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# The Potential for Public Empowerment through Government-Organized Participation

*This article develops a better theoretical understanding of the linkage between the processes and outcomes associated with government-organized public participation, including its potential to empower citizens in guiding administrative decisions. Special focus is given to those factors that shape the development and maintenance of the citizen-administrator relationship. To this end, the research examines the work of federally mandated citizen review panels and their interactions with state child protection agency administrators. Based on 52 in-depth interviews conducted with citizens and administrators in three U.S. states, a grounded theory approach is employed to derive a series of testable theoretical propositions. The insights gained are of importance not only to public administration scholars but also to citizens and administrators who engage one another through formally organized channels of participation.*

Public administration scholars and practitioners have long grappled with the prospects of balancing democracy's aims at openness and public inclusion with bureaucracy's focus on efficiency and expertise. A better understanding of these tensions has become increasingly important as a wide range of citizen participation opportunities have emerged during the past half century, many of which have sought to bring citizens to a more influential position relative to administration (Arnstein 1969; Kweit and Kweit 1981; Roberts 2004; Thomas 1995). Broadly speaking, citizen participation mechanisms are categorized as either citizen driven or government organized (Simonsen and Robbins 2000; Wandersman 1984). The latter is the focus of this article, and it is most often the result of legislative mandate; thus, it is at times referred to as mandated participation.

Under the auspices of a vast regime of intergovernmental grants, the U.S. federal government has over the past 50 years increasingly linked funding

eligibility, at least in part, to the recipient jurisdiction's willingness and ability to facilitate public involvement. Even with such provisions for participation, the recipient subnational government (i.e., state or locality) often retains significant discretion to interpret

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and implement the provisions for increased public inclusion. In other words, once public participation has been mandated, the choice for administrators is not necessarily whether to include the public but rather how inclusive to be in terms of quality of interaction and potential for impact.

## Government-Mandated Citizen Participation

The modern origins of mandated participation in the United States reach back to the mid-twentieth century, a pivotal time in the development of direct citizen inclusion in policy making and implementation (Roberts 2004). Two concurrent trends made this possible. Not only was the scope of government responsibility growing, but also a notable decline in public trust in traditional governing institutions was beginning. These conditions fueled the rising interest in more direct citizen involvement, including different varieties of government-sponsored participation (Simonsen and Robbins 2000).

In the 1960s, the Community Action Programs of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty emphasized "maximum feasible participation." Mandated public involvement was further institutionalized during the 1970s with the expansion of federal grant-in-aid programs to states and localities. By 1978, public participation requirements were featured prominently in 155 separate grant programs, which accounted for more than four out of every five dollars of federal grant funds (ACIR 1979). Despite recognition of the challenges to measuring its effectiveness (Rosener 1978), the number of policy areas with direct citizen involvement has ballooned far beyond community

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planning to include state energy policy (Timney 1998), public health and AIDS prevention (Foley 1998), transportation planning (Kathlene and Martin 1991), environmental protection (Rich et al. 1995), and watershed management (Irvin and Stansbury 2004), to name just a few.

Research suggests that some forms of participation are more conducive to public empowerment (i.e., public impact) than others, although widespread agreement on these outcomes has been elusive. For example, one of the most common participation mechanisms—the public hearing—is frequently denigrated for its ineffectiveness and the ease with which it is so often subverted by administrators (Innes and Booher 2004; King, Feltey, and Susel 1998). However, variations of the public hearing format have been hailed as highly successful in certain contexts (Moynihan 2003), such as when steps are taken by managers to meaningfully invite public attendance (Hock, Anderson, and Potoski 2013), and especially when such processes approximate true deliberation rather than being treated as formality (Lukensmeyer and Brigham 2005). Similar counterbalancing arguments have been made about the use of citizen boards or community panels (Crosby, Kelly, and Schaefer 1986; Houghton 1988; Kathlene and Martin 1991).

### Seeking a Link between Citizens and Administrators

In what is still one of the most-cited typologies of citizen participation, Sherry Arnstein (1969) described a range of citizen–administrator interactions as representing various rungs on a ladder. As one progresses up the ladder, the public becomes increasingly involved, first in manipulated or “token” ways but with greater citizen control manifest at the highest rungs. Subsequent treatments of participation models have adapted similar characterizations. For example, Mary Timney (2011) recently developed a 10-point scorecard of participation methods ranging from unitary, passive models in which agencies control the participation process to more inclusive, active models of increased citizen consideration. Such models provide a useful framework for understanding the potential for public empowerment through participation.

Administrators play a dual role in public empowerment, influencing both its processes and its outcomes. First, they help create the conditions for empowerment by shaping the venues in which the public participates and by providing information and other critical resources to build participant efficacy. This is what the community psychology literature describes as formal and instrumental empowerment, the former referring to citizen access to participation processes and the latter being the “individual’s actual capacity for participating in and influencing a decision-making process” (Rich et al. 1995, 667). Second, administrators influence the outcomes of participation, or “substantive empowerment” (Rich et al. 1995, 668), by working together with the public to make and then carry out effective decisions. Therefore, the processes and outcomes of empowerment are directly impacted by the administrator’s willingness to blend more democratic means with dominant administrative values and goals (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998), as well

as their level of responsiveness to citizen input (Bryer 2007, 2009; Yang and Callahan 2007).

A number of conceptual and empirical studies have examined factors that purportedly impact administrative responsiveness to direct public participation. Robert and Mary Kweit (1980) hypothesized that the closer citizen involvement aligns with bureaucratic forms and goals, the more facilitative and responsive administrators will be to citizen input. Further, they suggested that administrative tolerance for public involvement is a by-product of the resources that citizens are perceived to bring to the table, so to speak, as well as the environmental contexts, pressures, and constraints under which the participation processes emerge. Empirical evidence lends support. For example, stakeholder pressure, such as that from elected officials (Yang and Callahan 2007) or, more broadly, from media-driven public opinion (Yang and Pandey 2007), has shown positive association with bureaucratic openness to public involvement.

Efficiency and expertise are important administrative values to consider for their effects on bureaucratic responsiveness (Kaufman 1956). Not only does the engagement of citizens lengthen decision processes, but also citizen-participants are often perceived by administrators as lacking the technical expertise required to address major public concerns (Hadden 1981; Stewart 2007). This may cause administrators to grapple with how to balance their own expertise with the input provided by the public, ultimately weighing citizen interactions in terms of the costs and benefits involved. Irvin and Stansbury (2004) found that administrators were more likely to perceive lower costs of information sharing when the information was less technical in nature or when the capacity of citizen-participants was sufficiently high that they required less help in understanding it. On the side of benefit, administrators may consider meaningful public inclusion a means to strengthen perceptions of the legitimacy for governance mechanisms (Moynihan 2003). Even so, positive disposition of administrators toward participation has been found to be strongly tempered by time and resource constraints (Yang and Callahan 2007).

