

Visual Methodology, Case Studies, and Analyses to Explore How Political Participation in Local Government Planning Processes in the United States Can Increase Economic Growth while Reducing Inequality

Kristina L. Wright¹

¹University of Florida, klwright@ufl.edu

1 Abstract

Will the exploration of visual methodology uncover how the visual nature of political participation processes can encourage greater and more meaningful levels of participation while reducing inequality? Studies have shown that greater political participation leads to a reduction in inequality and can also lead to increases in economic growth (Solt, 2008). This study examines the City of Miami, Florida and the City of Denver, Colorado as case studies as part of a Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research Design. The overall aim is to consider how participatory frameworks and methods affect levels of participation while exploring the need for ongoing participation. Additionally, externalities such as changing property values and governmental fiscal impacts are considered to holistically analyze processes and outcomes.

Objectives of this research include showing how a mixed method Qualitative Research approach, including visual methodology is necessary to evaluate the performance and outcomes of local government planning participation processes in the United States. According to Watt and Wakefield, visual methods within case studies “offer new opportunities to experience visual methods...to distinct and sometimes marginalized groups, which broadens...wider understanding” (p. 195, 2017). These processes advance economic growth within communities through processes that strengthen the local economy due to the development of strong emotional bonds and a sense of place for the participants (Rangwala, 2010). “Visual methods can provide a starting point from which... (to) engage with deeper meaning and empathy both as individuals and when working with others” (Watt & Wakefield, p. 196, 2017).

This research also further examines different regulatory formats as well as their implementation through land development project analyses, which test the need for on-going participation. The importance of this study is based on current research of Frederick Solt (2008), which has shown that meaningful participation reduces inequality. Land Value analyses will also be used to consider another facet of the work of Frederick Solt to evaluate the need for different definitions of inequality to most effectively consider the ability to reduce inequality. Methods employed include case studies and a series of analyses, which include before-and-after examinations of the participatory processes within both contexts as well as housing costs, homeownership levels, and a qualitative analysis of meaningful participation criteria established by Innes and Booher (1999). For the purpose of this study meaningfulness is defined as the ability to shape public policy. According to Fung (2004), participants need to be decision-makers producing visible outcomes for participation to be considered meaningful and empowered.



Findings of this study include that both form-based code participatory processes within each context produced high levels of participation, and both were highly visual-based. Both Miami and Denver produced extensive participation for the development of the form-based codes for each city. While these were highly attended, ongoing opportunities to continue to participate are extremely limited, and in some cases non-existent, following code adoption within each context. While there are increasing levels of new technologies including social media, which offer additional forums, research has shown that these are limited in terms of audience participation, endorsements indicated by “liking”, or by presenting an opportunity to dissent as activists (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017). The chance to shape policy is therefore limited within these additional forums.

Form-based codes appear to increase the levels of economic growth in the community as a result of highly prescriptive regulations that present a great opportunity for community buy-in at the beginning of the process. In both contexts, housing values increased even following the economic downturn when each form-based code was adopted. Data obtained from the Florida Housing Finance Corporation (2016) also demonstrates the significant increases in the cost of renting following the period that corresponds to form-based code adoption and implementation. While participation increased dramatically within both case study contexts, it can be assumed that inequality was decreased in terms of increased opportunities to participate; however, in terms of reduction in inequality of individual homeownership rates, the data indicates that there has been a decline in the levels of homeownership in both contexts while property values and the cost to rent has increased (Florida Housing Finance Corporation, 2016 and U.S. Census data, 2018). For homeowners there were gains due to increased property values; however, for renters the cost to rent continued to increase as the inventory of available rentals began to decrease (Florida Housing Finance Corporation, 2016).

Throughout this study, local government planning participatory processes have been considered for their role to provide a unique opportunity for the public to meaningfully participate and engage a decision-making process that can shape public policy. Regulatory frameworks have been considered for externalities of increasing economic growth and for the potential to decrease inequality. If highly prescriptive code types increase participation at the beginning stages of the code formulation process but leave few opportunities for participation later on while property values continue to outpace the supply, are policies that produce tools such as linkage fees necessary to offset these externalities? These are tools that can ensure an adequate supply of workforce and affordable housing to eliminate further burden on public infrastructure and resources while increasing the overall quality of life.

In conclusion, highly attended processes of form-based code formulation can lead to increased property values, which can create economic growth for the local government and the homeowner; however, the participatory renter likely only experienced a decrease in inequality in terms of participation if all other factors remain constant while the supply of affordable rental units have decreased (Florida Housing Finance Corporation, 2016).



According to Thomas (2017) there is value in the ability to become “authors” within political participation processes, which allow participants to shape their own destiny; however, if self-determination is limited to participation, economic mobility and the reduction of financial inequality is limited once the conversation ends and the policies are in place. Linkage fees and policies are necessary to ensure an adequate supply of workforce and affordable housing is available if form-based codes produce economic growth only for the local governing body, land-, and homeowners.

References

- Florida Housing Finance Corporation. (2016) Rental Market Study. Retrieved from http://www.floridahousing.org/FHImageWebDocs/Newsroom/Publications/MarketStudies/2016/2016_Full_RMS_fina.pdf
- Fung, A. (2004). *Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Innes, J., & Booher, D. (1999). Consensus building and complex adaptive systems: A framework for evaluating collaborative planning [Electronic version]. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 65(4), 412-423.
- Koc-Michalska, K. and Lilleker, D. (2017). Digital Politics: Mobilization, Engagement, and Participation. *Political Communication*. Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 1-5.
- Rangwala, K. (Winter 2010). Place-based economy. *Economic Development Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1.
- Solt, F. (2008). Economic Inequality and Democratic Political Engagement. *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 52, no. 1, Jan. 2008, pp.48-60.
- Thomas, A. (2017). Democracy, Capital, and the Rise of the New Inequality. *Political Theory*, Vol. 45(6), pp. 863-876.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/housing/hvs/index.html>
- Watt, S. and Wakefield, C., eds. (2017). *Teaching Visual Methods in the Social Sciences*. New York: Routledge.

