

Citizen participation in U.S. local governments

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Local governments are answering the call for more open, accountable, and transparent decision making that includes citizen participation. Citizen participation in local governments is credited for **informing government decision making, facilitating decision implementation, increasing public trust** and **fostering citizenship values**.

Results from our survey show that a wide range of individuals and groups participate in local government decision making. **Figure 1** displays the frequency at which each group participates. The maroon bars represent the percentage of respondents who indicate that a group “very often” or “often” participates in government decision making. Figure 1 shows that **individual citizens participate most frequently in government decision making**, while **nonprofit human service organizations participate least frequently**.

Figure 1. Frequency of participation in decision making, by group

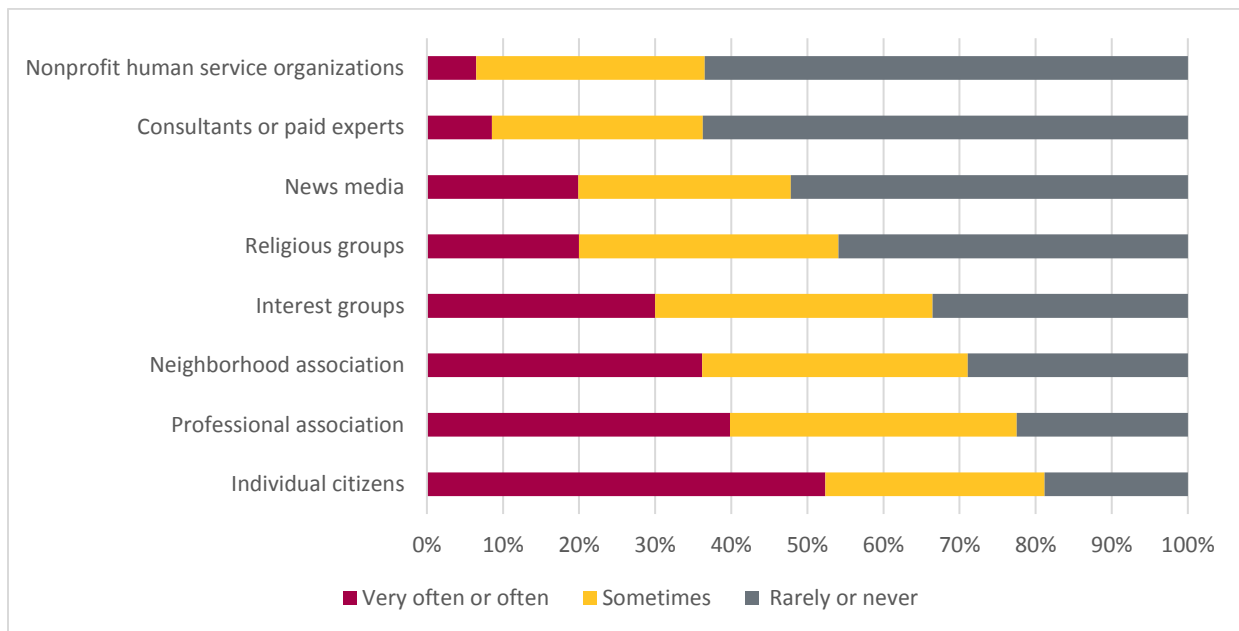


Figure 1 also suggests that local governments engage with civil society actors at different frequencies, with some governments rarely engaging with some groups and others that often engage with them. We analyzed our survey data to explain such differences.

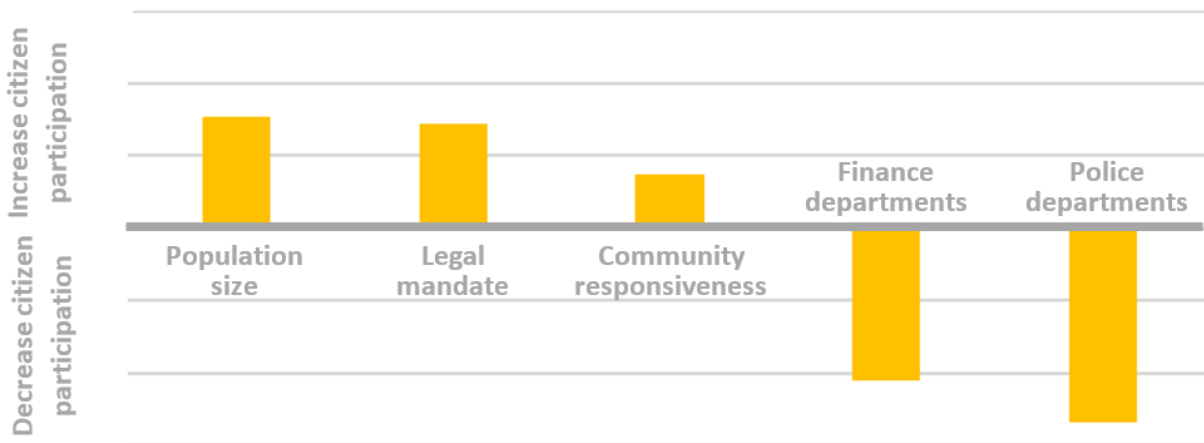
The results are shown in **Figure 2**, where the bars above the horizontal axis show the factors related to a higher level of citizen participation while the ones below the horizontal axis show factors related to a lower level of citizen participation. The height of the bars represents the importance of each factor related to citizen participation: the longer the bar, the more the factor can affect the level of citizen participation. Higher levels of **population**, **legal mandates**, and

Citizen participation is fostered by population size, legal mandate and community responsiveness.

community responsiveness are related to higher levels of citizen participation in government decision making. The relative height of the bars shows that **population** is the factor most strongly related to citizen participation. **Finance and police departments** report lower levels of citizen participation in decision making as compared to other departments.

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Figure 2. Factors influencing the level of citizen participation



1. Population size

Previous studies show that citizen participation in local governments is related to city size and socio-economic factors (Medaglia, 2007; Roberts, 2004). Similar to previous research, our analysis finds that city **population** is positively related to citizen participation in city government. This is likely because larger cities have more financial resources and higher capacity to implement citizen participation (Roberts, 2004), whereas smaller city governments can be constrained by limited resources and capacity.

2. Legal Mandates

Rules and regulations requiring citizen inputs is an important predictor of citizen participation in local government decision making. Governments subject to **legal mandates** such as federal law, state law, or local ordinances that require public input in decision making have higher levels of citizen participation. Legal mandates help to increase citizen participation even in departments such as finance and police where citizen participation is typically lower.

Legal mandates for citizen inputs promote citizen participation.

Citizen participation varies significantly across departments.

3. Department Type

We survey managers in five departments: Mayor's office, community development, finance, parks and recreation, and police. The last two bars in Figure 2 show that the **finance** and **police department** have levels of citizen participation as compared to the other departments.

4. Community responsiveness

We ask respondents about the extent to which their organization prioritizes community responsiveness in decision making. The results show that about 24% of respondents prioritize **community responsiveness**. The third bar in Figure 2 shows that city governments that prioritize community responsiveness in their decision making have a higher level of participation. This suggests that when governments value participation and input from their community, they are more likely to exert greater efforts and resources to promote citizen engagement, thereby increasing citizen participation.

City governments which value community responsiveness have more citizen participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our finding suggests two ways for city governments to promote citizen participation:

1. Policy should promote more **legal mandates** to include public inputs in government decision making.
2. City governments should promote **community responsiveness** as a key.