

Calling All Citizens: The Challenges of Public Consultation

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1. Introduction

One way governments have responded to the heightened democratic discontent of recent years is to seek greater input from citizens in the policymaking process. Often this means organizing large-scale public consultations that move beyond the normal range of stakeholders to invite the citizenry at large to voice their views on important policy issues.¹

Citizen consultation is motivated by several objectives: to facilitate citizen participation in public affairs; to enhance citizens' sense of political efficacy; to provide public officials with greater insight into the contours of public opinion; and to help shape public policy. But a number of practical shortcomings often undermine their efficacy: the limited number of citizens who come forward to express their views; the limited policy knowledge of those who do participate; questions about whether the viewpoints of participants are representative of the population at large; and attendant scepticism on the part of policymakers about the value of the information generated. There are, then, important questions about how and when – and indeed whether - public consultations can be used to positive effect.

To shed light on the matter, this paper provides a case study of one recent public consultation. In the fall of 2002, the city of Saint John, faced with a sizeable budget deficit,² sought public input on important fiscal decisions that had to be made before year's end. Citizens could provide their views in a traditional way – by mailing in a questionnaire to City Hall – or they could submit their views electronically via the City of Saint John website. On the same site, provision was made for discussion groups where citizens could exchange views on issues related to the budget dilemma. Drawing on a wide range of data sources, our analysis seeks to determine how effective this particular exercise was in achieving its varied goals: encouraging citizen participation, enhancing citizen efficacy, illuminating public opinion and shaping public policy.

2. Citizens and Officials: On the Same Page?

A common theme cutting across the potential obstacles to successful consultation is the role played by disappointed expectations. Officials anticipate large numbers of participants; fewer citizens participate than expected, creating the impression of public apathy. Officials expect citizens to have a solid grasp on the issues if they are offering

¹ See Katherine Graham and Susan Phillips (Eds.), *Citizen Engagement: Lessons in Participation from Local Government* (Toronto: IPAC, 1998). See also Dory Reeves, "Developing Effective Public Consultation: a review of Sheffield's UDP process," *Planning Practice and Research*, 10:2 (1995), 199-213.

² The city was faced with the necessity of cutting \$5 million from the budget for 2003. For more details, see Keith Culver, "Innovation Is Not Reform: Can Democracy Survive the New Information Communication Technologies?" In J. Mackay (Ed.), *Netting Citizens* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2002).

them up as input to the policymaking process; some participants have limited policy knowledge, engendering scepticism about the practical value of their contributions. Citizens, meanwhile, anticipate that their views will significantly influence policy; officials instead use the consultation for other purposes, generating cynicism on the part of citizens.³ By this manner of reasoning, one important measure of success for public consultations is the *degree of congruence between the actions and expectations of citizens and officials*.

To capture potential gaps between actions and expectations, it is necessary to draw on a variety of information sources. Consequently, our methodology is multi-pronged. On the citizen side of the analysis, our research draws partly on the database of citizen responses to the consultation, which contains comments provided by consultation participants, as well as some relevant demographic information. In addition, all participants were asked to provide contact information for the purposes of conducting a follow-up survey to probe into other relevant areas not picked up by the consultation itself. Of the 315 participants, 111 provided this contact information. The follow-up survey was conducted by telephone in April and May 2003, with four call attempts made to reach each potential respondent. This resulted in 55 completed interviews. The response rate measured against the initial population of 315 is 17%; measured against the group who provided contact information, the response rate is 49%. Given the low response rate, as well as the small number of respondents, the follow-up survey results must be treated with a significant degree of caution.⁴

On the other side of the coin, the actions and expectations of city councillors and administrators, our data sources include the official record of events from documents generated as part of the budget-making process. We draw too on personal observation, as the current researchers played an advisory role in designing the consultation and had some interaction with officials at both the planning and analysis phases. Some use is also made of media accounts of the consultation and its impact on budget-making, a likely source of feedback on the consultation process for much of the interested public. Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, interviews were conducted with city officials and councillors to dig beneath the official record for a deeper understanding of the actions and expectations of city officials.

Our analysis draws on these multiple sources to arrive at an objective determination of consultation outcomes across the dimensions of interest: citizen participation, the

³ Public consultations elsewhere have been viewed as a “means of testing public opinion or of building public support” for the issue under consideration. Graeme Cheeseman and Hugh Smith, “Public Consultation or Political Choreography? The Howard Government’s Quest for Community Views on Defence Policy,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 55:1(2001), 86.

⁴ Assuming no response bias, the 95% confidence interval for percentage-based measures would be $\pm 19\%$. To be clear, this is the confidence interval for drawing inferences about the population of consultation participants, not the population of the City of Saint John. As discussed further below, there is every reason to believe that consultation participants – whether the full 315 or our sample of 55 – did differ systematically from the general public.

illumination of public opinion, the shaping of public policy and effects on citizen efficacy. At the same time, we identify the expectations of the relevant players across each dimension, allowing us to measure the degree of congruence between actions and expectations. Where congruence is found, so too is success; where actions and expectations diverge lies an opportunity to strengthen and improve the consultation process in future undertakings.

There are certain limitations to our empirical data, in particular the small number of citizens who participated in our follow-up survey. Our contribution, however, is twofold: in addition to shedding light on one specific case study, the theoretical framework developed to evaluate this case has wider applicability. There has not been a great deal of theoretical reflection on public consultation as a method of citizen engagement, nor much work on developing the empirical tools needed to probe the perceptions and attitudes of citizens and officials to gauge the real impact of these exercises. Inasmuch as our work starts to flesh out some of these areas, it offers a methodological and theoretical contribution that goes beyond the case study at hand.

