

Development of a Model for the Participation of Influential Groups in Municipal Policy Formulation

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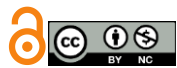
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ABSTRACT

Objective: The primary objective of this research was to develop a model for the participation of influential groups in the formulation of municipal policies.

Methodology: This study is developmental-applied in nature and descriptive-survey in terms of data collection method. Data were collected through field methods and interview tools. The sample population includes 10 professors, managers, and expert municipal consultants from Tehran and Alborz provinces, employing purposive sampling. Qualitative thematic analysis was utilized for data analysis.

Findings: The research results indicated that the environmental system governing influential groups encompasses cultural, social, political, legal, and administrative dimensions, situational conditions, and the role of citizenship. Leverage points of participation, roles of stakeholder groups, and competencies, capabilities, and skills are identified as the core capabilities of influential groups. The processes of realizing the participation of influential groups also involve organizational capacities for participation, media platforms, strategies of influential group participation, and facilitation processes.

Conclusion: The results and implications reflect the effective role-playing of influential groups and barriers to participation, including internal and external obstacles.

Keywords: *Participation of influential groups, policy formulation, strategies of influential group participation, municipality.*

1 Introduction

The participation of influential groups brings communicative and psychological benefits for service employees and influential groups at the individual level and enhances productivity and effectiveness at the

organizational level (Crow et al., 2020). The term "policy-making" has traditionally been associated with the concept of governance (Gorjipour et al., 2019). In a democracy, citizens judge their government based on policy performance, meaning the government's ability to deliver positive and tangible outcomes for the community and its

democratic performance, which refers to the extent to which government decision-making processes conform to democratic principles. Policies significantly affect the daily quality of life of citizens. Policy refers to the process of creating changes in formal laws, such as regulations and legal principles, to solve a problem or achieve a goal (Ebrahimi et al., 2020).

Legislative and policy-making processes built on integrity, participation, and transparency are essential and vital for designing and implementing effective policies and thus maintaining citizens' trust in government (Turban et al., 2006). Policies should not only pursue public interests but also, in practice, affirm and accommodate the existence and concerns of legitimate groups with differing competitive interests, as well as their clear participation in influencing political decision-making. In the policy-making process, a "win-win" situation rarely occurs; usually, one group may benefit from the policies (winner group), and another may be adversely affected (loser group) (Howlett, 2018).

The modes of influence vary; in general, an influential group is interested in having more communication channels. Whether this action is alone (in the case of large organizations that can themselves be significant political players) or collectively. However, the decision to undertake these activities alone or collectively can be unique (O'Brien & Li, 2017). This not only led to the formation of diverse political parties but also created numerous professional and specialized groups that political parties could not represent for various reasons. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain and America saw the rise of labor and employer unions and various influential associations in industries such as railways, steel, and oil and gas. These unions and associations endeavored to devise efficient methods to influence government policymaking (Horsford et al., 2018).

According to various studies, in some cases, the implementation of programs, plans, and public policies in Iran is not successful or satisfactory. Experiences indicate that several issues often occur in the implementation of a policy; in practice, what is implemented (if at all) fundamentally differs from what has been formulated (Gorjipour et al., 2019). In practice, due to the lack of capacity to implement policy, we often do not witness successful policies. Municipal policy areas are no exception, and it seems that one of the significant challenges in this regard is the low capacity to formulate such policies. What is observed is that if the relevant policies were properly formed and a suitable model existed for the participation of

influential groups in formulating municipal policies in the country, the goals of these policies, namely the enhancement of services through the municipality, would be achieved. However, few studies have been conducted on designing a model for the participation of influential groups in formulating municipal policies. Therefore, the primary aim of this research is to present a model for the participation of influential groups in formulating municipal policies. The most important research gap observed in the review of municipal policy areas is that in these studies, the role of policy formation as one of the important tools has not been discussed or examined. This led to the predominance of the concept of policymaking as a millennium paradigm, attracting general attention and being accepted by the government as a prerequisite for the municipality and put on the agenda. In this way, governments in various sectors were keen to develop and implement policy and change their approaches and strategies, review processes and products, and value chains, improving their readiness for successful and effective presence in new conditions (Hajipour et al., 2016).

