Chapter 71
Empowering Citizens:
A Constructivist Assessment of the Impact of Contextual and Design Factors on Shared Governance

Mary Griffiths
University of Adelaide, Australia

ABSTRACT

The federal government of Australia has established an innovative although uneven record in shared governance initiatives in a climate of political stability and broad social inclusion policies. The participatory reform agenda has the potential to increase citizen empowerment, improve government transparency and accountability, and develop the capacities of the administrative arm. Changes to Australian Public Service (APS) practice are now aimed at better support for citizen-centric policy formation and, in some examples, shared governance. Nevertheless, policy consultations remain at the high-risk/high gain end of citizen-government-APS relations. This chapter scopes the concept and contexts of policy co-production both as a technique of engagement and a desirable outcome in shared governance for representative democracies. It assesses policy engagement from the perspective of citizens as agents, not targets. Using a constructivist approach, the chapter assesses the impact of contextual factors, the new participatory reform agenda, and the design features on two consultations conducted in 2011: Clean Energy Legislation, and Digital Culture Public Sphere. Major factors impacting on policy coproduction are found to be context-specific and issue-specific, and outside the direct control of public service agencies. Theoretically, the constructivist approach combines the literature on modes of e-government research, on e-government success factors and participatory media, with evidence of institutional reform agendas and the evidence provided by the case studies. Methodologically, the data is drawn from public domain materials.

INTRODUCTION

The approach taken in this conceptual chapter is to sidestep normative concepts in e-government research in favour of a detailed analysis of national engagement principles and practices as they are illustrated in two Australian case studies. The study's research question is: what are the context-specific and issue-specific factors impacting on e-government success in the area of policy consultation? Associated questions include: by what criteria can policy coproduction success be measured? Is citizen centricity in policy, as advised in public service consultation best practice principles, evident in the design of policy consultations? How does thinking about citizens as *agents* and not *targets* of policy play out as a *technique* of engagement in the two case studies? Is shared governance an achievable outcome in the short term?

These questions raise significant issues about the management of potential changes to policy consultation practice.

The design and process of consultations illustrate designers' embedded values, and implicit judgments made about the complexity of policy issues, and citizens' capacity and willingness to engage. The success of online consultations also depends on how citizens are conceptualized in the process of coproduction; on public sphere and contextual factors; design features; and the scale, opportunities, the quality of participation supported.

Initial factors hypothesized as impacting on the success of policy co-production include (1) how the citizen is framed as an *agent* in policy making; (2) civil society's existing online participation protocols; (3) political issues; (4) the comprehensiveness of decision-making resources offered; (5) the match of the consultation design to the policy issue; (6) the point in the policy cycle when public consultation occurred; (7) the transparency of the governance of communications; and (8) timely feedback to participants; (9) the transparency of the consultation archives.

For the first of two case studies, I selected one aspect of a larger, more complex suite of consultations, *The Clean Energy Legislative Package* (2011). The full policy package was conducted amidst a fiery, hostile public sphere debate about the human impact on climate change. Time factors also impacted as a minority government was under pressure to steward the Bills through to rapid implementation early the following year. The challenges faced by the government agency were manifold. Priority strategies incorporated provision of accurate resources, visualizations, and impact modeling, and the use of external bodies and Websites as the sources of authoritative information. The second smaller case study of policy consultation involved the production of a *Digital Culture Public Sphere* discussion paper. This collaborative exercise was designed as a technique and an outcome. Government engaged with digital experts and practitioners, crowd sourced their industry and policy ideas, and built a digital culture peer community through the extensive use of familiar participatory online design tools and techniques. In the differences between the cases lie important lessons about citizen empowerment and the success of a crucial aspect of e-government: citizens' role in policy formation.

The chapter proceeds as follows: first, the description of the approach is accompanied by a literature review. This is followed by an outline of the methodology adopted. In line with constructivist approaches, an account of Australian contextual factors is given, and then detailed analyses of the two 2011 case studies of citizen policy coproduction. Case study features are compared in the discussion section. The chapter concludes with findings, through returning to the research questions, and indicates further research possibilities. Summarising, therefore, the chapter

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