Consider the fast-paced world we live in today. With society as complex as it is, we increasingly rely on specialization of roles. We simply do not have the time to participate in every mundane task required of our government. This fact makes pure democracy infeasible and leads directly to the idea of a representative democracy, much like the government employed in the United States. As such, normal citizens are free to be experts in their respective fields while entrusting government operations to career politicians. Often, this works to the benefit of everyone, yet sometimes there are gaps left by the process. Specifically consider the case of the Flint water crisis. In this case, the representative democracy failed its people through an improper characterization of the water issues affecting the city of Flint. As such, the role of the public is to recognize the failures of the representative system and to provide experience, context, and manpower as local experts to facilitate the problem stream of the policy process. In the future, this role can be protected and encouraged using policy mechanisms to incite, ease, and adapt to public participation.

The Flint water crisis resulted from a sequence of cascading government failures involving a wide range of political actors. After the city entered a financial crisis, emergency managers were put in place to reduce government spending (Goodin-Smith 2018). One action of this appointed administration was a shift to a cheaper water supply (“Flint Water Crisis” 2018). However, existing water contracts expired before the new water supply was ready resulting in the temporary usage of the Flint River (“Flint Water Crisis” 2018). Once this decision was made, the responsibility fell on the Michigan Department of Environment Quality (MDEQ) to ensure the Safe Drinking Water Act and Lead and Copper Pipe Rule were being adequately enforced within the Flint Water Treatment Plant (Clark 2018). Despite all assurances this water was safe, the public began having adverse reactions to the water (Clark 2018). Trust was placed in the MDEQ and the concerns of the citizens were overruled (Clark 2018). The citizens, notably LeeAnne Walters, turned to outside actors including the Environmental Protection Agency and scientists at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute to prove their case (Peplow 2018).

The principle error in the Flint administration was the dismissal of citizen concern leading to the reliance on false information. Why would public concerns be ignored by a governing administration? A primary justification stems from the lack of credibility. This can be directly observed in the Flint crises when the city officials stated, “I don’t believe that water came from your tap,” when presented with citizens’ samples of Flint water (Levy 2016). Ordinary citizens are frequently dismissed due to the lack of relevant education and overwhelming vested interest in policy outcomes. As examined in the last essay, lack of education and vested interest yield advocates as opposed to experts. With this distinction, the policy elite feels justified in dismissing their concerns.

A secondary justification for ignoring public concerns is the appeal to overall good. In other words, a citizen’s complaints are limited to a small scope where they are unable, or unwilling, to observe the “big picture” in which their concern results from a tradeoff that yields higher net good. In the case of the Flint crisis, the administration justifies its position to the people by claiming “the alternative is worse” (Levy 2016). The alternative they were referring to would be switching back to the Detroit water which would incur significant costs to the city. In their eyes, the public was unable to see that this was the best option available. Instead, the public was afflicted with the idiom: the grass is always greener. In the end, this dismissal causes the oversight of critical issues by relying on incorrect information.

When the reliance on incorrect information becomes apparent to the public, it then becomes their responsibility to correct the administration. By using traditional experts, information is typically most trustworthy, as seen in our last discussion. In addition, this process is significantly more efficient than involving ordinary citizens with every minor decision. By involving public opinion on every decision, significant time must be spent gathering information, not to mention the monetary costs to acquire the information. This leads to sluggish decision-making, not conducive to modern policymaking. Nonetheless, this set up can fail as is clearly demonstrated in the Flint water crisis when expert opinion given by the MDEQ pointed to clean water when the opposite was overwhelmingly true (Clark 2018). Thus, the first step in the role of public participation is to identify this misalignment of expert opinion and reality.

Once the disconnect is realized, the public is responsible for providing first-hand knowledge to aid policymakers in problem identification. Ordinary citizens have the potential to become local experts in their respective communities. Although they must fight the label of an advocate, by gathering evidence, they can effectively advise policymakers on the truth within the community. They can bolster their credibility by following strict scientific procedures for experimentation and evidence collection. By reaching out to scientists, citizens can become educated in proper techniques and yield meaningful evidence for policymakers. This was demonstrated beautifully in the case of the Flint water crisis through individuals such as Walters (Peplow 2018). Walters reached out to environmental engineer Marc Edwards to perform proper water sampling to provide evidence to support her claims (Peplow 2018). Using this evidence, Walters became a local expert and significantly aided the policymaking process.

An equally important byproduct of public participation is the gain of problem context. By entrusting elected officials and traditional experts, there is an increased social distance created. This social distance can be harmful if those in power are unable to realize or acknowledge the effects their decisions have directly on the public they represent. During the Flint water crisis, this social distance was greatly exaggerated as the government officials in power weren’t elected by the people (Goodin-Smith 2018). Instead, the emergency managers were appointed by the state government (Goodin-Smith 2018). As such, the officials didn’t live in Flint and weren’t impacted by the water supply issues in the slightest (Levy 2016). By involving the public and trusting their firsthand experience, contextual information can be realized and social distance minified.

Lastly, the public has a unique ability to supply manpower to focus the definition of a problem in the policy process. Often to understand a problem in detail, a significant amount of data collection is required. Given the fixed resources of government, especially local government, this process can be inefficient if not impossible. Even if it is possible, the methods of execution may not rise to the level deemed necessary to the public. Consider the water sampling problem in the Flint crisis. Samples were needed from water taps across the city to assess water contaminant levels. When this task was entrusted to government officials, improper techniques were used during sample collection and taps known to have few contaminants were often retested (Levy 2016). On the other hand, when the citizens led by Walters and Edwards executed the sample collection, correct procedures were implemented (Levy 2016). Furthermore, this sampling was efficiently sourced through the mass effort of hundreds of locals (Levy 2016). Clearly, this process benefited from the manpower of public participation.

The water crisis in Flint may not have been avoided through public participation, however, it could’ve been identified and corrected quicker with less damage. To enable this process, several policy mechanisms can be introduced to incite, ease, and adapt to public participation. First consider encouraging public participation. A simple policy mechanism would be to grant and protect the right of public participation in local government in state constitutions. This alone would incite many to exercise their rights. Additionally, an inducement mechanism could be introduced, such as a minor tax break. This could be given for anyone with proven participation that yields actionable results, such as the case with Walters in the Flint crisis.

Not only does public opinion need to be promoted, but it also needs to be made easier to express. A mechanism to facilitate this would be a rule for maintaining open town meetings with significant time allocated to public concerns. This would give the public an outlet to provide their concerns. Furthermore, a department could be created (or its staff increased) specifically for dealing with public interactions. In the case of Flint, public opinion was exposed in community meetings with officials and informed the local officials. However, that information did not reach upper levels of government. Thus, to improve this situation, this rule could be extended to state government as well. Yet another mechanism could involve providing information to the public about the methods in which they can provide their input.

Lastly, public opinion needs to be recognized and acted upon. This is accomplished by creating rules requiring town boards address public concerns between subsequent meetings. This could involve introducing committees to investigate issues or reach out to more of the public to assess how widespread the issues are. This was the most limited component of public participation represented in the Flint water crisis. Many people exercised their right to participate, but their voices were ignored. By providing additional accountability to the government officials, this will improve the chances of their voices being heard. If the local governments fail to comply, then the public should be informed on who further up in the administration should be contacted to address the issue if they are unsatisfied.

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