SUM MAR IES!

CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Anna Zhelnina

URBARIA
HELSINKI INSTITUTE OF URBAN AND REGIONAL STUDIES

Urbaria Research Report 2020/8

Civic participation in urban development

Anna Zhelnina
Postdoctoral researhcer
University of Helsinki

Summary

- Urban citizenship is the process of urban residents making demands and negotiating the future of the city and its parts.

- People's willingness and ability to engage in urban politics can be influenced by their residential stability and tenure type: homeowners are more likely to invest their time and effort in the improvement of their living environment. Feeling at home, belonging contributes to increased participation.

- Diversity of urban neighborhoods creates some advantages (diversity of resources and expertise among neighbors) as well as challenges (difficulties overcoming cultural differences) for local
- collective action.

- Formal and informal civic infrastructures enabling urban civic participation differ across cultural and national contexts. In traditionally democratic societies, these infrastructures are available to citizens as a routine engagement tool; in other contexts, citizens need to create them from scratch.

Introduction

Classic definitions of citizenship interpret it as membership in a polity that comes with a set of rights: civil, political, and social (Marshall 1950). These include freedoms (such as freedom of speech), access to voting, and some securities and welfare, respectively. In this classic understanding, citizenship is a formal institution providing the approved citizens with a legal platform to claim and defend their rights.

Scholarship on cities, however, has challenged this legalistic definition of citizenship. Research on urban social movements, protests, and urban politics has shown that **urban dwellers modify and stretch the meaning of who has rights and what these rights are on a daily basis.** Questions of belonging (who is the proper resident entitled to have a say in urban development?) and rights are central to the mechanisms of urban change, as increasingly diverse populations of big cities try to negotiate their often varying visions of what a good city should be.

Urban citizenship, therefore, can be defined as **the process of urban residents making demands and negotiating the future of the city and its parts. I**n this process, different players (residents, powerholders, businesses) engage with one another to decide the fate of particular urban territories and projects. Their visions of a good city and a good urban citizen clash, interact, and sometimes give rise to something new.

People don't always actively engage with urban development processes, just like they don't always show interest in politics more broadly. Urban scholarship provides some insights into the reasons for uneven civic participation in cities.

What affects civic participation in cities?

Scholars of civic participation have identified several key factors that may boost or hinder people's involvement in urban politics: tenure type, belonging and diversity, generational differences, and availability of participatory tools and infrastructures.

Tenure type

Tenure type affects urbanites' willingness and ability to engage in local politics and civic activism: **homeowners are more likely to do it than tenants** (Chen and Webster 2005; McCabe 2013; Pfeiffer and Morris 2017; Zhang 2012). One reason for the higher level of civic engagement among homeowners may be that the residential stability that comes with homeownership helps people establish stronger local social ties and join local groups (Manturuk, Lindblad, and Quercia 2012; McCabe 2013).

Robert Putnam hypothesized that residential stability and homeownership are associated with greater civic engagement because "[m]obility, like frequent re-potting of plants, tends to disrupt root systems, and it takes time for an uprooted individual to put down new roots" (Putnam 1995:75). **Residential stability, whether it is homeownership or stable long-term rent, allows people to plan their futures and their communities' futures**. Residential stability positions someone in the web of social and political relations and allows them to control the present situation, strategize, and make plans for the future.

Belonging

Homeowners are more invested in their place of residence financially (McCabe 2013) and emotionally (Becher 2014): they may seek to maximize the value of their property, but also feel more connected to the place and entitled to deciding its fate. Feeling at home, belonging is related to the embeddedness in local life and communities. This feeling has political implications: it motivates people to feel more responsible for their habitat and more entitled to have a say in its development, but it may also have some tradeoffs. For example, Duyvendak (2011) shows that "feeling at home" for some groups can come at the expense of others. Others, the excluded groups, may be seen as not entitled to decide the city's or the neighborhood's future: newcomers, immigrants, minorities, and even renters.