Behind our immediate method of investigation, too, there lies a larger analytical framework that might be put to work in future research. If there is considerable enthusiasm for the idea of citizen consultation nowadays, many governments nonetheless approach such exercises with a measure of trepidation and uncertainty.⁵ And rightly so, since the imprudent utilization of public consultations could well serve to exacerbate existing dissatisfaction with government. To our way of thinking, there are two critical questions to be asked about these exercises. The first can be addressed through single case studies: what is the degree of congruence between the actions and expectations of citizens and officials? The second requires a larger set of cases. Where there is divergence, what happens as these exercises multiple over time: do actions and expectations converge or do the gaps between the two, and attendant misunderstandings, persist or even widen? For consultations to be successful, the relevant players need to arrive at a common understanding of the appropriate place for consultations in the larger policymaking process. This larger theoretical framework, applied to numerous consultation exercises over time, might provide greater insight into the potential efficacy of public consultations.

3. Encouraging citizen participation

3.1 *Total participation*

In total, 315 people participated in the Saint John budget consultation. If the number seems relatively small at first blush, it looks more impressive when measured against the

⁵ Not least because involving citizens in the decision-making process may lead public policy in directions that government did not anticipate. See W. Michael Fenn, "Expanding the Frontiers of Public Participation: Public Involvement in Municipal Budgeting and Finance." In Katherine Graham and Susan Phillips (Eds.), *Citizen Engagement: Lessons in Participation from Local Government* (pp. 113-136) (Toronto: IPAC, 1998).

total pool of potential participants. With a population of about 70,000, nearly one in two hundred residents of the city took part in the consultation process. The same participation rate, played out in a pan-Canadian consultation, would produce roughly 140,000 participants. Few national consultations have come close to that penetration level,⁶ suggesting that the Saint John budget consultation should be considered a significant success in terms of the sheer number of participants.

One of the important features of the Saint John budget consultation was the attempt to encourage on-line participation.⁷ Residents could visit the city's website and register their views on the budget by filling in a questionnaire with a mix of closed and open-ended questions. They could also, if so inclined, participate in discussion forums on issues relating to the budget. Again, in terms of sheer numbers, this innovative effort was largely successful: of the 315 participants, 228 submitted their views electronically, while 87 mailed in a hard-copy of the consultation questionnaire they had picked up at one of various sites around the city.

3.2 Socio-demographics

A public consultation invites the public at large to submit their views on a given issue. Those who come forward to do so clearly represent a self-selected sample, who may differ from the general population in any number of relevant ways. At the very least, they will likely be people with a keener interest in the issue than those who choose not to participate. From a research perspective, it would clearly be invalid to treat the pool of consultation participants as a representative sample of the community from which inferences about the views of the general population could be drawn. The aim of a public consultation is to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and nuances of public opinion, rather than to tally the opinions of the populace.

But those in charge of running consultation exercises and incorporating the results in the policymaking process - city officials and councillors in this case - are not necessarily social scientists, and may therefore be of the opinion that those who participate in public consultations should mirror the general population as closely as possible. To the extent that participants match the population on certain basic characteristics, there may be greater confidence on the part of relevant officials that the consultation can be taken as a reasonable barometer of the public mood.⁸

⁶ By way of comparison, the participation figure normally cited for the Spicer Commission, the largest public consultation in Canadian history, is 400,000.

⁷ As such, the consultation was an example of e-democracy, which is viewed by some as the next crucial step to improving government-citizen relations. See Keith Culver, "Innovation Is Not Reform: Can Democracy Survive the New Information Communication Technologies?"

⁸ The question of whether citizens who participate in public consultations are representative of the general population is a common concern voiced by government officials. See Donald G. Lenihan, *E-Government: The Municipal Experience. The Crossing Boundaries Municipal Caucus Discussion Paper*, (Ottawa: Centre for Collaborative Government, 2002). See also Cheeseman and Smith, "Public Consultation or Political Choreography? The Howard Government's Quest for Community Views on Defence Policy," and Reeves, "Developing Effective Public Consultation: a Review of Sheffield's UDP process."

The most obvious comparisons that spring to mind are socio-demographic ones. Do participants match the population in terms of age, sex and socio-economic status? Given the substantial biases that are present in most forms of political participation, it is not surprising to find that participants in the Saint John budget consultation deviate in significant ways from the general population of the city. On all three counts, participation patterns reflect the participation biases evident elsewhere.

In the first place, younger residents of Saint John people were less likely to participate in the consultation than older residents. The largest number of participants were in the 40 to 49 and 50 to 59 age groups – 70 and 74 participants, respectively. In the 30 to 39 group, there were 52 participants, while in the 20 to 29 group there were but 30. With somewhat fewer people in older age groups in the general population, the participation rate of younger residents was clearly well below that of older citizens.

On two socio-economic indicators – education and home ownership status - there was also a certain degree of participation bias. Better-educated residents were more likely to make a submission to the consultation, as were those who own their own home rather than renting (Table 1).

Table 1: Socio-Economic Indicators

	Consultation participants	Saint John population
Education		
Without a high school certificate	13%	38%
High school certificate / some post-secondary	47%	51%
Completed university	40%	11%
Home ownership status		
Own	71%	54%
Rent	29%	46%

Note: Population figures derived from 1996 census data.

Finally, there was a significant gender gap in participation, as 178 men came forward to submit their views on the city budget as against only 113 women.

If there are no great surprises in any of this, its salience lies elsewhere, in the potential impact on the perceptions of officials about the representative quality of the consultation exercise. It should be noted, in that regard, that only two of the socio-demographic measures would have been available to city officials who might have been interested in assessing whether consultation participants represented a good cross-section of the population – age and gender. This information was collected as part of the consultation itself (rather than in the follow-up survey), but even then, the information was not highlighted in reports that were prepared summarizing the consultation results. Officials

who were not directly involved in the consultation exercise, which would include all city councillors, would have had to ask the relevant administrative official for this information.

