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Public Participation, Procedural Fairness, and Evaluations of Local Governance: The Moderating Role of Uncertainty

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to test whether the use of public participation by a local government increases perceptions of procedural fairness among the public and to propose an explanation for why fairness is a strong predictor of satisfaction with governmental decisions. To do this, we draw on the uncertainty management model to hypothesize that indications of procedural fairness can increase public support for government and its decisions and that fairness effects are greater for individuals who are more uncertain (less knowledgeable) about the governmental body in question. To test the hypothesis, we embedded an experiment in a survey of the public that was used by a local government to inform its budgetary decisions. The results provide support for the notion that governmental use of public input does increase perceptions of governmental fairness and that, in turn, perceptions of fairness have stronger relationships with overall governmental assessments for those who are relatively uncertain about a governmental institution.

Introduction

Public participation in local governing has seen an increased emphasis in recent decades. From providing input into local budgeting decisions (Berner and Smith 2004; Ebdon 2000) to helping guide state environmental policy (Daley 2008), the general public has been invited to provide input in an increasing number of governmental decisions and has been asked to do so in a number of different ways (Arnstein 1969; Fung 2006).¹ In response, researchers have begun to explore the interaction between public participation and procedural fairness to determine whether governmental use of public input is perceived as fair by observers (Joss and Brownlea 1999; Lauber and Knuth 1997; See 2009). Consistent with research that has examined the importance of fairness for other public institutions (e.g.,

We want to thank Lincoln Mayor Chris Beutler and Chief of Staff Rick Hoppe for their support in allowing us to conduct this research as we worked with them to engage the public on local budgetary issues. We would also like to thank Brian H. Bornstein and Christopher W. Larimer, as well as the anonymous reviewers and editors for helpful comments in the preparation of this manuscript.

1. Though a wide range of public participation techniques are used, and while these vary substantially by level of government, we will use the general term “public participation” to describe the governmental efforts to solicit public input through various means.

Tyler 1990), preliminary work has shown that governments' inclusion of public input can increase perceptions of procedural fairness among the public (Lauber and Knuth 1997).

The purpose of this article is to further extend the procedural justice perspective into governmental use of public participation by exploring the intersection of these two concepts within the context of a government's use of public participation in its budgeting decisions. Upon demonstrating the link between public participation and increased public perceptions of procedural fairness, we explore the relationship between process fairness and satisfaction with government performance. Specifically, we ask *why* fairness seems to matter in individual assessments of government. To address this question, we draw on uncertainty management theory which posits that information about process fairness is a cue that individuals use in their evaluation of an authority and that "the fairness effect" is more powerful for those who are uncertain about the authority in question (Van den Bos and Lind 2002). Accordingly, we hypothesize that fairness will be positively related to evaluations of government and governmental outcomes and that fairness will be more salient for those who are relatively less informed—or more uncertain—about the authority in question.

To test our hypotheses, we embedded a simple experiment within a survey used by the local government in Lincoln, Nebraska, to inform the development of its annual budget. Specifically, we examined whether perceptions of process fairness and outcome fairness increased among survey respondents who read a media report that emphasized the deliberative nature of previous public participation exercises undertaken by the city. In addition, we measured whether uncertain individuals were more likely to draw on information about public participation and fairness in their assessments of governmental activities. In each test, the results provide support for our hypotheses.

This inquiry contributes to the literature in several ways. First, this article provides evidence regarding the potential benefits that might accompany the use of public engagement efforts by local governments. While others have documented the use of public participation in various settings (e.g., Roberts 2004), assessed normative claims regarding the desirability of public input (e.g., Ho and Coates 2002; Neshkova and Guo 2011), or have assessed the impacts of public engagement (Fung 2001), this work takes a slightly different approach by providing evidence that public engagement efforts by local governments can increase perceptions of fairness and, perhaps, policy support for governmental decisions. Second, while the relationship between public participation and procedural fairness has been explored to some degree in other contexts, this article goes further by using experimental methods to assess the potential effects of public participation upon perceptions in a real-world setting. And third, from an information processing perspective, this study holds potential clues about the role of public participation and procedural fairness in shaping the attitudes of the general public by demonstrating that process fairness is a key piece of information that individuals use when evaluating governmental authorities. As such, this article contributes to the broader literature that seeks to understand the ways in which individuals use information about authorities to make judgments about those authorities.

Procedural Fairness, Public Participation, And Uncertainty Management

As Joss and Brownlea (1999, 323) point out, procedural justice research concerns itself with two primary questions. First, what constitutes a fair decision process? Second, how does fairness interrelate with decision acceptance? Commonly, the fairness of a process

is evaluated on four dimensions, though the four dimensions tend to change slightly depending on whether the target is a private authority such as a firm (Blader and Tyler 2003) or a public authority such as a criminal justice system (Tyler 1990). Within the public authority context, researchers have described four components upon which procedural fairness is judged: the ability of individuals to express their viewpoint, the authority's consistency in its application of processes and transparency about how decisions are made; the respectful treatment of individuals, and the trustworthiness of the authority (Tyler 1990).

Most commonly, scholars have worked in the criminal justice context to examine the relationships between perceptions of fairness and decision acceptance and satisfaction (e.g., Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 1990; Tyler and Wakslak 2004; Tyler, 2007; Watson and Angell 2007). In general, this research has shown that procedural fairness can positively impact individuals' perceptions of treatment by judges and courts (Tyler 1990, 2007), such that perceptions of fair treatment by governmental authorities can lead to increased feelings of the legitimacy of public institutions (Baird 2000) and increased levels of trust in political systems (Rottman 1998). Furthermore, positive perceptions of treatment at the hands of government officials can also lead to higher levels of satisfaction and acceptance of institutional directives (Tyler 1990). For example, researchers have documented positive effects such as the increased likelihood of individuals' acceptance of quasi-judicial decisions under conditions of fairness (MacCoun et al. 1988; Pruitt et al. 1993). On balance, this body of research has provided a fairly convincing account of the positive relationship between process fairness and outcome satisfaction and acceptance.

Of course, the interaction between individuals and the criminal justice system is a unique and somewhat sacred part of American life, where citizens (and noncitizens) expect some level of fair treatment from the police and courts. This is particularly true when contrasted with individuals' relationships with local governments, where they elect representatives and delegate authority to elected officials and bureaucrats who are expected to follow the rule of law and work in the best interest of the community. Thus, it is important to recognize that theories developed out of the criminal justice/criminology domain may not be directly applicable to other facets of public life. Nonetheless, as one transitions to examine the use of public participation in governmental processes through a procedural justice lens, it is clear to see how governmental inclusion of public input would meet many of the requirements of a procedurally fair process. For example, the inclusion of public input into governing decisions provides voice to the public and signals to citizens that their opinions are valued by policy makers. Moreover, to the point that public participation techniques are institutionalized and become a standard part of any decision-making exercise, public participation provides important information about the standardization of governmental processes. Assuming, then, that citizens perceive the use of public participation to be procedurally fair, we would expect citizens to express greater satisfaction with outcomes that are produced by governments that work to ensure public participation and incorporation of public input into their decision-making calculus.