Diversity

The increasing diversity of the urban neighborhoods across the world creates a set of challenges to urban citizenship and collective action. There is evidence of both advantages and shortcomings of social and ethnic heterogeneity in collective action and organizing for the common good. In line with the social movement theories, **diverse players can benefit from the variety of resources available to different groups of neighbors:** some may contribute their knowledge of the community and its needs to the cause, others are skilled in oral and written communication, and some may be able to provide financial support, hiring lawyers or printing materials (Zhelnina 2020).

On the other hand, there is rich evidence of barriers and misunderstandings that the ethnically and socially diverse neighbors may face when trying to improve the quality of life in their shared environment (Habyarimana et al. 2009; Vigdor 2004).

Availability of participatory tools and infrastructures

Another factor of civic participation in urban development is the skills and routine knowledge of urbanites. People may feel entitled to participate in the decision-making processes and know how to do it to a different degree. In some cultures, civic participation is a routine, everyday practice, embedded in the socialization process; it is part of the **cultural toolkit** (Swidler 1986). In other cultural contexts, it may be seen as something out of the ordinary, a measure of last resort.

Generational differences

Cultures of participation and civic engagement differ across national and political systems, but they may also differ across generations. Studies have shown that, in many countries, **young people feel detached from formal and traditional ways of civic engagement, looking for something more creative, innovative, and entertaining** (Pilkington and Pollock 2015). The life circumstances of younger generations also differ significantly from their parents and grandparents, which may affect their willingness to get involved in urban politics.

Worldwide, younger generations in big cities struggle to become homeowners, including in Finland (Statistics Finland 2019). A Finnish study has found a significant age difference in how homeownership affects voter turnout, one of the popular measures of citizens' involvement in politics. While homeownership remains a significant factor for the older generations, for younger people, a better predictor of whether they vote is education (Martikainen, Martikainen, and Wass 2005).

How do citizens participate in the making of a city?

Structures and institutions enabling citizens' participation in urban change and stability vary greatly across cities, not to mention national and cultural differences. Most of these enabling institutions are formal or informal to a different degree (Zhelnina and Tykanova 2019). **Formal, legally regulated participation tools** available to citizens include, for example, voting, membership in voluntary associations, municipal self-governance, homeowner associations, and participatory budgeting.

A significant share of civic-minded practices, however, are not formally regulated and sometimes even invisible to governmental structures: informal associations, networks of family and friends focusing on the creation and maintenance of some common good; activists themselves, their skills, ideas, and their vision of their place in the system of urban governance.

> *The right to the city is "far more than a right of individual or group access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts' desire"*
>
> David Harvey 2012

Both kinds of civic infrastructure are important when citizens try to influence the urban environment and housing. By seeking improvements to mundane things, such as housing, plumbing, daycare, "or other aspects of residential life" (Holston 2008:246), citizens also assert their right to have a say in their city's future, to be proper citizens. The right to the city is "far more than a right of individual or group access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts' desire" (Harvey 2012:4).

Urban problems and grassroots politics

People's assertion of their right to the city takes different forms in different cultural and political environments. In some urban contexts, **urbanites have to develop the necessary civic infrastructures from scratch, building activist networks, learning civic skills, and formulating civic identities.** There is significant literature on these processes in Latin American cities, where urban mobilizations were central to the demands of marginalized populations to be seen and treated as proper citizens (Holston 2008; Murphy 2015).

Initiatives addressing housing and the quality of the living environment emerge even in seemingly apolitical societies and in societies where politics is considered risky; for example, in authoritarian states. In contemporary Russia, urban civic initiatives are widespread and, in many cases, effective. Many of them refuse to be labeled "political," but they still manage to influence the decision-making regarding controversial urban development projects, and some even develop into formal civic infrastructures, for example, by electing activists into local councils and legislative bodies.

