



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 35
Issue 4 December

Article 13

2008

Review of *Citizen Lobbyists: Local Efforts to Influence Public Policy*. Brian Adams. Reviewed by Michael Woodford.

Michael Woodford
University of Michigan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Public Policy Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Woodford, Michael (2008) "Review of *Citizen Lobbyists: Local Efforts to Influence Public Policy*. Brian Adams. Reviewed by Michael Woodford.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 4 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol35/iss4/13>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

dimensions are added to our understanding of race and equitable treatment, and to our contemporary understanding of civil rights and the concept of Jim Crow.

Wilma Peebles-Wilkins

Brian Adams, *Citizen Lobbyists: Local Efforts to Influence Public Policy*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2007. \$71.50 hardcover, \$25.95 papercover.

In the context of growing concerns about the democratic deficit among citizens and the legitimacy and responsiveness of public institutions, political scientists and other scholars are giving renewed attention to citizen involvement in public policy. By participating in policy development, citizens can potentially influence policy issues and decisions, thereby promoting government responsiveness and accountability. However, as the trends outlined above continue, fewer individuals will likely become involved. This non-involvement by citizens can limit the scope and quality of the information utilized in policy formation, which can ultimately result in unresponsive, ineffective policy decisions. If the potential of participation is to be maximized, its practice must be transformed. Given current trends, examining empirical cases of participation is an important part of this transformation, especially analyses that shed light on the factors that contribute to participation. Further, to be most useful, these investigations must approach participation as multidimensional and complex. Considering both citizen- and state-initiated participation is part of this analysis; the tendency in the field is to examine one or the other.

Adams' work makes an important and accessible contribution to understanding participation by providing a comprehensive analysis of citizen involvement in local policy processes in Santa Ana, California, specifically participation in city and local school board policies between 1990 and 2000. Focusing on citizens who were "active" policy participants, Adams examines the characteristics of the policies in which these citizens were involved and then documents the activities they used to achieve their political objectives. He explores these dimensions through interviews with these citizen participants, minutes of

public meetings, and media reports.

Adams finds that the policies generating high public involvement in Santa Ana tended to directly impact citizens and that the potential impacts were clearly comprehensible. Underpinning directness and clarity are the length of the policy chain and the method or tool used to accomplish the policy aim. In particular, both directness and clarity were strong in policy cases characterized by short policy chains and policy tools that directly affected citizens. Three other factors are identified concerning the policies citizens tried to shape. First, policy entrepreneurs, those who promote interest and encourage participation on an issue, can influence engagement by providing citizens with opportunities to get involved. Second, local newspapers do little to encourage participation. Third, issues centering on the "fault lines in society" (i.e., social conflicts) can engender participation, but they do not necessarily do so in all cases. In Santa Ana, citizens' urban visions for their city (e.g., a cosmopolitan city versus a working class city) produced high participation, particularly when policy decisions required high trade-offs between visions. But policy issues that were focused on race, such as affirmative action and profiling, did not generate high participation.

In terms of the activities that "active" citizens use to accomplish their political goals, as suggested by the book's title, this study finds that involvement in local policy matters resembles lobbying. Behaviors such as attending public meetings, directly contacting elected officials and/or government staff, organizing other citizens and networking, and other lobbyist-like tactics were common. Within these lobbyist activities, interpersonal relationships and social networks are central, so much so that Adams identifies social networks to be a "political resource." Similar to traditional lobbyists, Santa Ana's citizen lobbyists generally attempted to persuade officials, but they employed pressure tactics when needed. As part of this analysis of political activities, unlike other literature on public meetings, Adams concludes that this participatory mechanism offers significant value to citizens in their efforts to influence public policy, such as the opportunity to provide important information as well as build and maintain relationships. Public meetings essentially are useful precursors to public

deliberation and problem solving.

This book helps to advance knowledge of participation. Explaining patterns of participation by examining the characteristics of the policies in which citizens become involved is extremely unique and insightful; questions concerning who participates remain common in this field. The in-depth nature of the study—especially its theoretical grounding, the provision of methodological rationales, and the successful integration of both quantitative and qualitative data—is an extremely positive quality. Adams' attention to common themes and their exceptions makes the complexity of participation come to life.

Problems also exist. In the final chapter, Adams sets out on the important exercise of assessing the contributions that "citizen lobbyists" make to local democracy. He argues that this mode of participation benefits citizens themselves and does little to advance the broader policy-making process. According to Adams, this approach and the tendency to focus on narrowly defined issues (i.e., those with direct and clear impact) do little to enhance public problem-solving. Two issues surface here. First, there is a tension between this conclusion and the findings related to the value of public meetings. Second, to make such a claim requires documenting the perspectives of policymakers and public administrators, which is not part of the current analysis. The absence of these perspectives leaves the empirical basis for this conclusion unstable and incomplete. Regardless of these concerns, this book does make a considerable contribution to understanding participation and has the potential to enhance efforts to improve participatory policy analysis.

Michael Woodford
University of Michigan

Anna R. Igra, *Wives without Husbands: Marriage, Desertion, and Welfare in New York, 1900-1935*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. \$19.95 papercover.

The marriage promotion, child support, and responsible fatherhood measures contained in mid-1990s welfare reform have been the subject of much scholarly debate. Anna Igra