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Central city socio-economic characteristics and public participation strategies

A comparative analysis of the Niagara Falls region's municipalities in the USA and Canada

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to examine the mechanisms used by municipalities to stimulate public participation and, in part, to argue that contrasts between the socio-economic make-up of central cities in the USA and Canada explain these divergent techniques.

Design/methodology/approach – The article is based on a survey of planning departments measuring the types of public participation strategies used by local governments.

Findings – The article's findings indicate that Canadian municipalities adopt a broader range of public participation techniques related to: voluntarism and public engagement, neighborhood and strategic planning, and e-government. In contrast, the article's findings indicate that US municipalities are more likely to promote public participation through mechanisms such as annual community meetings and referendums on public issues.

Research limitations/implications – The conclusion of the article offers recommendations for expanding the scope of public participation and developing strategies that maximize citizen input in community development activities in both countries.

Practical implications – The survey was conducted to identify the scope of public participation techniques used by local governments in the Niagara region. One limitation of this methodology is that it does not gauge the effectiveness of the participation techniques used by local governments or the intensity of public engagement. However, the results from this study provide future researchers with a mechanism for focusing future analysis.

Originality/value – The findings can assist in identifying new directions for enhancing public participation in the USA and Canada.

Keywords Citizen participation, Public policy, Urban regions, Local government, United States of America, Canada

Paper type Research paper

Introduction – literature review

Public participation is a core component of policymaking and implementation in democratic societies. This article uses a comparative framework to examine the scope of public participation in municipalities in the USA and Canada. Specifically, the findings from this research are based on the results of a survey sent to municipal

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planning departments in Erie County, NY; Niagara County, NY; and the Niagara Region Municipality of Ontario, Canada. The goal of this article is to identify approaches to public participation that enhance resident input in decision making related to housing and community development policy. In particular, this article argues the techniques used by municipalities in the USA and Canada to incorporate public participation into local planning and community development processes vary in important ways. For instance, the findings from this research indicate that Canadian municipalities adopt a broader range of public participation techniques related to: voluntarism and public engagement, neighborhood and strategic planning, and e-government. In contrast, US municipalities are more likely to promote public participation through mechanisms such as annual community meetings and referendums on public issues.

This study is an extension of past research on public participation in the policy processes of municipalities in the USA and Canada. For instance, this research builds upon Scavo's (1993) study of citizen participation in US cities. In this study, Scavo surveyed large US cities measuring the use of four distinct types of citizen participation mechanisms in local decision-making processes. Similarly, this study offers extensions to Berner's (2001) research on citizen participation in local government budgeting processes in North Carolina. Like Scavo, Berner utilized survey research methods to measure the use of various citizen participation techniques in local decision-making processes. In Canada, scholars have also examined the role of public participation in the policy process. For instance, Patten (2001) evaluated the growth in mandates for public consultation in recent decades. He found that there has been increased emphasis on soliciting public input in policy decisions throughout Canada, and this has strengthened the voice of local groups in the policy process. Hoyle (2000) arrived at similar conclusion in his study of public participation in decisions about waterfront development in Canadian cities.

This research is also linked to a more general body of empirical work dealing with citizen participation in urban policy processes. One of the earliest empirical studies of citizen participation was conducted by Arnstein (1969). In this study she examined model cities organizations in the USA and argued for stronger forms of resident participation and direct democracy in decision making surrounding local community development. Arnstein's work has been followed by a number of other studies. Simonsen and Robbins (2000) described the role of citizen participation in Eugene, Oregon's budgeting process. Their study highlighted the benefits of mandates for public involvement in policy making. Brody *et al.* (2003) and Gerber and Philips (2004) found that mandates for participation and various forms of direct democracy in local planning promoted decision making that was more responsive to citizens. Burby (2003) argued that the long-term successes of planning efforts were dependent on the degree to which planners and public administrators were proactive about expanding the scope of citizen participation.

Silverman (2003) described the benefits of mandated public participation through planning advisory boards in Detroit.

This research is also linked to recent theoretical work which argues for greater public participation in local policy processes. For example, Day (1997) and Chaskin (2005) delineated the inherent conflicts between bureaucratic, technocratic and grassroots interests in public participation processes. Together, these authors provide

a cautionary note to those interested in developing public participation strategies. Roberts (2004) adds that public participation techniques should be designed to allow disadvantaged groups greater access to the public participation process. She bases this argument on the growing focus of policy making on “wicked problems.” According to Roberts, wicked problems involve threats to the quality of life in communities, hard questions about budget cuts, siting of noxious facilities, pollution remediation, and other questions that relate to the equitable distribution of costs and benefits in society. She argues that these types of problems manifest themselves with increased frequency in modern society, and as a result it has become necessary for society to expand the level of participation and provide residents and disenfranchised groups with greater access to decision-making processes.

This article will build on past research by examining the use of public participation techniques in US and Canadian municipalities. The analysis will focus on the degree to which public participation varies between municipalities in these two nations. The conclusion of the article will offer recommendations for expanding the scope of public participation and developing strategies that maximize citizen input in community development activities and enhance citizen access to local policy processes.

Methods

The analysis in this article is based on a mail survey of planning departments in each of the municipalities in Erie County, NY; Niagara County, NY and the Niagara Region Municipality of Ontario, Canada[1]. Examining municipalities in the USA and Canada in the same region allowed for a number of factors related to regional socio-economic characteristics and development trends to be held constant. Moreover, the selection of the Niagara Falls region[2] as a focus for this analysis allowed for the research to examine the degree to which geographic proximity and shared interests in the areas commerce, tourism, and cultural exchange contributes to the adoption of similar approaches to public participation. The question of whether this high level of contact and exchange, in the absence of formal coordination and planning, translates into similarities in approaches to public participation is central to this research.

The survey was conducted during the spring of 2005. Surveys were sent to a total of 76 municipalities, and after several follow-up calls and mailings 52 (68 percent) of the municipalities responded to the survey; 64 of the municipalities surveyed were located in the USA, and 43 (67 percent) of them responded to the survey. These municipalities included cities, towns and villages. Twelve of the municipalities surveyed were located in Canada, and nine (75 percent) of them responded to the survey. These municipalities included cities, towns and townships.

The survey instruments included a total of 24 questions. Included in the survey instrument were 20 closed-ended questions and four open-ended questions. Four of the questions included measures for multiple dimensions of specific forms of citizen participation. These questions were modeled after similar measures used by Scavo (1993) and Berner (2001). For each dimension, respondents were presented with a dichotomous, yes/no, response category. Scores were derived from the total number of “yes” responses for each question. The first of these questions focused on measuring 14 dimensions of “open government techniques” used by municipalities[3]. The second of these questions focused on measuring seven dimensions of “public participation techniques” used by municipalities[4]. The third of these questions focused on nine

dimensions of “neighborhood empowerment techniques” used by municipalities[5]. The fourth of these questions focused on eight dimensions of “voluntarism and public engagement techniques” used by municipalities[6].

It should be noted that this analysis is exploratory in nature. The survey was conducted to identify the scope of public participation techniques used by local governments in the Niagara Region. One limitation of this methodology is that it does not gauge the effectiveness of the participation techniques used by local governments or the intensity of public engagement. However, the results from this study provide future researchers with a mechanism for focusing future analysis. In particular, future ethnographic work, applying participant observation and in-depth interviewing could benefit from the knowledge produced in this study about participation techniques used by local governments in the USA and Canada.

The Niagara Falls region

The Niagara Falls region is composed of two counties in western New York (Erie County and Niagara County), and one in Ontario, Canada (the Niagara Region Municipality). These counties share an international border along the Niagara River, with its most recognizable landmark being Niagara Falls, a geographic feature which separates the cities of Niagara Falls, NY and Niagara Falls, Ontario. The Niagara Falls region covers 2,725 square miles (4,385 square kilometers), 1,567 square miles (2,522 square kilometers) or 58 percent of the region’s land mass is in the USA and 1,158 square miles (1,863 square kilometers) or 42 percent of the region’s land mass is in Canada. On both sides of the border, the Niagara Falls region is characterized by multi-centric development. On the US side of the border there are two central cities. In Erie County the central city is Buffalo, NY and in Niagara County the central city is Niagara Falls, NY. In the Niagara Region Municipality the central cities are Niagara Falls, Ontario and St Catharines, Ontario. On the US side of the border, the City of Buffalo has a land mass of 40.6 square miles (65.3 square kilometers) and the City of Niagara Falls, NY has a land mass of 14.1 square miles (22.7 square kilometers). On the Canadian side of the border, the City of Niagara Falls, Ontario has a land mass of 130.5 square miles (210 square kilometers) and the City of St Catharines has a land mass of 60.4 square miles (97.1 square kilometers). Although the aggregate land mass of the Canadian side of the border is slightly smaller, the central cities on the Canadian side of the border have a larger aggregate land mass than the central cities on the US side of the border. Figure 1 identifies the municipal boundaries within the three counties. There are a total of 76 municipalities in the Niagara Falls region, 64 are in the USA and 12 are in Canada.

The Niagara Falls region had a total population of approximately 1,580,685 people in 2001[7]. In 2000 there was a population of 1,170,111 on the US side of the border, with 950,265 living in Erie County and 219,849 people living in Niagara County. In 2000, the City of Buffalo, NY had a population of 292,648 (31 percent of Erie County’s population) and the City of Niagara Falls, NY had a population of 55,677 (25 percent of Niagara County’s population). In 2001 there was a population of 410,574 on the Canadian side of the border, with 78,815 (19 percent of the Niagara Region Municipalities population) living in the City of Niagara Falls, Ontario and 129,170 (32 percent of the Niagara Region Municipalities population) living in the City of St Catharines, Ontario. A more detailed breakdown of that population by county and municipalities within each country is provided in Table I.

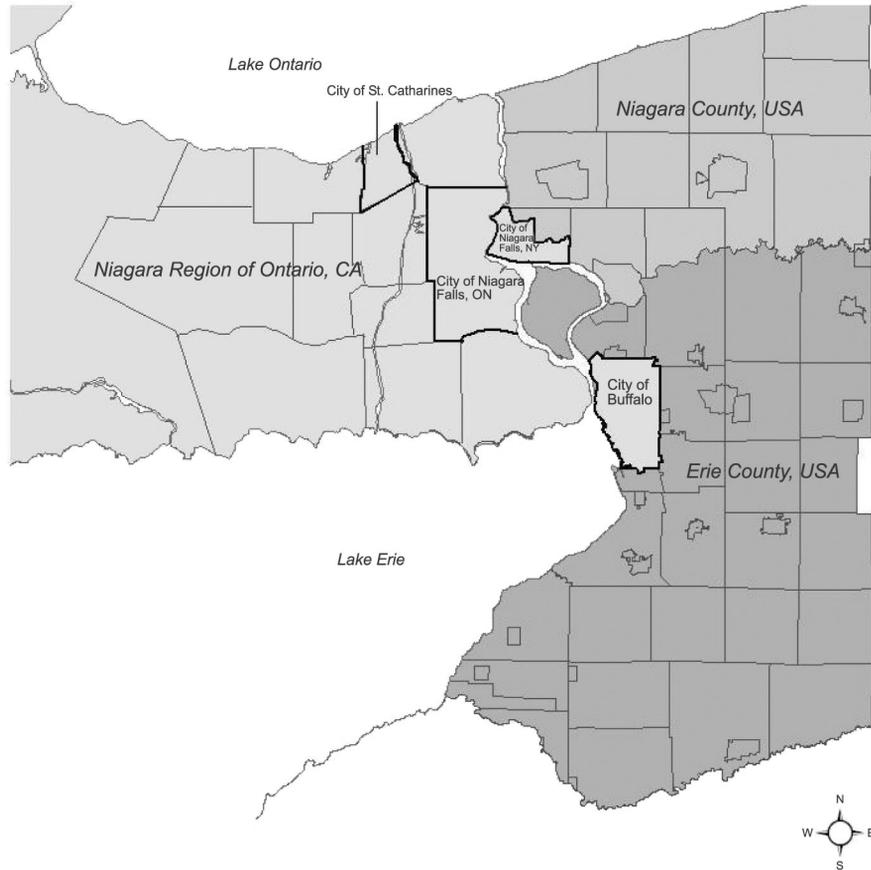


Figure 1.
Map of Erie County and
Niagara County in
New York, USA and the
Niagara region in Ontario,
Canada

Table I indicated that the racial composition on both sides of the border is relatively homogeneous, with most of the population being white. This is reflective of the population at county and municipal levels. However, the two central cities on the US side of the border had noticeably larger minority populations. In 2000, African Americans made up 38 percent of the population and Hispanics made up 7 percent of the population in the City of Buffalo, NY. Likewise, African Americans made up 20 percent of the population and Hispanics made up 2 percent of the population in the City of Niagara Falls, NY. In short, racial minorities were more concentrated in central cities on the US side of the border.