3.3 Political Engagement

The gap between participants and the population is even more pronounced on a series of items measuring levels of political engagement. On the participant follow-up survey, two questions asked how much attention respondents paid to “news and current events”, in general and with respect to Saint John specifically. On both questions, about two-thirds indicated that they paid a great deal of attention to current events, while virtually none said that they paid very little attention or none at all (Table 2). Similarly worded questions on national surveys suggest that roughly 10% claim to follow current events very closely, while about 40% report following not very closely or not at all.⁹

Table 2: Attention to News and Current Events

Attention Level	News and current events, generally	News and current events, Saint John specifically
A great deal of attention	64%	66%
Some attention	33%	31%
Very little attention	4%	4%
None at all	0%	0%

Active involvement in public affairs is also significantly higher among participants than in the population at large. Nearly half of the participants say that they contact public officials either often or sometimes, a figure that is more than double that of the general population (Table 3).

Table 3: Frequency of Contact with Public Officials

Contact public officials or politicians...	Consultation Participants	Canadian population ¹⁰
Often	15%	3%
Sometimes	29%	16%
Seldom	33%	21%
Never	24%	59%
(N)	(55)	(3377)

⁹ See for example Paul Howe and David Northrup, “Strengthening Canadian Democracy: The Views of Canadians,” *Policy Options*, Vol. 1, no. 5, p. 28

¹⁰ These figures are taken from an admittedly dated source, the 1984 Canadian Election Study, the most recent election study to contain an identically worded question to that on our survey.

In a similar vein, 38% of the consultation participants reported previous participation in some sort of public consultation. On this measure, there is no population comparison that can be drawn, but this seems a relatively high incidence of prior participation. Furthermore, most who had participated previously had done so multiple times (16 of 19 respondents), indicating a high level of involvement in civic affairs.

Thus, the general conclusion is that consultation participants were atypical, diverging significantly from the general population in their propensity to follow current events and participate in public affairs. Again this might generate misgivings on the part of those concerned about the representational quality of the consultation exercise. The high engagement levels of participants might raise concerns about whether they were simply a vocal minority whose views on the issues might differ significantly from those of the taciturn majority.

The engagement levels of participants are also relevant to an assessment of the quality of the commentary provided by citizens in the budget consultation. Examining the commentary directly is one way to arrive at this assessment, but the engagement levels of participants provide an indirect measure. Clearly, consultation participants represented the more attentive and participatory sections of the Saint John population, and as such they were likely well-informed about issues relating to the city budget - or at least better informed than much of the non-participant population.¹¹ Whether their level of understanding was on a par with that of city officials is another matter, but it is probably fair to say that the consultation successfully drew out the views of residents who were better positioned than most to say something sensible - and potentially useful - about issues relating to Saint John's budget crisis.

3.4 Levels of Efficacy

If consultation participants differed somewhat on basic demographics and even more in their levels of political engagement, they resembled the general population more closely on measures of political efficacy. Drawing on questions often asked on national surveys, we first asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on." About half agreed, about half disagreed (Table 4) – essentially the same pattern seen in surveys of the general population. This is a surprising congruity in light of the high levels of political engagement among participants. Despite following politics closely and participating actively in politics, consultation participants are like many of their fellow citizens in seeing government as somewhat impenetrable to the outsider.

¹¹ This particular participation bias is, of course, a reflection of the fact that the issues being discussed in a public consultation normally require a significant amount of knowledge on the part of participants. See Dory Reeves, "Developing Effective Public Consultation: a Review of Sheffield's UDP process."

Another item commonly used to measure efficacy is the agree-disagree statement, “I don't think the government cares much what people like me think.” Again, the responses from consultation participants look broadly similar to the results of general population surveys. Roughly 60% of respondents agree with the statement, while about 40% disagree (Table 4). Despite their high levels of engagement and participation, consultation participants still have a sense that they and their fellow citizens have relatively little influence over government.

Table 4: Participant Efficacy

	Politics and government so complicated		Don't think the government cares what people like me think	
	Consultation Participants	Canadian population	Consultation Participants	Canadian population
Strongly Agree	13%	9%	33%	28%
Agree	33%	40%	24%	36%
Disagree	35%	35%	38%	25%
Strongly disagree	18%	13%	6%	8%
Not sure / DK	2%	2%	0%	2%
(N)	(55)	(1535)	(55)	(3648)

Note: Population estimates based on 2000 Canadian Election Study

In contrast to basic demographics and measures of engagement, on measures of efficacy consultation participants look much like the general population. On this count, the consultation was representative of the population, drawing out people who might not have been expected to participate due to a diminished sense of political efficacy. This points to a potential for consultation exercises to tap into disaffected sections of the population.

The levels of efficacy evident in participants' responses to our survey questions also have relevance to the nature of the consultation commentary likely to be forthcoming. If those who take a negative view of government and its responsiveness to citizens are well represented among consultation participants, then critical opinions are to be anticipated. Also to be expected are reasonably high expectations on the part of citizens about the impact of their input on the policy process, expectations which, if dashed, might only deepen disaffection and further undermine the efficacy of the citizenry. The stakes are high when disaffected citizens participate as much as those who are more content.

To attach a label to consultation participants on the basis of the characteristics outlined above, they would seem to fit the mold of what Pippa Norris calls critical citizens: people with an interest in political affairs and keen to participate but not necessarily enamoured of government as it currently functions. What officials thought of the commentary provided by these critical citizens and how they made use of it in their budget-making are questions considered in the next section.

4. Illuminating Public Opinion

Two sources were used to gauge the views of city officials about the consultation process. We gained general insights through informal discussion with the city's officials responsible for the e-consultation. We gained more specific insights from analysis of qualitative data obtained in nine semi-structured oral interviews conducted with City officials in April, 2003, as part of an evaluation of the consultation program.¹² Seven of the nine interviewees were city councillors (seven of ten elected councillors), who participated on the assurance that their frank assessments of the e-consultation would be attributed only to city councillors generally, and not to specified individuals. The final two interviews were conducted with officials from the city's finance and public relations offices.¹³

One set of questions probed officials' perception of the degree to which the budget e-consultation process usefully illuminated public opinion. We first asked 'Do you have a sense of how many people participated?'¹⁴ Knowledge of the number of participants varied across city officials. The finance department official interviewed knew the exact number, yet the public relations official could only say that "It wasn't overly high." Three city councillors had no knowledge of the number of participants, two were mistaken yet clearly had some knowledge as they were able to guess relatively accurately that participants numbered in the low hundreds, and two councillors knew the exact number. The non-elected officials interviewed both took the 'long view' regarding the

¹² Anonymised transcripts of these interviews are on file with the authors. These interviews were judged by the University of New Brunswick Research Ethics Board to be part of a program evaluation and so exempt from that body's evaluation, as recorded in UNB REB file # 2003-042. We nonetheless made every attempt to ensure that interviews were conducted, recorded, and safeguarded in a manner consistent with research ethics standards.