Some studies have been conducted on the topic of research. Ghorbanizadeh and colleagues (2021) concluded that the causal conditions leading to the concept of public participation in policymaking consist of three categories: structural, economic, and behavioral factors (Ghorbanizadeh et al., 2021). Abbasi and Daneshfard (2021) concluded that the quantitative model of citizen participation in the first stage of public policy-making includes consultation, partnership, and empowerment (Abbasi & Daneshfard, 2021). Mirzaei Tabar and colleagues (2018) found that influential groups consistently and stably and social forces actively and passively play a role through identity and territorial belonging and tribal structure and contact with agents in the process of parliamentary elections and directing the votes of people in the Mamasani electoral district, where the role of influential groups is more prominent (Chegongi). On the other hand, the level of role-playing by political actors varies. Among influential groups in urban and rural areas, local influentials and elders have the most and the least impact, respectively. Among social forces in urban and rural areas, teachers have the most impact, and religious groups have the least impact (Mirzaei Tabar et al., 2019). The primary objective of this research was to develop a model for the participation of influential groups in the formulation of municipal policies.

2 Methods and Materials

The present study is of the developmental-applied type and descriptive-survey from the aspect of data collection methodology. In the qualitative part, data were collected using thematic analysis and interview tools through field methods. The statistical population of this research included a group of professors, managers, and expert municipal officers in Tehran and Alborz provinces, using purposive sampling until the saturation point was reached. In other words, sampling was continued until no new data or concepts were added to the categories obtained up to that point. Thematic analysis was also used for data analysis.

3 Findings and Results

At this stage, the desired codes were extracted from the transcribed texts of the interviews. It is important at this

stage that sampling is sufficient for the researcher to discover concepts, thus, the researcher reached theoretical saturation after conducting 10 interviews. During the process of code extraction from related texts, each interesting and significant point was coded. From within a text, many codes could be extracted, but as the data were regularly reviewed, new codes were added. The coding refers to extracting relevant sentences from interview texts and the researcher records them in a column labeled 'Code'. For example, the first interviewee, marked as I1, the second as I2, and so on up to the tenth marked as I10, in the column of selected statements, sentences from each interviewee are placed, and in the code column, the selected code from the statement is recorded. For instance, during an interview, interviewees have made various statements. Several different statements have been selected from their speech text.

Table 1

Sample of Coding and Basic Theme Extraction from Interviews

Marker	Selected Statements	Basic Themes
I10	Participation depends on the political system and the degree of democratic atmosphere in municipalities, influencing the share of knowledgeable employees and citizens, understanding of municipal policies, demanding by influential groups, sense of responsibility and cooperation, knowledge and expertise of groups, education and culture-building, and empowerment of groups, cultural interactions and team network communications of influential groups.	Political system; open participatory atmosphere; share of knowledgeable citizens; understanding of policies; demanding by influential groups; sense of responsibility and cooperation; knowledge and expertise of groups; education and empowerment of groups; culture-building; cultural interactions and communications of team networks of influential groups
I9	Generally, the need for democratic governments to involve influential groups is a recognized fact. Public choice theory and social participation are examples of governments moving towards the participation of all groups in the public policy-making process. Stakeholder groups try to attract more people to their side by voicing the people's desires. These groups, through speeches, newspapers, manifestos, statutes, and meetings, try to convey their views and thoughts to various groups in society, and people are drawn to stakeholder groups according to their taste and interest.	Voicing the desires of the people; transferring views and thoughts to various groups through speeches, newspapers, manifestos, statutes, and meetings; free-thinking spirit; belief in public participation; expressing opinions and suggestions; clear and specific expression of desires
I9	The presence of influential groups in society to create transparency and express the people's desires is an obvious and certain matter. The clearer and more transparent the interactive communication of these groups with the government and people, the more acceptable their presence will be. Governments can acquaint themselves with public issues and problems while providing a suitable platform for the activities of influential groups and aligning them with the goals of public policies. Therefore, the clearest relationship between influential groups, the government, and the people is the recognition of the group's goals by the people, providing equal conditions by the government for all groups, and adherence to group play issues by influential groups in society.	Creating transparency; expressing the desires of the people; clear and transparent interactive communication of influential groups with the government and people; activities of influential groups in line with the goals of public policies; providing equal conditions by the government for all groups
I5	The free-thinking spirit and belief in public participation can be one of the factors for the participation of influential groups. Also, the use of capable individuals (specialization and experiential learning), freedom of thought, and transparency at the organizational level and preventing monopolism can collectively be factors for the participation of influential groups in policy formulation.	Free-thinking spirit; belief in public participation; specialization and experiential learning; freedom of thought; transparency; preventing monopolism
I5	The impact of influential groups can increase the participation of influential groups and create this trust that individuals can participate in various ways in decisions related to their fields. Simply put, social capital is one of the important needs in the discussion of urban society. It can be said that an appropriate and striking outcome is a way to develop and increase social capital and public trust.	Increasing social capital; increasing public trust; expertise; knowledge; technical and practical capabilities; preventing one-sidedness; preventing authoritarian decisions; improvement and evolutionary development

The first step in data analysis is conceptualization into organizing themes. Conceptualization means picking up an observation, a sentence, or a paragraph, dividing it into

components, and assigning a name to each of the incidents, ideas, or events—labels that either symbolize the phenomenon or replace it. Consequently, in this study, the

collected codes have been assembled side by side to form a series of organizing themes. In the next phase, by aggregating the organizing themes, the overarching themes were extracted.

Overarching themes are more abstract and represent a higher level. They are produced through an analytical

process of making comparisons to highlight similarities and differences used at a lower level to generate concepts.

Grouping overarching themes reduces the number of units we need to work with.

Table 2

Overarching Themes

Row	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Overarching Themes
1	Customs; cultural dimension; cultural capacities; development of participatory policy-making culture	Cultural dimension	Environmental system governing influential groups
2	Existence of suitable platforms for public and elite participation like elections and festivals; social status; social justice and equity; social capacities; economic status; financial capacities; necessary resources	Social dimension	
3	Political orientations; political system; high political power; political structure; political awareness	Political dimension	
4	Laws and regulations; rule of law; legal and administrative capacities; administrative structure	Legal and administrative dimension	
5	Background conditions; causal conditions; external factors	Background conditions	
6	Public awareness; knowledgeable citizens; free-thinking spirit; belief in public participation; understanding of group goals by people; citizen participation in formulated policies	Role of citizenship	
7	Issue articulation; urban infrastructure; current urban affairs; legal problems; belief and faith in influential groups regardless of party; think tanks as central discourse	Leveraging point of participation	Core capabilities of influential groups
8	Oversight role of influential groups; party orientations; selection and agreement focus; share of employees; demanding by influential groups; sense of responsibility and cooperation; continuous evaluation in strategies by influential groups; guidance in urban, construction, and economic areas; participation in decision-making processes; impact on policies; maintaining relations with civil society; institutionalizing best practices; transparency and improving accountability	Roles of stakeholder groups	
9	Holistic view; perspective capacity (both city managers and external managers need to revise their perspectives, without which achieving mutual goals is not possible); knowledge and specialized insight of groups; technical and scientific capability (scientific and specialized); specialization and experiential learning; political capability; financial and economic capability; social capital capability; executive capability; cultural and social intelligence; knowing the right time and decision; having sufficient knowledge; timely and measured action; understanding of municipal policies; creating appropriate technical knowledge and capacity; well-versed in policy knowledge (policy education, game theory, theory of influential groups, etc., and public issue management)	Competence and capability	
10	Detection skills; identification skills; design of interaction games with influential groups; having connections and influence; use of specialist forces; use of research forces; use of forces with practical abilities; alignment with the capabilities of influential groups; cultural interactions and network communications of influential teams; problem-solving skills	Skills	
11	Providing sufficient and effective training in the organization; empowering groups; transparency at the organizational level; responsibility; accountability; effectiveness and efficiency; culture building; freedom of thought; awareness of common target groups; avoiding political secrecy; providing structures related to participation; level of democracy in the organization; creating a system that has proper communication with people and specialist groups; creating unity and integrity in the organization; constructive culture building in the organization; level of democratic atmosphere in municipalities; existence of suitable frameworks in the organization appropriate to problems; appropriate structure; dealing with internal and external pressures and threats of the organization; periodic meetings and workshops; creating trust in the organization; reducing uncertainty in the organization; presence of strong and efficient bureaucracy in the organization; protecting the interests of municipalities; quality implementation of municipal policies; logical structural groundwork in municipal policies; creating strategic thinking in the municipal organization	Organizational capacities for achieving participation of influential groups	Processes for achieving participation of influential groups

