

Agency and initiative by community associations in relations of shared governance: between civil society and local state

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Abstract This paper argues for the importance of emphasizing the agency and the initiative of community voluntary associations in relations of shared governance with the local state. This is intended to counter what the author sees as a current over emphasis on government-initiated, -directed, -guided or -administered forms of collaboration. Dangers documented by other scholars of this kind of collaborative governance include cooptation, placation, lack of real authority, absence of diversity and overall lack of parity with government. Based on a larger qualitative study of a mid-sized city near Boston, MA, the paper describes associations which choose to act (i) in opposition to local government as a path towards parity in shared governance, and (ii) in parallel with but separate from local government as a way to influence that government. The author argues that when associations exercise their agency to choose when and how to work with government (and when not to), this preserves associational independence while at the same time allowing for beneficial forms of state-associational engagement.

Relations between government and voluntary associations are often seen as important to various forms of shared governance (Warren, 2001; Fung,

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2003a, b; Taylor, 2007; Haus and Klausen, 2011). This paper argues for the importance of the agency and the initiative of associations in those relations. I intend this focus to counter what I see as a current over emphasis on government-led, -initiated, -invited, -directed, -guided, -coordinated and/or -administered forms of collaboration (Fung and Wright, 2001; Ansell and Gosh, 2008; Sirianni, 2009).

By agency, I simply mean associations exercising choice and autonomy about when and how to act in relations with government. By a voluntary association, I mean a freely formed membership group relying largely (but not exclusively) on volunteers and, in contrast to community organizations, characterized by a less formal and often less hierarchical leadership structure (Wuthnow, 1991; Smith, Stebbins and Dover, 2006). Agency includes a range of options, including cooperation, opposition or, simply, operating separately. I explore here two quite different kinds of agency. In the first instance, a voluntary association chose at first to act oppositionally towards local government, and then later to enter into a relationship of shared governance on its own terms. In the second instance, a coalition of associations opted to act separately, in parallel with, but not in opposition to, local government as a way to influence that government.

Indicative of the import of associational action, civic engagement scholars define associations as the heart of civil society (Eberly, 2000; Hendriks, 2006; Fox and Ward, 2008, p. 535). The value of the associational agency that I argue for here is that it preserves independence from the local state while still allowing associations to engage directly with the state.

In the first example, I describe successful legal action by the association resulted in the local state being required to engage in a genuinely collaborative partnership where real authority was shared. In the second, a group of local associations and community organizations formed a coalition which acted on its own, distinct from government but in a parallel direction, as a way to gain independent influence in a matter of public concern. This involved a separate simultaneous process of community visioning conducted, on the one hand, by local civil society groups and, on the other, by local government.

Documented government-led efforts of shared governance include neighbourhood councils, youth forums, local advisory groups and government-appointed volunteer boards, committees and commissions. As others have discussed, these efforts all too frequently result in co-optation and placation of resident participation, absence of real authority by residents and resident-formed associations (e.g. limited to consultation or mere information sharing) and lack of racial-ethnic and class diversity (Weir, 2010; Dougherty and Easton, 2012; King and Cruickshank, 2012). More often than not, these 'partnerships' end up being 'profoundly

unequal' (Newman *et al.*, 2004, p. 215). They may even mask new forms of state control (Taylor, 2007, p. 297). As one scholar argues, 'Unless those engaged in collaboration have the political power to defend the structures and resources that make collaboration possible, they can be scaled back and eliminated in the face of tightening budgets, unfavorable elections, or shifting fashions in public administration' (Weir, 2010, p. 598). It is for reasons like these that I focus here on the importance of agency and initiative towards shared governance coming more from local associations and community-based organizations and less from government.

I draw on data from a larger qualitative study of the city of Somerville, MA (Ostrander, 2013). That study is based on in-depth interviews with forty-five actively engaged residents; observations and taking of field notes at over thirty community meetings, and extensive reviews of city and community organization and association documents, reports and websites; plus two competing local newspapers. I focused on the five-year period from 2004 to 2009, beginning with the year the city's young reform mayor was elected. In January 2012, he began his fifth term. Initiating research questions for the broader project were how do people in Somerville actively engage in the public life of their city, through what kinds of organizational vehicles, in what sites and arenas, around what key issues, towards what ends and with what effect. The specific issue on which this paper focuses was not at the centre of the larger study but rather emerged in the course of the research. What I present here should then be considered somewhat exploratory.