In terms of educational attainment and income, both sides of the border had similar percentages of the population with a high school education or greater and relatively comparable income levels. However, educational attainment was slightly lower in central cities in the USA and slightly higher in the Canadian central cities. For instance, 73 percent of the population in the City of Buffalo, NY had a high school diploma or more in 2000 and 77 percent of the population in the City of Niagara Falls, NY had a high school diploma or more in 2000. In contrast, 86 percent of the population in the

	2000 totals for Erie and Niagara Counties, USA	2000 means for US municipalities (n = 64)	2001 totals for Niagara region, Canada	2001 means for Canadian municipalities (n = 12)
Total population	1,170,111	19,817	410,574	33,718
Percent White	81.2	95.2	94.3	96
Percent Black	14.3	2.2	0.1	0.7
Percent Hispanic	3.1	1.4	0.03	0.3
Percent with a High School diploma or more ^a	80.2	84.8	78.2	79.5
Median household income ^b	\$37,106	\$43,780	\$47,224 (\$30,696)	\$59,566 (\$30,696)
Total housing units	511,583	8,672	170,876	14,240
Median housing value ^c	\$79,150	\$93,358	\$148,523 (\$96,540)	\$162,784 (\$105,810)
Percent vacant	9.2	6.1	5	5.7
Percent owner-occupied	63.7	74.8	74	80
Percent renter-occupied	36.3	25.2	26	20

Notes: ^aeducational data are for the population 25 years and over in the USA and the population 20 years to 64 years in Canada; ^bhousehold income is reported in 1999 US dollars for the USA and in 2001 Canadian dollars for Canada (2001 US dollars in brackets); ^cmedian housing value is reported in 2000 US dollars for the USA and in 2001 Canadian dollars for Canada (2001 US dollars in brackets)

Sources: US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, *2000 Census of Population and Housing, Summary Tape File 3A; Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2001 Census of Canada*

Table I.
Descriptive statistics for the Niagara Falls region by municipalities

City of Niagara Falls, Ontario had a high school diploma or more in 2001 and 78 percent of the population in the City of St Catharines, Ontario had a high school diploma or more in 2001. On the other hand, household income was lower in central cities on both sides of the border. On the US side of the border, median household income was \$23,688 in US dollars in Buffalo, NY in 1999 and median household income was \$27,716 in US dollars in Niagara Falls, NY in 1999. On the Canadian side of the border, median household income was \$44,554 in Canadian dollars (\$28,954 in US dollars) in Niagara Falls, Ontario in 2001 and median household income was \$43,537 in Canadian dollars (\$28,288 in US dollars) in St Catharines, Ontario in 2001.

In terms of housing values and tenure, both sides of the border also exhibited similarities. However, in the aggregate the US side of the border tended to have weaker housing values, higher vacancy rates, and lower owner occupancy rates. In large part, this was a reflection of housing conditions in the central cities on the US side of the border. In 2000, the median housing value in the City of Buffalo, NY was \$57,018 in US dollars, the city had a 16 percent housing vacancy rate, and only 43 percent of housing units were owner occupied. Likewise, the median housing value in the City of Niagara Falls, NY was \$56,272 in US dollars, the city had a 13 percent housing vacancy rate, and 57 percent of housing units were owner occupied. In contrast, the 2001 median housing value in the City of Niagara Falls, Ontario was \$139,813 in Canadian dollars (\$90,879 in US dollars), the city had a 4 percent housing vacancy rate, and 71 percent of housing units were owner occupied. Similarly, the 2001 median housing value in the City of St Catharines, Ontario was \$141,937 in Canadian dollars (\$92,259 in US dollars), the city had a 4 percent housing vacancy rate, and 68 percent of housing units were owner occupied.

Within the Niagara Falls region, the USA and Canada share a number of similarities along the lines of socio-economic and housing characteristics. This is the case, despite operating under different national, state and provincial governments. However, the analysis of public participation techniques should be made, keeping in mind that important distinctions exist between the two countries. The USA has a higher degree of governmental fragmentation, exhibited by the presence of 64 municipalities on the US side of the border in comparison to 12 municipalities on the Canadian side of the border. To a much greater extent the USA also has an urban landscape dominated by central cities where minority populations are more heavily concentrated, income inequality is more acute, and disinvestment in housing is more severe. Although the health of democratic institutions in both countries makes enhanced public participation essential, conditions in US cities suggest a more immediate need for expanded use of public participation techniques at the local levels of government. The following section of this article will examine the degree to which municipalities in the USA have met this need.

Public participation on both sides of Niagara Falls

Sources of pressure to expand public participation

The survey results indicated that there were distinctions between the USA and Canada in how public participation techniques were used by municipalities. In order to understand why specific participation techniques are adopted, it is helpful to examine the sources of pressure on municipalities to use public participation. The respondents to the survey were asked to identify what they believed were the sources of pressure to

expand public participation in their municipalities. Respondents were provided with 14 sources to choose from and they were asked to identify all that were relevant to their municipality. Table II summarizes the results from this part of the analysis.

Statistically significant differences between US and Canadian municipalities were identified for four of the sources of pressure to expand public participation. Respondents identified local elected officials as a source of pressure to expand citizen participation 42.4 percent more often in Canada than the USA. This difference was significant at the 0.01 level. This finding resonates with the work of Day (1997) and Chaskin (2005), who describe the tension between bureaucratic, technocratic and grassroots interests in public participation processes. This finding suggests that Canada's local elected officials may play a greater role in acting as a broker between the public and local bureaucracies. In effect, the brokering role of local elected officials enhanced the public's access to decision making. This proposition is supported by another statistically significant source pressure to expand public participation identified in Table II. Respondents identified the general public as a source of pressure to expand citizen participation 23.8 percent more often in Canada than the USA. This difference was significant at the 0.10 level[8].

In contrast to Canada, sources of pressure to expand public participation were more likely to come from social service and grassroots organizations. For example, respondents identified social service organizations as a source of pressure to expand citizen participation 16.3 percent more often in the USA than Canada. This difference was significant at the 0.01 level. In fact, no Canadian municipalities identified social service organizations as a source of pressure to expand public participation. In part, this difference may be explained by the more centralized social service system in Canada. To a greater extent than in the USA, social service agencies are part of the public sector in Canada and are less likely to be a source of pressure for expanded public participation. However, the role of social service agencies in pressuring local government for expanded public participation in the USA may also be a reflection of these organizations acting as advocates for disenfranchised groups in US central cities. The more pronounced advocacy role of social service agencies in the USA may have come about in response to greater social inequality in urban America.

Similarly, respondents identified block clubs as a source of pressure to expand citizen participation 23.3 percent more often in the USA than Canada. This difference was significant at the 0.01 level. Again, no Canadian municipalities identified block clubs as a source of pressure to expand public participation. In the absence of pressures from local elected officials and the general public, block clubs have filled a void for neighborhood advocacy in US municipalities. It is noteworthy that block clubs are more prevalent in older urban areas of the USA where community disinvestment has occurred. Just as the more pronounced advocacy role of social service agencies may have emerged in response to greater social inequality in US cities, the heightened activity of block clubs may be a reflection of residents' efforts in declining communities to influence local decision making.

Staff, budget and neighborhood characteristics

Given the distinct pressures to expand citizen participation in both the USA and Canada, and the need to address urban inequality in central cities of the USA, one would expect to find that there has been growth in both the use of public participation

Table II.
Percent of municipalities
identifying specified
sources of pressure to
expand public
participation

Source of pressure to expand public participation	Entire region (n = 52) (%)	US municipalities (n = 43) (%)	Canadian municipalities (n = 9) (%)	Difference between USA and Canada (%)
Federal/national government	25	25.6	22.2	3.4
State/provincial government	34.6	30.2	55.6	25.4
County/regional government	23.1	25.6	11.1	14.5
Local elected officials	53.9	46.5	88.9	42.4***
Political parties	9.6	9.3	11.1	1.8
Corporate interests	7.7	4.7	22.2	17.5
Local business community and stakeholders	4.8	46.5	55.6	9.1
Social service organizations	13.5	16.3	0	16.3***
Other non-profit organizations	25	27.9	11.1	16.8
Neighborhood-based organizations	32.7	30.2	44.4	14.2
Home-owners associations	21.2	23.3	11.1	12.2
Tenants organizations	3.9	4.7	0	4.7
Block clubs	19.2	23.3	0	23.3***
General public	69.2	65.1	88.9	23.8

Notes: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

techniques and the demand for greater participation. The results from the survey provide mixed evidence related to this proposition. Table III provides a general overview of staff, budget and neighborhood characteristics related to public participation in the USA and Canada. This table indicates that municipalities on both sides of the border are strikingly similar in terms of: the number of planning and community development staff employed in local government, the percent of staff time allocated to planning and community development activities, the percent of annual budget allocations for public participation activities, the number of neighborhoods in the typical municipality, and the percent of neighborhoods with active neighborhood-based organizations. Along each of these measures there was no statistically significant difference between the USA and Canada.