12	Access to information dimensions; having a strong media; virtual social networks; establishing a database; sharing information	Media platform	
13	Attitude based on multidimensional interaction; friendly and close relationship; interactive strategy; empathy and cooperation in advancing goals; effective communications of groups to share efforts; complete explanation of the role of influential groups; interaction of resources; attention to different voices (convergent or divergent groups); downsizing; integration; reducing conflict that hinders influential groups; absorbing smaller sets within themselves; stimulating influential groups; negotiating with influential groups; encouraging and persuading; participatory policy-making strategy; observing group play issues by influential groups; creating trust and assurance; increasing the bargaining power of groups for participation; networking; party legitimacy and power; continuous improvement in group morale; use of hopeful elements	Strategies for participation of influential groups	
14	Identifying groups; providing equal conditions by the government for all groups; eliminating excessive bureaucracy; environment for public participation; capacity for accepting public participations; creating suitable tools for policy-making; preventing monopolism; having necessary powers; creating a systematic and correct structure for the participation of influential groups; evaluating and ranking influential groups; measuring satisfaction of groups; diagnosing issues and problems of them; strengthening interests of influential groups; absence of conflict among policy drafters and internal and external actors; understanding and believing in the expectations of influential ones; creating party structures in society	Facilitator processes	
15	Decision making and suitable policies; influential groups as consulting groups; participating groups; avoiding unilateral decisions; using the capacities of Islamic city councils; discovering the most common viewpoint for policy formulation; continuous expert meetings for managing influential groups; increasing participation of influential groups; creating public trust; supervising and controlling organizational policies; articulating expectations and desires of citizens; practical and optimized policies; reducing costs; successful implementation of policies; solving major public issues and problems; using the capacity of experts and elites; participating in synergy and in a transparent environment; increasing efficiency of municipal policies; increasing quality of service to citizens and the general public	Results	
16	Role-playing and impact of influential groups in a democratic society; improvement and evolutionary development; power to enact local laws; group, ethnic, and party thinking; increasing social capital; increasing acceptance; influence on public opinion; shaping policies; increasing productivity; creating sustainable, coherent, and legitimate policies for society; interaction and synergy between municipalities and other actors; using external capacities to solve public problems; optimal implementation of policy; comprehensive and real policy interactions; logical interactions of municipal policy systems; achieving goals of municipalities; complete understanding and awareness of issues; using the impact of external views of influential groups for formulating municipal policies; preventing the wastage of public interests; formulating realistic policies; formulating policies compatible with society; formulating socially acceptable policies	Outcomes	Proper role-playing of influential groups
17	Political inequality; creating discrimination	External barriers	Barriers to participation
18	Influence on political issues; bringing positions into discretion; preferring group interests and tastes over collective benefits; applying own viewpoints; providing incomplete or biased information to policymakers; dominance of influential groups over public opinion	Internal barriers	