In his examination of citizen–administrator interactions in Los Angeles neighborhood councils, Thomas Bryer (2009) highlighted an increase in responsiveness when there was a relationship of trust, when there was a sense of goal alignment between citizens and administrators, and when there was a willingness on the part of administrators to learn from the citizens. This raises the question of how to identify and pursue more unifying efforts that would facilitate these conditions, especially when the mandate for citizen

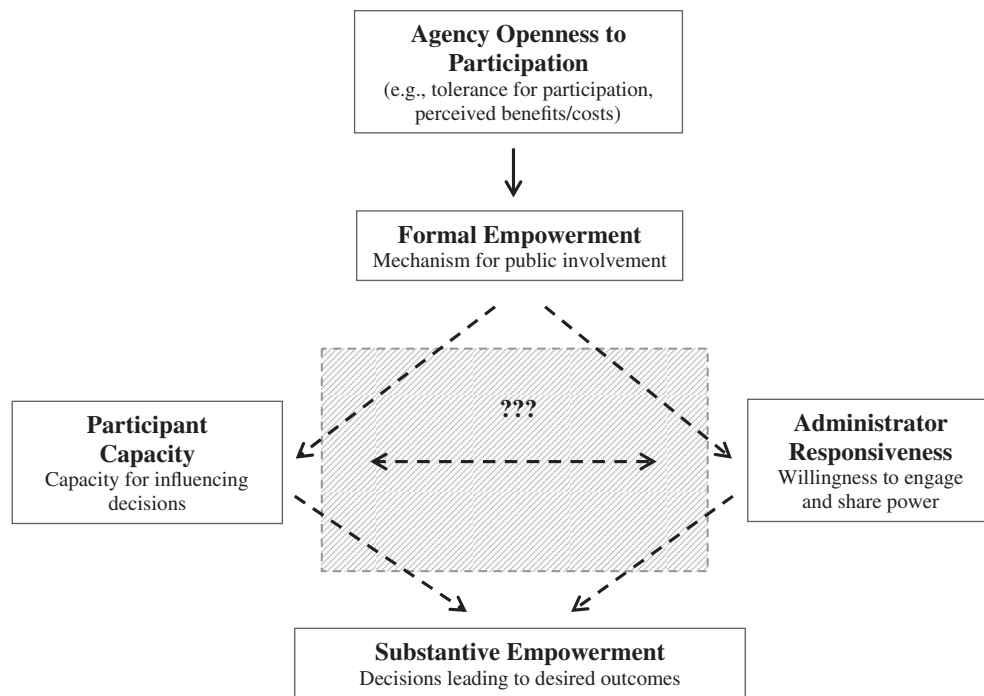
involvement so often emerges in an environment of low trust in government and when participation is seen as an additional check against administrative misbehavior. Such an environment may foster and perpetuate an adversarial relationship, which would work against trust-building efforts.

The existing literature has focused much more on administrator willingness to structure participation processes (i.e., formal empowerment), with much less theory development as to how those processes move toward

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**Figure 1 The Black Box of Public Empowerment**

empowered outcomes (i.e., substantive empowerment). As visualized in figure 1, there exists a sort of black box between participation structures/processes and the impacts of direct citizen involvement. There is a need for understanding how processes link with outcomes, how participation mechanisms shape citizen capacity, and how these phenomena interact with administrator responsiveness to move toward substantive empowerment. The next section describes the policy context in which the present research is framed to begin filling these gaps in our understanding of public empowerment through mandated participation.

### Research Context and Design

In recent years, state child protection as a policy area has experienced a number of important reforms that make it a natural context in which to study elements of public empowerment. Of particular interest are various provisions accompanying the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), as shown in figure 2. Originally passed in 1974, CAPTA made some (albeit limited) grant funding available to encourage states to begin more systematic efforts to examine and address child maltreatment. The legislation established parameters for defining abuse and neglect, promoted the tracking and measurement of these phenomena through a central data clearinghouse, and encouraged states to conform their mandatory reporting requirements to a federal standard. These requirements for information gathering and dissemination represent a partial step in the direction of potential public empowerment by increasing the public’s ability to access information about child abuse.

In 1996, however, a reauthorization of CAPTA (P.L. 104-235) made significant steps toward public empowerment by mandating greater citizen involvement in state child protection policy and practice. In order

to receive CAPTA grant funds, states would now be required to establish a minimum of three citizen review panels (CRPs) with the specific role of providing systemic evaluation of state child protection policy and practice. So as not to overburden states with the requirement, the legislation included provisions allowing the use of already-existing citizen boards (e.g., child fatality review teams and/or foster care review boards) to meet the CRP requirement; states could decide to support the creation of new panels or not. These CRPs were to be composed of citizen volunteers, with a membership broadly representative of the community it served but also including individuals with some level of expertise in child welfare. Importantly, the CRPs would meet regularly, and their activities and recommendations for agency improvements would be documented in an annual public report. States would be under obligation to provide adequate assistance in order for panels to perform their functions, including staff support and access to necessary information. While this more targeted approach to public inclusion moved closer toward a potentially empowered public, it lacked a crucial element, namely, the ability to gauge administrative response.