Paradoxically, urban redevelopment and the resulting threat of displacement can trigger the development of resilient and active civic infrastructures; for example, the infamous urban redevelopment in New York in the 1950s and 60s lead to the creation of a vast and active system of organizations addressing historic preservation, quality of urban life, and tenants protection (Gold 2014).

Routine urban citizenship

In some contexts, formal civic infrastructures are already in place and allow urban residents to get involved in the city-making without turning to protest actions and street politics. The role of voluntary associations in shaping the cities has been researched in the North American (McKenzie 1994) and Western European (Luhtakallio 2012) cities.

Some grassroots initiatives and civic innovations, like participatory budgeting, have conquered the cities worldwide relatively recently, becoming a part of the formal civic infrastructures allowing the urbanites to shape their cities (Jabola-Carolus et al. 2020). It is worth remembering that such civic innovations often result from grassroots efforts and street politics. It is particularly important in the age of growing disappointment in and avoidance of formal politics, especially among younger generations.

However, not only contentious or consensual politics is a tool for urban transformations. Several studies have focused on the continuity between everyday life and urban politics (Auyero 2004; Boudreau, Boucher, and Liguori 2009). Most of them have emphasized the **importance of the routine**, unarticulated aspects of everyday life. Even seemingly personal choices and stylistic preferences of urbanites can have far-reaching consequences for how cities – and even nations – operate. For example, Zhang (2012) demonstrates how lifestyle preferences of Chinese urban middle classes and their desire for homeownership have transformed Chinese cities. New architectural types of housing emerged to satisfy their needs, accompanied by the social composition, security, and privacy these middle classes were looking for.

Future research in Helsinki region

Finnish society is permeated by civic practices: voluntary associations structure multiple aspects of life in cities and beyond, offering urbanites a range of formal tools to participate in urban development (Eranti 2017; Luhtakallio 2012). These well-established practices, however, function in an increasingly globalizing world, and Finnish cities are connected to international trends, discourses, and practices through networks of global knowledge exchange, immigration, and market relations. In this context, two themes can be identified as promising directions for future research:
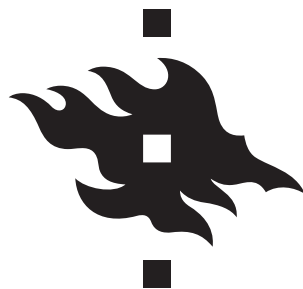
Inclusion/ exclusion dynamic in mixed and minority neighborhoods. Are there any differences in how Finnish-born and immigrant neighbors practice their urban citizenship? Above we have seen that some people may feel more empowered than others to exercise their urban citizenship based on their feeling of belonging. Due to differences in their "civic socialization," some neighbors may lack proficiency in some of the tools of civic engagement or lack understanding of the value of such practices.

Influences of globalization on urban citizenship. While there are well-established Finnish ways of participating in urban development, there is also some evidence of global diffusion of new practices and attitudes. Luhtakallio (2012) provides examples of how the squatters' international networks influence their local practices and choices in Finland; for example, some of the squatters may be less willing to cooperate with the governmental structures because of their belonging to the international subculture in which autonomy is one of the core values.

The October 2020 incident of police violence against another global movement, the Extinction Rebellion, in Helsinki also raises the question of how the local practices of both the citizens and the law enforcement are changing in the globalized political era. Given the centrality of local civic participation to social cohesion of residential neighborhoods and overall citizens' well-being, it is crucial to monitor and study this domain of urban life, with the effects of globalization, economic crises, and political shifts in mind.

References

Auyero, Javier. 2004. "When Everyday Life, Routine Politics, and Protest Meet." Theory and Society 33(3–4):417–41.

Becher, Debbie. 2014. Private Property and Public Power: Eminent Domain in Philadelphia. Oxford University Press.

Boudreau, Julie-Anne, Nathalie Boucher, and Marilena Liguori. 2009. "Taking the Bus Daily and Demonstrating on Sunday: Reflections on the Formation of Political Subjectivity in an Urban World." City 13(2–3):336–46.