Despite the lack of statistically significant differences in Table III, this Table does reveal interesting information about municipal activities related to public participation. The typical municipal government is relatively small in the Niagara Falls region, and allocates less than 20 percent of staff time to planning and community development activities. Likewise, the typical municipal government in the Niagara Falls region allocates less than 8 percent of annual budget dollars to activities that involve public participation. Coinciding with the relatively small size of government is the relatively small size of the municipalities themselves. The typical municipality in the Niagara Falls region has fewer than 12 neighborhoods and less than a quarter of those neighborhoods have active neighborhood based organizations. The data in Table III paint a picture of a region with a number of small municipalities that have relatively little public participation, civic engagement or activism at the neighborhood level. This is in sharp contrast to popular myths concerning civic engagement in small communities (Brower, 1996).

Notwithstanding the relatively low levels of public participation and neighborhood activism reported by respondents across the Niagara Falls Region, there was evidence of the potential for expanded public participation in the future. Respondents indicated

Characteristic	Entire region (<i>n</i> = 52)	US municipalities (<i>n</i> = 43)	Canadian municipalities (<i>n</i> = 9)	Difference between USA and Canada
Average number of planning and community development staff per municipality	8.1	8.6	6.6	2
Percent of municipality's staff time allocated for planning and community development activities	14.4	13.3	19.4	6.1
Percent of municipality's annual budget allocated for public participation activities	4.5	3.9	7.1	3.2
Average number of neighborhoods per municipality	9.5	9	11.6	2.6
Percent of neighborhoods with active neighborhood-based organizations	22.9	23	22.4	0.6

Notes: **p* < 0.10; ***p* < 0.05; ****p* < 0.01

Table III. Specified staff, budget and neighborhood characteristics for municipalities

that the general trend in the region has been toward increased public participation. Over 70 percent of the respondents indicated that their municipalities had increased the use of public participation techniques over the last ten years. Over 80 percent of the respondents indicated that public participation had positively influenced the policy making and planning processes to some degree in their municipalities. Over 78 percent of the respondents indicated that funding for public participation activities had remained stable or grew during the last ten years in their municipalities. Over 84 percent of the respondents indicated that the number of neighborhood-based organization either remained stable or grew over the last ten years. These trends were identified despite 77 percent of the respondents indicating that there had been no new mandates for increased public participation in their municipalities during the past ten years. In essence, public participation had expanded in small increments and municipal staff responsible for planning and community development activities continued to value its role in local policy processes.

Contrasting public participation techniques

Although the Niagara Falls region is characterized by small municipalities that have relatively little public participation and civic engagement at the neighborhood level, there are still signs that greater levels of participation could take root. Even though there are low levels of participation occurring through municipal governments in this region, there still remain significant differences between the USA and Canada in the techniques adopted to promote public participation. These are most apparent when examining the four forms of techniques used by municipalities to augment public participation measured in this research: open government techniques, public participation techniques, neighborhood empowerment techniques, and voluntarism and public engagement techniques. Table IV summarizes the combined scores for each dimension of these four forms of techniques used to augment public participation.

Table IV summarizes the scope of public participation techniques used as it relates to each type of participation. For two of the types of participation there were

Types of public participation	Entire region (n = 52)	US municipalities (n = 43)	Canadian municipalities (n = 9)	Difference between USA and Canada
Open government techniques (score ranges from 0-14)	8.3	8.1	9.1	1.0*
Public participation techniques (score ranges from 0-7)	4.1	4	4.2	0.2
Neighborhood empowerment techniques (score ranges from 0-8)	2	2	2.6	0.6
Volunteerism and public engagement techniques (score ranges from 0-9)	3.6	3.3	4.7	1.4**

Notes: *p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

Table IV.
Scores for public participation in municipalities

statistically significant differences between the USA and Canada in the scope of techniques adopted by municipalities. First, respondents to the survey indicated that on average Canadian municipalities used one more open government technique than their US counterparts. This difference was significant at the 0.10 level. Second, respondents indicated that on average Canadian municipalities used 1.4 more voluntarism and public engagement techniques than their US counterparts. This difference was significant at the 0.05 level. In addition to differences in the aggregate levels of public participation techniques used, there were also statistically significant differences in individual dimensions of each form of techniques used to augment participation.

Open government techniques. There were four dimensions of open government techniques where statistically significant differences existed between US and Canadian municipalities. Respondents indicated that on average Canadian municipalities were 50 percent more likely to notify individuals directly about upcoming meetings than US municipalities. This difference was significant at the 0.01 level. Respondents also indicated that on average Canadian municipalities were 26 percent more likely to both maintain a web site that provides information about local government and have a feature on their web site which allowed the public to send e-mail to local government. Both of these differences were significant at the 0.01 level. In contrast, respondents indicated that on average US municipalities were 32 percent more likely to hold an annual meeting in their municipality than those in Canada. This difference was significant at the 0.05 level.

This more detailed information about differences between the USA and Canada in the use of open government techniques suggests that Canadian municipalities were in contact with the public on a more frequent basis than US municipalities. This is somewhat ironic, since Canadian municipalities tend to have larger populations and cover a greater land mass. However, it is also likely that Canadian municipalities have developed increased capacity in open government techniques in response to these constraints, while smaller municipalities in the USA have had fewer resources to do the same.

Public participation techniques. There were three dimensions of public participation techniques where statistically significant differences existed between US and Canadian municipalities. Respondents indicated that on average Canadian municipalities were 39 percent more likely to solicit advice and feedback from stakeholders on policies or plans than US municipalities. This difference was significant at the 0.01 level. Respondents also indicated that on average Canadian municipalities were 33 percent more likely to provide for public participation in strategic planning exercises than US municipalities. This difference was significant at the 0.01 level. In contrast, respondents indicated that on average US municipalities were 8 percent more likely to appoint members of the public to advisory boards or task forces than those in Canada. This difference was significant at the 0.01 level.

This more detailed information about differences between the USA and Canada in the use of public participation techniques reveals that Canadian municipalities engage the public in a broader and more sustained manner, particularly in the area of strategic planning. In contrast, US municipalities have relied more upon the use of advisory boards as a mechanism for involving the public in local policy processes. As noted above, these distinctions may also be linked to more limited capacity in the smaller US

municipalities which may find it more difficult to engage in broad-based, sustained dialogue with the public around activities like strategic planning.

Neighborhood empowerment techniques. There were three dimensions of neighborhood empowerment techniques where statistically significant differences existed between US and Canadian municipalities. Respondents indicated that on average Canadian municipalities were 41 percent more likely to implement a formal neighborhood planning program than US municipalities. This difference was significant at the 0.10 level. In contrast, respondents indicated that on average US municipalities were 10 percent more likely to hire a community organizer to expand neighborhood-based organizations than those in Canada. This difference was significant at the 0.05 level. Respondents also indicated that on average US municipalities were 7 percent more likely to require a homeowners association in new residential developments than those in Canada. This difference was significant at the 0.10 level.

This more detailed information about differences between the USA and Canada in the use of neighborhood empowerment techniques brings a number of important contrasts to the surface. The tendency for Canadian municipalities to be more active in the implementation of formal neighborhood planning programs is another example of their engagement with the public in a more broad-based and sustained manner. This is in sharp contrast to US municipalities, which are more likely to encourage the formation of homeowners associations, a strategy for neighborhood planning which McKenzie (1994) describes as being shaped by privatization and fragmentation in local government. The higher rate of employment of community organizer in the USA is also a reflection of the complexity of the urban landscape on that side of the border. In the USA where inequalities between central cities and suburbs are more pronounced, there is a greater need for community organizers to assist declining neighborhoods. In many respects, the higher percent of municipalities that employ community organizers is most likely linked to the same underlying problems in US cities that produce pressures from block clubs to expand public participation in local decision-making processes. It is also noteworthy to point out that the distinctions between US and Canadian municipalities in terms of the last two forms of neighborhood empowerment techniques discussed are telling, since none of the Canadian municipalities hired community organizers or required homeowners associations in new residential developments.

Voluntarism and public engagement techniques. There were three dimensions of public participation techniques where statistically significant differences existed between US and Canadian municipalities. Respondents indicated that on average Canadian municipalities were 67 percent more likely to have an adopt-a-highway program than US municipalities. This difference was significant at the 0.01 level. Respondents also indicated that on average Canadian municipalities were 46 percent more likely to have a neighborhood watch program than US municipalities. This difference was significant at the 0.05 level. In contrast, respondents indicated that on average US municipalities were 32 percent more likely to have a community gardening program than those in Canada. This difference was significant at the 0.05 level.