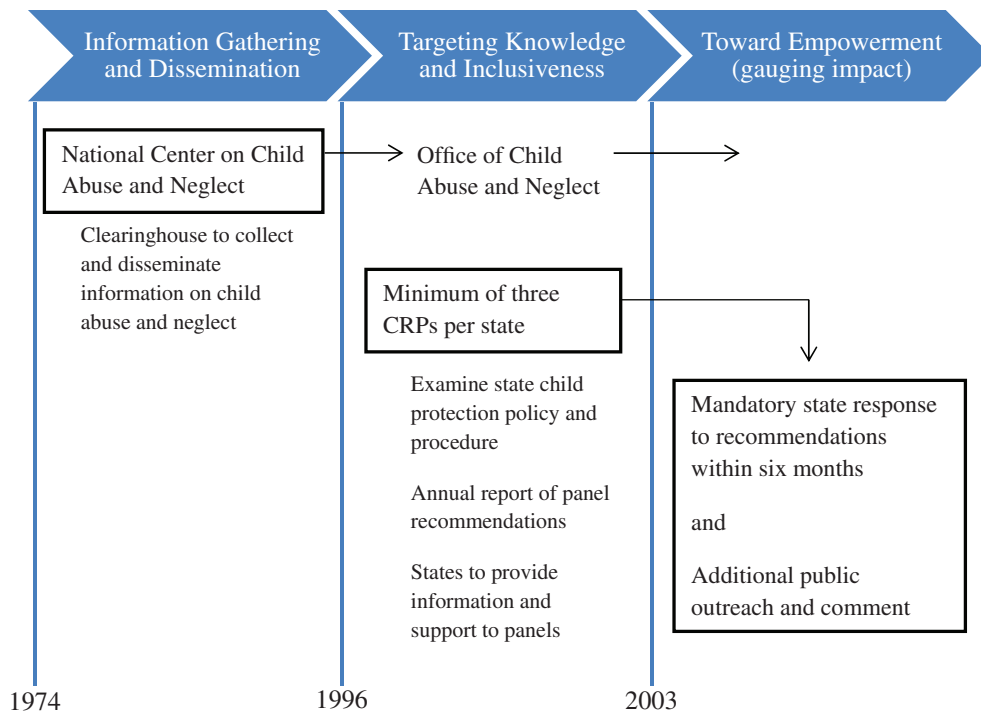
CAPTA was again reauthorized in 2003 as the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act (P.L. 108-36). One significant change was that state agency administrators were now required to respond to the CRP’s annual report of recommendations within six months, acknowledging and detailing how they intended to address itemized concerns. Although the state is not obliged to implement the recommendations of the CRP, their written responses give the panels a chance to assess the citizen-participants’ substantive empowerment. With wide variation in state responsiveness to these citizen groups, there exists a range of possible empowerment outcomes.

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**Figure 2 The Evolution of Empowerment in CAPTA**

Today, all 50 states have some form of CRP process in place. Almost all were compliant by the 1999 deadline, although at least two states—Indiana (in 2005) and Pennsylvania (in 2006)—lagged in meeting the CRP requirement. There is wide variation in how the states have implemented the rather vague citizen participation description in the CAPTA legislation, indicating that some states may take the work of the CRPs more seriously than others.

Only recently has the work of CRPs in child welfare been the focus of empirical examination, almost exclusively in the social work literature. Despite its limited scope, the existing research has shed light on the characteristics and perceptions of effectiveness of the CRP process. Demographic surveys of participants indicate that the groups are skewed toward participation by highly educated, middle-age females (Jones and Royse 2008a). Additionally, a very high proportion of CRP members come directly from social service professions, although generally outside the state child protection agency (Bryan, Jones, and Lawson 2010). Even though these participants come with advanced degrees, often including relevant experience in professions related to child welfare, customized training is needed for them to be effective in carrying out the functions of the CRP. This training becomes particularly important for individuals with no experience working within a large bureaucracy such as a state child welfare system (Collins-Camargo, Jones, and Krusich 2009).

Aside from training needs, other challenges to the effective work of CRPs include a lack of funding, a perception of defensive posturing by the state agency (Jones and Royse 2008b), a perception of distrust that characterizes many relationships between the agency and the citizen-participants (Collins-Camargo, Jones, and Krusich 2009; Jones 2004), and a pessimistic view by agency personnel regarding the ability of the citizen panels to make informed recommendations (Jones, Litzelfelner, and Ford (2003). Several strong, positive

predictors of perceived effectiveness in impacting child welfare policy and practices have been noted, including the level of group cohesion, the level of information flow between the state agency and the CRP, and the degree of perceived self-governance (i.e., autonomy) by the panels (Bryan, Jones, and Lawson 2010).

**Methodology**

Within a grounded theory framework, the present research employs a qualitative multicase analysis of citizen–agency relationships in three U.S. states. The rationale for selecting this methodology was to allow the researcher to more deeply examine relationships and interactions within the contexts in which they occur. Data collection, coding, categorization, and theory development were engaged concurrently. The principal benefit of such an approach is its flexibility in allowing unforeseen themes and patterns to emerge from the data, thus facilitating theory development (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

**Selection Strategy and Criteria**

Three states were selected for in-depth analysis and case development: Kentucky, Utah, and Pennsylvania. A purposeful selection strategy was used to ensure diversity among the cases in the study and to increase the richness of within- and across-case comparisons. The logic behind this nonrandom approach to case selection is a hallmark of many qualitative studies, in which the aim is less about generalization but rather “to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton 1990, 169). The richness of information was amplified by the selection of cases with characteristics that were intrinsically interesting and informative because of their uniqueness within the study’s context (Creswell 1998; Patton 1990; Stake 1995).

In the majority of states, administration of child protective services resides in a central child protection agency, with regional or county



**Table 1** Case Variation on Selection Criteria

	Kentucky	Utah	Pennsylvania
State/county role in child protective services	State administered	State administered	State supervised, county administered
Locus of panel coordination	External	Internal	External
Timing of compliance	Immediate (1999)	Immediate (1999)	Delayed (2010)
Number of current CRPs (as of 2012)	3	8	3
Regional panel coverage	Limited	Comprehensive	Limited
New or existing groups to meet mandate	New	Existing	New
Assigned agency liaison	Yes	Yes	Yes
State-level CRP	Yes	Yes	No

offices acting as extensions (i.e., state administered). In a smaller number of states, counties retain significantly greater discretion in administering child protection, while the state plays a supervisory role (i.e., state supervised, county administered). As a first criterion, then, cases were selected to reflect this variation in local discretion, which is believed to impact the ways in which citizen participation evolves, based on classification at the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2012).

Second, variation was sought in terms of the level of citizen panel autonomy, or the ability to self-direct as a group. In theory, less autonomous citizen groups may find their efforts being shaped according to the state agency's goals rather than directed toward their own (Houghton 1988). One indicator of CRP autonomy is the locus of coordination of panel efforts. Two broad patterns have emerged in this regard. Internal coordination, in which a child protection agency employee oversees the work of the CRPs, has the potential to reduce panel autonomy, with greater control of the citizen groups being left to the agency. On the other hand, external coordination by a party separate from the state agency may increase panel autonomy, with less control over the process being in the hands of agency administrators. Cases were selected to reflect both internal and external coordination.

