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# 25 The deliberative public servants: The roles of public servants in citizens' assemblies

**Abstract:** For several decades, numerous citizens' assemblies involving citizens in public decision-making have been multiplying at all levels of power. This development of a more participatory, deliberative or collaborative democracy implies the transformation of public administrations and public servants. Various studies show that civil servants are key actors in the organization of participatory processes, in their institutionalization and in their follow-up. However, they remain under-analyzed. In this chapter, we define and analyze more specifically the profile and role of public servants specialized in participation, those we call deliberative public servants. Then, we review the results of research on the relationship between civil servants' perception of participation and the processes they implement. We conclude by identifying research perspectives for the analysis of public officials and CAs.

**Keywords:** citizens' assemblies, deliberative democracy, public servants, participatory democracy, public participation professionals, public administration, facilitators

## 25.1 Introduction

For several decades, numerous citizens' assemblies (CAs) involving citizens in public decisions have been multiplying at all levels of power (Smith 2009; Font, della Porta and Sintomer 2014). This irruption of citizens into decision-making processes, encouraged by the critique of the bureaucratic model based on the agents' expertise (Dryzek 1994; Schneider and Ingram 1997; Bherer 2011), is a challenge for public administrations, which are invited to change (Moynihan 2003; Nabatchi 2010). Administrations are pushed to consider citizens, formerly mere beneficiaries of public services, as partners in the construction and implementation of public policies (Kathi and Cooper 2005). For many authors, this change in administrative culture conditions the consideration of participatory products in public action, which today remains limited and context-dependent (Bherer, Dufour and Montambeault 2016; Michels and De Graaf 2017). In the absence of significant changes in administrative practices, participation implemented by a bureaucratic administration may lead to disappointing or even traumatic outcomes for both citizens and public officials as it may create hope of political change that will not be met (King, Feltey and Susel 1998). In other words, and this has long been stressed, the transformation of the administration and the development of a more participatory, deliberative, or collaborative democracy are necessarily linked. The promotion of new and more participatory forms of democracy necessarily leads

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 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110758269-027

to a change in the role of public servants, and to the emergence of new public servants' profiles (Blijleven, Hulst and Hendriks 2019). However, it must be noted that while the relationship between administration and participation has long interested specialists in administrative science, it is only belatedly that specialists in participatory democracy have taken an interest in it. Even so, public servants are still under-analyzed in studies on participatory processes, and are almost invisible in studies on CAs, even though they play a key role in their organization.

In the literature on participation, it is in the frame of the work on the professionalization of participation (Bherer, Gauthier and Simard 2017a; Christensen 2018; Mazeaud and Nonjon 2018; Martínez-Palacios 2021) that the first surveys were conducted on the administrative institutionalization of citizen participation and on the public agents specializing in this field were conducted. Indeed, after having noted that the institutionalization of citizen participation had led to the emergence of the figure of the participation professional – defined as "an individual working in the public or the private sector who is paid to design, implement, and/or facilitate participatory forums" (Bherer, Gauthier and Simard 2017a) – a growing number of researchers have focused on studying their profile and their role, first focusing on professionals working outside of administrations, such as consultants and associative actors, and then on public agents. As a sign of a scientific and professional field that has not yet stabilized, these participation professionals go by different names in the literature: "facilitators", "deliberative practitioners" or "public engagement professionals" (Moore 2012; Forester 1999; Escobar 2013; Lee 2015). The terms used to designate them reveal the variety of the processes concerned and the place, central or peripheral, allocated to these professionals in these processes. These terms have been constructed mainly from the observation of participation professionals, but they also make it possible to describe the role and practices of public servants who organize CAs or other deliberative processes, which we refer to in this chapter as "deliberative public servants". In a nutshell, the "deliberative public servants" carry out all the tasks carried out by the participation professionals, but as civil servants hired by an administration. This lack of conceptual distinction between public officials and external consultants in the scientific literature and this diversity of terms used to describe their roles reminds us that participation is still in the process of being institutionalized.