Researchers have indeed made this link, though to this point only a small body of work has examined how the use of public participation can affect perceptions of procedural fairness in public institutions. For the most part, this work has studied the use of public participation in the development of such environmental policy as the siting of nuclear waste facilities (Linnerooth-Bayer and Fitzgerald 1996), water allocation (Syme, Nancarrow, and McCredin 1999), general ecosystem management issues (Smith and McDonough 2001), and wildlife management issues (Lauber 1999). Lauber and Knuth (1997),

for example, found that satisfaction with government decisions regarding the reintroduction of wildlife in New York State was positively related to the government's receptivity to citizen input and the influence that citizens had over the decision. More recently, Van Ryzin (2011) found that the use of fair processes by public servants increases the public's trust in those officials. Much like the scholarship that looks at the fair process effect in the courts context, this research has also shown there to be positive effects upon public attitudes when citizens perceive government to be acting fairly by incorporating public input into its decisions.

Drawing on this line of research, we posit that the inclusion of public input by a governmental authority will send strong signals to citizens about the fairness of the governmental authority. As such, we expect that individuals exposed to information that emphasizes local government's use of public participation—in this case, information about a public deliberation that emphasized the voice and process standardization aspects of procedural fairness—will be regarded as more fair by observers. Upon demonstrating the relationship between public participation and fairness, we move to determine whether perceptions of fairness are positively related to evaluations of government and satisfaction with outcomes. We expect that perceptions of fairness will lead to greater decision acceptance among the public. These expectations are more formally stated below.

Uncertainty Management Model

Whereas researchers have shown a preliminary link between public participation, procedural fairness, and satisfaction with governmental decisions, there has been a general lack of research attempting to explain why public participation in the development of public policy seems to increase satisfaction with outcomes. We contend that the uncertainty management model offers a useful lens through which to address this question. Developed primarily by social psychologists studying organizational psychology, the uncertainty management perspective is used to explain the differential effects of fairness upon evaluations of authorities (Lind and Van den Bos 2002; Van den Bos and Lind 2002). According to Lind and Van den Bos (2002, 184), procedural fairness provides people with a way to cope with the uncertainties that arise in their lives by communicating important information about an authority and that people tend to make greater use of fairness judgments under conditions of uncertainty.² Therefore, the processes and procedures that are used to treat the individual serve as critical pieces of information about the authority in question (Van den Bos 2001; Van den Bos and Lind 2002) and can play a similar role as knowledge seeking as individuals attempt to reduce their uncertainty by increasing their knowledge about a situation (e.g., Gross, Holtz, and Miller 1995).

Because individuals enter situations with variable levels of familiarity about the situation or variable levels of knowledge about an authority, it flows logically that people will draw upon cues variably. Indeed, uncertainty management scholars have found that under uncertain conditions individuals are, in fact, more likely to accept outcomes and processes when cues provide them a sense of fairness (Lind and Van den Bos 2002). Evidence of this relationship has been found in both laboratory and field settings (See 2009; Van den Bos, Van Schie, and Colenberg 2002). The research has shown that the effect of the fairness effect is strongest when it is presented early in the process (Lind, Kray, and

2. This argument is similar to that put forth by Koch (2003, 224) who argued that voters look for cues to reduce ideological uncertainty about candidates for the US House of Representatives.

Thompson 2001), and it has the greatest impact on those individuals who are less certain whether an authority can be trusted (Lind and Van den Bos 2002). Accordingly, research has shown that procedural justice concerns are weaker when an authority's trustworthiness is known (Van den Bos et al. 1998) and when uncertainty is not salient (Van den Bos, Lind, and Wilke 2001). Within the policy realm, See (2009) also tested the assumptions of this perspective and found that support for public policies can increase among uncertain individuals who perceive an authority to be fair.³

From this review of the literature, we derived three hypotheses:

- H1: Information about the use of deliberative public participation procedures will increase perceptions of fairness about the budgeting process.
- H2: General evaluations of city government and support for its use of tax dollars will be highly correlated with perceptions of process fairness when controlling for other relevant factors.
- H3: Uncertainty will moderate the positive relationship between perceptions of process fairness, evaluations of city government, and support for its use of tax dollars.

Conceptualizing Certainty/Uncertainty

Before moving on to further describe our hypotheses and methods, we first explain how we conceptualize uncertainty. To do this, we draw upon research from both social psychology and political science. Social psychologists Van den Bos and Lind (2002, 5) define uncertainty as: "The salience of either the unpredictability of future events or the inconsistency between important cognitions, experiences, or behaviors." Political scientists Alvarez and Brehm (1997) define uncertainty as a lack of information among individuals that stems from the high costs associated with collecting information about public policies. Only a handful of studies have focused upon the measurement of certainty/uncertainty, and as political scientists McGraw, Hasecke, and Conger (2003, 427n2) note, there has not been a sustained attempt to develop sophisticated measures of certainty. Instead, a collection of subjective and objective measures have been used to calculate the extent to which individuals are unsure about their "cognitions, experiences, or behaviors" or the extent to which they have failed to educate themselves about governmental operations.

In his use of subjective uncertainty, Koch (2003) relied on a measure employed by National Election Studies to better understand candidate choice, where respondents were simply asked how certain they were of their responses to a set of questions. Similarly, Alvarez and Franklin (1994) asked respondents about their level of certainty in response to a set of questions about political figures. In their view, Alvarez and Franklin see uncertainty as inherently subjective; thus, by asking respondents about their level of uncertainty the authors argue that this approach is no more or less fraught with potential problems than are other survey questions that attempt to measure subjective states. As

3. Consistent with this line of research is work that has shown survey respondents to use first judgments to provide top-of-the-head responses (Zaller 1992) to respond to survey questions. Similarly, a long line of research has provided evidence of the power of framing effects and cues to provide mental shortcuts to survey respondents. In our particular experiment, we expect that information about fairness will provide a central piece of information that respondents will use to inform their judgments about local government.

a result, the authors argue that such low cost approaches can be reliably used in assessments of uncertainty among survey respondents.

Though Koch (2003) and Alvarez and Franklin (1994) relied on subjective measures of uncertainty, most work in political science has instead relied upon objective measures of uncertainty whereby the certainty of an individual is measured by the accuracy or objective correctness of a response. Examples of such measures in political science can be found in Alvarez and Brehm (1997) who looked at racial attitudes among Americans and Bartels (1986) who studied uncertainty as it relates to vote choice.⁴ In the present study, we, too, utilize an objective measure of uncertainty to carry out our analyses. As is described in greater detail below, the measure relies on responses to two fact-based questions. Individuals who answer both questions correctly are considered to be least uncertain (most certain) about their local government, while those who are not able to answer either question correctly are considered to be the most uncertain (least certain). As such, our measure of uncertainty is similar conceptually to the informational uncertainty, in that it relies upon levels of knowledge to measure and assess individuals' sense of uncertainty about a target (Van den Bos and Lind 2010).

Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we examine the attitudes of individuals who were presented with information about public input processes used by a local government to develop its budget. Lincoln, Nebraska, contains approximately 250,000 residents according to the US Census Bureau (2010 estimates). The city is home to a large, public university that serves as the flagship institution for the state. Similar to many other cities in the state and region, the city operates a strong mayor-council form of government. In 2008, the city of Lincoln initiated a number of public input exercises to allow the public to comment and provide input on the city's budgeting decisions for the upcoming fiscal year. In April and May, 2008, the city hosted a random telephone survey, a nonrandom online survey, a series of town hall meetings, and one public deliberation that brought residents together with the mayor and other city officials for a full day to discuss city budgetary issues.⁵ In spring 2009, the city followed up on the 2008 activities, again hosting a nonrandom online survey and another public deliberation about the budget. Finally, in December 2009 to January 2010, the city conducted a random phone survey and a nonrandom online survey. This three-step, multifaceted approach to collect public input was designed to give individuals multiple outlets through which to state their opinion about the city's budget and constituted a multiyear effort by the city to systematically bring the public into its budget decision-making efforts. The key feature of each set of activities was the public deliberation among the public and city officials that took place in 2008 and 2009, thus providing an opportunity to test the impact of public deliberation upon perceptions of fairness.

4. Social psychologists have paid more attention to measuring certainty/uncertainty, though the research is still fairly scarce. Much of the research that has looked at certainty as a measurement issue has viewed it through the lens of attitude intensity. As political scientists McGraw, Hasecke, and Conger (2003) note, certainty is typically treated as a dimension of attitude strength in social-psychological theories. Gross, Holtz, and Miller (1995, 215) noted that "a coherent picture of the nomological net in which the concept of certainty is located and its convergent or discriminant validity with respect to other measures of attitude strength is lacking."

5. The public deliberations in 2008 and 2009 were modeled on the deliberative models developed by Fishkin (1991) and colleagues.

Design and Procedure

Participants for this study were recruited from the random phone survey in December, 2009, and the nonrandom online survey in January, 2010 (T1). The random telephone survey of 607 people asked respondents about their satisfaction with city services and their views on city budgeting. At the completion of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to be recontacted at a later date to participate in a follow-up study about city budgeting issues. In total, 268 people agreed and provided their e-mail address to the interviewer. The nonrandom internet survey was accessed by the public on the city website and contained the exact questions that were asked on the telephone survey and were asked in the same order as on the telephone survey. Just over 1,000 individuals took the online survey. Again, at the completion of the online survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to be contacted for a follow-up study. This time, 422 people agreed to the follow-up exercises and provided e-mail addresses. In April 2010 (T2), all 690 individuals who agreed to be contacted for the follow-up study were e-mailed an invitation to take a follow-up online survey about city budgeting issues; 197 (29%) actually participated in the experiment and completed the entire survey, allowing us to use their results in the predictive models presented below.⁶ The sample was primarily female (58%), white (97%), fairly well-educated (41% reported having at least some graduate school education), and slightly older (48% reported being at least 55 years old). Participants to the T2 survey were similar demographically to the initial samples at T1. In comparison to the general population of the city, the sample was slightly more female (50.2% for the overall population), more white (89.2% white for the overall population), slightly more educated (33.3% in general population have bachelor's degree or higher), and older (10.4% of the general population is 65 years or older).

To measure uncertainty, participants were asked two questions at T1. Both questions were multiple choice questions; one asked whether respondents knew which area of spending constitutes the largest proportion of the city's budget and the other asked about the amount of property tax that the city receives from each dollar collected from city residents (Appendix 1 for full list of survey questions used). Using an objective measure of uncertainty, respondents were coded a "3," if they were not able to answer either question correctly, a "2" if they answered one question correctly, and a "1" if they answered both questions correctly. With this coding scheme, larger numbers represent higher levels of uncertainty. This uncertainty measure was significantly correlated ($r = .340, p, .001$) with a subjective certainty question that was asked at T2: "In general, how informed on City issues are you?" Also measured at T1 was an overall measure of satisfaction with city services; following the lead of See (2009), this variable serves as a control variable in our multivariate tests of hypotheses 2 and 3.

The experimental design of the study at T2 was a simple one-way design.⁷ Upon accessing the online survey, respondents were randomly assigned automatically to one of

6. The two-phase approach to data collection had held a primary advantage in that the effort provided panel data so that the key measure of uncertainty could be measured at time 1 without contaminating the experimental treatment and variables of interest measured at time 2. Specifically, the data collection approach allowed us to partially side step potential problems associated with endogeneity (Gibson 2008). In addition to the methodological benefits, our data collection approach also allowed us to leverage a real-world exercise in public participation and examine its impacts upon perceptions of fairness and perceptions of government more generally.

7. In total, 16.4% of respondents that provided responses at T2 were drawn from the original random telephone sample, while the rest were from the online survey.

the two treatments.⁸ In both treatments, participants were asked to read one of the two actual articles that appeared in the major local newspaper about the city's use of public input for budgeting in the previous 2 years. The two articles varied primarily in their descriptions of the city's use of public input to inform its budget. Those in the "deliberation" condition read an article that was written by an observer who described the city's efforts to involve the public in its budgeting decisions through the use of public deliberations. It contained language that highlighted the public's interactions with government officials and the public input's provision of voice to the public. Indeed, the article was quite positive in its description of the city's use of public input. The other half of respondents was placed in the "nodeliberation" condition. These individuals were presented with an opinion article written by an actual participant in the 2009 survey and deliberation. This article also focused on the city's use of public input but did not mention the interaction between the public and city officials and did not mention the deliberative aspect of the process. Instead, the article was somewhat critical of the methods employed by the city and the author suggested that the city may have had ulterior motives for collecting public input on the issue.⁹ In short, the article suggested that the city's use of public input was done for political reasons rather than as a civically responsible attempt at bringing the public into the budgeting process (both articles are presented in Appendix 2¹⁰). Immediately following the reading of the articles, participants were asked whether they felt the article was positive or negative in its tone as a manipulation check.

Next, respondents answered a number of questions about the fairness of the city's budgeting efforts. Specifically, participants were asked about "process fairness" ("The procedures used by the City of Lincoln to make its budgetary decisions are fair") and "outcome fairness" ("The outcomes of the procedures used by the City of Lincoln to make its budgetary decisions are fair").¹¹ To test the effect of public participation on perceptions of fairness, responses to these questions served as dependent variables in our test of Hypothesis 1. In addition, responses to the "process fairness" question served as a primary independent variable in our test of hypotheses 2 and 3, while "outcome fairness" served as a control in the tests of those hypotheses. Both questions were asked on a 5-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating stronger levels of agreement.

Finally, participants were asked to respond to two questions about more general attitudes about city government and their use of tax dollars that served as dependent vari-

8. Statistical tests show that randomization did not unequally distribute individuals by gender, age, race, or education.

