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Helen Ingram
Steven Rathgeb Smith
Editors

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6. Citizen Action Programs and Participatory Politics in Tucson

SALLIE A. MARSTON

On August 20, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Economic Opportunity Act. He stated publicly upon signing it that "on this occasion the American people and our American system are making history. . . . Today for the first time in the history of the human race, a great nation is able to make and is willing to make a commitment to eradicate poverty among its people." The centerpiece of the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) was Title II-A, the community action programs, which were defined as and intended to be "... developed, conducted, and administered with the maximum feasible participation of the residents of the areas and members of the group served." Johnson had declared an "unconditional" war on poverty and its social consequences in America, and Congress had empowered him to deploy community action as the chief weapon aimed at its elimination. Yet after only three years, the president effectively abandoned the war on poverty for the war in Vietnam, and by the early 1970s the post mortems on the Economic Opportunity Office's efforts were being filed. Many commentators, for different reasons, called the war a dismal failure and said the community action programs had done more harm than good or had co-opted the activist poor. A few, like Richard Cole, argued that the war could not be viewed as an absolute loss because the weaponry of community action had significantly reconfigured the citizen-government relationship. He indicated that community action programs (CAPs) had improved the

delivery of municipal services in some cities and positively affected citizens' attitudes about the accessibility of government.

The OEO effectively ceased funding CAPs approximately two decades ago, and many scholars and politicians regard the war on poverty as a failure equal to the war in Southeast Asia that supplanted it. Yet while poverty has persisted and even increased, the war on poverty programs can be seen to have left a legacy of increased citizen participation in local governing. Interestingly, though the funds for federal community action initiatives have long been discontinued or redirected to different uses through the Community Services Administration, vestiges of the 1960s CAPs persist across the country; some have even evolved into powerful, high-profile, municipally funded agencies. In this chapter I talk about how the community action programs of the 1960s have shaped local politics in the 1980s and 1990s. I use the sprawling metropolitan area of Tucson, Arizona, as an illustrative case.

The Economic Opportunity Act

Lyndon Johnson signed the EOA into law, but John Kennedy conceived the war on poverty in 1963 when he decided that he wanted “a comprehensive, coordinated attack on poverty” as part of his 1964 legislative program. Carefully maintaining his reluctance to confront directly the increasingly volatile civil rights struggle as a racial crisis, Kennedy chose to transform it into a class issue and to promote programs that would alleviate poverty and address, through the back door, the politically difficult demands of black Americans. In short, the poverty programs came to be predicated on the assumption that poverty was equivalent to being black or minority. Thus the issue of civil rights for African Americans could be subsumed into the seemingly more tractable and less politically contentious problem of ameliorating poverty.

With Kennedy’s assassination, Johnson inherited the fractious civil rights claims of African Americans and turned to Sargent Shriver to direct drafting of the war on poverty legislation. The bill contained six principal areas of concentration: youth programs, community action programs, special antipoverty programs for rural areas, loans for small businesses not otherwise able to obtain credit, work experience programs, and volunteer service and administration programs. What was perhaps most innovative about the EOA of 1964 was Title II-A, which “encouraged or required the poor themselves to assume an important role both in planning and implementing the war at the local level.”

Institutional change was at the heart of the CAP and it had emerged through a number of influences, most importantly Kennedy’s Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Crime, a book coauthored by one of the members of the committee, and the Ford Foundation’s Grey Areas Project. The message from these and other sources was that institutional change at the community level was absolutely essential to the success of an attack on poverty and that such an attack could not be waged without the assent and cooperation of those who suffered from poverty. The focus on institutional change and community context, as well as several political constraints, helped to establish Title II-A—citizen action or participation—as the cornerstone in the design and implementation of the Economic Opportunity Act.

According to Joseph Kershaw, a model CAP has four principal attributes:

—It “mobilizes and utilizes resources, public and private, of any urban or rural area in an attack on poverty”;

—It “provides services assistance, and other activities of sufficient scope and size to give promise of progress toward elimination of poverty or a cause or causes of poverty through developing employment opportunities, improving human performance, motivation, and productivity, or bettering the conditions under which people live, learn, and work”;

—It is aimed at “the strengthening of community capabilities for planning and coordinating Federal, State, and other assistance related to the elimination of poverty”; and

—It is to be “developed, conducted, and administered with the maximum feasible participation of the residents of the areas and members of the groups served.”

In each jurisdiction the planning, conducting, administering, evaluating, and coordination of the citywide community action programs were to be undertaken by a local Community Action Agency (CAA). Program

7. Anderson (1975); and Sundquist (1968).

11. Marris and Rein (1967); and Friedman (1977).
resources were to be allocated among the city’s low-income neighborhoods through the CAA, and residents were to elect individuals from their neighborhoods who would represent them on the CAA board of directors. Residents were also to be encouraged and trained to participate in the decisionmaking surrounding the design, implementation, and disbursement of funds for local antipoverty programs. The CAA itself was originally intended to be a “public or private nonprofit agency (other than a political party), or a combination thereof.” The governing board of the CAA was to be made up of three categories of representatives: from private and public agencies (elected officials, members of the board of education, board members of major private social welfare agencies); community leaders (religious, business, minority group leaders); and “residents of the areas and members of the groups to be served” (at least one member from each of the CAP target neighborhoods elected through “traditional democratic processes”). The 1966 and 1967 amendments to the act altered the composition of the governing board of the CAA to the extent that one-third of the board was to be composed of public officials or their representatives. The amendments were meant to send a signal to cities and other political jurisdictions that they were expected to assume financial responsibility for the CAA as federal funding began to be withdrawn. In early 1969 over 1,000 CAs were operating in American cities, and Tucson was one of them.

The War on Poverty in Tucson: OEO and Model Cities

In 1964, in hopeful anticipation of funding by the OEO, a number of organizers of Tucson’s impoverished Mexican-American and Native-American communities gathered to begin planning for receipt of funds.

Nine inner-city areas, which included Native-American, Mexican-American, and African-American populations, were targeted for community action. When the OEO funds were received in 1966, the poor neighborhoods, most of them Mexican-American, had already made some decisions about fund allocation and the design and composition of the coordinating community action agency, locally called the Committee on Economic Opportunity (CEO). The CEO board was made of equal numbers of business representatives, agency representatives, and citizens and operated independently of city staff and administrative structure. When funds were finally granted, the nine neighborhood councils were quickly convened in each of the target neighborhoods. Council representatives were elected by fellow residents who sent some of their number to the CEO, which also included appointed representatives from the business community and social service agencies. The CEO managed the operation of the various components of the OEO program from budget and management to citizen participation. The neighborhood councils worked singly and together with the CEO to improve services—food and nutrition, education, delinquency counseling—to the neighborhoods.

As OEO funds began to dry up by the end of 1967, community organizers, citizens, and city staff met to plan an application for other federal funds, this time to model cities program. In 1969 Tucson was selected to be one of the 150 model cities demonstration sites. Like the CAP component of the OEO, the federal model cities program had been designed to demonstrate how city governments and neighborhoods could work together to address social and economic problems. More important, though, model cities was also intended to bring disenfranchised groups into the political process by instructing them about how the political process worked and how they could become more involved in local decision making. Under model cities, six inner-city, “poverty pocket” neighborhoods, approximately six square blocks each, were included in the program. Most were Mexican-American. The nine neighborhoods originally targeted under the OEO were more or less incorporated into these six. A policy board and a model neighborhood council, composed of 80 percent residents and 20 percent city staff, were created.

his death in spring 1992, head of the local Job Corps, while Sharon Maxwell is chief administrator of the Citizen Participation Office. Their narratives as well as my own cross checking of newspaper articles, published organizational reports, and interviews with neighborhood activists and advocates, especially John McNair (interview, June 25, 1991), Corky Poster (interview, May 2, 1991), and Salomon Baldenegro (interview, September 20 and October 9, 1992), constitute the foundation for the history that is presented here.
Twelve neighborhood task forces composed of residents were also created. Besides developing model neighborhood plans for land use, the task force addressed neighborhood issues such as economic development, transportation, drug abuse prevention, housing, education, crime and delinquency, recreation, and services to the elderly. The Inner City Neighborhood Council, composed of 80 percent city staff and 20 percent residents, coordinated activities. By 1972, through a federal mandate, the model cities program had expanded beyond the inner city to include another six low-income neighborhoods. The neighborhood-level task forces were enlarged to include representatives from the new areas, and the Expanded Neighborhood Council was created, in tandem with the Inner City Council, and charged with coordinating the activities of the six new neighborhoods. In 1974, when model cities funding was cut off, the federal government’s revenue-sharing dollars were used to continue some of the uncompleted neighborhood projects and to keep citizen participation and planning in operation. Lack of funds caused the task forces to be disbanded in 1976, although in 1977 funds from the community development grants were used to finish up several projects and maintain resident participation. Through both the more recent revenue-sharing and the earlier community development phase, the city maintained, to a large degree, the organizational model mandated under model cities.

Between 1975 and 1978, the city began, through its Office of Budget and Research, to study the citizen participation process to assess the value of and need for a permanent city-funded Office of Citizen Participation. The office was established and organized by the city in 1976, but city staff and citizen volunteers and appointees continued to study the possibility of a citizen-designed citizen participation process. Following the advice of a citizen advisory task force, city staff utilized the existing six political wards as planning units, divided them into three subunits of approximately 20,000 residents each, and organized elections for representatives to the Citizen Participation Council, a group that would advise the mayor and council on decisions such as the distribution of community development block grants, capital improvements, and human services monies. In 1980, the citizen-designed participation process, centering on a restructured Office of Citizen Participation, was adopted by the mayor and council, and it is still in operation in 1993.

The history of the Citizen Participation Office (CPO) is one of waxing and waning popular and administrative support, most often depending on citizen activism and its impact on land development projects. As a citizen advocacy agency, it sits uncomfortably within the city’s administrative structure, receiving criticism sometimes from residents and sometimes from inside the bureaucracy, depending on which way the political and economic wind is blowing. Economic circumstances in the early 1990s caused operating capacity at the CPO to be at an especially low ebb. However, since their inception in 1966, community action programs have continued to be a viable, sometimes a pivotal, part of Tucson’s government structure, and institutionalization has had an undeniably important impact on local politics.

The Neighborhoods and Citizen Activism in Tucson

The war on poverty citizen action programs and their successive incarnations have had at least four enduring effects on citizens’ empowerment and Tucson’s local political culture. Of these four, perhaps only a single one, the political empowerment of the disenfranchised, can be regarded as an intentional consequence of poverty policy. The other three—the fostering of a participatory tradition in local political culture, the emergence of middle-class, growth-related activism, and the creation of the neighborhood as the contemporary public sphere of participatory democracy—were unintended. The unintended ones have had, I would argue, the most persistent and profound impact on local politics, planning, and policymaking and citizen empowerment.

Political Empowerment of the Disenfranchised

The primary aim of the CAP was to bring previously alienated social groups into the political process by teaching them how to make the political system work for them. In its larger attempt, through citizen participation, to eradicate poverty and permanently improve the political power of the poor, the CAP failed in Tucson as it did elsewhere. Still, the 1970s witnessed an overall increase in the formal political participation of the Mexican-American population, who have employed the framework of citizen action as well as more traditional electoral mecha-

20. Haveman (1977); and Lemann (1991)
nisms to press their demands. Evidence of the formal incorporation of Mexican Americans into the local political system can be traced in individual histories as well as at the group level. Mexican Americans, many of whom cut their political teeth on the CAP, occupy seats on the city council and county board of supervisors, are elected to the Arizona state legislature, and hold influential civil service positions. Mexican Americans have for the past two decades constituted a significant voting bloc, and the Southside, mostly Mexican-American neighborhoods, is well organized and active on a range of issues from filing class action lawsuits over trichloroethylene pollution in the groundwater to petitioning for improved street lighting and police protection.

Most recently Nicholas Lemann has argued that the political incorporation of the poor and disenfranchised would have occurred anyway owing to earlier civil rights legislation. As some analysts have shown, however, the CAPs, and especially the CAAs, were bootcamps for civil rights advocates, drawing African and Mexican Americans into the political arena and mobilizing them for a more activist political posture—formal and informal. It is indeed true that neither the war on poverty nor the citizen action programs eliminated poverty—a deep structural problem not amenable to superficial solutions. The CAPs did, however, alter the terrain of local (and state and national) politics by establishing competing forces to existing political organizations, which became institutionalized opportunities for the poor to participate in the decisions that affected them. This newly configured political terrain had ramifications beyond poor neighborhoods.

Currently in Tucson, the CPO helps poor neighborhoods orchestrate their demands and remain connected to the political process. Yet as scholars of citizen action correctly point out, their connection to the system has, in a real sense, depoliticized them by directing their demands to issues surrounding the distribution of resources and deflecting their discontent from the larger structural questions of political and economic organization and production. While the stated objective of drawing the disenfranchised into the political process has been a mitigated success, the three unintended policy consequences of the CAP and the institutionalization of a Citizen Participation Office in Tucson have been far less equivocal.

24. The description of the present state of neighborhood activism in Tucson is distilled from a work in progress. See Marston (forthcoming). Information on the activism of Southside Mexican-American neighborhoods comes from interviews with resident activists, including Bertha Valenzuela (June 5, 1991), Manuel Herrera Jr. (June 14, 1991), Rebecca Quintero (June 13, 1991), and Alberto Montano and Maria Bick (June 18, 1991).
In a city where a great deal of capital is generated for land development, citizen participation is often regarded by both developers and local government as a costly obstacle to economic growth. The CPO enables citizens to influence the growth process, and not just on election days.

The Enfranchised Participate

Interestingly, the war on poverty programs of the late 1960s had the ripple effect of encouraging middle-class Anglos to participate more directly in local government actions. A 1990 metropolitanwide survey of neighborhood activists in the city found that the typical activist is a long-time Tucsonan, is Anglo and middle class, has a college education, and works in a professional occupation. As the “growth machine” began to accelerate in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this group saw itself becoming increasingly powerless to alter the developments that were directly affecting its property values and quality of life. In the CPO, the institution that the CAP had initiated and model cities had institutionalized, middle-class Tucsonans found a residentially based participatory model and a city agency that would also facilitate their access to decisionmaking. These middle-class neighborhoods, often drawing in poorer neighborhoods for general moral and sometimes specific issue support, have been extremely successful in having their demands considered through the formation of policies that manifest themselves as changes to the city charter. One of these is the neighborhood protection initiative, which was pushed by neighborhoods in the 1985 election and added to the city charter in 1986. It requires “voter approval of controlled access highways and grade separated interchanges.” The notification requirement passed and entered into the city charter in 1984 requires that the CPO “mail projected and final agendas of Mayor and Council meetings to neighborhood representatives” two weeks before the meeting is to occur. It also requires the CPO to “notify appropriate neighborhood associations within a one-mile radius of a proposed large or high intensity development (including industrial, business, and residential uses) by distributing information provided by the Planning Department.”

28. This information includes historic district/plan reviews, neighborhood plans/inventories, annexations, zoning, code revisions, rezoning applications, zoning examiner meetings, community design review committee meetings/public hearings, citizen advisory planning committee meetings/public hearings, and so forth (Mayor and Council Policy Manual Policy 510-04).

Middle-class neighborhoods in the city and the county from time to time form coalitions for various purposes. These coalitions are usually proactive and, along with some of the high-profile activists, are among the most influential constituencies in the city and county. The coalitions, such as the Neighborhood Coalition of Greater Tucson (NCGT), which is functionally a political action committee, have successfully promoted political candidates sensitive to neighborhood issues, pushed for policies that ensure citizen control over large-scale transportation changes, provided a measure of protection for the area’s architectural and environmental resources, and made the city council and the county board of supervisors aware of the interests of neighborhood groups. A former president of the NCGT has suggested that the emergence of middle-class, neighborhood-based activism is evidence of the failure of local officials and local government bureaus to represent citizen concerns adequately. He states that the widespread system of neighborhood associations and coalitions in Tucson “parallels the formal government system” and argues that this “underground government is building up because the existing government cannot represent the average citizen.”

Electoral victories have also been one of the success stories of middle-class-dominated neighborhood activism in the city and county over the last decade. In 1987 neighborhood candidates, endorsed by the NCGT and running on a neighborhood platform, won the mayoral and several council seats despite a high-profile oppositional campaign by the Southern Arizona Homebuilders Association, which plastered billboards across the city with the worried query, “Does your job depend on growth?” In the 1989 elections, two more neighborhood candidates were added to the city council. Neighborhoods have also had some success at halting or creating crippling delays for private development proposals through ballot propositions and demonstrations before city council meetings. In a practice exhibited across the country and particularly in western cities as different as Los Angeles, San Antonio, and San Francisco, middle-class Tucsonans who, two decades ago, would have invoked the ballot box to articulate their political choices and concerns, increasingly use methods of direct democracy and their neighborhoods as territorial organizing bases.

29. Quotations are based on interviews with Tucson activists in 1988. They are part of a study described in more detail in Marston and Meadows (1988).
30. For examples from other sunbelt cities, see Davis (1990); Plotkin (1987); and Mollenkopf (1983).
The Neighborhood as Public Sphere

By targeting the neighborhood as the crucible for the enfranchisement of the poor, a direct legacy of the CAPs has been the strengthening of the neighborhood as the predominant public sphere of popular political life in Tucson. Accelerated by suburbanization and more recent urban restructuring, especially the increasing segregation of production, commerce, and residence, middle-class Tucsonans have used CAP tactics and the organizational base of the neighborhood to wage their own growth-related battles. One result has been that for the poor and the middle class, the neighborhood has become a public service delivery unit as well as the venue for civic discourse, opinion formation, and political action. 31

Consistent with republican constructions about the importance of the public sphere to the health and smooth functioning of a liberal democracy, the neighborhood is a space of face-to-face interaction where the critical activity of public talk—discussions about the functioning of the political economy—may be readily entered. One of the obvious advantages of the neighborhood as public sphere is that neighborhoods are spaces to which almost everyone has access—everyone lives somewhere, although the homeless are notable exceptions. Another is that in the neighborhood, public and private converge and the personal is often most clearly political. Thus, for example, in San Francisco the private issue of sexual preference was politicized in large part through neighborhood organizing. 32

Unfortunately, the neighborhood as public sphere is also a limited social construction. Not all neighborhoods, for instance, are safe public spaces, nor are all neighborhoods accessible to all people. As a result, the neighborhood as a public space is impoverished because class, race, and ethnic residential segregation dangerously restrict the range and depth of discussion. As Iris M. Young argues, a public space is "a place accessible to anyone, where anyone can participate and witness . . . [and] in entering the public one always risks encounter with those who are different, those who identify with different groups and have different opinions or different forms of life." 33

Furthermore, neighborhood demands tend to revolve around a rather narrowly constructed critique of the inequalities of public resource distribution. In Tucson, neighborhood complaints and demands center on changes in land use and inadequate delivery of public services such as police protection. There is no public talk about the social relations that produce and reproduce urban landscapes and public resource distributions, the market system that drives them, or the bureaucracy that operationalizes them. In short, the public sphere of the Tucson neighborhood often invokes a participatory ideal that is built around a narrow range of issues and mostly balkanized constituencies. Consequently, the contemporary construction of the neighborhood as the space for public discourse is both an advance and a retreat on the original liberal ideal, which was predicated on the exclusive participation of white, middle-class, property-owning males. 34 It is an advance in that new groups have been encouraged to enter into public discourse and a retreat in that the sphere of discussion has been sharply circumscribed.

The Battle for Citizen Participation

Paul Peterson and David Greenstone have argued that because the CAPs were in essence aimed at attacking political poverty, their success or failure needs to be assessed first by examining the shape and extent of the citizen participation they engendered and second by assessing their impacts on political processes and institutions. The critical question about citizen participation is whether CAPs fostered substantive representation, that is, "the extent to which the formal representatives acquired sufficient power to alter government policies so as to benefit large numbers of constituents." 35 Undoubtedly, in Tucson, Mexican Americans have been well integrated into the political mainstream, from holding elected offices to using direct democracy tactics to press their demands.

Certainly, one of the successes and intended effects of the community action programs of the 1960s is that the CPO has enhanced the capacity of citizens, poor or otherwise, to participate directly in some of the...
planning and decisionmaking that affects the quality of their lives and their futures. The institutionalization of citizen participation has changed the way that the local government operates—not as a monolithic and impenetrable bureaucracy but through the interaction of informal neighborhood units with the formal political apparatus. While some critics have argued that civil rights legislation is chiefly responsible for the integration of the poor into the political process, CAPs surely hastened their political incorporation.

What is more interesting than the debates about the shortcomings of the community action programs is the unexpected outcomes of their implementation (an important point that Susan Gonzales Baker addresses in relation to the Immigration Reform and Control Act in chapter 7). I believe the CAP helped to bring about the wholesale transformation of the political terrain in Tucson. First, the participatory ideal has gained widespread currency. Maintained by the city's Office of Citizen Participation, neighborhood activism is well established and often effective. During the past twenty-five years, through the critical support of the CPO, neighborhood groups have agitated for the implementation of policies that have gained them timely access to information as well as a measure of control over the pace, location, and direction of growth and development in the city.

Second, the neighborhood organizing model advanced through CAP initiatives in poor neighborhoods in Tucson has been captured by middle-class citizens who have used it to rally their neighbors around issues of growth and the quality of life. During the 1980s these middle-class neighborhoods have become an impressive, often formidable, force in local politics. Third, in this morphologically sprawling and suburbanized metropolis of nearly three-quarters of a million people, the neighborhood has become the most effective space of civic life. While this innovation can be a positive force for participatory democracy, it has also been a force invoked to debate rather parochial issues. Furthermore, more often than not, the neighborhood is an exclusionary and demographically homogenous space and thus limits the potential for a full range of debate. In short, the neighborhood as a new public sphere circumscribes the ideal of a true open forum where anyone can speak and anyone can listen. The implications of a limited forum are clear in Tucson, where the issues are most often constructed around a contentious middle-class ideal of a controlled growth that delegates necessary but unwanted land uses to areas where there is the least resistance, that is, poor, unorganized neighborhoods. Thus, while a greater number of citizens have gained direct access to the political decision making and many of the critical decisions that affect their lives, their gain has been at the expense of other citizens who do not have the time, resources, security, or confidence to rally their neighbors and articulate their needs. Ultimately everyone loses in such an unbalanced political context, as the 1992 riots in Los Angeles amply demonstrate.

While the discussion has focused exclusively on Tucson, I should point out that this city is not unique in possessing a capacity-building office like the CPO and a politically engaged citizenry operating from a neighborhood base. Miami, Cleveland, Dayton, and Seattle, to name just a few cities, operate neighborhood offices promoting citizen participation, many of them with roots stretching back to the OEO initiatives. Across the country there is evidence that neighborhoods have become the focal point for citizens organizing to seek greater access to government. For example, a recent publication by the Kettering Foundation found that while many citizens feel alienated from the formal political process—as evidenced by decreasing voter participation rates—they have not abandoned political activity entirely but have turned to the public life of their neighborhoods where they feel they can make a difference. This dramatic transformation of local politics suggests that although the war on poverty was lost more than twenty-five years ago, its central campaign, the citizen action program, has dramatically altered the political geography of American life. The contours of this new political landscape are now in evidence, and while the implications for contemporary citizenship are being clearly felt, they are only vaguely understood.

37. For more information on these cities see Hallman (1977); Sharp (1986); and Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993).
38. Kettering Foundation; and chapter 11 in this volume.

References

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