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TYRANNY OF THE MEDIAN AND
COSTLY CONSENT: A REFLECTION ON
THE JUSTIFICATION FOR
PARTICIPATORY URBAN PLANNING
PROCESSES

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Abstract Wide participation, in the urban planning context, is justified as the means of balancing multiple interests outside the traditional decision-making setup. However, this article argues that the participatory paradigm provides at best inadequate justification to the planning process. Particularly if consensus building is the aim of the participatory process, it suffers from a number of impossibility results well documented in the political economics literature. ‘Lazy deliberators’ will arrive at the acceptance of *a priori* median preference, and participatory processes necessarily exclude some groups, even under equitable capability and power distribution. This article intends to contribute to the debate on the nature of participatory planning by critically analyzing the motivations of participation and limitation of the participatory planning paradigms, and advocates a temperate view on their efficacy.

Keywords consensus, consent, participation, persuasion, political economy

The participatory approach in the public planning domain has become institutionalized as a method of good planning practice as opposed to the rational hierarchical comprehensive approach. In the public sphere, especially in community planning, democratic principles and public participation have become increasingly accepted as means for balancing and rationalizing multiple interests and preferences. The end of participation is to forge consensus among interested parties, including planners, decision-makers, citizen groups and advocacy groups, outside the traditional decision-making setup. Participation is thus viewed as a community action that is meant to augment the institutionalized democratic processes. Democratic processes in a substantive way legitimize the role of the state, and community participation counter-balances the Hobbesian Leviathan.

This article, however, argues that public participation in planning processes does not refute the critiques of democratic decision-making. In particular, the interest-based model of democracy, which Young (1996) distinguishes from the deliberative model of democracy (see e.g. Cohen, 1986) mirrors the dynamics of public participation. Participation involves costs similar to costs of voting in a democracy. A vote is an expression of consent; groups in a participatory process consenting to a decision are essentially voting. Negotiations that precede voting are structurally similar in many respects to participatory settings. Incentives to reveal or conceal preferences through voting and through participation are not entirely different. Furthermore, the advocates of consensus in public planning ignore a crucial point. Planning is fundamentally concerned with choices of future actions and states. The futurity (selves as well as generations) cannot justifiably consent to these choices at the present. Yet we must plan now.

Decision-making in the realm of governance, and by extension in public planning, in a liberal democracy involves the balancing of multiple and different individual and social interests and consent of these preference-bearers either in the form of votes or otherwise, is traded to arrive at a position that appeals to a majority.¹ One would imagine that this would lead to a 'mean'. When a simple majority system plays out, median preferences become the norm of the day. In either case, the measures of central tendency play an effective role in marginalizing the viewpoints outside the center, more often than not, without evaluating the merits. Sometimes persistent problems can only be tackled with radical solutions.

Under certain strong assumptions, the median voter theorem (see Persson and Tabellini, 2000) states that the one-person one-vote principle leads to adoption of preferences of the median voter as the socially optimal policy. In a perfectly equal and stable power situation, perfectly equal capability distribution, when different costs of participation do not affect different people differently and in the case of honest communication and representation, the median voter then consistently represents the social will and preference. If this goal of empowering the masses is realized in its

ideal state, it fails to illuminate how this system, which consistently misrepresents the distant from the center viewpoints and alienates them, can claim legitimacy. Why does the tyranny of the median take a moral high ground over the tyranny of the elite? Only utilitarianism gives an internally consistent and explicit justification, in that the aggregate well-being of the society can be at the expense of the well-being of an individual. If the preference of the median voter maximizes the social well-being then so be it. Utilitarianism is not without its detractors. The premise of the well-being of society being paramount is also axiomatic; that is, justification of the principle is derived from the internal consistency of the theory not from the external practical and ethical grounds.

This article elaborates on the critique of the communicative turn in planning in the literature, exemplified by Abram (2000), Huxley (2000), Neumann (2000) and Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (1998). I also extensively borrow ideas from the political economics literature that has been summarized in Buchanan and Tullock (1965) and Persson and Tabellini (2000). I shall argue that the communicative planning paradigm, in light of its own critique of technical and supposedly value-neutral planning, provides inadequate justification to the planning processes. I shall also touch upon the ideas illustrated in Hopkins (2001) and Sager (2002), on institutional dynamics in urban policy formulation, collective action and collaborative planning. The communicative planning paradigm asserts the need to discover and balance stakeholders' interests while marginalizing the fringes. It unduly privileges the communication among participants and necessarily excludes individuals and groups who cannot participate, like future generations. Participatory planning aims at justifying actions directed at changes towards a better 'future', with the consent of the 'present'. I shall argue for the need to nurture conflicting positions, as opposed to conformity, to lend grounds for action-oriented planning. The critiques by Mansbridge (1996) and Young (1996) of the deliberative models are also drawn upon, to argue for a temperate view on the efficacy of participatory planning paradigm.

The participatory turn in planning

The theory of communicative action by Jürgen Habermas has lent a foundational basis to Forester's argument for participatory planning and use of narratives. Forester (1999), in his characteristic narrative style, argues that planning by its very nature is politically deliberative and not entirely personally reflective; a view advocated by Schön (1983) asserts the need for planners to listen to conflicting positions of different interest groups and to observe the dynamics of group formation and organizational manipulation.

However, the participatory planning paradigm has been conflated with the end of the process, namely the forging of consensus between various

groups (e.g. Innes, 1996; Margerum, 2002) or community action (e.g. Harwood, 2003; Reardon, 1998). Participatory planning is typically meant to deflect criticism that planning appears to be top-down, an instrument of state oppression, encroaching on personal freedoms. These critiques have been liberally directed against the modern planning paradigms that lend themselves to the supremacy of objective reason and evaluation. It is said that the planners as technocrats serve the interests of the elite groups. Planners, it is claimed, being part of the elite, subvert the will of the plebe (as in the British comedy *Yes, Minister*), despite their ascendancy to political power. By enabling wide participation in the planning procedures in the public realm, checks are meant to be instituted against these power imbalances. The end of participation is a widespread consent to a particular course of action that may or may not be duly represented in formal documents such as plans. However, the effects of public participation in informing planning and policy procedures and formulating goals have not yet been well documented and critically analyzed, and the brouhaha justified (an exception is Helling, 1998).

Any justification for wide participation in public planning procedures has to make an argument that participation, especially of previously marginalized individuals or groups, will lead to just states or, in a particular urban planning context, to ethically more acceptable planning processes. A justification for consensus as an end to these participatory processes, has to appeal to the ideas that when various groups consent to a particular program of action, it is more easily realizable and the process of building shared understandings will open up new avenues for collaboration. '[Agreements reached among stakeholders] can be more durable and implementable because, having taken more interests into account, they are less likely to produce unhappy stakeholders who might sabotage implementation. Such agreements are more likely not only to be fair, but also to be regarded as fair' (Innes and Booher, 1999: 414). Such assumptions however, are questioned in the literature (for e.g. Aitken and Michel, 1995; Alfasi, 2003; Rocheleau et al., 1995). Is it possible or even desirable that different groups participating in different institutional and cultural settings arrive at a position of consensus? Which groups are purported to be represented? How are marginalized groups allowed to participate? What claims do these groups have for such participation as representatives of 'particular' collective interest? How are the outcomes consistent with participation? Conventional wisdom dictates that women are important stakeholders and should participate extensively in the water management efforts in developing countries; Cleaver (2004) makes an incisive observation that the fetching effort is often delegated to others, significantly to children, and yet the institutional frameworks do not allow their participation. Does the counterfactual of non-participation definitely lead to a worse result? If so, worse for which sections of the populace? Can causality be established with sufficient depth and validity? These questions are critical in analyzing the

effect of participation in providing justification for the current planning procedures.

Forester (1989), as Innes (1998) later, recognizes the reality of the power imbalances and modifies communicative rationality to suit planning purposes. They account for the fact that systematic distortions of information do occur and are perhaps necessary. Huxley (2000) argues that Forester also questions ontological distinctions that Habermas makes between 'technical' and 'practical' realms. He points out that access to information and participation, as in the case of other social processes, is skewed for different groups and planners have an ethical responsibility to correct it. He recognizes how planners, by strategically manipulating information, can persuade others of a particular view of reality. Thus the end of persuasion is not consensus but pragmatic consent.

Consensus is an outcome in which all the concerned parties agree to a particular view.² Consensus is thus a super-majority rule, more specifically a unanimity rule, from a social choice perspective. Any super-majority rule, including consensus, is subject to impossibility results that have been well documented in social choice literature and more recently applied to planning contexts (Sager, 2002). In particular, Arrow's Impossibility Theorem states that there can exist no social preference aggregation mechanism including simple-majority, super-majority or unanimity rules, that satisfies four basic principles: Pareto optimality, independence of irrelevant alternatives, non-dictatorship, and honest preference reflection. If we can argue that representative democracy will not adequately capture the general will of the society, then participatory processes do not address these critiques. Any participation leading to consensus building as an end is akin to voting in a representative democracy, where consent is made public by explicit vote.

Dahl (1982) puts his finger on the nub of the question, a critical aspect that has been glossed over, the issue of exclusivity of participation within a democracy or in mechanisms that supplement it. Dahl notes that majoritarianism suffers from a question of majority of *what* units within *which* boundaries. This question extends to any preference aggregation mechanism including consensus building, and is especially pertinent to urban planning. How do we choose who should participate in a planning process? In this age, when we recognize the impact of localized actions on a much larger scale, does participatory planning lead us to just states of the world for the persons/entities who cannot participate because of spatial separation (outside jurisdictions or scope of the participatory mechanisms) or temporal separation (future generations)? The dead speak to us through our fading memories but the unborn are yet to have a voice. How do we elicit consent from these excluded individuals and groups and to what extent are their interests represented and who represents them? What are the groups' claims to legitimacy in such representations? If we cannot individuate the distant societies or future generations, the participants

should be cosmopolitan enough to include them in the scope of considerations (Donaghy, 2001). Invariably, the motivations and limitations of participation have to be delved into to arrive at a more balanced view of its potency in urban planning processes.

Young (1996) argues that even deliberative democracy relies on exclusionary methods. She claims, 'Instead of defining discussion as the open reciprocal recognition of the point of view of everyone, these institutions [parliamentary debates and arguments in courts] style deliberation as agonistic. Deliberation is competition. Parties to dispute aim to win the argument, not to achieve mutual understanding' (p. 123). Hillier (2002), in defending the notion that agonism is consistent with communication in the public sphere, argues that 'when core values are incommensurable, but there is an agreement between secondary values, agonistic deliberation or argument may take place' (p. 125). She goes on to claim that deliberative democracy necessarily assumes unity, either as in shared understanding, a background consensus, or in reaching understanding through discourse. She points out that either of these assumptions is problematic because plural, multicultural, social groups cannot claim to have sufficient shared understanding; the prior unity assumption obviates the need to consider the opinions and values that are sufficiently different from one's own.

It is pervasively believed and accepted that local problems need local solutions by local people. This has been promoted of late with the advent of 'posties'³ in a range of human endeavors from urban planning to development theory and political science. While the goals of the argument, to advocate a more vocal and legitimate representation of local interests (Healey, 1997) in the solving of a 'problem', are laudable in intent, the local interests are never a cohesive entity as they are portrayed. As Donaghy and Hopkins (2006) describe it, there is a presumption among the planning theorists of the possibility of *unitary and stable public interest* and the end of participatory processes is to discover it or create it. The medley of local interests suffers from the same uneven power dynamics as the global solutions advocated by the modernists. Though the pragmatists and post-modernists disagree on the theoretical framework in which this vernacular knowledge of interests is produced and proliferated, one cannot fail to see striking similarities between the notions of empowerment of the marginalized and legitimization of public interest through public participation. However, which problems are presented as social urgencies, the very definition of the problems that are meant to be solved, cannot escape the power dynamics of who perceives them as problems and who has the capability and opportunity to solve them.

To believe that participation will lead to socially preferable outcomes is at best naïve. Hopkins (2001) cites examples where neighborhood groups collectively organized themselves to exclude people with non-conforming backgrounds and orientation (race, convicted criminals, etc.). Vigilantism, a manifestation of excessive participation, which directly challenges the

state's monopoly on police power, paradoxically leads to repression of a similar kind. Public meetings in the city halls are routinely dominated by interest groups that have the necessary power and motivation to collectively organize themselves and indulge in grandstanding, to the detriment of the others. The conception of the preferable outcome suffers from a cyclical question: if it is not preferable to large segments of the society how can it be socially preferable? The outcomes, irrespective of whether they appeal to a majority (including a super-majority), then have to be judged by independent and evolving standards. The standards can be consistent with the concepts of 'inviolable natural rights' as Dworkin (1978) argues, 'primary goods' distribution as Rawls (1999) articulates, Nozick's 'constraint based deontology', or any number of other 'just-state' theories.

The communicative turn in planning thus provides no more justification for a method of planning than the universalist paradigms. In its effort to secure the consensus of the affected populace, through its actions, the participatory paradigm of urban planning invariably cannot consider all persons and things. This leaves it vulnerable to the same critique it levies against other planning paradigms. Sager (2002: 242) sums up the dilemma of communicative planning by asking, 'How can participants show empathy and be so open to the arguments of the other actors as required in communicative planning, and simultaneously be sceptical and critical enough to avoid being manipulated?'

Motivations to participate and costly communication

Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (1998) allude to the implicit assumption of proponents of participatory democracy that representative democracy is bad and participatory democracy is good. This assumption is at best questionable. Inquiry into the justifications for participatory urban planning processes leads us to the following questions. What are the incentives to participate in a planning procedure, as individuals and groups? How are systematic distortions in communication between individuals, irrespective of the power differentials, inevitable? This section briefly outlines the strategic nature of communication.⁴

We, as both individuals and groups, are cognitively limited. Planning is the process of making choices about the future, both where we intend to be and how we intend to get there in light of contingencies and uncertainty. To even begin discussing these different but interrelated questions we would have to begin with the partial ordering⁵ of preferences, albeit changeable, about this state of affairs over that and this course of actions over that. Communication about these preferences involves defining our perception of our own desires and preferences and defending those in light of others'

purported preferences. New preference orderings can be discovered in the process of communication, and this discovery may include new choices which may fundamentally change how the *a priori* preferences are ordered. One of the intents of communication, in a participatory setting, is to persuade others to accept our preference positions. This requires effort and thus is not costless.

The formation of preferences is a costly exercise. One has to choose from myriad options to formally declare preference, even to oneself (see Schwartz, 2004). Thus changing preferences in the light of countervailing evidence, for example, when presented with a better argument, is to forego the benefits of the choice of the preference and incur substantial costs of change. Eliciting consent typically involves shaping or changing preferences of individuals and entities. The costs and benefits are not purely economic and can include non-quantifiable entities such as loss of social standing, risk of being called fickle, etc. Thus as individuals and groups we demand extremely strong reasons to change our stated preferences. These reasons could involve appeals to abstract standards such as ethics and religious beliefs, expediency with regards to convincing others about unrelated preferences, etc. We are constantly trading beliefs and stated preferences only when our assessment of the benefits of such trade is greater than the costs (formation costs as well as the costs incurred due to potential changes). Changes in preferences and beliefs require time and effort on the part of both the persuader and the persuadee. Understanding and convincing each other is a costly and time-consuming process. Consent is achieved only when the benefits the consenter derives from consent are much more valuable than the costs involved. If these costs outweigh the perceived benefits, it will not be in one's interest to participate or communicate. While not always the case, communication does serve a strategic purpose.