¹³ Interviews were conducted by a graduate student researcher over a two week period, focussing on four areas of interest: comparison of attitudes to the consultation before and after the exercise, attitudes to the consultation's electronic delivery, perceptions regarding the success of the consultation, and its effect on the budget-making process. The data we report in this paper were gathered from responses to specific questions designed to repeat the categories of our approach to citizens in our approach to officials. The resulting data have been analysed for simple variations in yes or no answers, and for thematic variations where bivalent answers permit further elaboration. Within the space constraints of this paper we limit ourselves to quotation of representative remarks falling within themes identified in the body of interviews. Some answers led without further prompting from the interviewer toward questions we had intended to ask at a different stage of the interview. The interviewer did not intervene in these situations, and simply aimed to ask all set questions by the close of the interview.

¹⁴ Responses to this question frequently led without our prompting to evaluation of the adequacy and relevance of the number of participants, two separable questions whose answers are implicated in discussions of engagement and efficacy we originally intended to examine in questions subsequent to our inquiry regarding knowledge of numbers of participants. In order to represent faithfully the fact of unprompted remarks connecting sheer numbers of participants, engagement, and efficacy, we report here both specific knowledge of interviewees regarding participation, and their remarks verging into other analytical categories.

number of participants, accepting this initial consultation of citizens using new technologies as a valuable first step. As the public relations official put it:

It wasn't overly high, but it wasn't really surprising, I don't think. We didn't really anticipate that we would get 1000 back. This was the first time that we'd even did it as a city. It's one of the first ones, I'd say, that's been done in Canada to do a public consultation on budget, online. And it was a trial run, and a partnership as well, so there were a lot of factors at play. We did publicize the information, where to find it and where the paper copies were. And people of course, had never done it before either. Sometimes you do surveys on the Internet, sometimes public quotations get looked at. I think it might be better the next time we do one. But it was definitely a trial one, I think a good one.

The councillors interviewed were quick to move to discussions of adequacy and relevance of participant numbers, both in the case of those councillors who knew the number of participants, and those who were told in the course of the interview. The most representative and clearly stated observation queried the numbers of participants, their representativeness, and made clear the minimal impact of the consultation on this particular councillor's deliberations:

I was into the website a couple of times, but ah, again, the numbers weren't as extensive as I'd like to see. The breakdowns, therefore, in my mind are questionable as to whether they are actually speaking for the electorate that I represent. So I didn't take it as seriously as I'd like to, and I didn't take it as seriously as I think I should, if it was given the proper time format, and the proper information to our citizens in terms of them having that ability to respond.

Other councillors understood the idea of representativeness in quasi-social scientific terms, both in interviews and in conversations with non-elected city officials. As the official from the finance department put it,

In one regards you can look at it and say 2-300 respondents out of 70000 population, and say, that's not very good. And certainly, some of our councillors, when you look at it and said from a standpoint of comparing to a statistical survey where you survey 300 to 400 people, but you get statistical merit because you're going it on a survey sampling basis. It was questionable from that standpoint.

It is noteworthy that this official, a strong advocate of the consultative process, does not question the relevance of councillors' concerns regarding representativeness, conceived as statistical validity of some unspecified kind. As we will demonstrate in our discussion of officials' perception of the sociodemographic profile of citizens who did participate, elected officials conceived of the consultation as requiring an unspecified blend of sheer numbers of participants, and an unspecified kind of representativeness amongst those citizens. Elected officials' preoccupation with numbers of participants is reasonably attributed to their concern with citizens whose votes must be secured. It remains unclear why some elected officials seek some kind of broad representativeness amongst consultation participants, and do not suppose that consultation participants may in fact be

reflective of politically active citizens who are typically a subset of all citizens eligible to participate in public political processes.

Discussion of the number of participants in the consultation was followed immediately by two further questions: “Do you think the number of participants was adequate?” and “Do you think that the participants probably represented a good cross-section of Saint John residents?” Responses split: five officials responded negatively, three officials responded equivocally, and one official did not know. This should not be read as a blanket condemnation of consultation – a novel practice in Saint John, as we observed above – but in the context of the shared and repeated view that the consultation needed more participants in order to be valuable to councillors as a tool for informing their decisions. Several councillors were careful to couch their negative answer in terms indicating their general support of the idea of consulting citizens.

Several councillors who responded negatively questioned the representativeness of participants, focussing particularly on internet accessibility, apparently without consideration of the option for citizens to participate using paper forms. Councillors who responded negatively were additionally concerned, to varying degrees, with the statistical validity of samples. One councillor indicated that he did not know who had participated, yet he thought it relevant to state that while consultation within the city omitted consideration of the views of persons whose activities are important to the city, such an omission was not, in his view, wrong.

Another councillor was uncertain of the number of participants, and after learning the number observed that:

...even if you're doing a survey, you have to have a minimum of 400 to be accurate 19 out of 20 times. And it has to be a random survey as opposed to having the business community wanting to determine, oh, we don't want a tax increase, so they get all of their members to respond to it, thinking that they can control that. The numbers so small and indicating what group they represent. You're not really sure what group they represent when it comes in electronically. So a number like 300 isn't large enough to be accurate. Any polls, any surveys, they're always telling you you should have a minimum of 400. Randomly you can get an accurate perception, an indication of what the citizens of Saint John think. Not what one sector, but what the city thinks.

A quite different concern was raised regarding the very possibility of consultation and e-consultation providing an accurate account of sociodemographics of participants: “my concern was always that the questionnaire would be infiltrated by special interest groups. And I'm not sure if they were able to analysis that adequately. Before embarking on this process, I asked a question addressing this concern, and they assured me that there would be some kind of control for that.” It is worth marking, finally, the concern that sociodemographics of participants were significantly influenced by use of new information communications technologies to enhance the consultative process. A councillor who commented that the number of participants was insufficient and not representative of a good cross section of Saint John residents raised an additional worry while qualifying his negative view with admission that the e-consultation might have

been be useful as a first step. After being asked, “all things considered, do you consider the public consultation to have been a success?” the councillor answered that “I suppose for what it set out to do and the numbers that came up was, yes. But broadly, I wouldn’t think success to say that the numbers were sufficient and really proper. That’s not anyone’s fault, the public didn’t respond. Regarding the Internet, the computer, or the website, there are some people who are slavish at them, but there are many people that didn’t even know about them. And I’m wondering if maybe that alone was enough.” This particular councillor seemed to be unaware that the consultation could be engaged on paper as well as on-line, but nonetheless his concern is clear and relevant: he raises the issue of whether a ‘digital divide’ inadvertently reduced the rate of participation.

In the reasons given for supposing that the consultation did not include those persons it ought to have included, we found no common view regarding the causes of the perceived shortcomings of the consultation as an attempt to reach a cross section of Saint John residents. We saw instead a range of reasons running from a sense that consultation of residents might be perceived as unrepresentative of those with interests in Saint John deserving to be heard, to the view that a consultation with adequate reach to citizens ought to be an exercise in sampling, and to the final view that the technology used must be more accessible to citizens in order to be usable by a good cross section of them. No general agreement emerged then, pro or contra the use of the new information communication technologies to engage citizens. There was equally no agreement, and indeed no direct reference to a specific understanding of what might count as an adequate range of participants.

Equivocal responses from elected and non-elected officials emphasised the value of the consultation as a first step, but worried that the consultation may have failed to reach an adequate range of citizens and repeated the view that too few citizens participated. As with those interviewees who responded negatively, there is little indication in interview responses to questions that officials shared an understanding of some adequate range of participants. There is instead a kind of agnosticism, sometimes seen as a rejection of our question regarding whether participants represented a good cross section of residents. A councillor responded:

I don’t know if it was adequate. I certainly would have liked to see more. 300 out of a population of 70000 is a small but it may at the same time reflect the views of the population as a whole. So maybe it is adequate...

Interviewer: Do you think that the participants probably represented a good cross-section of Saint John residents?

I would like to have seen where they came from. I don’t know if there was a way of determining where they came from, east-west. Different areas of the city, on a socio-economic scale. If the sort of information was available we’d have a better, clearer picture. It would be interesting to see if they asked what area of the city do you come from? Not too prying, but it might give some kind of idea. Lower west side, or whatever.

A non-elected official was somewhat more specific in discussion of the data, suggesting greater knowledge of it, yet remained equally inspecific regarding the standard for achievement of consultation of a good cross section of residents. The official said: "I was pleased when I looked at the some of the demographic profiling. I was pleased we didn't see any particular age group responding. I think it was good from that standpoint. I think it gave us a good cross-section of both gender and age-wise...So, on the basis of the demographics, I think it was a reasonable cross-section of the community we got." The public relations official who indicated no knowledge of the adequacy of the range of participants was forthright in admission that s/he had no sense of the standard properly applied. The official replied: "I think that a lot of people in the community were missed. But it's hard to judge whether they were representative of the community. I think there was a wide age group, and a good diversity between male and female. I don't know, it's hard to judge. Adequate for what? Really don't know." The views of these officials demonstrate that even amongst those who do not suppose consultations require large numbers of participants for success as consultations, there is an implicit assertion that a particular kind of cross section of residents ought to be consulted, yet there is no shared sense of what might constitute a good cross section. Indeed, it is unclear that there is really much difference between the views of those who supposed the consultation's sociodemographic profile was inadequate, possibly adequate, or unknown. None of the officials interviewed had a specific view regarding what constitutes a good cross section of residents for the purposes of consultation. Those with any view seemed to hold something like a sense that a good cross section would represent all residents in some measure broader than and certainly not identical to the class of residents ordinarily politically active.

In another analytical vein, officials' perceptions of the *sophistication* of citizens' contributions were gathered through a question asked in the context of the overall success of the consultation. Following the questions discussed above regarding the sociodemographic characteristics of participants, officials were asked "Did you find their comments and suggestions constructive and well-informed?" Some officials indicated that they had minimal knowledge of participants' free-form contributions, having relied instead on the summary report brought to Council by the Commissioner of Finance. Themes emerging in participants' contributions were summarised in the form of short paragraphs associated with particular questions asked of participants. Some officials qualified their remarks on the quality of participants' contributions, suggesting that the broad and general nature of the questions asked tended to diffuse the focus of participants' responses, perhaps inadvertently giving the impression that participants were less well informed than some might actually be. Officials were generally concerned that information provided to citizens might not have been sufficient, or relevant.

Two officials simply responded 'no' to the question, and two others responded that they had not examined citizens' contributions. Four officials responded positively, albeit in brief and muted terms: "Yes. Well... some of them... very few of them yes." A more extensive contribution drew particular attention to the concern that contributions from citizens were based on inadequate information and suggested that the city itself may need

to pay more attention to communicating to the public the challenges faced by the city. That official responded:

I thought there were some really good suggestions. I thought that some of the comments that came back were from people that were seeing the services, and using the services first hand. So from that standpoint they have merit. The well-informed part is difficult because I'm not sure if... we made an attempt to get some basic information out there in relation to the services, but I don't think we've gone far enough yet in terms of building an understanding of some of the challenges we've got with some of the services and some of the restriction we've got.

One official rejected the question on the grounds that consultation allowed general interest group positions to be stated but didn't provide issue-specific input. This official appeared to conceive of consultation as a tool to deliver nearly final decisions, as opposed to informational support for decision makers. The official argued that: "We can look to group comments and suggestions, you know. And again, don't raise my taxes, or don't cut the grant to this group, or don't cut the grant to that group. And, that, I don't think is really the kind of consultation that we have to have. We have to have input from people who can tell us why we should be out of a certain service, or why we should be growing a certain service, and how we can grow the income pockets of the city to provide those services."

In sum, then, officials are divided with respect to the quality of participants' engagement: some quickly deny the value of the participants' engagement, while others are cautiously enthusiastic and one official rejects the exercise as a whole on the grounds that it fails to engage participants on questions where their contributions might be best formed. There is a consistent thread of concern regarding the adequacy of information available to participants and in fact relied on by participants. Interestingly, officials were quite vague as to precisely what kind of information citizens might need to provide adequately well-informed contributions. There is some feeling amongst officials that they serve an intermediary role between experts and citizens, evaluating and choosing to accept or reject professional advice ordinarily unavailable to private citizens.

5. Shaping Public Policy

In light of the reservations expressed by officials about the number of consultation participants, the degree to which they faithfully reflected the larger community, and the quality of their contributions, our expectation was that the reported impact of the consultation results on the budget-making process would be slight. This was indeed the case.¹⁵ We asked officials directly: "To what degree do you think the results of the consultation actually affected the budget-making process?" and as a followup to evaluate their specific knowledge of participants' contributions, "Were there any specific ideas or

¹⁵ This is in keeping with the pattern observed elsewhere. As Lenihan notes, municipal leaders have been careful to note that public consultations are "not intended as an alternative to government," as "the government would not be bound by views expressed." See Lenihan, "E-Government: The Municipal Experience. The Crossing Boundaries Municipal Caucus Discussion Paper," 29.

suggestions that had an impact on the budget?” In order to assess officials’ attitudes regarding consultation generally, apart from the present exercise, we asked additionally “Do you think another consultation should be held for next year’s budget” and “Do you think that in the future, these consultations should have more impact or less impact on the budget-making process?” Responses nearly reversed between the categories: officials responded negatively to varying degrees with respect to the present consultation, yet some officials were positive regarding consultation in the future and further integration of consultation into decision-making. The principal reasons for optimism for the future included hope that further consultations might gather more participants, issue-specific consultations might deliver more easily used information from participants, and better provision of information to citizens in those consultations might improve the quality of their contributions.

Officials’ negative responses to the present consultation varied between flat negatives and indications that the consultation came too late or ran against pre-existing plans. Officials commented that: “I don’t think it affected it an iota this year... I can’t think of any [specific suggestions implemented]. I mean, the replies were handed out [to councillors], so there. But you’ve already decided that you’re going to do certain things. That’s the problem.” Another official echoed this view in similar terms: “I don’t think very much [was affected by participants]. They’re going to do what they’re going to do, and they did it.” Other officials gave specific reasons for their negative view. One official was careful to place the value of the consultation in context against other sources of information available to support decisions: “Nothing, they didn’t do a thing. Only because we knew other information that was coming in.” Another official remarked again on the soundness of the sample of citizens, answering that no specific suggestion was taken up “because we were careful not to go down to the specific level. Because there was no sort of statistical validity to the sample.” Finally, a councillor, offered the opportunity to comment on the consultation as a whole, supposed that consultation is actually properly synonymous with polling: “This is valuable, but I think the best method of public consultation is good polling by a professional company, such as Corporate Communications.” This view was echoed in similarly precise terms by another official.

In the context of the second category of questions inquiring into attitudes toward future consultations, two of nine officials interviewed indicated that a budget consultation should not be undertaken next year. Six of nine officials were in favour of repeated consultation, and two of those officials proposed variations on the strategy employed in the present consultation. One official was uncertain whether another consultation should take place. Of the officials who responded negatively, one qualified the negative response by supporting less frequent consultation: “No. I would say that you’ve got a lot of things on the table, and if you could work away at a few of those ideas, maybe do this once every three years, or something like that.” The two officials who supported different approaches to budget consultation sought more specific, targeted questions, and one of those officials disputed the value of ICT-enhanced consultation. That official suggested: “I think that consultation should be sending people out, and randomly go to homes. Go to a neighborhood and go to this home and that home and try to get feed back in the printed

form where someone is asked the type of questions that you're here to ask me today. Electronic is a wonderful tool but it gets abused a lot."

When asked in broader terms whether "in the future, these consultations should have more impact or less impact on the budget-making process?" no officials responded negatively. Response varied from two of nine officials admitting the possibility of some useful impact, to six officials uniformly in favour of well-structured consultations having a greater impact on budget-making. There was considerable emphasis on capturing contribution from an adequate range of participants, and further emphasis on careful timing of consultation to integrate with the policy-making process. One official remained unsure of the appropriate role of further consultation.

The more cautious support offered by two officials indicated concern about the force of consultations: "I think that they have a role to play, but the whole budget process, I believe it can't be strictly controlled by this type of consultation." Officials in favour of further consultation raised a range of concerns. Some were concerned regarding timing: "They should encourage more participation, and in doing so they should have more impact on the process. They also have to be inputted much earlier than before so the process is not going into its last hundred meters in the hundred meter dash. The input has to start at the beginning of the race and has to carry on through." Others, as noted above, sought in-person interviews, believing ICT-enhanced consultation to be inferior. There was repeated concern regarding the ability of consultation to capture public opinion accurately: "If there was some way to ensure that they would cover the public in every point of view, I'd say yes. If there was some way of determining whether we're going to get a legitimate cross-section of the population, I could go along with that." Finally, some connected relevance of numbers of consultation participants directly to the political process:

Well they should have more of an impact, if there were a lot more of the people in the city actually going on the website, or actually sat down and filled in the questionnaires and put their ideas in. You've got to get a good number of these back. Then you would say hey, we've got to pay a little more attention to this because we've got a quarter of the population saying this, the city's saying this, so we've got half of the population saying this so we better start listening to them because guess what, it's going to affect the elections.

By any standard, we suggest, there is a significant contrast between the weight accorded participants' contributions, and councillors' willingness to engage in further consultations to attempt to improve use of those contributions. So even out of an exercise which received mixed support from officials, there is a generally strong sense that congruence of actions and expectations is desirable. There is nonetheless a significant obstacle to congruence evident in the diversity of views held by officials regarding the nature of legitimate consultation in the democratic process. In particular, it is troubling that officials appear to view legitimate consultation as involving some unspecified larger number of citizens, drawn from some unspecified cross section of Saint John citizens.

There is further reason for concern regarding a lack of congruence between officials and citizens, stemming from a ‘second order’ lack of congruence amongst officials regarding the goal of consultation. Some officials accepted the generally used understanding of consultation as a way of grasping in a nuanced way the opinion of a social group regarding specific issues, using methods including opportunities to offer opinions without constraining structures found in multiple-choice or other survey styles. Yet other officials persisted in supposing that consultations are synonymous with surveys, or require a counting of heads rather than a counting of ideas. There was little sense amongst councillors that politically active citizens are a subset of citizens considered as a whole. Consequently it appears that the results of the consultation may have been unduly discounted, on the mistaken view that participants were not representative of citizens in at least the same degree as current electoral practices.

6. Enhancing Citizen Efficacy

6.1 Impact on Policymaking

To determine whether the Saint John budget consultation enhanced citizen efficacy, we return to the results of our follow-up survey of consultation participants. The most direct way in which a public consultation can enhance citizen efficacy is if those who participated come away at the end of the day with the feeling that their views made a difference to the policymaking process. In order for this result to be achieved, it is first necessary for citizens simply to have some *awareness* of the consultation outcome.

On this front, we first asked survey respondents about their awareness of the city budget itself: had they heard a lot, a little, or nothing at all about next year’s budget? Awareness, by this measure, was reasonably high. About three-quarters said they had heard something about next year’s budget (Table 5), though most of these said only a little, rather than a lot. Awareness of “how the public consultation was used in the budget-making process”, on the other hand, was considerably lower. Only 40% reported hearing something in this regard (Table 5), and of these, virtually all said they had heard only a little.

These respondents were then asked how they had heard about the consultation outcome. Most did not know (7 of 22) or cited the media – either the newspaper, radio or TV (12 of 22) - as the source of their information. None reported contacting the city (by telephone or in person) to inquire about the consultation outcome or visiting the city’s website to consult the information that was posted after the fact to apprise interested citizens of the results of the consultation.

Table 5: Awareness of Budget and Consultation Outcome

Heard...	About budget	About how consultation was used in budget-making process
A lot	18%	2%
A little	58%	38%
Nothing at all	22%	58%
Don't know	2%	0%
(N)	(55)	(55)

Thus the first link in the chain whereby citizen efficacy might be enhanced by public consultation was relatively weak. Many who participated in the consultation heard nothing about its impact on the policymaking process and those who did relied primarily on secondary outlets – the media in particular – to fill them in, rather than accessing information directly from the sponsor of the consultation, the city of Saint John.

The next link in the chain was no stronger. Those who had heard something about how the consultation was used in the budget process were asked: Do you think the consultation had a large impact, a small impact or no impact at all on next year's budget? Of the 22 who had heard something about the effect of the consultation on the budget, just one thought it had a large impact on budget, while 11 said a small impact. Six said it had no impact at all, while four were unsure.

This might, on the one hand, be taken as a positive outcome. Our interviews with city officials suggested that the real impact of the consultation lay somewhere between a "small impact" and "no impact at all". Citizens appear to have a relatively accurate perception of their less than central place in the policymaking process.

This perception, however, must be weighed against the expectations citizens brought to the table. Did they believe that the views of citizens should carry the day or were they content with a secondary role? Two questions were asked to gauge these expectations. We first asked which of three groups – officials at City Hall, elected city councillors or the public – should have the *greatest* say over budget decisions. We then asked which of the three groups should have the *least* say over budget decisions.

On the first question, opinion was fairly evenly split. Though "the public" was the most common response, only one-third of respondents opted for this strong endorsement of public input (Table 6). More were willing to concede the greatest measure of influence either to officials at City Hall or to elected councillors. At the same time, another 16% were willing to allow that citizens should actually have the least say in budget decisions of the three groups, though more preferred to relegate elected councillors or officials at City Hall to third fiddle.

Table 6: Relative Influence on Budget Decisions

	Most Say	Least Say
Officials at City Hall	33%	27%
Elected city councilors	24%	41%
The public	36%	16%
Don't know	7%	15%
(N)	(55)	(55)

These figures suggest that citizens do not see their contribution as simply a minor adjunct to the traditional policy-making process, but neither are they uniformly of the opinion that the views of the public must carry the day. Expectations, on the whole, are high but not uncompromising. They are, however, at odds with reality, which in this case consisted in a negligible influence of the public consultation on the budget-making process.

6.2 General Feelings of Efficacy

In addition to assessments of the degree of public input to the policymaking process, citizen efficacy can also be affected in more diffuse ways by participation in a public consultation. Our participant follow-up survey included two standard measures of general efficacy, one asking whether respondents felt that “political and government [sometimes] seem so complicated that a person like me can’t understand what’s going on,” the other asking their views on the statement “I don’t think the government cares much what people like me think.” As noted above (Table 4), consultation participants were much like the general public in exhibiting fairly low levels of efficacy in their responses to both questions.

As follow-up questions, we asked respondents two questions:

- Do you think your opinion about *how complicated government is* was affected by the budget consultation you participated in?
- Do you think your opinion about *whether government cares what people think* was affected by the budget consultation you participated in?

As Table 7 indicates, the bulk of respondents reported no effect on their sense of efficacy from participation in the budget consultation. Bearing in mind, however, that this was just a single consultation, the self-reported effects are not inconsiderable. If the single exercise evolved into a sustained effort to consult citizens regularly on a range of policy issues, the effects on citizen efficacy would presumably be more pronounced.

Table 7: Impact of Consultation Participation on Measures of Citizen Efficacy

Opinion Affected by Budget Consultation?	How Complicated Government Is	Whether Government Cares What People Think
Yes	20%	27%
No	80%	73%
(N)	(55)	(55)

Another set of follow-up questions asked those respondents who had said yes, their feelings of efficacy had been affected by participation in the budget consultation, in which direction they had been swayed. Did they, as a result of their participation, feel government was more complicated than before or less complicated? And were they more inclined or less inclined to feel government cares what people think? The samples answering these questions were extremely small, but the results are suggestive. Of the 11 people who reported that their sense of “how complicated government is” was affected by the budget consultation, 7 said they came away feeling government was more complicated, 2 that it was less complicated, while 2 did not know. Of the 15 who reported that their feeling about whether government cares what people think were affected by the consultation, 8 said they were more inclined to feel government did not care, while 7 were more likely to feel that government did care. Contrary to what might be anticipated – that participation would engender stronger feelings of efficacy, since the whole purpose of the exercise is to engage citizens in the policy process – there are suggestions in these numbers that this effect cannot be assumed. Some citizens seem to end up with a diminished sense of efficacy as a result of participating in a public consultation.

Diminished efficacy would normally, of course, be considered a negative outcome, but there may be an upside as well. If citizens come away with a deeper understanding of the significant challenges facing government decision-makers, this may lead to scaled-back expectations of the public’s role in policy-making – or, as some city officials might prefer, more realistic expectations. A feeling that government is complicated is not necessarily an unconstructive attitude if government, in point of fact, *is* complicated. To the extent public consultations give participants insight into the potential limitations of citizen participation, there may be a positive lining in this particular outcome .

6.3 The Bottom Line

If there are reasons to think that citizens might not have been uniformly satisfied with, and edified by, the consultation process, there is a bottom line question that is perhaps the most critical: would they participate in a budget consultation again next year? When asked this question on our follow-up survey, the overwhelming majority – 51 of 55 respondents – indicated that they would in fact come forward to provide their views again.

The reasons for this undiminished enthusiasm for public consultation would like vary from person to person, in ways that we can only speculate on given the limitations of our quantitative data. Some participants did feel that the consultation had an impact on the

budget process, a small one in most cases, but an impact nonetheless. This would have been consonant with the expectations of those who felt that the public should have some influence, but not necessarily the predominant influence, on budget decisions. A good number, on the other hand, were largely unaware of the outcome of the consultation or how it affected the budget process and may have derived their continued commitment to consultation processes on the experience of participation itself. Others still were likely aware of, and disappointed with, the limited impact of the consultation, and may have suffered some attendant erosion in their feelings of political efficacy, yet were committed to participating in future exercises simply because of a deep-seated zeal for participation in civic affairs. And others still may have drawn the lesson from their experience that policymaking is more complex than they had previously appreciated and that citizens should reasonably expect only a limited role in government decision-making via public consultations.

In short, the bottom line is encouraging, but it should not detract attention from the fact that the impact of the Saint John budget consultation on citizen efficacy was decidedly mixed. If participants remain willing to participate in the future, this can probably be attributed in part to the limited influence that would be anticipated from a single consultation exercise. Regular citizen consultations - multiplied across different issue areas, coordinated by different levels of government - could produce magnified effects, both negative and positive, on the political efficacy of citizens. Whether the overall balance sheet will be positive or negative will depend in good measure on whether citizens and officials are on the same page, holding expectations that are congruent with the actual outcomes of the consultation process.

7. Conclusion

Our analysis is organized around the notion of congruence between actions and expectations. Did citizens participate to the extent anticipated by officials? Did officials feel enlightened by what the public had to say? Did they use the results of the consultation in the manner citizens were expecting? Did citizens feel empowered and involved in the policymaking process?

Our analysis suggests the Saint John budget consultation, while a noteworthy effort to involve citizens more directly in the policymaking process, suffered from some significant shortcomings. A sizable number of citizens did participate in the consultation. They were not a perfect microcosm of the Saint John population, but this was to be expected, given the self-selected basis for participation. The consultation succeeded, to our minds, in encouraging citizen participation. Officials, however, appear to have expected more. The limited number of participants was a concern for some, as was the representativeness of the pool of participants. While there was some sympathy for the notion that the results were quite impressive for a first time effort, there was nonetheless a feeling among officials that the consultation did not illuminate all shades of public opinion to the fullest. Consequently, the impact on the formulation of the budget was slight.

This limited impact was less than expected by most consultation participants. The impact on their feelings of political efficacy – their sense of political involvement and

influence over government - was probably muted, however, by somewhat low levels of awareness of the consultation outcome. Some citizens simply participated in the consultation but heard little about the results or the impact on the budget process. The one-off nature of the exercise also must have limited its potential negative effect. But it does seem clear that citizen efficacy was not obviously enhanced – or at least not to the degree that might have been hoped for - by the budget consultation process.

Where congruence between actions and expectations is lacking, there is room for improvement, which can come about in different ways. Actions can change next time out or expectations can adjust; or both can show some movement until the two achieve a happy equilibrium. In future consultations that might be undertaken in Saint John, for example, the actions of citizens might change: more might participate and under-represented sections of society might come forward in greater numbers. As well – or perhaps instead - officials might come to expect a bit less of the citizenry. To the extent such changes occur, the consultation results might be seen as a more effective probe into the contours of public opinion and consequently have greater effect on policy – in other words, the action of officials might come closer to meeting the expectations of citizens. At the same time, those expectations might themselves adjust, as citizens may come to appreciate that public consultation has a clearly circumscribed role to play in the policy-making process.

Common understandings, then, are critical to the success of public consultations. Close empirical study that is sensitive to the actions and expectations of all involved should provide greater insight into both the unrealized potential and the limitations of these important exercises in citizen engagement.