The instances of associational agency I describe here took place as part of continuing local public debates about two major re-development projects which have profound implications for the regeneration of this mid-sized, formerly industrial, nearly two-century-old city. One project is a 145-acre open lot called Assembly Square. This huge flat area is contiguous to Boston proper. The second is an enormous public transportation project: a new subway line that will extend across the city of Somerville and into Boston. The debates about these two projects occurred in a context of an on-going larger struggle between the city administration and engaged residents where residents wanted more engagement, transparency and power.

Somerville has approximately 77,000 residents tucked into a mere 4 square miles, making it the densest city in New England. This city is well suited to a study of civic engagement, since in 1972 and again in 2009 the National Civic League designated it an All-America city. This award has been called a 'civic Oscar' celebrating local civic engagement, community activism, innovation and inclusiveness (Federico, 2009). Somerville's rise has been hard-won since this is the same the city known throughout the mid-twentieth century as Slumerville and notorious for the Winter Hill

Gang, loosely depicted in the 2006 award-winning film *The Departed*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Matt Damon and Jack Nicholson. The city's population is divided about equally into three groups: (i) an older Irish and Italian heritage white ethnic working class who still make up nearly all of the city's elected officials; (ii) a diverse group of newer immigrants mainly from Brazil, Central America and Haiti who presently have none of their number among elected city officials; and (iii) a younger group of middle class professionals, referred to as Yuppies by the old ethnics, who have managed to have a few of their number elected to political office. The next section of this paper describes and analyses the two forms of associational agency and initiative introduced above.

The Mystic View Task Force: acting in opposition to the local state as a path to shared governance

Mystic View Task Force (MVTF) is a Somerville voluntary association convened in summer 1998 with the specific aim of establishing a public process for future development of the 145-acre flat piece of land directly bordering the city of Boston called Assembly Square:

The Mystic View Task Force exists to increase understanding among Somerville, Massachusetts, residents about how each choice that we make regarding land use, real estate development, transportation infrastructure, public health, and housing affordability creates the future that we are building for ourselves and the environment in which we will live. Anyone may join the Mystic View Task Force by applying for membership and paying dues, but only Somerville residents may be voting members. (MVTF, *About the Mystic View Task Force*)

The Task Force named itself for the Mystic River, which borders this huge tract of land. Assembly Square is the former site of an enormous Ford Motor assembly plant closed in 1958 and since the 1970s occupied by a deteriorating shopping mall. Future plans for the area include a large IKEA store, a city park, a block of 2100 new residential units, retail and office space, shops, restaurants and a 200-room hotel ([Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, 2008](#), p. iv). This ambitious project slated for completion by 2020 will form a completely new mixed use neighbourhood.

When residents established the MVTF, Somerville city officials were taking very little account of resident concerns. The Assembly Square Shopping Mall which had replaced the closed Ford factory was failing. MVTF sought a balanced commercial, residential and recreational development to replace the failing big box stores and parking lots. They wanted a plan for Assembly Square that would improve the city's overall economy

and tax base, create local jobs and affordable housing and provide recreational opportunities along the Mystic River. In May 1999, MVTF organized a community forum which resulted in a vision of a pedestrian-oriented mixed use development that could potentially provide acres of usable open space; diverse, high-quality jobs; and over \$30 million in new net tax revenue for a city badly in need of some other source of funds besides resident property taxes.

When the city administration failed to respond satisfactorily to their community-generated vision, MVTF joined with the Conservation Law Foundation to bring a legal suit against the city. In 2002, a local court ruled in favour of the claimants who had contended that the Somerville Planning Board had failed to call for public hearings and traffic studies when they issued permits in 2000 for a huge Home Depot store (Chabot, 2002a, b). As a result of this oppositional legal strategy, MVTF became a key player with substantial influence in the city, a player with whom the city administration henceforth had to deal at every turn in decisions about Assembly Square. Explaining their decision to bring a legal suit, one key leader of the Mystic Task Force reflected the thinking of other members when he said:

I think that the community felt that city government was acceding to the interests of developers who would have been content to develop Assembly Square as a big box [store] center. . . . What was really frustrating was that the city appeared to be having open meetings but when the plans were made they seemed to basically reflect what the developers wanted. . . . The Mystic View Task Force . . . felt like the only resort was to sue to stop it . . . and that's what we did.