Chen, Simon CY, and Chris J. Webster. 2005. "Homeowners Associations, Collective Action and the Costs of Private Governance." Housing Studies 20(2):205–20.

Duyvendak, Jan Willem. 2011. The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Europe and the United States. Springer.

Eranti, Veikko. 2017. "Re-Visiting NIMBY: From Conflicting Interests to Conflicting Valuations." The Sociological Review 65(2):285–301.

Gold, Roberta. 2014. When Tenants Claimed the City: The Struggle for Citizenship in New York City Housing. University of Illinois Press.

Habyarimana, James, Macartan Humphreys, Daniel N. Posner, and Jeremy M. Weinstein. 2009. Coethnicity: Diversity and the Dilemmas of Collective Action. Russell Sage Foundation.

Harvey, David. 2012. Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution. Verso Books.

Holston, James. 2008. Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil. Princeton University Press.

Jabola-Carolus, Isaac, Luke Elliott-Negri, James M. Jasper, Jessica Mahlbacher, Manès Weisskircher, and Anna Zhelnina. 2020. "Strategic Interaction Sequences: The Institutionalization of Participatory Budgeting in New York City." Social Movement Studies 19(5–6):640–56.

Luhtakallio, Eeva. 2012. Practicing Democracy: Local Activism and Politics in France and Finland. Springer.

Manturuk, Kim, Mark Lindblad, and Roberto Quercia. 2012. "Homeownership and Civic Engagement in Low-Income Urban Neighborhoods: A Longitudinal Analysis." Urban Affairs Review 48(5):731–60.

Marshall, Thomas H. 1950. Citizenship and Social Class. Vol. 11. Cambridge.

Martikainen, Pekka, Tuomo Martikainen, and Hanna Wass. 2005. "The Effect of Socioeconomic Factors on Voter Turnout in Finland: A Register based Study of 2.9 Million Voters." European Journal of Political Research 44(5):645–69.

McCabe, Brian J. 2013. "Are Homeowners Better Citizens? Homeownership and Community Participation in the United States." Social Forces 91(3):929–54.

McKenzie, Evan. 1994. Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government. Yale University Press.

Murphy, Edward. 2015. For a Proper Home: Housing Rights in the Margins of Urban Chile, 1960-2010. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Pfeiffer, Deirdre, and Eric A. Morris. 2017. "Are Homeowners Better Neighbors during Housing Booms? Understanding Civic and Social Engagement by Tenure during the Housing Market Cycle." Cityscape 19(2):215–38.

Pilkington, Hilary, and Gary Pollock. 2015. "'Politics Are Bollocks': Youth, Politics and Activism in Contemporary Europe." The Sociological Review 63(S2):1–35. doi: 10.1111/1467-954X.12260.

Putnam, Robert D. 1995. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." Journal of Democracy 6(1):65–78.

Statistics Finland. 2019. "Owner-Occupancy Living Decreases among Young Age Groups." Statistics Finland. Retrieved October 15, 2020 (https://www.stat.fi/til/asas/2018/01/asas_2018_01_2019-10-10_tie_002_en.html).

Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." American Sociological Review 51(2):273–86.

Vigdor, Jacob L. 2004. "Community Composition and Collective Action: Analyzing Initial Mail Response to the 2000 Census." The Review of Economics and Statistics 86(1):303–12. doi: 10.1162/003465304323023822.

Zhang, Li. 2012. In Search of Paradise: Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis. Cornell University Press.

Zhelnina, Anna. 2020. "Engaging Neighbors: Housing Strategies and Political Mobilization in Moscow's Renovation."

Zhelnina, Anna, and Elena Tykanova. 2019. "Beyond the Global North and South: Contemporary Studies of Local Activism in Post-Soviet Russia." in International Conference on Cities and Change "Three Decades of Post-socialist Transition", Darmstadt, May 17-18, 2019, edited by N. Čamprag and A. Suri. Darmstadt: tuprints.

UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI