Decisional participation and citizens' influence

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Abstract:

Democratic practice can take many forms, among which the most recognized is electoral participation, but citizens may also participate in collective governance more directly in the form of public participation. Initiated and supervised by decision-makers, public participation varies greatly in the citizens' level of influence (Bherer 2011). Caddy and Vergez (2002) differentiate between informative processes, consultation processes, and participation in decision-making. While a consultation process involves a more active degree of engagement than a passive informative process, it is only when actors are allowed to participate in the decision-making that they exercise real power. We refer to this form of participation as "decisional participation." This research explores citizens' influence when involved in decisional participation. Participative measures and processes have rarely been evaluated, even though scholars are numerous to question their effective influence (Caddy and Vergez 2002; Thibault, Lequin and Tremblay 2000). Our goal is therefore to better determine the expanse of actors' power in instances of decisional participation. This communication presents the first results of our research, stemming from an exploratory phase during which we observed how participation worked within six decisional spaces.

Decisional participation and citizens' influence

In Political Science, the theme of participation is widespread, and highly diversified. Be it political, civic, citizen, electoral, conventional (or non conventional), public, decisional… every descriptive has been used to describe the different facets of participation, depending on the participating subject, the participation's goal or the way we practice it.

One much touted aspect of participation in recent years is public participation, which, according to Thibault, Lequin and Tremblay, consists in "taking part in the public decision process with more or less extensive power" (2000, p.11). For Caddy and Vergez (2002), it has become inevitable to associate citizens with governance, be it through information, consultation or participation in public decision-making processes.

For Dahlsted (2009, p.787), the partnership between a wide variety of actors is on its way to becoming one of the solutions most often put forward to respond to the challenges of contemporary societies. In the case of Sweden, the author even refers to "partnership as governmentality" (Dahlsted, 2009, p.788). This is in line with an analysis by Landry and Haché (2001) regarding the governance of the Quebec educational system, a system where the participation of the many actors involved has become an essential component, considered legitimate.

We are thus experiencing an explosive increase in the number of decision-making arenas that are systematically open to citizens by governmental authorities. We need only think of parliamentary committees or user boards. Groups are also increasingly called upon, invited for example, to take part in summits. Certain bodies, such as Youth Forums, allow both the participation of citizens and groups, and reserve seats for both on their Councils.

It goes without saying that this openness does not however mean that citizens necessarily have more power than before. The question of the influence of participants raises a number of doubts as to the true importance granted to citizens within the context of public participation processes. How much room are we willing to give the unelected? According to Thibault, Lequin and Tremblay, participation understood as "citizen empowerment" may only be symbolic since it is totally dependent on decision-makers: "we are often under the impression that the act of soliciting participation reflects a public relations or validation scheme and that other powers have precedence over these decisions" (Thibault, Lequin and Tremblay, 2000, p.13). If this is indeed the case regarding those types of participation that offer only weak influence to the actors involved, can the same be said of decision-making bodies that go beyond information and consultation?

The purpose of this research is to touch upon the different forms participation can take by focusing on participation within the context of decision-making processes. We will study three areas where the decision-making body is participatory and includes citizens. In all three cases, we will observe the tendencies and particularities of the area, the legislation with regards to participation, and the actual practice that takes place. This will allow us to eventually study citizen's room to manoeuvre within these bodies of decisional participation and to compare that manoeuvre margin to that of other actors.

The Levels of Participation

Following Milbrath (1965), many have questioned themselves on the "how" and "why" of political involvement. For a long time, political science has had a tendency to see participation mainly from the standpoint of the vote, whether it's understanding who votes, why we vote (or don't vote), or the effect this vote has (for example, Blais 2000; Clarke et al. 2004; Mayer 2002; Miller and Shanks 1996; Wolfinger and Rosenston 1980). Yet, beyond electoral participation, which offers the citizen an opportunity to choose his representatives, a multitude of intervention

possibilities is emerging for citizens who wish to get involved within the public sphere. It is towards a certain number of those interventions that we orient ourselves within the context of this research.

Brouard, Larivet and Sakka distinguish these initiatives according to the initiator, "either the State, civil society groups, and the citizens themselves" (2010, p.56). In the case of civil society groups and citizens, they principally involve activities organized by pressure groups (whether it's community groups, unions, students or others) or initiatives of the citizen himself, such as volunteer work or responsible consumption. As for the State, apart from elections, it initiates citizen assemblies, neighbourhood councils, public hearings and user committees, notably in hospitals. Within the context of these initiatives, citizens are invited to get informed about the issues at stake, to share their opinion. This participation model corresponds to what Bhérer (2011) calls public participation: "Public participation is at […] the heart of the public decision-making process. It takes the form of highly varied participatory mechanisms, whose common characteristic is to be initiated by public authorities outside of electoral campaigns with the goal of inviting citizens to share their views on specific topics" (2011, p.107). At the heart of his definition, Bhérer places the initiative of mechanisms by public authorities, who wish to take advantage of the many benefits of the partnership. His work has shown the disparity between the dozens of surveyed models (from the work of Smith 2005, notably), a disparity found as much on the user, issues, and functioning levels than on the true influence of participants (Bhérer 2011, p.117).

The question of participant influence is one that raises a number of doubts regarding the actual importance given to citizens within the context of public participation processes. How much room are we willing to give to those who are not traditionally elected individuals? And what place do we reserve for these elected individuals in these citizen spaces?

This type of participation has been little studied up until today. What decisional participation is, how it mingles with other types of political participation, the importance of citizens within these decision-making bodies, and the true authority they can exercise are a few of the questions that remain incomplete if not unexplained.

Graph 1 illustrates the overlaps between three different types of participation[1], in order to help us better locate decisional participation in relation to public and citizen participation.

Graph 1: The Circles of Participation

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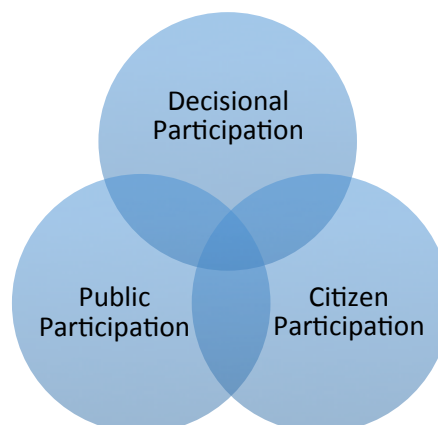
[1] Electoral participation not being a part of our study, we have set it aside.

Citizen participation "corresponds to the whole of actions by which citizens participate in the public space and in society" (Brouard et al. 2011, p.56). As mentioned above, Brouard and colleagues identify three sources from which these initiatives may originate. When we consider citizens creating a social economy enterprise who's final goal is to improve the quality of life of a village, it is decisional participation that enters the arena of citizen participation since the citizens who are members of the Board of Directors of the social economy enterprise participate in the decision-making that touches upon the orientation of the enterprise. On the contrary, when we are talking about the State, it is public participation that enters the circle of citizen participation, as long as civil society is invited to take part in the discussions. Parliamentary Committee public hearings nicely illustrate this situation. However, certain public participation bodies, where there is a civil society presence, are also decisional. Regional Conferences of Elected Officials (RCEOs) are a good example of this type of multiplayer body where decisions are taken. Here, we find ourselves in the middle of the graph, where the three models of participation intersect.

Up to this point, the situation is pretty simple. It gets more complex when we add in the question of influence. Consider school board councils, where sit school board trustees, elected during school board elections, and two parent representatives, elected by the school board's Parent's committee. All sit and all take part in the discussions. Nevertheless, parent-trustees do not have the right to vote. Should we therefore consider this decision-making body as solely a part of the public participation arena, or is it still to be considered decisional participation? Although it is at the heart of influence, the right to vote is not everything. The right to sit and the right to speak can also, technically, influence a decision. Thus, in our judgement, participation in a decision cannot solely be determined, in the end, by the right to vote. Voting is fundamental, in the sense that it determines whether a body is decisional or consultative. But participating in the decision is not just a function of the right to vote. The right to vote is not everything, and it is certainly not eliminatory. For some, this unique decisional moment does not even exist, since everything is already decided at the moment of the vote. For example, non-voting members of school board Councils clearly play a role in the decision (Lacroix 2012).

The question then arises: since citizens have the possibility of influencing elected officials, is it fair to speak of decisional participation? In this case, any openness of public decision-makers towards citizen's presence, be there a decision in the moment or not, leads to a decisional participation. Must we go beyond simple possibility and *ascertain* this decisional power (even if it is not formally established) for us to speak of decisional participation?

These are important questions. They raise the question of decisional power, of citizen's manoeuvre margin in relation to this power, and thus to the question of the definition of decisional participation. They are at the heart of our research project, of which the first step consists in studying the practices related to participation within bodies where decisions are made (as opposed to consultative bodies). By observing the variations between the bodies, as well as the variations in the application of what is required by law, we will be in a better position to determine the different types of decisional participation and eventually, citizen's room to manoeuvre within decisional participation bodies.

These observations will be the result of a gathering of information within six participating organizations. We will start by introducing these bodies and what the law requires of each of them concerning participation. We will then analyze their functioning (formalism, discussion, decision) and the effective participation of the actors involved (who intervenes and how).

Methodology and Participating Organizations

To successfully carry out our research, which aims to better understand, we opt for an exploratory study based mainly, for the gathering of information, on the direct observation of six decisional bodies.

We have chosen to direct this study in two phases. During the first phase, from which the present text derives, we observe two Regional Conferences of Elected Officials' Board of Directors meetings (RCEO) and two Day-Care Center (DCC) Board of Director meetings. To this data, we add data collected during a preceding study of two School Board Trustee Council meetings in two distinct School Boards (SB). During the second phase, taking place from August 2013 to June 2014, we will observe the proceedings of two decisional bodies of two regional Youth Forums, two Local Development Centres (LDC), two Regional Environmental Councils, two Health and Social Service Centres (HSSC) and two School Governing Boards (elementary or high school). In each case, they are participative decisional bodies of varied composition, from a variety of sectors of activity, from which we hope to extract differing types of operating modes allowing for a certain description of the operating modes of participative decision-making bodies within public bodies. These bodies have been selected according to three criteria:

- They are decisional bodies in which participate a variety of different actors.

- These bodies offer a variety of different formats, composition and regulations that make for a rich and pertinent comparative process.

- Observing bodies within a body (for instance, two DCC Council meetings) will allow us to go further in our quest to highlight both the regularities and particularities of bodies, while isolating, as much as is possible, that which is related to context from that which is related to the body itself.

The data collection method most adapted to the object of our research is direct observation, which " for a researcher, consists in directly observing the object of study or the environment in which the phenomenon is taking place in order to extract from it all pertinent information" (Mace and Pétry, 2000, p. 92).

By using this method in their 1993 study, Easton and colleagues observed the proceedings of official meetings of local school boards and documented attendance and absence, topics discussed, speakers, duration and tone of debates, and the use of formal propositions. The grids used to compile observations during regular meetings of each of these participating bodies, one for each meeting, were strongly inspired by Easton and his colleagues (1993). The main changes made allowed for the adaptation of the grid to the particular imperatives of the present study. The heart of this grid is comprised of a simple table, directly filled in by one of the researchers, or by a research assistant, on site, as the deliberations take place. This grid is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Decisional Meeting Observation Grid

WHAT?	WHO?	HOW?
(Proceedings, topics discussed, procedures, formal propositions…)	(Actors, individuals or group)	(Point of the intervention, tone of the intervention, reactions – verbal or non-verbal, decorum, duration, discussion/debate, decision…)

The grid ends with a space reserved for "General Observation" and in the header, identifies the observed meeting (identification of the body, date, location, start and end times). The analysis of observational data is produced from revised observational grids with the intent of extracting all information that would allow for the identification of the participants or of the participating bodies.

For bodies, we focused on general proceedings based on the following categories:

Decorum	Are the proceedings governed by formal and official procedural rules or by a general non-formalism?
Discussion	Does the issue addressed give rise to a discussion (one or two interventions are considered to be a short duration, while three or more interventions are considered to be a long duration) or no discussion (no intervention following the presentation of the issue).
Decision	Are decisions made by way of consensus (tacit or explicit), by a vote (majority or unanimous) or do they consist of a refusal of the submitted proposition?

For actors, we focus on the use of the right to speak according to the following categories:

Elected	Participant elected by universal suffrage, such as SB trustees.
User	Participant who benefits from services offered by the organization, such as parents of DCCs.
Management	Participant serving as Director General or Assistant Director General.
Professional	Participant who is an employee of the organization and whose contribution rests on expertise.
Community	Participant representing the community served by the organization, such as representatives of civil society bodies who sit on RCEO Boards.
President	Person responsible for conducting deliberations.

The use of the right to speak of these actors is analyzed from two angles:

Point of the Intervention	Does the participant discuss the content (of the issue addressed) or the form (of the meeting's proceedings)?
Tone of the Intervention	Does the participant ask for additional information or does he furnish additional information? Does he voice his opinion (positive or negative) concerning the topic discussed? Does he oppose the issue or the proposition presented?

Presentation of the Bodies

School Board Trustee Councils

Within the context of the present study, two regular meetings of two SB Trustee Councils were analyzed. One of the limitations often mentioned in the literature concerning observational technique is the potential bias created by the presence of researchers on the field. Meetings of the School Board Trustee Council are always public. Participants thus expect the public to take part in these meetings. However, few citizens were actually present at the observed meetings and even fewer stayed for the whole meeting, often leaving after a particular item on the agenda, such as the question period reserved for the public.

a) Legislation Concerning Participation

According to the Education Act, each SB has at its head a Board of Trustees Council. Currently, this Council is comprised of Trustees elected by all the people of their respective constituency having the right to vote and of two parent representatives (one primary and one high school representative) (art.143). Parent-trustees are elected to this function by the members of the Parent's committee (art.145). As for the Parent's committee, it is comprised of one parent representative for each school in the SB, elected by the parent's general assembly, and one representative of the CCSEHEDAA (Advisory Committee on Services for Handicapped Students and Students with Social Maladjustments or Learning Disabilities, art.189). The President and Vice-President of the Council are nominated by its members (art.155).[2] A Director General (DG), responsible for the day-to-day management of activities and resources, namely the human resources, (art.260) of this organization (art.201), manages each SB. The Board of Trustees Council nominates this person. Even though the DG does not have the right to vote, this person participates in the deliberations of the Board of Trustees Council and sees to the implementation of the Council's decisions (art.144).

b) The actors

In both cases, the actors participating in the Board of Trustees Council were: the School Board trustees (**Elected**), the Parent-trustees (**Users**), the DGs and Assistant DGs as appropriate (**Management**), the Directors of services (**Professionals**) and the **President**. The community is not, properly speaking, present within these bodies.[3]

The Board of Directors of Regional Conferences of Elected Officials

As was the case for SBs, two regular meetings of the Board of Directors of two RCEOs were studied. The RCEO Board meetings are also of a public nature. The actors are thus used to their deliberations and decisions being held in front people exterior to the body. In this sense, we believe that the presence of the researchers did not significantly interfere with their regular practices.

c) Legislation Concerning Participation

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[2] It should be noted that in 2008, the Quebec Government modified this law. However, a certain number of these modifications will only take effect during the forthcoming school elections, scheduled for November 2014.

[3] Co-opted Trustees will be able to ensure this role after the next school elections.

The Act respecting the Ministère des Affaires Municipales, des Régions et de l'Occupation stipulates that each administrative region must have an RCEO. The RCEO is led by a Board of Directors comprised of the following members working on its territory: the prefects of regional county municipalities; the mayors of local municipalities having 5 000 or more inhabitants; the mayors of the local municipalities listed in Annex B (art. 21.8)[4]. The RCEOs can also address requests to the government for it to: allow for the designation of one or more additional representatives of a local municipality to its Board of Directors selected by and amongst members of the Council of the municipality; or for it to modify Annex B, particularly to add one or more local rural municipalities. Certain rules apply more specifically to certain regions. However, to ensure the anonymity of participant RECOs, we will not go into these details.

Beyond elected members, the law provides that the RCEOs must nominate to their Board of Directors "additional members whose number may not exceed one third of the totality of its members, other than those members provided for under paragraph 8 of article 21.8. These additional members are selected after consulting organizations that the Conference considers representative of the diverse fields present within the community to be served, particularly those from the field of the economy, education, culture and science. The conference determines the duration of the mandate of these members." (art. 21.9).

Lastly, members of the National Assembly whose constituency's territory lies within the RCEO's territory can exercise their right to speak during Council meetings, but do not have the right to vote (art. 21.9). The public may attend public meetings of an RCEO Councils. (art. 21.11).

b) The actors

In the case of RCEOs, it should be noted that within the two organizations, the actors participating in the Council meeting were: the mayors and prefects **(Elected)**, social, economic, cultural, sports representatives… **(Community)**, the DG **(Management)**, the employees **(Professionals)** and the **President**. The users are not, properly speaking, present within these bodies.

The Board of Directors of Day-Care Centers

As with the other organizations in question, the regular meetings of two DCC Councils were studied. At the time of data analysis, one single meeting of DCC1 was observed, as well as two DCC2 meetings. DCC Council meetings are not open to the public. Thus, in this case, the researcher's presence was exceptional. It is possible that this may have interfered with their regular practices. However, it is impossible for us to measure the impact this presence may have had on the observed meeting's proceedings.

a) Legislation Concerning Participation

According to the Educational Childcare Act, a DCC is headed by a Board of Directors comprised of at least two-thirds parents, at the most two members of the centre's personnel and at least one member "from the business community or from the institutional, social, education or community sectors" (art.7). This Council must be comprised of at least seven members

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[4] When a prefect of a regional county municipality is also the mayor of a concerned local municipality, the council of the regional county municipality designates, amongst its members, an additional member to the Board of Directors of the Conference. It is also the case when a regional county municipality's territory does not include one of these local municipalities (art.21.8).

(art.7) and, according to Early Childhood Education and Care regulations, the members of the Council are responsible for electing the President, a seat that must be occupied by a parent member (art.27). Furthermore, for a Council decision to be considered valid, it must be made "by a majority of administrators forming the majority of required parent users of day-care center services" (art.28).

b) The Actors

Within two organizations, the actors participating in the Council meeting were: the parents (**Users)**, the community representatives (**Community)**, the DG and Assistant DG as appropriate (**Management)**, the educators (**Professionals)** and the **President**. Properly speaking, there are no elected persons in these bodies.

Results and Discussion

The observations presented in Tables 2 and 3 point to certain tendencies, but also to an important share of diversity both within the bodies and the actors.

Table 2 compares body's practices. When we pay attention to the particularities of each type of body, we notice that the RCEOs are the bodies that are most similar, maybe because they include more participants. In both cases, we find a rather strict decorum, fairly consensual decisions interspersed with the occasional vote, and discussions of varied length depending on the subject matter discussed.

On the contrary, the two DCCs and the two SBs diverge in their functioning. In both cases, one is fairly flexible, the other rather strict, and the decision-making process is very diversified. However, even though the discussions within SBs are rather short (if not absent), they are always long in DCCs.

Table 2: Comparison of Practices: The Bodies

	SB1	SB2	RCEO1	RCEO2	DCC1	DCC2
Decorum	Strict	Flexible	Strict	Strict	Flexible	Strict
Decision	Unanimous or majority votes	Consensus	Consensus and a few votes	Consensus and one single vote	Neither vote nor consensus	Unanimous votes
Discussion	Short Long	None Short	None Long	Highly variable	Long	Long

On the actor side (Table 3), the imposing presence of Management in the discussions is without a doubt the most noticeable tendency. In all cases, Management gives out information. Very often, it also presents cases, and voices its opinion on these cases. This could be explained by the central role played by Directors (as well as Assistants) within the organizations whose Councils we observed.

When looking at the particularities of each type of body, we notice that the DCCs are the most similar. Globally, the actors act in much the same manner, although a certain number of them intervene more often in DCC2, which is the body with the strictest functioning. On the RCEO side, it is the formulation of the Director's and the Professional's opinions in RCEO2 that distinguish it from RCEO1, where the same actors present and inform without voicing their opinion.

Lastly, it is the President's acts in particular that vary between the two observed SBs. In SB2, the President is much more present, but not only with regards to form, since she also takes part in the discussion.

Table 3: Comparison of Practices: The Actors

Object and Tone	SB1	SB2	RCEO1	RCEO2	DCC1	DCC2
Elected	High Content Information Opinion	High Content Information Opinion	Medium Content Information Opinion	High/Low Content Information Opinion		
Users	Low Content	Medium Content Information Opinion			Medium Content Information Opinion	High Content Information Opinion
Community			Medium Content Information Opinion Presentation	High/Low Content Information Opinion Presentation	Very Low Content Information	Medium Content Information Opinion
Management	Medium Content Information Opinion	High Content Information Presentation	High Content Information Presentation	High/Medium Content Information Opinion Presentation	High Content Information Opinion Presentation	High Content Information Opinion Presentation
Professionals	High Content Information Presentation	Medium Content Information Presentation	High Content + form Information Presentation	High/Medium Content Information Opinion Presentation	Very Low Content Information Opinion	Very Low Content Information Opinion
President	Low Form	High Content + form Information Opinion Presentation	High Content + form Information	High Form Information	Low Form Information	Medium Form Information Opinion

In a nutshell, School Board Trustee Councils (SB) constitute two similar bodies, governed by similar legislation, that function in quite different manners, both at the actor level and at the Council level, considered as a decisional unit. Somewhat like School Board Trustee Councils, the two DCC Councils offer interesting variations. Thus, they are bodies whose general method of functioning differs from one to the other, despite having similar legislation, but where we find a quite similar participation level amongst the different actors. Finally, with regards to RCEOs, similarities can be mentioned concerning bodies: consensual decisions, formal context of meetings, and variable length of discussions. The involved actor's participation also takes place in a similar fashion, except for the sharing of opinions, which diverges.

This study is still in its early stages, and more observations will follow in order to confirm or reject the tendencies and particularities observed until now. However, it is already interesting to note the weak presence of constraints at the legislative level, which are mainly focused on the "who?" with a rather low level of focus on the "how?". This seems to allow for greater diversity in practice, particularly according to the personalities of those who sit on these bodies, since the contribution of each of the actors is not clearly established. By adding other bodies, we will maybe be in a position to determine if more binding legislation influences practices, despite the possible influence of other factors such as the culture of the organization, the environment or the identity of actors and groups.

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