A number of other factors were also considered in selecting the cases for this study, providing additional opportunities for variation and comparison, as shown in table 1 (ordered by sequence of site visits and interviews). Because agency openness to participation is another key variable relevant to empowerment, cases were chosen that had the potential for a range in state response to the political mandate to create CRPs. Indicators of state responsiveness in case selection include the timing of compliance to the CAPTA mandate (immediate or delayed), the number and geographic coverage of the panels across the states (limited or comprehensive), whether states created new panels or simply used existing citizen groups to meet the requirement, whether the state had assigned an agency liaison to provide support for the panels, and whether the state had facilitated the creation of at least one panel devoted specifically to state-level policy.

### **Primary and Secondary Data**

Primary original data for the research come from 52 in-depth personal interviews conducted with state and regional-level agency administrators and employees, as well as CRP participants

(Kentucky = 15, Pennsylvania = 16, Utah = 21). On average, the interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed a guided discussion format, focusing broadly on perceptions and experiences with the panels' efforts to shape agency decisions and outcomes. The data collection process also entailed multiple site visits in each case state as well as opportunities for direct observation of panel training and activities. The interview process continued until no new data, or data that were only marginally constructive to new theory, were being revealed—a point described as reaching saturation (Creswell 1998; Strauss and Corbin 1998).

In Kentucky and Utah, one-third of the interviewees were administrative representatives of the state child protection agency, including regional agencies. In Pennsylvania, fewer state agency administrators were interviewed because of the unique child protection structure, in which the state Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF) plays more of a support and monitoring role, while the individual counties administer child protective services. To bolster the limited administrator perspective, a number of interviews were conducted with members of the CRP Subcommittee, a stakeholder group established and assisted by the OCYF to organize and support the citizen review process throughout the state. By including members of this group in the interviews, again, one-third of the interviewees represented the state agency perspective.

Interviewing and subsequent note transcription was conducted solely by the researcher. Each set of interview notes was carefully transcribed from handwritten to digital format, and open coding of the responses resulted in the categorization of similar concepts. Conceptual categories were spatially paired on a matrix and reordered to see the predominance of themes emerging from the interviews (Miles and Huberman 1994). Within-case analyses highlighted similarities and distinctions in the structure and processes of government-organized citizen participation. Through constant comparison of data across the cases, the analysis extended to the emergence of broader themes from the guided discussions.

In addition to the primary interview data, the research also made use of extensive document analysis of publicly available secondary resources, including federal and state legislative proceedings, judicial rulings, and annual reports of panel activities and state responses. These data sources enhanced understanding of the context, tone of citizen-administrator interaction, and level of substantive public empowerment manifest through formal participation processes. Furthermore, secondary data allowed confirmation of insights revealed through the primary data—an important source of triangulation in the analysis (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Miles and Huberman 1994).

### **Emergent Themes and Testable Propositions**

Within- and across-case analyses revealed several important themes in regard to the process of moving toward a stronger citizen voice in shaping agency decisions. Three broad theoretical propositions about the potential for government-organized citizen participation to empower the public emerged.

1. The gap between bureaucratic reality and participant expectations can become a major source of disappointment and frustration for both citizens and administrators involved.

2. The degree of citizen–administrator interconnectedness impacts citizens’ feelings of influence and empowerment in the participation process.
3. With legitimate processes in place, the path to empowered outcomes runs through strong citizen–administrator relationships.

In the discussion that follows, each of these propositions is explored in more detail, including a series of testable subpropositions that appear in italicized font within the text.

### ***Bureaucratic Realities and Participant Expectations***

According to agency administrators, a significant factor shaping the tone of the citizen–administrator relationship is whether the participating public maintains realistic expectations for the review process and its potential outcomes. Fundamentally, this requires understanding the constraints under which agency administrators operate and, in light of these, providing realistic recommendations for agency improvement. Certainly, this is not to suggest that bureaucratic realities should not be scrutinized and challenged by the panels. That is, in fact, a key benefit of the review process, as noted by interviewees—that citizens provide an outside perspective and challenge convention by asking not only how things are done but also why. Nevertheless, voices from both sides underscored the need to be cognizant of constraints.

***The balance between passion and patience.*** Although many citizen-participants had acquired expertise in fields related to child welfare, this certainly did not mean that they had a concomitant understanding of bureaucratic and political structures. While the source of personal interest in participation varied, one underlying characteristic was identifiable across the wide range of participants, namely, an expressed, impassioned desire to improve the lives of children and families in their state. However, working with a large public bureaucracy, infused as it is with the politics of child welfare, is often markedly slower and much less flexible than what many citizen-participants initially expect. The resulting gap between bureaucratic reality and participant expectations can become a major source disappointment for both the citizens and administrators involved. Such disappointment can lead, in turn, to frustration when participants possess especially strong feelings or personal clarity about what they think should be done by an agency but do not see as clearly the nuanced reality of what is actually feasible. This is in line with what the literature has suggested regarding citizens’ normative expectations (e.g., see James 2011).

At times, preconceived notions caused citizen-participants to become unbendingly focused on particular issues that they found most disconcerting about the agency. Having a “pet issue,” though, does not necessarily create a negative tone in the relationship between the parties involved. However, if an individual brings a retaliatory mentality based on perceived negative experiences with the state (e.g., having one’s own child removed from the home or having received poor foster care reviews), the result can be dramatic. When the rhetoric takes on a tone of having a “bone to pick” or

a personal “axe to grind” with the agency, this was viewed widely across all cases as damaging both the citizen–agency relationship and the cohesion between the citizen-participants. Individuals with exceptionally strong personal agendas were much more likely to become frustrated and exit the participation process.

The cogent reality of administrative constraints was described by an administrator, who said, “There is not generally a lot of wiggle room for the [agency]. So many of our guidelines and operating procedures are dictated by federal and state mandates.” Perhaps the most formidable constraint was the ever-present budgetary concern—the lack of money to implement new programs or initiate new technologies. As one panel member acknowledged, recommendations that appeared to be “pie in the sky” were most often neglected, not because they were undesirable but rather because they were unfeasible. By tacitly acknowledging agency constraints, panels can realistically adjust in advance their expectations and recommendations in ways that will maintain a positive tone in the relationship.

