." They hold these negative views even though they realize the politicking and negotiating is necessary, as you can see in this statement: "[*A]nywhere where decisions about money are being made, lots of politics and deals are bound to happen*. Of course, these answers might be colored by the purpose of the interviews with the non-participants. They may represent rationalizations for why they do not participate so that the researchers do not look at them critically for not engaging in "socially desirable behavior." The pilot results could be tested in a study that allows respondents to provide the information anonymously to overcome this threat to the validity of these findings.

Participants and nominees are more pragmatic about the role of politics and how this must involve give and take. As one nominee describes: "*I think it sucks. Well, that is not true. But it does suck, because it is usually more take than it is give*." A board member explains it this way: "*It is a matter of give and take. It's easy to become so cynical, but you have to believe you can truly*

make your point, mesh with others, prioritize, and then you must compromise." As a leader of a board shares: "*As I said, there are so many interests and no one wins. It's important to have groups since they can find middle ground and try to protect those they serve.*"

The active participants generally tend to believe that they will stay involved in some fashion, partly motivated by their sense of community. "*I will serve longer after my term is up – for me, not doing something is cutting myself off from society…* " At the same time, involvement is flexible over time, and can be ramped up in intensity or slowly fade away as motivations change. *"[My] activity tapered off after middle school.* " As one's children age, the motivation to stay involved in school-related activities might disappear, for example.

While participants are clear about their desire to continue to be involved, many of them envision changing what they are doing in governance over time. Public administrators could harness this ebb and flow in participation by communicating the wide-ranging civic engagement opportunities that allow for varying levels of interest throughout the adult life cycle. Rather than simply waiting for citizens to self-select, currently involved citizens can act as ambassadors to recruit reticent citizens explaining their current involvement and why they plan to continue their civic engagement activities. This would be a means for systematically recruiting a diverse group of citizens who represent different perspectives on community issues.

Once they became involved, participants learned about additional service opportunities and became more familiar with which issues are important and where the important decisions are made. When participants become more knowledgeable, the overall service time they give increases. This emphasizes the need for communicating opportunities since citizens and opportunities could be matched more efficiently if there is more information about boards and service available to citizens.

It is also clear that citizens feel that once they have been empowered to participate, it is unlikely they will revert to non-participants. When asked what she would do if she did not successfully advocate her position, "*Would I step off or fight harder? Fight: I would not do it quieter*." When citizens see that there is input considered, even if their viewpoint does not prevail, this only encourages more input. Administrators can

take advantage of this feedback loop to broaden the range of opportunities available to citizens. This is important to maximizing the effectiveness of the individual participants, as well as respecting their autonomy.

As we have learned from this group of interviewees, citizen participation is not limited to formal government activities. People also build social capital through expanded definitions of civic engagement activities that include religious and non-profit organizations. This leads to involvement based on a combination of community-interested motivations that complement an individual's policy interest. Citizens find pathways to participation that transform them into public value creators. Administrators can leverage this latent tendency toward civic engagement, in its many forms, by better communication of opportunities and direct invitations to participate.

CONCLUSION

This research examines the civic engagement decision and satisfaction with the experience for residents of a mid-sized university town in Oklahoma. We compare the civic engagement activities and motivations to become involved for three distinct types of civic participants: those who have no direct government engagement, those who have been nominated but have not yet served on city boards, councils, commissions or committees, and those who are/have served on a city board.

We find that people define civic engagement activities broadly to include any service that builds social capital. Citizens have more expansive definitions of civic engagement than what is reported in the literature, including any activities designed to strengthen the fabric of their community through other channels, such as charitable and religious organization work. Typically they become engaged because they see themselves as issue advocates or because of their investment in the community in general. The citizen participation literature tends to be more restrictive, segregating self-interested motivations from public service motivated participation (Brewer et al. 2000). To better leverage an innate willingness to engage, there exists an opportunity for city administrators to be better communicators and let citizens know of

opportunities for civic engagement.

Citizens often do not have enough information to form any sort of expectation about the process or outcomes. We found quite large misperceptions about the amount of time required for service. In addition, the amount of prior knowledge required for board service is low especially since city staff members are on hand to answer technical questions. The role of administrators is a topic of some dissatisfaction among participants. However, the dissatisfaction seems to be more about poor articulation of goals and objectives which makes it hard for board members to understand the task at hand. After receiving additional information about legal or process constraints on board activities, those who had expectations are willing to adjust them as long as their input is seriously considered. Surprisingly, there is little evidence that the motivations to participate vary greatly between those who do, those who do not and those who are willing to serve. To have a more robust and representative system of citizen boards, public administrators could provide realistic estimates of the time required to serve and that one does not need to be an expert – all have valuable ideas, a finding supported by Stewart (2007).

Participant's satisfaction with their civic engagement activities is pragmatic. When describing outcomes, they tend to talk about the experience and process more than they talk about satisfaction with a specific decision that the board made. Concerns that scholars have raised about self-interested participation appear to be overcome by the encouragement of open dialogue during the board decision-making process. Non-participants, on the other hand, have very low expectations about participation outcomes. It seems, though, that they are basing their conclusions on what they see and hear relative to the activities of elected officials and then extrapolate this to what they would be likely to experience. Public administrators can emphasize the reasonable dialogue that occurs at board meetings. This may be a low-cost means to counter the perceived political insider-outsider tension.

The results from this exploratory study provide an initial look at the social phenomenon of civic engagement from the individual citizen's perspective. As with any exploratory study, the first threat to validity is the use of convenience and purposive sampling strategies. Combined with a low number of interviews, the findings are not likely to be representative of the whole population. The purpose of the study was

to inductively explore a social phenomenon about which little scholarly knowledge is available. A small sample study such as this offers the advantages of low costs to gather inductive data as well as the opportunity to refine the research design to explore more deeply the initial findings. Indeed, the researchers would consider this to be a pilot study that can be replicated with a larger, more representative sample and in multiple jurisdictions to identify environmental variables that may also be influential. In addition, the richness of these findings suggests a need to expand our knowledge to explore the range of board types and the possibility that citizens' perceptions may vary based on the board's mission and goals. Contextual factors related to the city governance structure and the composition of the citizenry may also influence the findings.

There are also concerns related to respondent and researcher bias. As we noted above, it may be possible that non-participants in particular were telling the interviewer the "right" (i.e., socially-desirable) answer. In terms of research bias, the analysis of interview notes is subjective. We attempted to control subjectivity by independently collecting and coding data, and then examining inter-rater reliability. Plus we were able to triangulate the major findings by answering the research questions simultaneously and comparing results. Last, while this study is not generalizable**,** case studies can help us to gain a deeper understanding from the native perspective and guide us in the next round of research.

This study explored the participation decision to find out more about who participates, what motivates them to participate and how they perceive their participation experience. From these results, we know that citizens have an expanded definition of civic engagement that goes beyond service on government boards, committees, councils and commissions. The issues they care about and the people with whom they interact profoundly influence their decision to become directly involved in governance activities. Further, there seems to be a universal willingness to serve, and a surprising willingness to provide service that exceeds the actual time commitment required. Those who have served report a positive experience. Those unwilling to serve base their decision on a dislike of the perceived zero sum game of politics. There is a sense that citizens are willing to serve; however they first need to know what opportunities there are to serve. Public administrators can

play a facilitative role in communicating opportunities as well as reasonable expectations of time and interactions.

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