

PARTICIPATING IN MUNICIPAL POLITICS

Curricular Assignment



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To see democracy in action, you do not have to look far. Everything from parking rules to water quality and park amenities emerges from local decision making. But, if you don't know how to best interact with the mayor or other government officials, you may be like a lot of other people who simply throw their hands up and say, there's nothing we can do. Well, our democracy is not called "rule by the leaders," is it? Our democracy is literally, "rule by the people." To fulfill our obligations as citizens or residents, we need to know how to insert ourselves into participation with local or municipal politics.

When we talk about municipal politics, we're referring to the most local of political action that takes place in municipalities such as cities, counties, towns, special districts and school districts. For most of us, our greatest opportunity to meet elected representatives, staff members, and appointed officials is at the local level. There, we may relay our own experiences and stories in hopes of effecting change (Britt & Alexander, 2019).

How and where you decide to participate in democracy will likely depend on the range of options with which you are familiar. For instance, most of us know that by the time we reach 18 years of age, we will have the right to vote. That's a basic, foundational way to use your voice and engage in civic matters.

There are so many more ways, however, to influence local matters. People who are active in municipal politics work together to make sure the right stakeholders and decision makers meet. They understand that good decision making depends on good participatory processes (Carlee, 2019). You can jumpstart your learning curve in discovering how municipal politics works by putting yourself in the middle of some of the action, watching what others say and do, asking questions, and investigating the many options for you to engage with others in the public sphere (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

With this assignment, you'll increase your *knowledge* by considering:

1. How and where do local meetings take place and what opportunities exist for resident involvement there?
2. What resources exist that you can research to help you better understand controversial local issues?

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You'll have the opportunity to learn *skills* by considering:

1. What is required of you to construct fieldnotes with facts and impressions as a form of ethnographic research?

You can consider your own *values* and that of others by asking:

1. In what ways do elected and appointed leaders express respect (or not) toward residents seeking to be engaged in municipal politics?
2. As you review your fieldnotes, what did you focus on and how did that reveal what values your brought into the observation?

Putting what you learn into *action* means asking:

1. What formal and informal routes exist for citizens to express themselves?
2. How are different views invited into (or not) civil discourse?

Activity Instructions

Attend a public meeting. Doing so is a simple, accessible way to see your elected officials and staff members at work, as well as to see how citizens interact with them. For this assignment, consider going to a meeting of your city council, county commissioners, or board of education, for instance. These meetings are open to the public, often have time for public comments on any subject, and operate by formal procedures for addressing agenda items, typically following Robert's Rules of Order. Plan on staying for 1-1/2 to 2 hours. Look to your government web sites to determine days and times of upcoming meetings

Once you get to the meeting location, make sure you've allowed ample time to find parking and be prepared to pass through security checks, if required. You may need to turn off your phone and other devices, and, leave food and drink behind.

Find a seat and begin taking detailed notes on the content and the talk/conversation(s) that arise in the meeting. These fieldnotes are a form a research used by ethnographers who study different cultures, groups, and organizations to understand how they operate, their rules of interaction, and the values that permeate their talk (Goodall, 2000). You will use your fieldnotes to help you write the paper to complete the assignment. Don't worry if you don't understand everything that is being discussed about, for instance, zoning or achievement tests or wastewater treatment. Keep taking notes and then later, you will do an additional archival search to learn more about you were introduced to at the meeting. If you are nervous about attending a public meeting, it may help you feel more comfortable by watching a prior meeting online, if they are recorded and digitally archived in your municipality.

As you observe the meeting, consider how local government officials involve or dismiss residents that are speakers from the floor. Look at officials speaking and not speaking. How do they invite and respond to questions from the audience? How to they listen to stories presented, and through other communicative means. You may also want to consider how residents interact with their local officials. Are they deferential to

the political power? How can you tell? Are they disruptive and if so, in what ways? How did they construct their stories or facts to provide a compelling presentation?

Reflection Instructions

1. Write a paper of 3-5 pages, typed and double-spaced.
2. First, recap the main ideas presented at the meeting in no more than 1 page.
3. Second, go deeper into discussion about one topic. To do this, include additional research (archival search) about a concept with which you heard about at the meeting but were not entirely familiar to gain additional knowledge about the history, controversies, and regulations surrounding the local matter you heard discussed. Include this research (and cite it) by integrating it with what was discussed at the meeting.
4. Third, connect what you learned from the meeting and additional research with course ideas, concepts or theories.

For Instructors

Rationale

Civic participation by youth has waxed and waned through the years. To ensure students are provided instruction on how to engage with public issues in ethical and effective ways, it is incumbent upon higher education instructors to provide pathways for students to learn and understand how politics operates to consider competing views and values in a democracy. For many students, practical government operations and concerns sound like a foreign language. This assignment is designed to help students overcome the barriers to civic participation that arise from unfamiliarity with civic processes. Asking students to move from the comfort of the classroom to the territory of a public meeting may seem daunting at first, however, for most students the experience is eye-opening and an important and meaningful introduction to local officials who set policy and direct funding for municipal concerns.

Objectives

1. To familiarize students with locations, people, and processes by which government operates close to home.
2. To introduce fieldnotes, ethnography, and archival search as research methods.
3. To notice and examine how ethics are expressed by public leaders and everyday citizens.
4. To highlight the values important to the student-writer.

Materials Required

It will be helpful for students to complete the readings cited about the role of citizens as community agents. Students will also need to arrange for transportation to the public meeting.

The instructor can post times and locations for city council, county commissioner, school board, or other meetings.

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Discussion Questions

In a debrief with the class, you may want to pose questions including:

- What values did you see communicated by the local officials? How were those values expressed (words, gestures, policies, etc.)?
- Imagine you have 3 minutes as a speaker from the floor at the next meeting. What will you say and why?
- How can/do citizens participate in local politics in ways other than attending local government meetings?

Duration

The activity requires as little as 15 minutes and as much as 45 minutes of class time after students have attended the meetings and written their papers to discuss interesting experiences, new knowledge gained, and challenges encountered.

Class Size

This activity can be adapted for a seminar, mid-size group, or online class.

Special Considerations/Alternatives

If transportation or other obstacles prevent students from attending a meeting in person, most city and county public meetings are aired on public television as well as livestreamed and archived on government web sites. Instructors may assign a certain meeting to watch and analyze as an alternative.

Suggested Readings:

- Britt, Lori L. and Rob Alexander (2019). Stories Communities Tell: How Deliberative Practitioners Can Work with Community Narratives. *Journal of Public Deliberation* 15 (3), Article 6. Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol15/iss3/art6>
- Carlee, R. (2019, Spring). The Arlington Way: Public engagement as a community expectation. *National Civic Review*, 108 (1), 25-32.
- Goodall, H. L. (2000). *Writing the new ethnography (chapter 2)*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Nabatchi, Tina and Matt Leighninger (2015) "Good or bad? Charming or Tedious? Understanding Public Participation," in *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*. Hoboken, chapter 2. NJ: Jossey-Bass.