A year later in 2003, the city continued to move in a direction contrary to the community vision, arguing that the area was large enough to accommodate both a big-box Home Depot and a planned IKEA store. MVTF responded with another legal suit aimed at blocking two big-box stores which MVTF argued would generate high levels of traffic and pollution and create insufficient jobs for residents (Boston Sunday Globe editorial, 7 April 2003). Again, the Task Force prevailed when a court ruled in their favour.

In June 2006, worn down by the Task Force's success with legal appeals and seeking a more cooperative and collaborative relationship, national developer Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT) hired by the city to develop Assembly Square entered into direct negotiations with MVTF. As an MVTF leader explained:

There were two [earlier] efforts to mediate the dispute and those failed because I think the developers didn't go to the table in good faith because they felt like they were promised by the city that they would get what they

wanted and they didn't really have to accede to the demands of the community. This last time mediation was proposed [in 2006] it was a much more serious effort. A high profile mediator . . . who had been an environmental activist as well as a state government leader played the role of mediator. A new group of developers took it more seriously. I think the community also realized this was a real opportunity to negotiate a meaningful solution . . . and we were able to reach an agreement.

On 17 October 2006, MVTF, FRIT developers and Somerville's new mayor announced that they had reached a settlement of their long-standing disputes. The agreement stated that FRIT would take steps to guarantee long-term development that would provide more jobs and tax revenue to the city than FRIT's initial plans had entailed. Developers also agreed to specific steps that would mitigate the environmental impacts of increased traffic and improve public open space along the Mystic River and throughout the site. In return, the Task Force agreed to drop its pending lawsuit and not to bring future ones.

MVTF's actions in bringing the legal suit guaranteed MVTF a position of permanent authority in relation to city government 'until such time as the Master Plan has been built out in its entirety and the Long Term Vision Plan is completed and built out in its entirety' (MVTF, 2006, *Final Settlement Agreement*). MVTF called for, and the settlement required, a specially created Public Advisory Council (PAC) charged with overseeing the development of Assembly Square. Illustrating the kind of inclusive body MVTF opted for, PAC consists of 'seven members representing the following constituencies: a) two members shall be appointed by MVTF . . . ; b) one member shall be appointed by the Board of Aldermen of the City; c) one member shall be from the Ten Hills Neighborhood of the City; d) one member shall be from the East Somerville Neighborhood of the City; and e) two members shall be appointed by the Mayor of the City.' A second kind of collaborative entity, Assembly Square Transportation Management Association (TMA), was mandated to oversee the transportation aspects of the project. TMA is 'an independent, public-private organization with a governing board [which includes]: One board member . . . appointed by FRIT; One board member . . . appointed by the Mayor; One board member . . . appointed by MVTF.' In an important decision by MVTF that reflected its commitment to retaining its community grassroots base, twenty individual members penned their signature to the legal agreement.

While the eventual completion of Assembly Square is years off, what is certain is that the MVTF is a central political player with whom city officials and developers must be in regular active negotiation. In November 2009, MVTF collaborated with the city's Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee (Somervision) to prepare for the subway Green Line Extension and its

effect upon development and other issues around the city. This was a continuation of MVTF's move from an oppositional stance to a genuine collaborative partnership with city government, initiated not by government but by a voluntary association on its own terms.

The Community Corridor Planning coalition: acting separately from the local state through a parallel process of community decision-making

Somerville contains only a single stop of the extensive metropolitan and regional subway. Public transportation from one end of Somerville to the other is limited entirely to buses. The new subway Green Line will provide rapid transit across Somerville as well as fast direct access into Boston. As the director of Somerville's community development agency stated at a community meeting in 2008, 'The coming of the Green Line is going to dominate our lives for the next twenty years. We got it. Now we need to all work on how we want it to impact our community.' When I interviewed the city's longest-serving alderman, he told me, 'The Green Line coming to Somerville is probably the biggest issue we're all focused on now.'

The history of extending the Green Line is long and contested, going back to the 1920s, when the state of Massachusetts's Metropolitan Planning Commission considered extending area trains into Somerville (Guha, 2009). In 1990, the state of Massachusetts finally agreed to make good on its legal obligation to fund and build an extension of Boston-area subway as payback to Somerville for the pollution increase caused by Boston's notorious Big Dig highway project (Kaiser, 2004). The state's agreement came only after the city successfully won the first of several lawsuits aimed at holding the state to their obligation. Ten years later in 2000, no progress had been made. This prompted the City of Somerville and the Conservation Law Foundation to file another lawsuit against the state of Massachusetts. In 2006, a collaboration that included a local voluntary association called Somerville Transportation Equity Partnership (STEP) and a neighbourhood group called the Union Square Task Force finally brought about a multi-million dollar state investment in the Green Line extension.