On the basis of these observations, our chapter proceeds in three stages. First, we will review the results of research on the relationship between public servants' perception of participation and the processes they implement. Secondly, we will define and analyze more specifically the profile and role of public agents specialized in participation, those we call deliberative public servants. Finally, as a conclusion, we will identify research perspectives for the analysis of public servants and CAs.

## 25.2 The perception of citizen participation by public agents and its effects on the systems

For a long time, the literature, particularly in administrative sciences, has emphasized the importance of studying the administration in the development of a more participatory, deliberative, or collaborative public action (King, Feltey and Susel 1998; Yang 2005; Eckerd and Heidelberg 2020; Kübler et al. 2020; Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2022a, 2022b). Indeed, it is widely accepted "that public administrators' trust in citizens is a relevant and valid construct and a predictor of proactive citizen involvement efforts" (Yang 2005: 1). Also, many quantitative studies have aimed to measure and explain the administrations' attitudes towards participation in various national contexts (Pierre, Røiseland and Gustavsen 2017; Oh, Shin and Park 2022). A recent literature review, based on evidence from 99 peer-reviewed journal articles, allowed the authors to highlight four categories of determinants of agents' attitudes towards participation: personal characteristics, process characteristics, organizational structures and culture and lastly contextual features (Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2022a). The agents' perceptions of participation are very important because they guide the design of the processes. Given the importance of this role, it is surprising that there is so little data on these agents among the many studies on participation. Surveys show that from the public agents' point of view, the value of citizen participation is less democratic than instrumental, which influences the type of processes public agents carry out carry out (Eckerd and Heidelberg 2020; Värttö 2021). In their study of an American environmental administration, Eckerd and Heidelberg (2020) have shown that the processes implemented are more or less democratic depending on the meaning and value that the agents give to public participation. Their study shows that agents can adopt four types of attitudes towards the public during a participatory process: public as a partner, public as a student, public as an informational source, public as a hurdle. We can also mention the work of Migchelbrink and Van de Walle (2022b) who developed a typology of attitudes and role perceptions of public managers in participatory budgeting. According to this study, agents can adopt a managerial attitude, a city-centred attitude, a technocratic attitude, or a sceptical attitude. They also show how these role perceptions affect their behaviours and decisions in participatory budgeting practices. These results should be linked to recent quantitative studies which, in their analysis of the variables involved in the implementation of mini-publics in Switzerland, have highlighted the important role of the administration and the weight of instrumental issues. This leads them to conclude that the development of these mechanisms reflects a search for governability rather than a search for democratization of decision-making processes (Kübler et al. 2020).

**Table 25.1:** Agent's attitudes and roles towards participation

| Agent's attitudes towards participation | Public managers' attitudes and role perceptions in participatory budgeting | Agent's types of attitudes towards the public during a participatory process |
|---|---|---|
| – Personal characteristics<br>– Process characteristics<br>– Organizational structures and culture<br>– Contextual features | – Managerial attitude<br>– City-centred attitude<br>– Technocratic attitude<br>– Sceptical attitude | – Public as a partner<br>– Public as a student<br>– Public as an informational source<br>– Public as a hurdle |
| Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2022a | Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2022b | Eckerd and Heidelberg 2020 |

## 25.3 Who are the deliberative public servants?

The research we have just cited highlights the interest of studying the relationship between public agents and citizen participation, but does not address the characteristics of these actors and the concrete role they play. Although deliberative public servants are rarely the focus of systematic investigation, different research shed light on their presence and role in different national contexts: in Brazil (Sa Vilas Boas 2020), in the UK (Cooper and Smith 2012; Chilvers 2013; Escobar 2013 2017), in Finland (Puustinen *et al.*2017), in the United States (Lee 2015), in France (Gourgues 2012; Mazeaud 2012; Mazeaud and Nonjon 2018), in Germany (Cooper and Smith 2012), in Quebec (Bherer, Gauthier and Simard 2017a; McMullin 2020), in Italy (Lewanski and Ravazzi 2017), in Spain (Martínez-Palacios 2021) and in Australia (Christensen 2020). It emerges that the integration of participatory expertise within administrations has taken place according to a double dynamic of diffusion and specialization (Gourgues, Mazeaud and Nonjon 2021) which leads us to distinguish two types of agents: agents whose mission is to design and organize participatory mechanisms, and those who are in charge of a sectoral policy and who are impacted by the implementation of a deliberative process. In the first group the agents are assigned primarily to tasks related to the organization of deliberative processes or to the promotion of these processes within their administration. The second group, which is much more numerous, consists of the agents whose work is affected by the organization of participatory and deliberative processes within their administration, without having organized it themselves. For these agents, participatory products are a new source of information to be integrated (or not) into their daily activities. These agents are impossible to typify as their profiles are so varied. They occupy all administrative functions and are present at all levels of power. However, they are more present in the land use and urban planning sectors. Generally speaking, these agents are required to carry out their tasks by combining the insights of their technical expertise with the lay knowledge of citizen-users. This irruption of lay knowledge in the work of these agents disrupts their work habits and generates new