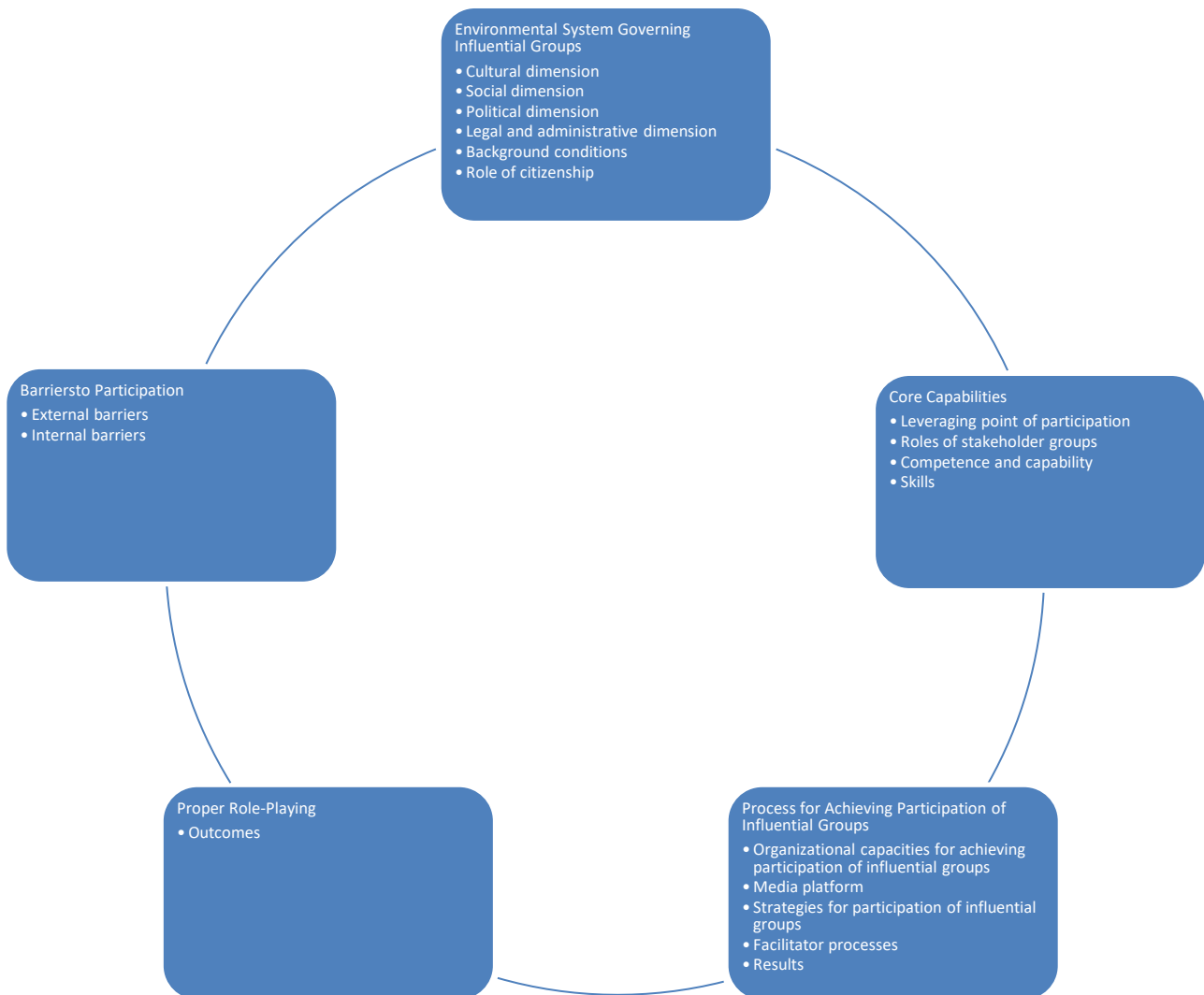
The findings of Table 2 show that there are 16 organizing themes and 6 overarching themes (environmental system governing influential groups, core capabilities of influential groups, processes for achieving participation of influential

groups, proper role-playing of influential groups, and barriers to participation).

Based on the aggregation of interviews and codes collected in the form of overarching and organizing themes, the research model is as follows:

Figure 1

Simple Model of Dimensions



4 Discussion and Conclusion

The primary goal of this study was to present a model for the participation of influential groups in formulating municipal policies. The findings indicate that there are 16 organizing themes and 6 overarching themes, including the environmental system governing influential groups, core capabilities of influential groups, processes for achieving participation of influential groups, proper role-playing of influential groups, and barriers to participation, for the model of participation of influential groups in formulating municipal policies. These findings are consistent with the results of some studies (Horsford et al., 2018; Howlett, 2018; Mirzaei Tabar et al., 2019; O'Brien & Li, 2017; Sheikhhagloo et al., 2022). In explaining the results, it should be said that the participation of influential groups has

become a dominant goal in the policies of some governments, and countries have followed a specific model of participation of influential groups based on their unique conditions. Participation of influential groups means changing the environment governing business activities in such a way that while preserving the main texture of activity, only the aforementioned space is changed, and market conditions impact the company's operations in a way that motives and mechanisms of the private sector become the basis for decision-making.

In Iran, the government has a prominent and unrivaled presence in various societal affairs, and most decision-making regarding public issues occurs within governmental organizations. It is a reality that, given the government's performance, many policies in Iran are not satisfactory. It appears that policy-making in Iran is politically charged,

rushed, and temporary, carried out without sufficient reflection and without scientifically rooting the issues. In the country, every year, there are talks of formulating policies to solve the country's major public issues, yet those issues remain unresolved, or many of the formulated policies exacerbate the public issue. The lack of problem-solving functionality could be attributed to weaknesses in recognition and root-cause analysis or other stages of the policy-making process, but the most important issue to note is that policy-making should be knowledge-based and, at the same time, a clear differentiation of data, information, knowledge, and wisdom should be well-executed. Government policies can play a significant role in responding to structural forces and mitigating their destructive effects. Practically, reviewing municipal policies and identifying problems and reasons for not achieving goals can pave the way toward achieving those goals.

Reviewing the capacities for formulating municipal policies can also help manage these goals. Based on the research results, two internal and external barriers cause the lack of participation of influential groups in policy formulation. Political inequality and discrimination as external barriers and influences on political issues, arbitrating positions, preferring group interests and tastes over collective benefits, applying own viewpoints, providing incomplete or biased information to policymakers, and dominance of influential groups over public opinion are among the internal barriers to participation. On the other hand, supervision, party orientations, selection and agreement focus, share of employees, demanding by influential groups, sense of responsibility and cooperation, continuous evaluation in strategies by influential groups, guidance in urban, construction, and economic areas, participation in decision-making processes, impact on policies, maintaining relations with civil society, institutionalizing best practices, and transparency and improving accountability are among the important roles of influential groups.

Limitations of this research must be noted; this study was qualitative and the validation of results was not feasible due to financial and time constraints of the researcher. Also, the generalization of results should be viewed with caution because the results of this study were limited to a specific region. It is recommended that future researchers use mixed methods and consider a broader scope of study. It is suggested that municipalities utilize expert opinions for the participation of individuals and groups. In formulating any policy, the views and opinions of different groups and people

should be considered, and ultimately, feedback on participation should be provided and reported by the municipalities to the stakeholders.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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