During 2004 and 2005, city government and the community again worked together as hundreds of Somerville residents showed up at public hearings to convince state officials of the merits of the Green Line extension. The mayor kept pressing the point that, 'The state has made a legal commitment to this project and it must follow through' (City of Somerville website). Advocates emphasized the finding by the state's own transportation agency that the new subway line would cut automobile traffic by 64,000

cars each day, and the Somerville Chamber of Commerce claim that it would bring three billion dollars in economic activity to the city (City of Somerville website).

In early 2009, the city administration invited a group of local associations and non-profit organizations to co-sponsor a city-run visioning process planned for the spring, summer and fall of 2009 focused around planning for the community impact of the impending Green Line. This group, the Community Corridor Planning (CCP) coalition, defined themselves as 'a grassroots non-profit coalition committed to resident participation in planning for a livable, equitable, Somerville' (text from flyer). Coalition members included the STEP, the city's community development agency, a small organization focused on environmental issues called Groundwork Somerville and the city's community Health Alliance.

CCP declined the invitation of city government to conduct a joint visioning process, choosing instead to conduct a separate process of their own. A coalition leader explained that their process would run in parallel with the city's initiative, and that CCP would share the proposals that emerged from their grassroots process once they adequately represented the concerns and wishes of the community (Maislin, 2009). This decision reflected CCP's belief that a city-run process might not be as inclusive of the city's diverse populations nor as wide-ranging in its different and perhaps conflicting points of view.

The city administration's process called SomerVision kicked off on a Saturday afternoon in April 2009 at an Open House held in a public school cafeteria. People mingled about looking at city-generated detailed maps and plans for the proposed route for the Green Line. During the couple of hours I spent at the open house, perhaps twenty people other than those staffing booths perused the displays. Suggesting that CCP's concerns were perhaps well-grounded, with few exceptions, the crowd was white and apparently Anglo.

Just four days later in the very same public school cafeteria, the CCP coalition held their first meeting early on a Wednesday evening. The welcoming speaker described it as 'the first of many'. About seventy people attended and, as near as I could tell, about a third were Latino or Brazilian or Haitian, this in vivid contrast to the city event's much smaller attendance primarily by white Anglos. The flyers publicizing the coalition event were in multiple languages. Demonstrating CCP's active choice to be inclusive, there was simultaneous translation of the entire programme (including small group discussions) into Spanish, Portuguese and Haitian Creole by multi-lingual Somerville youth trained by a local immigrant advocacy organization called The Welcome Project. The introductory speaker stated the goal of the meeting as to 'ensure that the Green Line meets the needs

of our diverse communities.' She told those assembled that the evening's discussion would be compiled and used in the next stage of CCP's process, a series of small gatherings in peoples' homes over the summer. A culminating meeting would occur in October, where participants would develop principles to guide a community vision that would be conveyed to city government.

Reflecting CCP's choice to be not only inclusive but also highly participatory and provide space for a range of opinions, most of the April CCP meeting was spent in small group activities as people sat in groups of ten or so at tables labelled according to planned Green Line stops around the city. Led by volunteer facilitators, participants at each table named places they especially liked in the area of the stop, offered what would make the area better and stated their worries were about the changes the Green Line would bring, and what could be done to address those concerns.

The culminating October CCP meeting was again held early on a Wednesday evening. This time, I counted about a 100 people present, half of whom appeared to be Latino or Brazilian or Haitian. Youth from The Welcome Project again provided language interpretation. In contrast to city-run meetings where I never saw food served, CCP in a move to both attract a diverse representation of participants and to increase participation over the dinner hour provided a multi-ethnic buffet meal. The opening speaker from one of the CCP organizations talked about the city administration's visioning and planning process saying, 'We can influence that plan. We can say to them what we want.' The speaker's statement demonstrates that CCP's ultimate aim was to exercise an independent voice that would have an effect on the city's comprehensive plan for Somerville.

This final community-run meeting was again organized in structured small group discussion which resulted first in developing and then systematically prioritizing a set of principles to guide the vision that participants wanted for their city. Discussions started with a list of sixteen priorities that had been generated from the series of summer small gatherings run by CCP. At the end of the evening, once all the tables had put forth their priorities and those priorities were voted upon by the entire assembly, final core principles were established. Soon after, CCP issued a document in English, Spanish, Portuguese and Haitian Creole articulating the core principles which the community had developed and affirmed.