9. Interestingly, the argument laid out by the author is similar to a critique of the procedural fairness literature that was outlined by MacCoun (2005). In that review, MacCoun focused partially on the ability of policy makers and other authorities to use procedural fairness to placate individuals who are in a vulnerable position.

10. There are potential confounds with the articles used to treat participants. In particular, one of the articles was written by a reporter who served as a neutral observer, whereas the other was written by an actual participant to the public input activities. Together, these factors may have reduced the credibility of the private letter writer in the eyes of readers. However, the credibility of the private resident may have been bolstered by the fact that she mentioned her expertise in policy studies and survey design. Nonetheless, we feel that the articles tapped into the intended sentiments of our participants. And as the results below show, the manipulation checks and the hypotheses related to the two treatments both produced results that were expected. In the end, while the manipulations were not ideal, each was used because of our collaboration with the city on this study. Both articles were vetted by the mayor's office for appropriateness and because of commitments to their efforts, we were somewhat bound in our use of experimental manipulations. Further, while we could have developed hypothetical stories that may have been more ideal for this purpose, the mayor's office was reluctant to present residents with false articles about a very real policy effort.

11. These questions were adapted from See (2009).

ables in the regression analyses. First, respondents were asked, "Overall, how would you rate the performance of Lincoln City government?" We label this the "overall assessment" variable; responses to this question served as the dependent variable in the first set of models designed to measure the impact of procedural fairness and uncertainty upon respondents' overall assessment of city government. Response options ranged from a score of one (poor) to five (excellent). The second dependent variable was designed to measure public support for, and satisfaction with, the city government's tax policy and use of its revenue: "I receive good value for my city government tax dollars" and was asked on a 5-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating higher levels of agreement.¹² We label this the "policy support" variable.

Analyses and Results

As a manipulation check, participants were asked whether they thought the treatment article was positive or negative in its description after reading it. As expected, participants in the deliberation condition were significantly more likely to say that the article was positive ($M = 3.63$; $SD = .77$) than those in the nondeliberation condition ($M = 2.11$; $SD = .98$) ($F_{(1, 201)} = 155.63, p < .001$). The results gave us confidence that our experimental treatment had the intended effect.

To test our first hypothesis, that information about the deliberative process would increase perceptions of fairness, we first employed analysis of variance to determine whether descriptions of the public participation activities and the emphasis upon the city government's provision of voice to the public positively impacted perceptions of fairness among participants. As figure 1 shows, the deliberation treatment did have the hypothesized effect upon peoples' perceptions of fairness such that individuals in the deliberation condition were more likely to agree that the procedures used by the city to make its budgetary decisions are fair: $M = 3.50$ ($SD = .80$) for deliberation condition and $M = 3.24$ ($SD = .85$) for nondeliberation condition ($F_{(1, 200)} = 4.94, p = .027, d = .31$). Furthermore, participants in the deliberation condition were more likely to indicate that the outcomes of the procedures used by the city of Lincoln to make its budgetary decisions are fair: $M = 3.46$ ($SD = .80$) for deliberation condition and $M = 3.17$ ($SD = .86$) for nondeliberation condition ($F_{(1, 200)} = 6.05, p = .015, d = .34$). Together, though the mean differences and accompanying effect sizes (Cohen's $d = .31$ and $.34$, respectively) are somewhat modest, the results provide support for Hypothesis 1 and suggest that information about government's use of public input can increase perceptions of fairness among the public, particularly when that information emphasizes the deliberative aspect of the public participation techniques employed by the city.

To test our second and third hypotheses, we ran both ordered logistic and OLS regressions on two different dependent variables.¹³ The dependent variable in the first set of

12. These questions were chosen primarily because the city wanted to assess local evaluations of government and perceptions of the value of tax dollar. However, the variables fit nicely with this inquiry because they allow for an overall assessment of government, as well as a more specific evaluation of the city's use of tax dollars.

13. Because of the ordered nature of the dependent variable, ordinal logistic regression is the more appropriate analytical tool. The models were run using ordinal regression and the results were highly consistent with the OLS regressions presented here. Thus, we present the OLS regressions for ease of interpretation and presentation of the interaction effect. Results of the ordinal logistic regressions are available upon request. Furthermore, rather than employ a two-stage regression model, we chose to examine the effects of the treatment upon fairness separately for a more direct analysis of the treatment's effect.

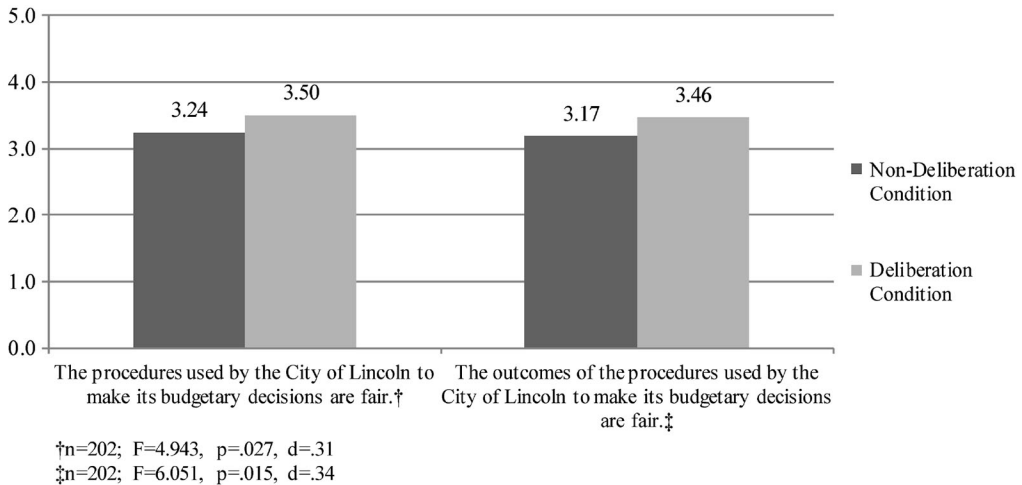


Figure 1. Perceptions of Fairness by Experimental Condition.

models was a response to the “overall assessment” variable designed to measure respondents’ general evaluation of city government. The second dependent variable was a response to the “policy support” variable designed to measure general support for the city government’s tax policy and use of its revenue. For each dependent variable, we ran one full regression including a control for the treatment condition and also ran separate models for those in the deliberation condition and one for those in the nondeliberation condition to better see the relationships between our variables of interest for the different treatment conditions.¹⁴ Again, we expected the impact of fairness upon overall assessments of government to be more acute in the deliberative condition of this study, where individuals were presented with information that accentuated the procedural fairness of the governmental entity.