Information production is a costly process. Communication is a method of discovering information about the beliefs and preferences of others in a cooperative setting. In a planning or a political setting, such information transmission is fraught with noise and systematic distortion. Information about our own preferences is communicated noisily to others. Perceiving others' positions suffers because of, or is enriched by understanding, these distortions. To elicit consent is an extremely tenuous process. One's own preference is valuable information for others. The intent of participatory planning is to identify the different positions of different groups and clarify them. However, strategic posturing is possible when one is aware of what the other groups value. It makes perfect sense for certain groups to misrepresent the position as much as possible, to obfuscate the intent, to gain a strategic advantage either at the negotiating table or otherwise. Loss of credibility is a real possibility in such situations (see Fisher and Ury, 1983) and strategic posturing of preferences is balanced by the necessity to maintain credibility for future negotiations. When credibility is not an issue, when the same groups do not interact repeatedly, when collectives

are formed and re-formed continuously, strategic posturing is a tenable reality.⁶

The case of the dynamics of radicals and moderates in the environmental movement is suggestive. A former executive director of the Sierra Club, David Brower, in an interview to *E magazine* said,

If the Sierra club isn't doing what I want, I start another organization. If Friends of the Earth isn't, then I start another. And see if I can, by setting a new example, have some influence on what the Sierra Club does, or Friends of the Earth does. (Morgan, 1990: 14)

This has been interpreted and widely circulated as

The Sierra Club made the Nature Conservancy look reasonable. I founded Friends of the Earth to make the Sierra Club look reasonable. Then I founded Earth Island Institute to make Friends of the Earth look reasonable. Earth First! now makes us look reasonable. We're still waiting for someone else to come along and make Earth First! look reasonable.⁷

Whether this interpretation holds water is a moot point. However, it is illustrative of a fundamental principle: the presence of radicals provides moderates sufficient grounds and others sufficient motivation to negotiate. It requires the groups on the other side of the negotiating table to shift their positions considerably to reach an agreement. Moderate groups thus have sufficient motivation to encourage the presence of radical groups and claim sanity of their positions in light of these radicals. Consistently, viewpoints distant from the centre are relegated to the background, while coalitions are formed around the centre.

Crawford and Sobel (1982), in an interesting and seminal exposition of strategic communication, assert that talk is cheap. So misrepresentation of position is especially lucrative. Since I know that the other is prone to posturing, it will be in my best interests to obfuscate my position as well. This will then lead to a guessing game of real values and preferences. Under this rhetoric of adumbration, one's own positions may shift or even be lost.⁸ Rhetoric attempts to convince others of the truth.

We live in a world that is characterized by our inability, to varying degrees, to comprehend it. When we cannot satisfactorily explain to ourselves our reasons for our own behaviors and preferences, how much harder it is to discern others' reasons and preferences. Thus we rely on their statement of their preferences, either explicit as statements or implicit by actions. This is where Cohen (1986) differs from the standard account of democracy; democratic voting is a discovery process of various social preferences, not necessarily adoption, as opposed to selection of a general preference. If the purpose is to discover *the* collective preference or individual preferences of various parties participating in the process both

representative and participatory democratic processes, are subject to manipulation and deception.

Collectives, coercion and trade of consent

Participatory planning requires groups coalescing for the sake of expediency around issues of interest. Participatory decision-making does not alleviate the problem of collective group formation in a democracy, as Rousseau claimed was the bane of the formation of *general will*. In fact, it relies precisely on such formation of opportune groups, because negotiations are easier when dealing through organized collectives than with individual actors. As Hillier (2002) argues, recognizing the legitimacy of the stakeholders and encouraging them to participate allows a fuller range of views to be aired than would otherwise be possible. 'Stakeholders' are essentially opportune collectives and individuals with a vested interest in a particular discussion. Thus to organize these collectives, one would need sufficient grounds to prove that the organization would benefit from amplifying a voice, in discussion or in direct action. Mouffe (1999: 752) notes, '[Deliberative model] of democratic politics denies the central role in politics of conflictual dimension and its crucial role in formation of collective identities.'

The organizational dynamics of communication should also be taken into account when discussing the deliberations among various stakeholders. Opportune collectives, while ephemeral in nature, do have a certain structure to which they conform, dependent on the individuals and organizations they include. Sunstein (2003) notes that organizations tend to amplify their viewpoint, especially when they are not designed to tolerate dissent within. Further communication between such collectives (the state being one of them) is fundamentally skewed to influence the key actors within the collectives. The communication within and between collectives is thus fraught with methodical distortion and never reaches the ideal of communicative rationality of honest and open communication (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998). In an effort to secure consent from various groups, consent is arrived at by misrepresenting the positions and preferences in negotiations.

Hopkins (2001) claims trading of voting positions is a reasonable supposition to arrive at pragmatic governance in the light of under-represented groups. The example of the legislators representing rural populations consenting to an urban renewal proposal in response to the urban legislators' consent on farm subsidies, is a case in point. A cognitive account of voting, in such trade of consent, should account for the cost and motivations involved in participation. Entrenched beliefs, resistance to change, costly adjustments, personal attachments to positions and things, individual capability to resist changes to belief and get away with it, etc., have to be

accounted for when groups agree to a particular position and values in lieu of their prior preferences. The notion of belief adjustment and revision sits well with both Habermasian theory about the 'unforced force' of better argument and Quine and Ullian's (1978) argument about adjustments of beliefs under cognitive dissonance. We rationalize *ex post facto* to satisfy ourselves to preserve coherence.

Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary ([<http://www.dict.org>], accessed 3 April 2004) defines coercion as: 'The application to another of either physical or moral force.' Consent can thus be achieved by various mechanisms such as coercion by explicit physical force, coercion due to social power structure, coercion of the better or more persuasive argument, and coercion of moral compulsion due to mutual trade of consent on different issues. Of all these, coercion through established power structure is the easiest way to achieve consent, because this consent reinforces and entrenches the same power structure and strata that realize it. Mansbridge (1996) argues,

Even the most internally democratic small collectives cannot in fact achieve equality of power in their decisions. If coercion is legitimated only by equal power, then no real democracy – especially no real large-scale democracy – can ever fully justify the coercion it exercises.

Power is held by a group, not necessarily only by the financial or political influence it wields or the capability it has, but also by information about its own preference that is unavailable to other groups in the process. The inevitable power differential is fundamentally inherent and intrinsic to participation.

Consent achieved through mutual trade of consent is perhaps the least abrasive. Urban legislators consenting to rural farm subsidy policy in order to bind the rural legislators to support an urban mass transit, is an example of such trade. However, such trade might result in proliferation of 'pork-barrel' projects. But as Krehbiel (1991: 95) notes, 'Pork may be the necessary lubricant for the legislative machine, however it is not the machine's main product.' It can be argued that similar trade of consent happens in coalition formations, for example, such as special interest groups, and around issues outside the traditional democratic process, including direct action and lobbying.

This should help us understand why and when consent should be sought and the manner in which it is to be achieved. Who wants it from whom and for what purposes and when is it given? Participation is not an end in itself, it should lead us towards an end, committed prior to participation or discovered during the process. It should help us as planners to build social networks, to strategically position arguments to suit different forces at work, and to promote a sense of individual ownership of the collective preference (both are illusory!).

Salvaging participation: consensus versus persuasion

Neuman (2000) argues that consensus building evokes images of fairness and agreement in the face of diversity and fragmentation. He points out some critical flaws in achieving consensus. Consensus achieves only general agreements. But the Devil (or God if you will) is in the detail. Consensus building is typically divorced from power mechanisms that are inherent to the process. It is typically position-based bargaining. Contentious issues are swept under the carpet for the purposes of arriving at consensus. In this sense the consensus is thin, fragile and prone to manipulation. Thus consensus should not be the aim of participatory planning but clarification of positions to oneself and to other participants and persuasion of others should be.

That being said, the purpose of this argument is not to denigrate the benefits of eliciting consent. The process of convincing and getting consent is extremely useful in a social setting. Especially when non-abrasive coercion (the last three of the mechanisms described earlier, to a varying degree) is used to achieve consent, it builds social capital. It increases trust among the participants especially when the process of achieving consent is a continuous process and is used for different issues. Even if the process of eliciting consent does not reach its ultimate end, the negotiation builds shared meanings of positions and clarifies each standpoint, which could be used at a later time to build on and continue the dialogue. Different groups will be exposed to different positions when negotiations are carried out and thus the process helps in appreciating the validity of plural positions. It helps in altering individual preference positions as well as creating new preference options. It also lends legitimacy to public decision-making in the current age by serving as a useful tool for refuting arguments of favoritism and corruption that are perceived to be endemic to a decision process that is not transparent.