This more detailed information about differences between the USA and Canada in the use of public participation techniques reinforces the aggregate trend that Canadian

municipalities use more voluntarism and public engagement techniques than US municipalities. In fact, the only technique represented by this form of public participation where US municipalities outperformed Canadian municipalities was community gardening programs. The more frequent use of such programs is tied to the greater need for them in declining neighborhoods in the USA, since community gardening programs are widely used to address the problem of vacant and derelict property in urban communities.

Conclusions/recommendations

This research began with the premise that public participation should be a core component of policymaking and implementation in healthy democratic societies. The analysis of data from the survey of municipalities in the Niagara Falls region provided mixed evidence concerning the place of public participation in local decision-making processes. Findings from this study indicted that pressures for increased public participation emanate from different sources on each side of the border separating the USA and Canada. In Canada, local elected officials and the general public are more likely to push for more public participation in local policy processes, while in the USA social service organizations and block clubs are more likely to advocate for greater participation. In part, it has been argued that these distinctions are linked to more acute inequalities between central cities and suburbs in the USA.

Despite differences in the nature of inequality in the urban landscape in the USA and Canada, survey respondents reported few distinctions in the levels of resources allocated to public participation in the two countries. This is a troubling finding given Roberts' (2004) argument for increased public participation in public deliberations in places where threats to the quality of life in communities, hard questions about budget cuts, and other questions that relate to the equitable distribution of costs and benefits in society are highly salient. Yet, the differences that do exist between the types of public participation techniques used in US and Canadian municipalities provide some direction for future efforts to expand the role of the public in local policy processes.

Many of the strengths of the Canadian experience with public participation could have an immediate impact if adopted more universally by US municipalities. For example, Canadian municipalities were more likely to have sustained interactions with the public on issues related to planning and community development. This was particularly the case where strategic planning and neighborhood planning activities were concerned. Canadian municipalities also exhibited greater levels of voluntarism and public engagement, and used technology more widely to increase public access to government. In turn, the experience of US municipalities with public participation was much more grounded in interactions with neighborhood-based organizations; particularly those found in central cities and disadvantaged communities. The expansion of respective public participation approaches could assist both nations. However, it should be emphasized that the mutual adaptations of existing public participation techniques should not preclude municipalities from experimenting with even more ambitious approaches to promoting participation in local policy processes.

Notes

1. In municipalities where there was no planning department, surveys were addressed to the municipal clerk or the municipality's community development officer.
2. This article refers to the entire area under analysis, which encompasses the USA and Canadian municipalities in aggregate, as the Niagara Falls region.
3. The question concerning open government techniques asked respondents to indicate if their municipalities: held public hearings, delivered notices for upcoming meeting to individuals, displayed notices for upcoming meetings in libraries or community centers, published notices for upcoming meetings in local newspapers, broadcast public meetings or hearings on local or cable television, issued news releases concerning policies or plans, distributed newsletters or fact sheets to the public, held annual town meetings, held an annual open house in their government offices, sponsored a community fair, employed a community ombudsman or liaison, maintained a web site which provides information about local government, maintained a web site so the public could send e-mail to local government, or respond to phone calls or correspondences from the public.
4. The question concerning public participation techniques asked respondents to indicate if their municipality: conducted focus groups to gather input on policies or plans, solicited feedback or advice from stakeholders on policies or plans, held workshops, organized expert panels or charettes, provided for public participation in strategic planning exercises, allowed publicly initiated referendums or votes to approve policies or plans, or appointed members of the public to advisory boards and task forces.
5. The question concerning neighborhood empowerment techniques asked respondents to indicate if their municipality: required neighborhood-based planning in its local charter or ordinances, implemented a formal neighborhood planning program, mandated public participation in neighborhood planning activities, consulted with neighborhood-based organizations, provided neighborhood-based organizations with meeting space, hired a community organizer to expand neighborhood-based organizations, provided technical assistance to neighborhood-based organizations, provided neighborhood-based organizations with funding, or required homeowners associations in new residential developments.
6. The question concerning voluntarism and public engagement techniques asked respondents to indicate if their municipality had: an adopt-a-park program, an adopt-a-highway program, a neighborhood clean-up program, a community gardening program, a volunteer recycling program, a volunteer fire department, a block club program, or a neighborhood watch program.
7. This estimate is based on 2000 US census data and 2001 data from the Census of Canada.
8. It is noteworthy that only 55.6 percent of the Canadian respondents identified provincial government as a source of pressure for expanded public participation, since the provincial Planning Act entails various requirements for participation. It is possible that local administrators perceive local elected officials and the general public as watchdogs for mandated public participation.

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