The process fairness variable was inserted into our regression models to test for the main effects upon our dependent variables; inclusion of this variable allows us to test Hypothesis 2 regarding the main effects of process fairness upon assessments of government. In order to test Hypothesis 3 regarding uncertainty, we also include the objective uncertainty measure and interact this variable with the process fairness variable. This multiplicative interaction term allowed us to observe the moderating effects of uncertainty upon perceptions of process fairness when individuals are asked to evaluate local government and make judgments regarding policy support and, thus, served as the test for Hypothesis 3. Finally, because of the theoretical links between procedural and distributive fairness (Tyler 1990; Van den Bos and Lind 2002), we included the outcome fairness variable described above, as well as the mean service satisfaction score described above. We expected that responses to both dependent variables would be positively related to respondents’ mean satisfaction with government services. We also included a control for the manipulation check question presented above. However, the inclusion of that variable

14. The model was also ran using a three-term interaction term (procedural fairness perception \times uncertainty \times procedural fairness condition) for all respondents; however, the three-way interaction term does not reach conventional levels of significance.

did not improve the fit of the models, nor did it impact the significance of the variables already included in the models. Therefore, we chose not to include the variable in the analyses presented in tables 1 and 2. It is important to note that the tests of hypotheses 2 and 3, rather than serving as a test of the effects of the treatment upon perceptions of fairness, are intended to assess the impact of fairness upon the dependent variables above. As such, we do not make any claims about the direct or indirect effects of the treatment variable. Nonetheless, bivariate tests (not presented) showed that there was no statistical relationship between the variables; thus, there can be no indirect effect.

Table 1 presents the results of the set of models related to the question asking respondents to rate the overall performance of city government.¹⁵ The column labeled "Both Conditions" presents the full model controlling for experimental condition. As the column shows, the main effects of procedural fairness did have a significant, positive impact upon overall assessments of government. Additionally, the interaction between process fairness and uncertainty also had a significant, positive impact (see Figure 2) such that a one-unit increase in uncertainty increased the effects of process fairness upon overall assessments by .148. It is also evident from the results in Table 2 that outcomes had strong predictive power. In particular, we saw that perceptions of outcome fairness and general satisfaction with city services both had a highly significant relationship with overall assessments of government. Interestingly, the effect of the treatment control variable was negative and nonsignificant. Considering that the treatment had such a strong relationship with process and outcome fairness, this finding was somewhat puzzling in that it suggests that the treatment effects are indirect, working through the process and outcome fairness variables. To assess this possibility, we dropped the outcome and process variables, as well as the uncertainty variable and interaction, from the model. The results again showed that there was a nonsignificant relationship between the treatment control and the dependent variable. We conducted another test to determine whether the results of the analysis changed when the treatment control was dropped from the model. Once again, there were no appreciable effects on the results of the regression model.

To better see the relationship between the interaction terms and the dependent variables, we ran regressions to isolate the relationships under each experimental condition. In both the deliberation and the nondeliberation models, the columns on the left-hand side present the findings without the introduction of the interaction terms to the models and the right-hand column includes the interaction term. As the table shows, the interaction between fairness and uncertainty was a significant positive predictor of overall evaluations of city government performance for those in the deliberation condition. Specifically, a one-unit increase in uncertainty variable led to a .267 increase in participants' evaluation of the overall performance of city government. Furthermore, the inclusion of the interaction variable improved the predictive ability of the model as the adjusted r^2 increases by .28 in the interaction model. In contrast, we saw neither main effects nor interaction effects for the variables of interest in the nondeliberation condition. However, we did see strong outcome effects as outcome fairness and satisfaction with services both significantly improved evaluations of government. Together, the pattern of the results in Table 1 provides strong support for Hypotheses 2 and 3 that perceptions of fairness can positively affect overall assessments of government and that the effects are enhanced under conditions of uncertainty.

15. Because of the introduction of the interaction terms, all variables were mean centered for ease of interpretation.

Table 1. Procedural Fairness in Budgeting and Overall Assessments of City Government

	Both Conditions		Fairness Condition		Nonfairness Condition	
Process Fairness	.202* (.085)	.230# (.121)	.301* (.122)	.098 (.119)	.106 (.120)	
Uncertainty	2.100# (.056)	2.106 (.082)	2.142# (.081)	2.084 (.079)	2.076 (.080)	
Process Fairness × Uncertainty	.148* (.070)	—	.267* (.108)	—	.054 (.095)	
Outcome Fairness	.437*** (.084)	.387** (.127)	.424** (.125)	.489*** (.116)	.488*** (.116)	
Satisfaction with Services	.431*** (.103)	.461** (.153)	.419** (.151)	.414** (.143)	.414** (.144)	
Fairness Treatment	2.085 (.093)	—	—	—	—	
Constant	3.058 (.067)	2.976 (.069)	2.962 (.068)	3.054 (.063)	3.055 (.063)	
Adjusted R ²	.458	.416	.444	.474	.470	
F	28.994***	19.903***	17.942***	21.758***	17.336***	
N	198	105	105	92	92	

Dependent variable: "Overall, how would you rate the performance of Lincoln City government?" Scored on a 1-5 scale where 1 = "Poor" and 5 = "Excellent."

$p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Procedural Fairness in Budgeting and Support for Government Policy

	Both Conditions	Fairness Condition	Nonfairness Condition
Process Fairness	.240* (.095)	.274* (.131)	.128 (.140)
Uncertainty	2.166** (.062)	2.157# (.088)	2.163# (.091)
Process Fairness × Uncertainty	.136# (.078)	—	—
Outcome Fairness	.420*** (.094)	.333* (.137)	.509*** (.136)
Satisfaction with Services	.570*** (.114)	.635*** (.165)	.530** (.166)
Fairness Treatment	2.055 (.104)	—	—
Constant	3.483 (.075)	3.435 (.075)	3.484 (.073)
Adjusted R ²	.462	.433	.464
F	29.371***	21.273***	21.055***
N	197	105	91

Dependent variable: "I receive good value for my city government tax dollars." Scored on a 1-5 scale where 1 = "Strongly Disagree" and 5 = "Strongly Agree."

$p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

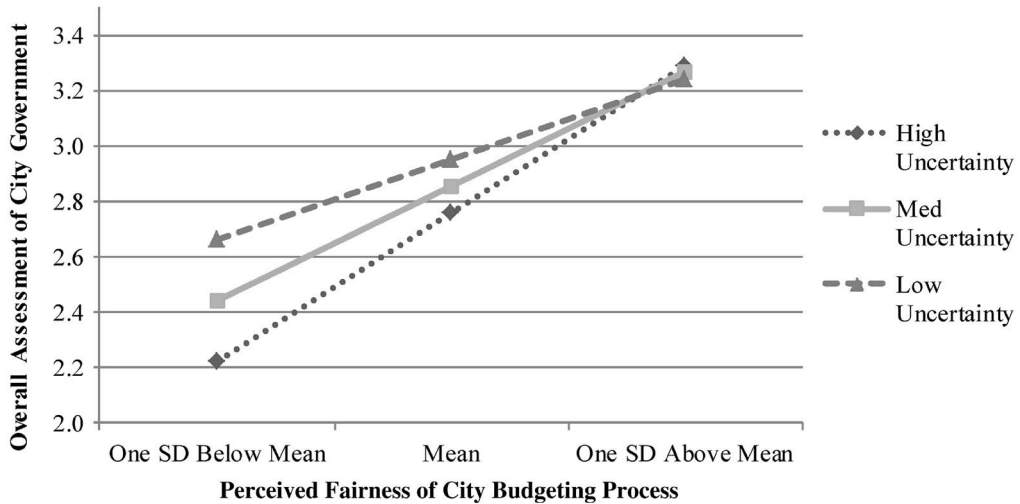


Figure 2. Assessments of City Government by Perceived Fairness and Level of Uncertainty.

To further understand the interaction between fairness and uncertainty and their impact upon support for governmental policy, we moved to examine the impact of fairness upon individuals' responses to the policy support variable. Again, this dependent variable was designed to tap respondents' level of support for the tax policies of their local government. As Table 2 shows, there was a very similar pattern between our variables of interest in these models as in those presented in Table 1, though in the "Both Conditions" model, the interaction variable did not reach conventional levels of significance.

Once again, we ran separate regressions isolating each experimental condition. Similar to the results presented in Table 1, we saw that the main effects of process fairness were strong predictors of policy support. Further, the interaction term of interest again reached statistical significance in the deliberation condition but not in the nonfairness condition. Once again, we also saw that outcome fairness and service satisfaction are consistent drivers of peoples' perceptions of tax value. However, as we saw in Table 1, the effects of outcome fairness and service satisfaction were diminished among those in the deliberation condition, in relation to those in the nondeliberation condition.

Discussion

In general, the results presented here provide support for all three of the hypotheses posed above. It is clear that information regarding public participation in governing decisions, specifically information that emphasizes deliberation and the public's voice in governmental decisions, can lead to increased perceptions of fairness. Interestingly, public participation does not only have an effect upon notions of process fairness but it also appears that information about public input processes can drive perceptions of outcome fairness as well, as the results in figure 1 above suggest. To the extent that individuals focus on governmental outputs rather than processes—and the results of the regression models certainly suggest that they do—this finding has implications for understanding

the ways in which individuals link governmental processes to satisfaction with governmental outputs. Indeed, assuming that descriptions of public input processes are in fact driving general notions of fairness, the findings seem to be in line with previous research (e.g., Tyler 1990), which has shown process fairness to be a key driver of satisfaction and decision acceptance among the public.

The findings of our regression analyses also provide solid support for our second hypothesis that process fairness will positively impact overall evaluations of government and policy support represented by the perceived value of tax dollars. The main effect of process fairness upon evaluations of government and government policy are significant at conventional levels in both the "Both Conditions" models and in three of the four "Deliberation Condition" models. The significant relationships suggest that the effect of process fairness, presumptively being driven by perceptions of fairness associated with public participation in this case, is a strong predictor as we hypothesized above. Thus, in a strict examination of our main effects, we observe what Van den Bos and Lind (2002) term the "fair process effect."

Additionally, we see support for our third hypothesis that the effects of process fairness will be greater among individuals high in uncertainty about city government. The significance of this interaction supports our most critical hypothesis and is directly in line with our expectations regarding the positive effects that process fairness, again being driven by the notions of fairness associated with public participation activities, can have upon overall evaluations of government and its policies among those with relatively less knowledge about government. From an uncertainty management perspective, this relationship likely exists because the fairness of processes used by government provides uncertain individuals with information regarding the authority's behavior, which, in turn, shapes the ways in which the respondent evaluates government. Thus, the finding holds a potential explanation for why governmental activity that includes public participation is seen as relatively more fair.

Moving the focus from the variables directly associated with our hypotheses tests, it is important to recognize the strong effect that service satisfaction had upon perceptions of city performance and perceptions of value. This finding is consistent with literature that has shown service satisfaction to be a strong correlate with overall assessments of municipal government (Van Ryzin 2004, 2007). Indeed, the finding suggests the need for future researchers to seriously consider the use of service satisfaction as a control in analyses related to evaluations of city government.

Finally, it is critical to acknowledge some of the methodological implications of our employment of uncertainty. Specifically, rather than manipulate uncertainty, which has been a common approach in the literature examining uncertainty management (See 2009; Van den Bos and Lind 2002), we measured uncertainty using an objective scale and interacted that variable with process fairness. Thus, to use the language of Van den Bos and Lind (2009), we employed an "informational uncertainty" metric. Because those authors have documented that the use of informational uncertainty may actually be a weaker moderator of fairness than other measures of uncertainty, it is possible that our measure actually underestimates the impact of uncertainty in its moderating role. To assess this possibility, and to better understand the potential effects of measuring or manipulating uncertainty, we recommend that researchers employ multiple experimental designs, which might capitalize upon both manipulating uncertainty as well as using objective and subjective measures such that it would be possible to observe the differential effects of each approach.

Alternative Interpretations

As a direct test of our hypotheses, the results here have provided support for the notion that perceptions of process fairness, when measured in conjunction with individual uncertainty, can, in fact, lead to improved perceptions of governmental activities. However, it may be beneficial to consider the link between our study and the long line of research that has focused on framing effects.

As Alvarez and Franklin (1994, 671) note, "Citizens face an inherently uncertain political world yet they are nonetheless called upon to make consequential political choices." And as we know from public opinion research, citizens may not necessarily be up to the task as survey participants are not fully rational actors capable of making complex calculations on the spot. Instead, we know that individuals (based on research conducted in the United States) have relatively low knowledge levels when it comes to political and policy matters (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1990), they tend to rely upon top of the head responses (Zaller 1992), and that there is variation among individuals with some people relying upon more rational, calculus-based decisions, while others rely more upon intuition and heuristics (Lau 2003). Thus, in situations where there are relatively low levels of knowledge about an issue, respondents may be more susceptible to framing effects and other types of manipulations (Sniderman and Theriault 2004).

In our particular scenario where individuals were being asked about local budgeting and were presented with information about related public participation exercises, we believe that there were two reasons to suspect that individuals were likely to be susceptible to such cues. First, there may be low levels of knowledge among our survey respondents because city budgeting is not an issue that consistently makes headlines or that is likely discussed among individuals at their leisure; in such a case, it is not unreasonable to assume that individuals will be more open to the effects of framing. A second, and somewhat related source of susceptibility, may actually stem from the fact that individuals in this study were contacted multiple times about the city budget. Thus, it may be the case that the surveys heightened previously nonexistent sensitivities toward the city's budget situation among respondents but did not serve to help solidify opinions among participants. Supposing that this was indeed the case, it may be that the individuals in our study were actually relatively knowledgeable of city budgeting since they were contacted repeatedly by the city but that they may have held competing opinions about the city's budget and, potentially, the city government in general. In other words, our survey participants may have reached a point of ambivalence toward the budget situation such that individuals possessed competing attitudes toward the city and its budget approach. To paraphrase Nelson and Kinder (1996), when individuals hold competing attitudes simultaneously, frames help individuals decide which of their many considerations is relevant and important and which should be given less attention. As Sniderman and Theriault (2004, 138) suggest, "the weaker the consistency of the pool of considerations that citizens take account of in making a choice about an issue in politics, the stronger the framing effect." In this instance, information about fairness may have been the cue that affected ultimate outcomes of city government activity. This potential does not diminish the significance of the results, however.

Limitations

A number of caveats are in order. First, Hypothesis 1 was designed to test whether individuals who were presented with an article about public participation perceived the processes used by the city to be more procedurally fair. While our test did support our hypothesis, we employed an admittedly blunt treatment of process fairness to participants, and the article in the nondeliberation condition was not necessarily ideal. In particular, the newspaper article in the deliberation condition reads more like a standard, objective piece of journalism, while the article in the nondeliberation condition reads more like an opinion piece. Nonetheless, we chose to utilize actual newspaper descriptions of the public input process as opposed to fictitious descriptions because of the nature of the sample and the purpose of the survey in which this experiment was embedded. Surely, a laboratory experiment would have provided a better opportunity to devise more nuanced descriptions of the public input processes.

Second, recall that the fairness of a procedure is typically measured on four dimensions: the ability of individuals to express their viewpoint; the authority's consistency in its application of processes and transparency about how decisions are made; the respectful treatment of individuals; and the trustworthiness of the authority (Tyler 1990). The measures of process and outcome fairness in our study did not allow us to fully assess which aspects of public participation might have driven the increased perceptions of fairness in the fairness condition. This may be troublesome in light of the fact that the deliberation article appeals to at least three of the four components of fairness outlined by Tyler, while the nondeliberation article seems to focus more squarely on the trustworthiness aspect of fairness. Because there is little guidance in the literature that would allow us to make strong claims regarding which components of fairness may have been most critical in driving the fairness assessments of participants, we were left to presume that the deliberation article's description of the provision of the public's voice and the city's emphasis on transparency and respect were the primary factors that lead to increased perceptions of fairness among survey participants. Future research would do well to parse these potentially differential effects by emphasizing each individually.

Third, we must recognize that in our results outcome fairness and satisfaction with governmental services had consistently positive impacts upon evaluations of government and evaluations of tax value. Though the strength of this positive relationship diminished in the deliberation condition, the results of this study suggest that distributive concerns are at least as important in overall evaluations of government as are procedural concerns. Finally, at the same time, we see that perceptions of process fairness can lead to positive attitudes toward government, researchers must also recognize that information regarding governmental processes do not consistently produce positive evaluations from the public (e.g., Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Further, observers must be cognizant of the potential for messages regarding process fairness to be manipulated for malevolent purposes (MacCoun 2005), a possibility that was recognized by the author of the article in the nondeliberation condition.

Conclusion

By examining the interaction between public participation and procedural fairness through the uncertainty management lens, we have contributed to the literature in sev-

eral ways. First, this article has integrated three areas of research to outline the ways in which the general public perceives the fairness of public participation activities sponsored by government. In particular, we have provided evidence that individuals who are presented with information about governments' use of public participation exercises do view governmental activities to be more fair. Again, because of the significant body of research showing fairness to be a strong predictor of governmental outputs and decisions (e.g., Tyler 1990; MacCoun et al. 1988), these findings have important implications for understanding decision acceptance among the general public and may even help researchers understand the public's trust, or lack of trust, in public institutions (Ramirez 2008). An increasing amount of governmental business requires public input—President Obama issued a call for Transparency and Open Government aimed at fostering public participation immediately on assuming office in January 2009—thus, it is essential that researchers strive to understand public perceptions toward governmental efforts to incorporate formalized public outreach efforts. This article serves as a step toward providing this understanding by going beyond traditional approaches to theorizing about the use of public participation and making prescriptions about its use, which it does by providing evidence about the potential effects of public participation on attitudes toward government.

Second, on a more general level, the present effort contributes to our understanding of why fairness matters. As noted, a long line of research has provided evidence of the positive effects of fairness, yet there has been a relative lack of associated research attempting to explain why procedural fairness is such a powerful predictor of attitudes and behavior (Lind and Van den Bos 2002). In this article, we saw that uncertain individuals are more likely to make use of information regarding public participation and procedural fairness in their assessment of government. This finding suggests that governmental procedures, particularly the use of public input to inform governmental decisions, can drive support for public policy, presumably because it provides an importance piece of information about the ways in which government works. As researchers continue to explore the intersection of fairness and satisfaction with government, it will be critical that researchers continue to ask why fairness is such an important component of government satisfaction. Tyler and colleagues have, of course, explored this question extensively in the criminal justice context. It is our view, however, that this question needs to be addressed more fully in other areas of government if researchers are truly to understand the formation of public opinions toward governmental institutions.

In sum, the results of this work provide a potential perspective from which to explore the interaction between public participation and fairness. As efforts to increase direct public input into governmental decisions increase, it will be imperative that scholars continue to investigate how the public views such efforts. Additionally, it will be critical to study such relationships with a variety of samples and methods. If citizens do indeed consider the use of public participation to be procedurally fair, there may be considerable implications for government since a long line of research out of the procedural justice perspective has shown us that there are clear attitudinal and behavioral implications when individuals consider authorities to be acting in a fair way.

Appendix 1. Survey Questions, Frequencies, and Descriptive Statistics

Phone Survey (T1)

Service Satisfaction Variable

Please tell me if you are very dissatisfied (1), dissatisfied (2), neutral (3), satisfied (4), or very satisfied (5) with each.

- A. Overall quality of life in the city
- B. The overall appearance of the city
- C. The cleanliness of the city
- D. The number of unsightly or blighted properties in the city
- E. The safety and security of the city
- F. Recreational opportunities
- G. Employment opportunities
- H. Ease of car travel in the city
- I. Ease of bike travel in the city
- J. Ease of bus travel in the city
- K. Overall natural environment
- L. Community spirit of Lincoln's people
- M. Snowplowing of city streets
- N. Fire and ambulance services
- O. City recycling and sustainability efforts
- P. Availability of affordable quality housing
- Q. Job creation and economic development
- R. Zoning and growth planning
- S. Management of sewage and storm water
- T. Building safety permits and inspections
- U. Health department services
- V. Street maintenance
- W. The overall quality of parks

Uncertainty Variable

Of each dollar collected in property taxes in Lincoln, the city government receives approximately how much? Would you say ... (correct answer in bold)

Less than 20%

20–40%

40–60%

More than 60%

Lincoln city government spends the HIGHEST amount of its budget on which category of services? Would you say. . . (correct answer in bold)

Health department
services

Parks, recreation,
and libraries

Public safety
services

Maintaining and
building roads

Follow Up Online Survey (T2)

Manipulation Check

How would you rate the author's opinion of the public participation procedures?

Very
Negative (1)

Somewhat
Negative (2)

Neither Negative
nor Positive (3)

Somewhat
Positive (4)

Very
Positive (5)

Process Fairness Variable

The procedures used by the City of Lincoln to make its budgetary decisions are fair.

Strongly
Disagree (1)

Disagree
(2)

Neither Agree
nor Disagree (3)

Agree
(4)

Strongly
Agree (5)

Outcome Fairness Variable

The outcomes of the procedures used by the City of Lincoln to make its budgetary decisions are fair.

