


# Ladder of Citizen Participation

 Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation describes how empowered public institutions and officials deny power to citizens, and how levels of citizen agency, control, and power can be increased

Proposed by **Sherry Arnstein** in 1969, the Ladder of Citizen Participation is one of the most widely referenced and influential models in the field of democratic public participation. For local leaders, organizers, and facilitators who want to understand foundational theories of public engagement and participation, and the ways in which empowered public institutions and officials deny power to citizens, Arnstein's seminal article is essential reading. The model also influenced many later models, including Elizabeth Rocha's [\*\*Ladder of Empowerment\*\*](#) and Roger Hart's [\*\*Ladder of Children's Participation\*\*](#).

Arnstein's penetrating, no-nonsense, even pugnacious analysis advanced a central argument that remains as relevant today as it was in 1969: citizen participation in democratic processes, if it is to be considered "participation" in any genuine or practice sense, requires the redistribution of power. In Arnstein's formulation, *citizen participation is citizen power*. Without an authentic reallocation of power—in the form of money or decision-making authority, for example—participation merely "allows the powerholders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit. It maintains the status quo."

*"The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you. Participation of the governed in their government is, in theory, the cornerstone of democracy—a revered idea that is vigorously applauded by virtually everyone. The applause is reduced to polite handclaps, however, when this principle is advocated by the have-not blacks, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Indians, Eskimos, and whites. And when the have-nots define participation as redistribution of power, the American consensus on the fundamental principle explodes into many shades of outright racial, ethnic, ideological, and political opposition."*

*Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," [\*Journal of the American Planning Association\*](#)*

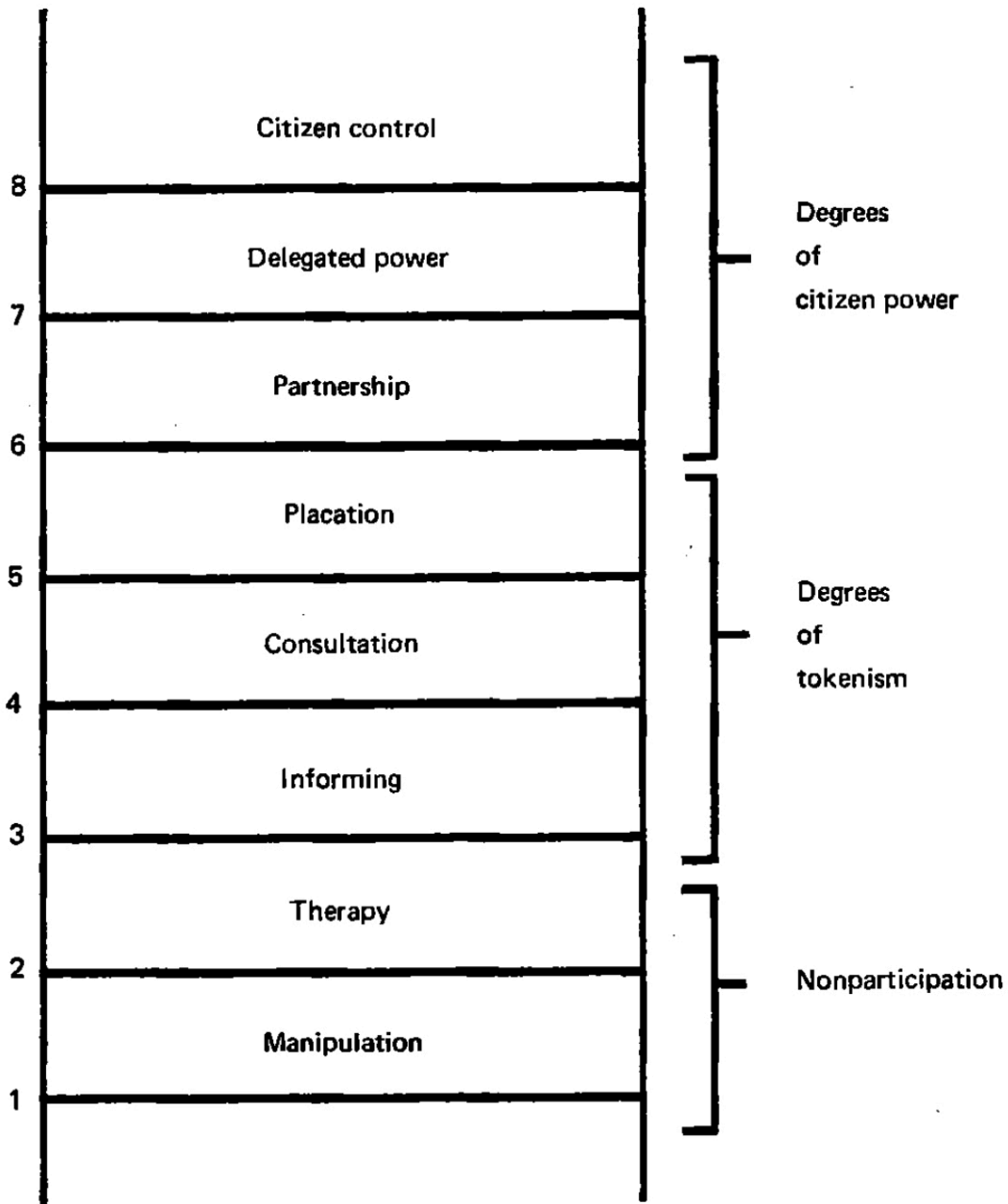
Arnstein opens her article with a central question: "What is citizen participation and what is its relationship to the social imperatives of our time?" She then provides a detailed answer:

"My answer to the critical what question is simply that citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax

resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out. In short, it is the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society.... participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless.”

## **The Ladder of Citizen Participation**

Arnstein’s typology of citizen participation is presented as a metaphorical “ladder,” with each ascending rung representing increasing levels of citizen agency, control, and power. In addition to the eight “rungs” of participation, Arnstein includes a descriptive continuum of participatory power that moves from *nonparticipation* (no power) to *degrees of tokenism* (counterfeit power) to *degrees of citizen participation* (actual power).



The original 1969 illustration of Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation as it appeared in the Journal of the American Planning Association. The Ladder features eight "rungs" that describe three general forms of citizen power in democratic decision-making: Nonparticipation (no power), Degrees of Tokenism (counterfeit power), and Degrees of Citizen Power (actual power).

The eight rungs of the Ladder of Citizen Participation are:

### 1. Manipulation

An "illusory" form of participation, *manipulation* occurs when public institutions, officials, or

administrators mislead citizens into believing they are being given power in a process that has been intentionally manufactured to deny them power. In Arnstein's words: "In the name of citizen participation, people are placed on rubber stamp advisory committees or advisory boards for the express purpose of 'educating' them or engineering their support. Instead of genuine citizen participation, the bottom rung of the ladder signifies the distortion of participation into a public relations vehicle by powerholders."

## 2. Therapy

Participation as *therapy* occurs when public officials and administrators "assume that powerlessness is synonymous with mental illness," and they create pseudo-participatory programs that attempt to convince citizens that *they are the problem* when in fact it's established institutions and policies that are creating the problems for citizens. In Arnstein's words: "What makes this form of 'participation' so invidious is that citizens are engaged in extensive activity, but the focus of it is on curing them of their 'pathology' rather than changing the racism and victimization that create their 'pathologies.'"

## 3. Informing

While Arnstein acknowledges that *informing* "citizens of their rights, responsibilities, and options can be the most important first step toward legitimate citizen participation," she also notes that "too frequently the emphasis is placed on a one-way flow of information—from officials to citizens—with no channel provided for feedback and no power for negotiation...meetings can also be turned into vehicles for one-way communication by the simple device of providing superficial information, discouraging questions, or giving irrelevant answers." In *informing* situations, citizens are "intimidated by futility, legalistic jargon, and prestige of the official" to accept the information provided as fact or endorse the proposals put forward by those in power.

## 4. Consultation

Similarly, Arnstein notes that "inviting citizens' opinions, like informing them, can be a legitimate step toward their full participation." However, when *consultation* processes "not combined with other modes of participation, this rung of the ladder is still a sham since it offers no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account. The most frequent methods used for consulting people are attitude surveys, neighborhood meetings, and public hearings. When power holders restrict the input of citizens' ideas solely to this level, participation remains just a window-dressing ritual. People are primarily perceived as statistical abstractions, and participation is measured by how many come to meetings, take brochures home, or answer a questionnaire. What citizens achieve in all this activity is that they have 'participated in participation.' And what powerholders achieve is the evidence that they have gone through the required motions of involving 'those people.'"

## 5. Placation

Participation as *placation* occurs when citizens are granted a limited degree of influence in a process, but their participation is largely or entirely tokenistic: citizens are merely involved only to demonstrate that they were involved. In Arnstein's words: "An example of placation strategy is to place a few hand-picked 'worthy' poor on boards of Community Action Agencies or on public bodies like the board of education, police commission, or housing authority. If they are not accountable to a constituency in the community and if the traditional power elite hold the majority of seats, the have-nots can be easily outvoted and outfoxed."

## 6. Partnership

Participation as *partnership* occurs when public institutions, officials, or administrators allow citizens to negotiate better deals, veto decisions, share funding, or put forward requests that are at least partially fulfilled. In Arnstein's words: "At this rung of the ladder, power is in fact redistributed through negotiation between citizens and powerholders. They agree to share planning and decision-making responsibilities through such structures as joint policy boards, planning committees, and mechanisms for resolving impasses. After the groundrules have been established through some form of give-and-take, they are not subject to unilateral change." Arnstein does note, however, that in many *partnership* situations, power is not voluntarily shared by public institutions, but rather *taken by the citizens* through actions such as protests, campaigns, or community organizing.

## 7. Delegated Power

Participation as *delegated power* occurs when public institutions, officials, or administrators give up at least some degree of control, management, decision-making authority, or funding to citizens. For example, a citizen board or corporation that is tasked with managing a community program, rather than merely participating in a program managed by a city, would be an example of delegated power. In Arnstein's words: "At this level, the ladder has been scaled to the point where citizens hold the significant cards to assure accountability of the program to them. To resolve differences, powerholders need to start the bargaining process rather than respond to pressure from the other end."

## 8. Citizen Control

Participation as *citizen control* occurs, in Arnstein's words, when "participants or residents can govern a program or an institution, be in full charge of policy and managerial aspects, and be able to negotiate the conditions under which 'outsiders' may change them." In citizen-control situations, for example, public funding would flow directly to a community organization, and that organization would have full control over how that funding is allocated.

# Limitations of the Model

Like any model, framework, or simplifying metaphor, the Ladder of Citizen Participation can only explain so much. A standard criticism of two-dimensional models—particularly those that can be interpreted as graduated hierarchical scales that ascend from lower to higher—is that (1) they cannot adequately represent the layered complexity or fluctuating power dynamics that are typically in play in real-world participatory situations, and (2) the tendency is to interpret lower levels as universally negative (or worse than) and higher levels as universally positive (or better when), in fact, lower levels may be positive in some circumstances and higher levels negative in others.

For example, it may be perfectly appropriate to inform community members about already-made decisions in some situations (e.g., district administrative decisions about teacher and staff salaries), or to withhold control from citizens in others, such as when they may not have the specialized skills or expertise required for a given task (e.g., managing public funds on a large project). Yet, as Arnstein notes, the model's simplicity is precisely what makes it effective as a conceptual tool: "The ladder juxtaposes powerless citizens with the powerful in order to highlight the fundamental divisions between them.

Arnstein describes a few other limitations of model:

- "The justification for using such simplistic abstractions," Arnstein writes, "is that in most cases the have-nots really do perceive the powerful as a monolithic 'system,' and powerholders actually do view the have-nots as a sea of 'those people,' with little comprehension of the class and caste differences among them." Yet in reality "neither the have-nots nor the powerholders are homogeneous blocs. Each group encompasses a host of divergent points of view, significant cleavages, competing vested interests, and splintered subgroups."
- Arnstein notes that the ladder does not include an analysis of the "roadblocks" to authentic citizen participation and empowerment: "These roadblocks lie on both sides of the simplistic fence. On the powerholders' side, they include racism, paternalism, and resistance to power redistribution. On the have-nots' side, they include inadequacies of the poor community's political socioeconomic infrastructure and knowledge-base, plus difficulties of organizing a representative and accountable citizens' group in the face of futility, alienation, and distrust."
- Arnstein is also aware that in "the real world of people and programs, there might be 150 rungs with less sharp and 'pure' distinctions among them" and that "some of the characteristics used to illustrate each of the eight types might be applicable to other rungs. For example, employment of the have-nots in a program or on a planning staff could occur at any of the eight rungs and could represent either a legitimate or illegitimate

characteristic of citizen participation. Depending on their motives, powerholders can hire poor people to coopt them, to placate them, or to utilize the have-nots' special skills and insights. Some mayors, in private, actually boast of their strategy in hiring militant black leaders to muzzle them while destroying their credibility in the black community."

- While *citizen control* appears at the apex of the ladder, and it offers many advantages as a model of citizen participation, Arnstein notes several potential disadvantages: "it supports separatism; it creates balkanization of public services; it is more costly and less efficient; it enables minority group 'hustlers' to be just as opportunistic and disdainful of the have-nots as their white predecessors; it is incompatible with merit systems and professionalism; and ironically enough, it can turn out to be a new Mickey Mouse game for the have-nots by not allowing them sufficient dollar resources to succeed." The other seven rungs of the ladder present similar complexities, along with a host of potential advantages and disadvantages.

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## References

Arnstein, S. (1969.) [A ladder of citizen participation](#). *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 35(4), 216-224.

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