tensions that they have to manage with regard to citizens, with regard to agents of other services (and notably deliberative public servants), and with regard to citizens. In this chapter, we mainly focus on the first category of agents, the participation specialists, whom we call "deliberative public servants".

The existence of deliberative public servants has mainly been identified in local authorities (Mazeaud and Nonjon 2018; Christensen 2020). On the other hand, it is impossible to identify a typical profile of deliberative public servant. While women seem to be more numerous than men in this profession (Mazeaud and Nonjon 2018; Christensen 2020), their personal characteristics are varied (social origin, experience, skills, etc.). It should be noted, however, that several surveys highlight that many of them come from the sectors of community organizing, teaching, popular education, or development (Craig, Mayo and Popple 2011; Mazeaud and Nonjon 2018; Escobar 2019). But it should also be noted that the agents studied in these surveys manage a wide variety of participatory mechanisms: participatory budgeting, local participatory assemblies, project-based consultations, etc.

The lack of a typical profile can be related to the low level of institutionalization of participation within administrations. Administering participation is similar to an "unclear job" (Jeannot 2011); this leads agents to invent their job during the course of their daily activities (Mazeaud 2012; Gourgues 2012). This work mentions that a significant majority of agents share certain common values and conceive their profession as a militant commitment to the dissemination of participatory and deliberative practices within their administration, public institutions, and in society in general. They are overall promoters of democracy, and more specifically, they are often responsible for leading a real "culture change project" (Escobar 2017) within their administration in favor of citizen participation. If this activist commitment can be seen as a cause of their commitment to participation, it can also be understood as the product of the weak institutionalization of participation in administrations (Mazeaud 2012). This absence of a typical profile can also be explained by the weight of national contexts and political-administrative and cultural structures that strongly affect the modalities of the implementation of participation in the administrations. Indeed, on this issue, the rare comparative analyses (Mazeaud and Nonjon 2017; Martinez-Palacios and Mazeaud 2019) are consistent with the elements pointed out in the previously cited literature review (Migchelbrink and Van de Walle 2022a).

**Table 25.2:** Who are the deliberative public servants?

| |
|---|
| – Varied characteristics (social origin, experience, skills, etc.) but most of them are women |
| – Previous experience outside the administration in the sectors of community organizing, teaching, popular education or development |
| – Manage a wide variety of participatory mechanisms |
| – Common values and conceive their profession as a militant commitment to the dissemination of participatory and deliberative practices within their administration, public institutions and in society in general. |

## 25.4 What are the deliberative public servants' roles in citizens' assemblies?

Several pieces of work have produced typologies of the roles of deliberative public servants (Bherer, Gauthier and Simard 2017b; Blijleven, Hulst and Hendriks 2019; Sa Vilas Boas 2020). It emerges that these roles depend strongly on the agents' profile, the characteristics of the participatory processes they are in charge of, but also the political-administrative characteristics of the administrations in which they carry out their activities: department dedicated to participation with a strong autonomy, transversal department, technical department, general secretariat in direct link with the elected officials. Indeed, public participation agents are at the heart of a system in tension between citizens, elected officials, consultants, and other public agents. Although employed by public authorities, they must appear as neutral mediators between citizens and public authorities (Escobar 2017). They must also articulate the logic of the participatory process and the bureaucratic functioning. Thus, for example, Agger and Sørensen (2018) identify four roles that managers of collaborative innovation have to play: Pilot, Whip, Culture-maker, Communicator. These roles oscillating between pilot of a process and promoter of a participation culture in their administrations appear more or less clearly in the case studies (Bherer, Gauthier and Simard 2017b; Mazeaud and Nonjon 2018). Escobar (2013) emphasizes that the role of promoter of a culture of participation within the administration leads the other services to develop a love-hate relationship with them: they will sometimes be seen as useful resources to involve citizens in their projects, sometimes as threats to their autonomy and workload.

The tasks of the deliberative public servants are more or less visible according to the stages of the participatory process, and scholars agree that attention must be paid not only to the visible face (frontstage) such as the animation but also to all the less visible moments (backstage) of the deliberative processes (Forester 1999; Escobar 2019). Concerning the less visible tasks, Forester (1999: 8) talks about the "messy, conflicted, dirty-hands experience of practitioners". Before the participatory event, agents play a role in the design of the process. It is in this design activity that the agents' perceptions of participation and their role exert a strong influence. However, agents are not totally free to define the design of the devices; it is most often the product of the relationships they have with elected officials (Røiseland and Vabo 2020) and consultants (Mazeaud and Nonjon 2020). These agents also play a role in the animation of the process. During the process, the activities that these agents carry out can be analyzed as "micropolitical work" of the agents, that is, "the work that facilitators carry out to develop processes that meet participatory standards of inclusion, interaction and impact" (Escobar 2019: 5).

In particular, their work often consists of preventing elected officials from taking up too much space at the expense of citizens during participatory processes (Escobar 2017). They are regularly called upon to facilitate processes, this is defined as "the craft of enabling conversations that are inclusive, meaningful and productive" (Escobar 2011:

178). Although studies have sought to investigate the influence of facilitators on the quality of deliberations and their outputs (e.g., Carcasson and Sprain 2016; Spada and Vreeland 2020), few have undertaken to understand whether the facilitators' status as a public agent changes the quality of facilitation.

Finally, the deliberative public servants play a role after the participatory processes in monitoring the outcomes of participation. In many cases, and in the absence of any rules, monitoring is initiated and carried out by the agents on their own initiative. This research is particularly important since many studies have shown that the clash with the administrative culture can be a hindrance to administrations taking into account the products of participation; these products may be misunderstood by agents or considered incompatible with the organizational culture of their administration (King, Feltey and Susel 1998; Cooper and Smith 2012; Bherer, Dufour and Montambeault 2016). As a result, their role is often to negotiate with other public officials to ensure that public engagement will have an impact on public policy (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021). This direct link that deliberative public servants have with the administration and elected officials is a considerable advantage over private consultants (Escobar 2017). In some situations, the choice of public authorities to outsource the organization of the participatory process is made in order to allow them to avoid political and administrative responsibilities (Wan 2018). Conversely, as participation is institutionalized within their administration, these agents, whose militant commitment is well known, manage to "convert" agents from other departments to participation as the processes are organized (Escobar 2017).

On the one hand, the analysis of the missions carried out by these agents allows us to understand that they play a real political role (Escobar 2019): the agents manage, in their daily practices, the power relationships and the competition between actors that often takes place through anecdotical actions (Morley 2006). From then on, these agents are the real entrepreneurs of the transformation of administrations through participation. On the other hand, studies have shown that the concrete tasks carried out by these agents (monitoring the public, reporting, logistical organization, monitoring, and evaluation) were quite similar to those carried out by other public agents, and as such reveal the process of bureaucratization of participation (Gourgues, Mazeaud and Nonjon 2021).

**Table 25.3:** What is the deliberative public servants' role in CAs?

| Agents' roles in CAs depend on:<br>– the profile of the agents<br>– the characteristics of the deliberative process they oversee<br>– the political-administrative characteristics of the administrations | | |
|---|---|---|
| Their role oscillates between pilot of a process and promoter of a participation culture in their administrations | Before the CA: role in the design and the organization. Their influence is the product of their relationships with elected officials and | As participation is institutionalized within their administration, these agents manage to "convert" agents from other departments to |

**Table 25.3** *(Continued)*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| (Escobar 2013; Bherer, Gauthier and Simard 2017b; Mazeaud and Nonjon 2018). | consultants (Røiseland and Vabo 2020; Mazeaud and Nonjon 2020). | participation as the processes are organized (Escobar 2017). |
| Agger and Sørensen, (2018) identify four roles that managers of collaborative innovation have to play:<br><br>Pilot<br>Whip<br>Culture-maker<br>Communicator | During the CA: "micropolitical work", including facilitation (Escobar 2011 2019).<br><br>After the CA, role in monitoring the outcomes of participation. In the absence of any rules, monitoring is initiated and carried out by the agents on their own initiative. As a result, their role is often to negotiate with other public officials to ensure that public engagement will have an impact on public policy (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021). | They play a real political role (Escobar 2019) as they manage, in their daily practices, the power relationships and the competition between actors that often takes place through anecdotical actions (Morley 2006).<br><br>They are entrepreneurs of the transformation of administrations through participation.<br><br>Some tasks carried out by these agents reveal the process of bureaucratization of participation (Gourgues, Mazeaud, Nonjon 2021). |

## 25.5 Conclusions and perspectives for the study of the role of deliberative public servants in citizens' assemblies

Despite the development of a recent literature on the professionals of citizen participation, few researchers have undertaken to study the role of public agents responsible for organizing democratic innovations. Yet the work we have listed in this chapter shows to what extent these under-studied actors are key players in participatory processes. These results show the importance of taking these actors into account in the study of CAs. Indeed, the organization of CAs without the involvement of the administration and a paradigm shift in the way public servants view citizen participation are essential for the long-term institutionalization of CAs. Moreover, the agents' detailed knowledge of the administration is a considerable advantage over private consultants regarding the consideration of the outcomes of participation by public authorities to ensure that CAs have an impact. There is much to be gained from systematically studying the profile and activities of public agents of participation, as well as public agents' perceptions of CAs. In the numerous case studies of CAs, research should take as much care in studying the administrative conditions of their deployment as in studying the deliberative dynamics.

Two perspectives seem to be particularly fruitful in shedding light on the logic of the implementation of CAs and its effects. Firstly, beyond the analysis of the role of public participation agents in the design of mechanisms, and more broadly in the success of mini-publics, it seems necessary to consider the perverse effects of the professionalization and institutionalization of citizen participation. Several investigations have pointed out that the dynamics of institutionalization – the love-hate relationships between actors (Escobar 2013), the struggles of jurisdictions (Mazeaud and Nonjon 2018) – could explain some of their effects. We can mention here the fact that the more they are known and appreciated within their administration, the more the deliberative public servants can be drawn into multiple organization of participatory devices whose quality can only decrease due to a lack of resources (Escobar 2013). We can also mention that the need to be recognized in their administration and the impossibility of controlling their jurisdiction partly explains the tendency to focus attention on the participatory event rather than on the participatory outcome intended to guide a change in public policy (Gourgues, Mazeaud and Nonjon 2021), and thus to feed the phenomenon of proceduralization of participation, (Ganuza and Baiocchi 2012; Lee 2015), which may explain why processes with limited effects continue to multiply.

Secondly, and most importantly, it is essential to question the perception that non-specialist agents have of CAs. Indeed, these agents have often not been involved in the design and implementation of the mechanisms. However, it is these agents in charge of sectoral policies who must concretely integrate CAs outcomes into public policies. Moreover, as we have seen, public participation agents invest a great deal of energy in monitoring participatory outcomes and ensuring that participation has an impact. However, research on local participatory processes has shown that these processes can be difficult for front-line agents (Tawa Lama-Rewal 2019) and technicians because these processes push them to transform their identities and professional practices in order to integrate citizens' opinions (Blondiaux and Michel 2007; Mazeaud 2009). Indeed, these agents are required to make decisions not only on the basis of their technical expertise as they did before but also by integrating the lay knowledge of citizen-users. These are all avenues to be explored in order to understand the logic and effects of CA at both local and national levels.

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