Strongly
Disagree (1)

Disagree
(2)

Neither Agree
nor Disagree (3)

Agree
(4)

Strongly
Agree (5)

Overall Assessment Variable

Overall, how would you rate the performance of Lincoln City government?

Poor (1)

Fair (2)

Good (3)

Very Good (4)

Excellent (5)

Policy Support Variable

I receive good value for my city government tax dollars.

Strongly
Disagree (1)

Disagree
(2)

Neither Agree
nor Disagree (3)

Agree
(4)

Strongly
Agree (5)

Appendix 2. Treatment Conditions

Deliberation Condition

Budget is focus of gathering

April 13, 2008

City faces a nearly \$6 million shortfall, mayor tells residents at meeting meant to discuss priorities.

Mayor Beutler hosted 51 randomly chosen Lincoln residents at The Cornhusker Hotel on Saturday to talk about the municipal budget.

The daylong discussion, called "Priority Lincoln," was designed to help city leaders figure out how to prioritize city services. It is part of Mayor Beutler's new approach to budgeting to try to end annual budget shortfalls of as much as \$9 million.

The city also sought public input with a scientific phone survey of 600 residents last month. The people who participated Saturday were chosen from the pool of residents surveyed.

Other residents can participate by taking an online survey or attending a town hall meeting.

It's all part of Mayor Beutler's plan to begin using outcome-based budgeting, an approach by which the city will make budget decisions based on citizen priorities.

Their help is needed.

Mayor Beutler announced Saturday that the city is projecting a nearly \$6 million budget shortfall this year—smaller than some of the gaps in recent years but increasingly difficult to close as the city runs out of short-term solutions.

The mayor said he is eager to hear from working people who use city services, so that city leaders know, instead of guess, how Lincoln residents feel. For too long, he said, the city has told people who live in Lincoln they can have all the city services they're used to having—even as the city grows—without tax increases or growth in government.

No longer can the city keep building the same old budgets with inflationary increases, Mayor Beutler said. It's time to figure out, for example, how much residents are willing to spend to keep crime under control. "The easy way of doing things is over," Mayor Beutler said. "I'm going to take the heat for some real difficult decisions this summer."

Much of Saturday was spent educating participants about the budget and how the city got to the point of repeated budget shortfalls. For example, it was news to some that the city's budget is entirely separate from the school district's and that the city cannot rob the school district's treasury to solve its budget problems.

People also learned that the city gets most of its revenue from sales taxes. That the city property tax rate has dropped 45% since 1993. That the school district gets 64 cents of every dollar in property tax revenue they pay, compared with 14 cents for the city. That 69% of the city's budget goes toward personnel costs, but state law dictates that salaries and benefits keep up with other cities, regardless of the budget picture.

And they learned that Lincoln's property tax rate is the seventh lowest out of the 10 largest Nebraska cities. Of course, the three cities behind Lincoln don't all have health departments, aging departments, or public busing. Add to all of that the ever-increasing cost of things such as health care and fuel, and it's clear the city's in a fix.

Perhaps that's why, at the end of the day, when asked how they would address the city's budget deficit, 45% of the participants said they did raise property taxes. The second most popular option was to decrease certain city services.

The vast majority of participants identified police and fire services as the most important services, followed by economic development. People also often said they believe there's still fat to be found in the city budget, often citing "empty city buses" as an example of waste.

But after hearing about all the services the city and county already provide jointly, and the fact that the number of city employees has gone down even as the city has grown, people seemed less inclined to cut government.

Police Chief Casady said he's seen so much belt-tightening in city government since he started out as an officer in 1974 that sometimes it feels like the city is clipping coupons while other taxing entities are buying new grills.

One resident wasn't among those inclined to raise taxes after everything he heard. The retired accounting systems manager went into the day knowing full well that even if the city cut its budget substantially, his property tax bill wouldn't change much because the school district accounts for the biggest bite. He'd like to see more scrutiny of the school budget.

Another man, who didn't want his name used, voted to increase taxes, but not because of the things he learned about the city budget on Saturday. He said he would've voted that way at the beginning of the day, too.

Nondeliberation Condition

Local View: Mayor's Survey Unprofessional

June 19, 2009

After reading the Lincoln Journal Star's report concerning the results of the mayor's budget survey, subtitled "Many willing to pay," that appeared in the June 4 edition, I felt compelled to weigh in on the discussion of the proper value or worth of the survey results.

I have first-hand knowledge because I directly participated in the survey and have a particular insight based on my education in social psychology and certification in public policy analysis, involving the design and interpretation of research surveys. I agree with the concerns the Lincoln Journal Star discussed regarding the unscientific nature of the polling process. Obtaining respondents to participate in the survey by posting a questionnaire on the internet introduces an unfair preference for people who own computers with Internet access.

Even more disturbing to me, however, was the totally inappropriate way in which many of the individual survey questions were drafted. It is universally understood that, by manipulating the wording of a questions, the person conducting a survey can change how a respondent answers that question.

The mayor's "Taking Charge" survey was rife with such questions. The most egregious example of this practice concerned the question of whether a city Health Department-sponsored bike safety program should be continued. To answer "yes," the choice was "increase property taxes about four cents per month for the average household in order to continue the program that has helped reduce injuries by 40%." To answer "no," the choice was "not to increase taxes and eliminate the program, allowing injury rates to return to the previous level."

This question was clearly phrased in a biased manner designed to lead those of us who participated to select the option expressing a willingness to pay increased property taxes. Although the "yes" option asserts the program has reduced injuries by 40%, the director of the city's Health Department admitted to me the statistical relationship between the program and the accident data is a correlation only, not cause-and-effect.

I suggested that other factors, instead of the city's program, could explain the decrease in such accidents over time. I pointed out that the city has spent a significant amount of money developing a trails system during the same period, which has led to a decrease in children riding their bikes on streets and sidewalks. This factor alone could explain the reduction in accidents, and it was apparent that the existence of other factors had not occurred to the director. Yet, the option to discontinue the program explicitly stated that, if the program is eliminated, accident rates necessarily will return to previous levels.

In light of the error introduced by the unscientific nature of the sample and the way in which the survey questions were crafted, it is not surprising that, even in these difficult economic times, two-thirds of the participants in the mayor's survey indicated a willingness to raise their property taxes to some degree to save certain city programs.

From the perspective of social science, the "Taking Charge" initiative seemed designed to elicit a consensus in favor of increased property taxes. The issues we were asked about largely involved services provided by the city to children and low-income families, which are groups most likely to appeal to the sympathies and, consequently, be most difficult to "deprive."

Most of the costs associated with the programs that were candidates for elimination were quoted as pennies per month per average household rather than the sum total. As a result, in most instances, we were diverted from the actual cost of the program as a whole during discussions.

Clearly, it is more difficult to say "no" to spending pennies than it is to spending thousands of dollars. There were both pre- and post-questionnaires to detect any change in our opinions during the discussions. Why do both a pre- and a post-questionnaire assessment unless the material presented during the discussions was intended more to persuade us rather than to inform the city leadership?

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