However, deliberators without extra effort, 'lazy deliberators' as Lew Hopkins puts it, arrive at an *a priori* median of preferences as the consensus position of the group deliberating. However, in order to move the resulting agreement to a position that is different from the median, the deliberators have to engage, consciously and strategically, in a costly effort to convince others to arrive at a position closer to their own. This costly effort could involve misrepresenting positions, lending support to other issues which do not directly concern the current deliberation, rhetoric, and the formulation of a better argument. The moral force of the better argument in the participatory process does help in eliciting consent. However, as Young (1996) and Hillier (2002) make clear, arguments need not engender shared understanding. One of the legitimate strategies in a participatory process is obfuscation of intent so as to elicit consent of other groups on standpoints closer to the real standpoint of the group. Once

recognition is granted to such strategies, groups can be very well-placed to understand the micro-political climate in which communication occurs, which will lead to a more realistic justification of the participatory process.

Consensus may not be the ultimate aim of a participatory process. The process should aim at persuasion of a position. It should lead to clarification of one's own preferences and goals in the light of others. It is to be justified as an opportunity afforded for coalition formation, which other setups and institutional practices may not easily permit. The coalition formation thus constitutes 'citizenry', which is essential for a liberal democracy and should afford the opportunity for dissent that may otherwise not be feasible. Even when the dissent is not particularly helpful to individual positions, the very presence of the possibility of active dissent is in line with the Rawlsian insurance principle. Participation also helps to bring to bear varied views and values and thus may help set agendas in a more equitable fashion.

Participatory decision-making does not overcome the tyranny of the median nor achieve a 'better' consensus or a more reliable consent than representation. It does not overcome the differential power or capabilities. It does not inherently improve upon representation in terms of cost, reliance on knowledge, or opportunities for radical views to be heard. However, the process of participation may justify specific practices in specific situations as a substitute or complement to representative democracy. It may achieve social cognition and constitute the concept of citizenship. Discovering that others share similar preferences may facilitate coalition-forming and precipitate collective actions. In such cases, the participation may be justified only when the participants are cosmopolitan enough, yet not paralyzed by the numerous choices and vast amounts of information.

Thus planners should appreciate the strategic realities of participation and harness it to the ends that are justifiable from their own standards. Persuasion, typically achieved through non-abrasive coercion, will help us to engender more persuasion on other issues. Persuasion should be aimed at specific participants who will contribute to the legitimation of the end, while carefully considering who has the opportunity and capability of being involved in the process.

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Notes

1. Majority can be taken broadly to include super-majorities, largest power-holding groups, etc., and not necessarily simple majority of numbers.

2. The other meaning of consensus, in a hermeneutic sense, is the tacit shared background understanding upon which any deliberation occurs. This interpretation of consensus is not a subject of this article.
3. Rorty (1987) characterizes 'posties' to be 'post-modern, post-structuralist, post-phenomenological, post-analytic – even, God save the mark, post-contemporary.'
4. The ideal speech situations envisaged by Habermas are not in conflict with the strategic nature of communication. I am particularly indebted to missives from Kieran Donaghy and John Forester. In Donaghy's own words:

[Ideal speech situation] exists only as a 'fact of reason' that one arrives at in a counterfactual thought experiment. Its purpose is to indicate what validity consists in, i.e., what is arrived at through the 'unforced force of the better (more compelling) argument', in a communications based theory of behavior. In strategic action, some of the background validity claims of communicative action [accuracy, legitimacy, sincerity and coherence] are no longer assumed to be true and the mutual expectations that they can or will be redeemed are suspended.
5. It is not complete ordering because we postpone judgment on alternatives that we have not yet compared or have no immediate reason to consider. It is extremely cumbersome to be 'logically omniscient'.
6. For examples of strategy-proof institutional structures in planning situations, see Sager (2002).
7. See for example, [http://www.4x4wire.com/access/education/nm_twp/nm_twp_pt7.html], accessed 9 January 2005.
8. While it might be the case that preference positions are determined by available options as in the case of Elster (1982), or for prudential reasons as in the case of Pascal's Wager, I am arguing here for a much simpler case: When articulating preference positions, even to ourselves, we may have reasons to suspend the claim of accuracy.

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