One common adjustment in expectations had to do with the speed of change. As one interviewee noted, “The wheels of state government turn very slowly.” Because of this, some panel members observed the panels shifting from short-term thinking to longer-term

goals, seeing the groups’ efforts as part of a big-picture process or “part of a bigger conversation.” However, for those participants who were not content to simply be part of the conversation, remaining with the panels was much less likely. *The more citizens are able to balance their pursuit of preferred outcomes with patience for the process, the more likely they will continue their involvement. Participant retention suffers as a result of unmet and/or unadjusted expectations.*

***The mystique (and power) of complexity.*** In the formal relationship between the agency and the CRPs, there are two key sources of power that the former maintains over the latter. First, the agency has statutory and legal authority from the state, which includes not only the mandate to provide child protective services but also the allocation of public resources to do so. Second, and perhaps less obvious, is the power that comes from being cloaked in organizational complexity. In Kentucky, I witnessed one CRP member concede to the panel coordinator that she could no longer participate, in large measure because she found the review process to be overly complex and demanding. The initially steep learning curve, particularly for those with less direct ties to the system, creates a challenge for the recruitment and retention of panel members.

While a working knowledge of child welfare was important to successful panel participation, equally or more important was the participants’ willingness to apply themselves in learning about the complexities of the child protection system. This is no small task, as learning ranges from the agency-specific dialect and “alphabet soup” of government acronyms, to the intricacies of demands flowing up and down through the intergovernmental system, and horizontally between intersectoral partners. To achieve this sort of systemic understanding requires prolonged experience with and exposure to

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the agency. Importantly, it also requires that the agency be willing to facilitate this learning by sharing pertinent information and building participant capacity. *With experience, the citizen-participants' capacity to engage agency administrators increases. The greater the capacity to understand the agency—its language, culture, and politics—the better positioned citizens will be to engage in dialogue and shape agency decisions.*

### **Citizen–Administrator Interconnectedness**

The public's greatest ability to shape agency administrators' decisions will come in working with, not against, the agency. One very important step in this regard is securing willing support from the agency. Obtaining administrative buy-in to the citizen review process is vital in setting a positive tone in the relationship between citizens and the agency and achieving success in shaping administrative decisions. The degree of citizen–administrator interconnectedness impacts citizens' feelings of influence and empowerment in the participation process.

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A common theme identified by interviewees was the challenge of establishing a meaningful and productive relationship in light of what seems like a revolving door of agency leadership and an ever-changing set of administrative priorities. The dynamic nature of child welfare, with its pendulum-like swings from crisis to crisis, can cause seemingly rapid shifts in administrative focus (Gainsborough 2010). In addition, frequent changes in leaders and issues make it difficult for the CRPs to gain momentum in their work and build sustainable relationships with high-level agency decision makers. The desire for more face-to-face interactions, described later, is met with the reality of time constraints and competing agency priorities. Despite these difficulties, some panels have been quite successful at establishing positive and productive relationships with top agency officials.

**Structuring for success.** One important consideration in helping citizen-participants identify and build relationships with administrators is to structure jurisdictional coverage in ways that allow the panels to clearly identify the appropriate administrative audience. This includes minimizing the number of administrators that panels must take into consideration when crafting their recommendations. In both Kentucky and Utah, the regional citizen panels align with the corresponding regional offices of the state's child protection services, while the statewide panels are paired directly with the central state office. This allows the citizen groups in these two states to more clearly identify agency leaders with whom to engage.

In Pennsylvania, however, the issue is made more difficult because child protection services are administered by the counties, while the state's role is one of supervision. Each of the three CRPs in Pennsylvania covers about a dozen counties, but these groupings do not correspond to a meaningful regional administrative jurisdiction of the state child protective service. Because each county administers its own system of child protection, the CRPs have an average of 12 agency heads to consider rather than a single agency director. According to the panel participants with whom I spoke, being stretched across so many administrative boundaries made it difficult

to secure administrator support for and buy-in to the process. The panels reported struggling to know where to target their efforts and with whom to start the intended dialogue regarding systemic improvements—hard enough to do with one administrator, let alone a dozen.

Effective government-organized citizen participation is facilitated by the ability of participants to clearly identify relevant administrative actors. This means that it is useful to keep the number of administrative decision makers in the relationship relatively small. *The more diffuse the administrative audience—that is, the greater the number of decision makers to consider—the less influence citizen-participants will have on agency direction and decisions.*

**Moving from apathy to empathy.** The next vital step in moving toward the establishment of an effective relationship between citizens and administrators, particularly those at

higher levels of agency influence, is to reduce the proximal and qualitative distance between the parties. The more meaningful, direct, and sustained the interactions, the greater the chance of administrators supporting the panels' efforts to shape agency direction. A comparison of the three case states is instructive in this regard, as the cases represent varying degrees of separation between the citizen panels and the administrative decision makers.

In Pennsylvania, there was a sense of deep separation between the state agency and the CRPs, although this distance should not be confused with a lack of interest. Two factors contributed to the apparent divide. First, interpreting the spirit of the CAPTA legislation as aiming for truly citizen-led panels, the state structured citizen–agency relationships with a strong tilt toward panel autonomy. Explicit efforts were taken to reduce agency contact with the panels lest the contact be interpreted as meddling in the groups' work. Second, the unique county-administered structure for child protective services made the state's role in engaging the panels less direct by its very nature, as the mandated recommendation and response dialogue was intended ultimately to be between the panels and the county agency administrators. While the state did assign a liaison initially, this individual's presence at the panel meetings was essentially kept to an invitation-only basis. Indeed, the liaison attended just a couple of meetings, in an effort to help orient the panels. Following that, the only sustained support personnel to attend regularly was the contracted external coordinator. As vital as the coordinator's role was to the panels' efforts, this arrangement meant that there was very little direct and sustained interaction with the state administrative decision makers.

In Kentucky, the CRPs have historically had more continuous contact with representatives of the state and regional child protection agencies, although this contact has tended to be less direct with top administrators. Like Pennsylvania, Kentucky's citizen panels have an externally contracted coordinator who attends each meeting and provides important logistical support for the groups. Each panel also has a designated liaison from the state or regional agency who regularly attends meetings and provides support for the participation process. As the title suggests, the liaison is the one who links the agency with the panels. However, the liaisons are not



high-level agency administrators, and they do not have agency-wide decision-making power. Regional and state administrators have attended panel meetings, but this has been infrequent and inconsistent. Recent developments, such as a quarterly meeting between the panel chairs and higher-level agency administrators, have put panels in more direct contact with top agency officials, and the impacts on panel–agency relationships have been positive. Even so, the bulk of sustained interaction between the agency and the panels is mediated through the liaison and the externally contracted coordinator.

Finally, in Utah, the quality improvement committees (QICs, the term for citizen review panels in that state) and the state and regional child protection agencies are highly interconnected. Agency involvement in the review process is direct and ongoing. From their inception, the QICs have had agency representatives as sitting members, in addition to the support personnel who attend. Furthermore, the QICs are internally coordinated by the state, in direct contrast with both Kentucky and Pennsylvania’s external coordinators. More importantly, the top regional-level administrators actively participate in the monthly meetings of a number of the local committees. The administrators’ presence is welcomed by the committees and recognized as enhancing the groups’ success. The high degree of interconnectedness has enabled the QICs to have greater influence on agency decisions and to sense a substantial empowerment in their participation.

The further the distance between citizens and top administrators, the less likely these key decision makers are to consider the panels and to engage their recommendations seriously. The closer citizens and administrators start to come in interaction and purpose, the more likely citizen-participants are to be able to influence agency decisions. The reason that sustained and sincere interaction between the state and panels is important is so that the CRPs can avoid the lamentable position of being both out of sight and out of mind. Furthermore, having the administrators in the room adds a level of continuity to the process. More importantly, it becomes difficult to ignore and dismiss the panels’ efforts, particularly because the administrator begins to take a vested interest in the panels’ success. Any successful changes brought by such a relationship come because the two parties move from coercion to cooperation on shared ends. In short, administrative absence from the process fosters apathy, contact breeds sympathy, and co-experience secures empathy. It is in the movement toward empathy that empowerment occurs. *The more sustained the relationship between citizen-participants and the agency, and in particular the more direct and frequent the interactions with higher-level agency administrators, the more likely a sense of empowerment will result from participation.*

**Being connected but not controlled.** One crucial aspect of panel autonomy is to be found in its agenda-setting capacity, or, in other words, the panels’ ability to establish the course of priorities where attention and effort will be spent. Across each of the case states, interviewees emphasized the importance of the panels having a strong measure of self-guidance in choosing which aspects of the child protection system to review. This, of course, is consistent

with the enabling federal legislation that mandated the creation of the panels. However, the interviews also revealed two related themes explaining the challenge of complete panel autonomy in agenda setting. First, it is difficult to prioritize and reduce the number of topic choices, with child protection being such a broad and encompassing field. Second, panels inevitably realize that they do not work in a vacuum and must actively consider their interrelatedness with the agency when selecting areas of focus.

Ultimately, these two realities lead panels to sense a need (and even desire) for some guidance and direction from the state agency in agenda setting. Interviewees in Pennsylvania, for example, suggested that more state direction toward topic selection would be helpful because “it is just too big of a system to turn the CRPs loose.” Others wanted more guidance because of the newness of the process in Pennsylvania, frequently describing their ignorance of the system by asserting, “We don’t know what we don’t know.” Similar sentiments were expressed in Kentucky and Utah as well, although the connections with the child protection agencies in those states were somewhat more developed. Without some agency guidance, panels start to wonder about the value of their efforts and whether they are “meeting just to meet.”

Varying degrees of agency influence on the agenda of the citizen groups were manifest across the three case states. In Pennsylvania, interviewees noted practically no influence by the state child protection agency in setting the panels’ agenda. This was attributable in large part to the hands-off approach that the state has taken with the panels since their inception. In Kentucky, recent efforts, such as the annual all-panel retreat, have increasingly sought to bring panel members and agency administrators in closer contact during the agenda-setting process. While the state agency has no formal say in which systemic issues will be the focus of the panels’ yearly review activities, some panels have started to inquire about agency priorities, so as to avoid what one administrator described as the panels simply going through “an academic exercise.”

In Utah, with administrators participating on the citizen committees, agenda items were much more directly prone to being influenced by the agency. Surprisingly, only one interviewee felt that this arrangement compromised the integrity of the review process, evoking the image of a fox guarding the henhouse. Participants were overwhelmingly satisfied with the agency presence and guidance. For example, one interviewee noted that even when the agency expressed some needs to the QIC, “the relationship, as it has evolved, allows such a partnership, so it does not feel like [the agency] is overstepping.” Concerns over ceding independence were counterbalanced by an increase in group influence on agency decisions.

There is a precarious balance to be sought between the level of panel autonomy and the degree of agency control over panel activities. With too much agency control, citizen groups can be manipulated in order to weaken their impact or co-opted by the government body in order to direct efforts to the ends that the state most

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The further the distance between citizens and top administrators, the less likely these key decision makers are to consider the panels and to engage their recommendations seriously.

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desires. On the other hand, with too much panel autonomy, the citizen groups may find themselves so detached from the state that they wander without direction or, worse, find themselves starved of vital connections and support needed to perform their duties. *Citizen frustration will increase if participants perceive the agency to be too controlling of the process. Similarly, frustration will increase if the participants are too disconnected from the agency. A balance must be struck between panel autonomy and agency control.*

**Shortening the feedback loop.** There is a distinct disjointedness inherent in the recommendation and response exchange required in the CAPTA legislation. As detailed previously, at the end of each year's efforts, the panels issue a report of recommendations to the state, which then has six months to provide a formal response to the panels. This lag in response segments the process somewhat artificially and renders real-time dialogue nearly impossible. The panels resume the next year's activities while still awaiting response to the previous year's recommendations, making it exceptionally difficult for the citizen groups to attain a sense of accomplishment and closure to their efforts.

There is great value to shortening the communications feedback loop and bringing fluidity to the citizen–agency interactions. In Pennsylvania, the experience of waiting for more than 15 months to receive the state's first response to the panel reports was understandably exasperating for the panel participants. It finally required a face-to-face meeting with representatives from the OCYF to modify parameters for a more timely state response moving forward, the agreement ultimately being a fixed six-month guideline. In Kentucky, the feedback loop was shortened through the creation of a memorandum of understanding, in which a three-month recommendation and response timeline was initiated. Utah's citizen committees do not issue just one recommendation report annually but rather submit formal recommendations on an ongoing basis. A formal protocol stipulates a one-month response time frame after the recommendation is received. However, with administrators at the table and participating on the citizen committees, the effective response to citizen recommendations is often immediate. By shortening the feedback mechanism and adding fluidity to the process, the citizen–agency interaction moves closer to an engaged dialogue. *As the communication between citizens and administrators becomes more continuous—that is, as the lag between recommendation*

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There is a precarious balance to be sought between the level of panel autonomy and the degree of agency control over panel activities.

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*and response decreases—citizens are more likely to feel that they have an effective voice through the participation process.*

Table 2 distinguishes the case states on the characteristics described earlier, which emerged as important themes related to securing administrative buy-in to the citizen review process. The columns are aligned from left to right according to the citizen panels' level of connection with agency administrators (refer to the first row). Pennsylvania's CRPs are indirectly connected to the agency through the external coordinator, Kentucky's CRP–agency connections are mediated through the liaison, and Utah's QICs are directly connected with administrators serving as active participants on the citizen groups. The implications of this type of connectedness on perceptions of empowerment are discussed in the following section.

**Relationship Building and the Path to Empowered Outcomes**

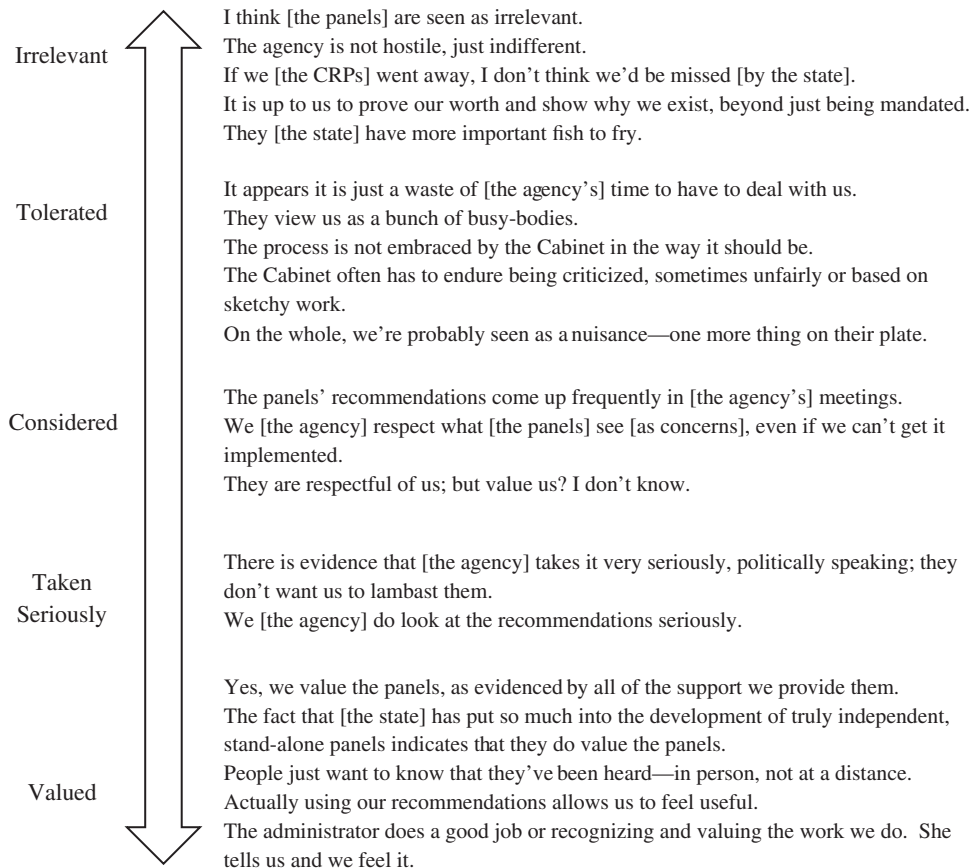
Interviewees were asked to assess whether they considered the panels to be valued by the state agency. The range of responses shown in figure 3 depict a continuum that runs from feeling irrelevant at the shallow end to feeling increasingly important at deeper levels. As the relationships strengthen, perceptions of being valued deepen as well.

Interviewees were also asked to define success with regard to the work of the CRPs, as a way of gauging the effectiveness of citizen participation. Three distinct models emerged from their responses. In one model, panel success was contingent on outcomes, specifically, changes in agency policy or practice that the CRP had clearly influenced. Another model defined success based on whether participants felt that the agency adequately supported the panels in the review process itself. A third model for perceived panel success also was revealed, somewhere between outcomes and processes. In this view, perceived success was based on the quality of the relationships that were developed with the agency representatives during engagement process. Interestingly, outcomes, processes, and relationships also emerged as dominant ways to gauge whether the work of the panels was valued by the agency. Figure 4 shows the three views of success with representative comments reflecting each view. With legitimate processes in place, the path to empowered outcomes runs through strong citizen–administrator relationships. In the absence of identifiable outcomes, expectations tend to shift back to an emphasis on relationships or processes.

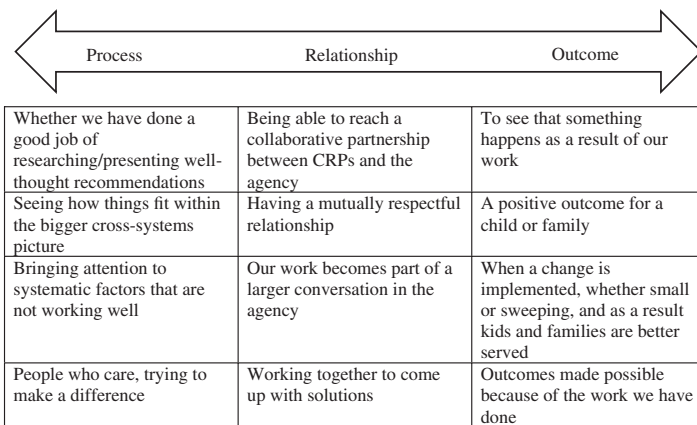
Some interesting patterns emerge when comparing the case states on these perceptions of success. In Utah, for example, members of the quality improvement committees were far more precise in identifying specific agency changes that had been directly influenced by their recommendations. Importantly, this translated into a strong propensity to adopt an outcome-based definition of success. It became clear from the interviews that a sense of success raised expectations for future success as well. At the other end of the spectrum were respondents in Pennsylvania. At the time the interviews were conducted, the state still had not issued its first response to the CRPs, a period of substantial delay lasting more than 15 months. Not surprisingly, the focus there emphasized process, with participants consistently reiterating that their chief desire was that the OCYF would simply provide a response to the panels'

**Table 2** Important Elements of Securing Administrative Buy-In to Participation

	Pennsylvania	Kentucky	Utah
Connection with agency	Indirect through external coordinator	Mediated through liaison	Direct with administrator
Jurisdictional alignment	Fragmented	Clear alignment	Clear alignment
Administrative audience	Multiple and diffuse	Singular head	Singular head
Panel autonomy in agenda setting	High panel autonomy; seeking more direction	High panel autonomy; seeking more direction	Balance autonomy with agency direction
Length of feedback loop	Long (six months)	Medium (three month)	Near continuity



**Figure 3 Levels of Perceived Value of Citizen-Participants**



**Figure 4 Three Views for Assessing Participation Success**

reports. The sentiments of one panel member capture the collective mood quite well: “Can't they just answer us? Does it have to be this hard?”

In the middle was Kentucky, where there was evidence of both outcome- and process-based assessments of success and perceived value. When asked to identify an agency change influenced by the panels, few interviewees could do so specifically. Expectations about the process were largely being met; the panels were being provided

Cooperative power does not necessarily consider the empowerment of one party to come at the expense of another party; it can be mutually beneficial and synergistic.

excellent support and the state issued responses on time. However, panel members felt that their efforts were not thoughtfully considered, as if their recommendations were too quickly dismissed. Interestingly, with process expectations met but outcome expectations frustrated, many panel members I spoke with had turned their attention to the quality of the relationships between the citizen-participants and the agency administrators. Unable to clearly identify influenced outcomes, expectations for success and the basis for estimating the panels' sense of being valued by the agency shift on the continua depicted in figures 3 and 4. *Citizen-participants desire outcomes that are indicative of the efficacy and value of their efforts. However, process- and relationship-based expectations must be satisfied before a focus on outcomes is plausible.*

**Discussion: Rethinking the “Power” in Empowerment**

A comparison of the three cases in this study reveals that public empowerment in the context of government-organized citizen participation requires a reconceptualization of power itself, moving from traditional control-based approaches toward those rooted

more in cooperation. In the traditional view, power is the ability of an individual or group to control the actions of other entities because of the unequal bases on which each stands in the relationship (see, e.g., Dahl 1957). However, there are other power configurations that are not control based but start instead from a premise of alignment (Follett 1940). Cooperative power does not necessarily

consider the empowerment of one party to come at the expense of another party; it can be mutually beneficial and synergistic.

There are two specific challenges in applying a control-based view of power to government-organized citizen participation in general and the citizen review process in particular. First, there exists a stark mismatch in power bases between the state agencies and the CRPs. Although established by federal mandate, the CRPs clearly are not endowed with power to match or supersede the legal-rational authority of the state agency. Second, there is a tendency for each party to view itself in the power position with respect to the other. The state perceives itself in the power position primarily because it is tasked with creating and supporting the citizen panels. The CRPs, alternatively, have some expectation of influence because they are federally mandated and because the state is required to respond to the panels' recommendations. This divergence in role agreement can be a source of angst for both parties.

As described in the CAPTA legislation, states are required to respond in writing within six months to the recommendations given by the CRPs. The citizen panels cannot, however, dictate what that response will be; the mandate is to reply, not necessarily comply. If the CRPs enter the participation process assuming that they can force the state agency to adopt their specific recommendations, unmet expectations will almost certainly cause initial optimism to give way to frustration. Indeed, several outcomes are reasonable to imagine. For instance, if the panels present themselves in a combative or controlling way, the state may choose to minimize the support it provides for the review process. This would dramatically weaken the already-tentative power base of the CRPs. Alternatively, rather than subverting the process itself, the state agency may assert control over the outcomes by simply choosing to give superficial consideration to the panels' recommendations—a sort of “thanks but no thanks” to the panel for its efforts. Either way, the tone of interaction between the CRPs and agency will turn negative, and the participants will become frustrated or disillusioned in both the processes and outcomes of citizen review. Ultimately, for CRPs to be effective in influencing agency direction and decisions, they must concentrate on strengthening relationships and establishing shared foundations of cooperative engagement.

## Conclusion

Previous research has paid more particular attention to those factors that lead to formal empowerment processes, but with much less knowledge on how citizen–administrator engagement can lead to substantively empowered outcomes. This study begins to fill in our understanding of the linkages between participation mechanisms, participant capacity, and administrative responsiveness, highlighting the vital and dynamic citizen–administrator relationship that connects processes to outcomes within the black box (figure 1). Emergent themes from across the cases fostered a series of testable propositions regarding the potential for government-organized citizen participation to empower the public. There is a need to reconceptualize empowerment in the context of government-organized citizen participation, moving away from a control-based norm to one of cooperation. The tone of relationship acts as a transition

mechanism toward cooperative engagement. Two critical factors shaping the tone of relationship emerged from the cases, including (1) the need for citizen-participants to maintain realistic expectations for the participation process and outcomes in light of agency constraints and (2) the importance of administrators demonstrating a high level of buy-in and support of the participation process. The analysis also showed the connection between process-, relationship-, and outcome-based expectations for participation success.

Having a venue in which to participate does not guarantee that the participant will have a voice in shaping administrative decisions. Voice entails more than speaking; it is also being heard and understood. It is no coincidence then that the citizen-participants in Utah, who were most clear in their ability to gauge impact on administrative decisions, were similarly adamant that they had an effective voice through the review process. Kentucky's participants expressed a nuanced and qualified assessment of having a voice, and, in the absence of any state response up to that time, Pennsylvania's participants were guardedly hopeful but uncertain. Although they were given a venue to speak, there was no way of knowing whether they were being heard.

Building relationships between citizens and administrators is vital to empowering citizens in the context of government-organized public participation. The development of relationships, however, does not

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Building relationships between citizens and administrators is vital to empowering citizens in the context of government-organized public participation.

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connote just one party moving over into the camp of the other. Rather, it was manifest most strongly as administrators and citizens met somewhere in the middle in terms of adapting to each other, with citizens coming to appreciate certain bureaucratic realities and administrators buying in to the citizen review process, balancing their expertise with a willingness to consider outside points of view. The

deeper those interactions go, both in terms of exposure and creating shared goals, the stronger will be the ensuing relationship. The result is a concomitant move toward an empowered citizenry.

The study also provided insight into citizen-government relationships within the rich context child protective services and opened a lens through which to understand the motives and methods of public empowerment through organized participation. Through these discussions, both citizens and administrators can better discern processes and structures that most effectively leverage the impact that public participation can have on shaping agency direction and decisions. Future research, both qualitative and quantitative, should expand the number and types of citizen participation contexts by designing studies to test the propositions emerging from this analysis.

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