Meanwhile after several city-sponsored smaller meetings during December 2009, the city administration's SomerVision called a large public meeting for early January 2010. About 100 people attended, a more diverse group than before. Two city staffers ran the meeting following a PowerPoint-driven process developed by a national consulting group called World Café ([World Café website](#)). Urged by the immigrant advocacy

organization, The Welcome Project, this time the city too offered multiple simultaneous language translation. The programme consisted of a series of structured ‘conversations’ held at each of eighteen tables of six persons each. First, everyone told where in the city they lived and/or worked, for how long, what they liked most and what makes Somerville special, and then a change of tables. The next set of questions was about what people wanted Somerville to be twenty years from now, what the city is ‘best at’ and what concerns are commonly shared. A ‘report out’ to the full assembly from each table gave one priority to conserve for the future, one possibility and one concern. Examples were: keep the small town feel, keep local businesses. Possibilities included making areas of the city free of automobiles. Concerns included how to turn the city’s diversity into democracy, and what to do about families leaving the city when their children become school age because of worries about the quality of the public schools. On 1 March 2010, the city administration issued its own document: the city’s vision statement for 2010–2030.

A number of similarities as well as differences exist between the core principles established by the community coalition and the vision established by the city-run process. Both address economic development. However, the community principles focus directly on creating jobs and keeping the city affordable (naming working class occupations), while the city document refers more generally to investing in the growth of a resilient economic base. Both allude to the city’s diversity of residents and its businesses. Both include environmental issues like the importance of green spaces in such a dense urban area, but the community document refers specifically to the need to reduce pollution and toxic substances affecting resident health. Both address transportation, but the community document specifies the importance of equal access. And, finally, only in the community document is resident participation in community affairs — democratic shared governance as this paper has termed it — addressed at all. That document reads:

We want to make sure residents are included on an ongoing basis in the planning, design, and zoning changes to the stations and areas around them. . . . We need an easy and clear process for residents to address problems as they come up, with ways of immediately resolving unseen impacts.

Like the completion of the enormously ambitious plan to re-develop Assembly Square, the extension of the Green Line subway is years off. However, what is clearly established is the on-going participation of a strong and active coalition of civil society actors with whom the local state must continue to negotiate whenever decisions about the Green Line are made.

Discussion and conclusion

I have described community associations that choose to act either counter to or separate from local government as a way to achieve a more equally balanced collaborative relationship with government as they sought to influence local re-development decisions. These associations determined for themselves when to work directly with the local state (and when not to) as part of on-going relationships of shared governance. I argue here for the importance of associations retaining their capacity to make that choice, to exercise their own agency, to decide on their own terms whether or how to enter into collaborative relations with local government at any given time (Gaventa, 2004; Taylor, 2007). Separate and sometimes oppositional forms of agency on the part of community associations and organizations can, I argue, help to avoid the pitfalls of government-initiated, -invited, -directed, -guided, -coordinated and/or -administered forms of collaborative governance. Pitfalls include cooptation, placation, participation that fails to be representative of a community's diversity and exclusion from genuine forms of power.

The larger significance of the argument I make here derives from the role of associations like those discussed in this paper as at the heart of civil society. Civil society exists outside the state and 'in partial independence from it' (Taylor, 1990, p. 95) where people can 'organize themselves independently of (or at least beyond) state direction' (Calhoun, 1993, p. 271). This function directly reflects the field of community development's commitment to building civic participation, community capacity and local social capital as well as the understanding of the value of oppositional strategies in achieving them (DeFilippis, Fisher and Shragge, 2009).

The capacity of associations to speak and act outside of and sometimes against state power is essential to civil society (Taylor, 1990; Calhoun, 1993; Eberly, 2000; Hendriks, 2006). However, when civil society is valued only as a bulwark against, watchdog over and/or substitute for weaknesses (or dangers) of the state, this discourages civil society associations from mutually beneficial collaborations with the state. When civil society actors instead retain their capacity 'to make hard choices on whether to work with or against the state' (Hendriks, 2006, p. 487), then, I argue, truly democratic forms of shared governance become possible. Governance as conceptualized by the burgeoning literature on the topic – and in this paper – is not, then, limited to the actions of government (Fung and Wright, 2001; Boyte, 2005; Garcia, 2006; Taylor, 2007; Ansell and Gosh, 2008; Fox and Ward, 2008; Sirianni, 2009; Michels, 2011). Non-state actors like those I discuss here challenge state actors to adopt different ends, or collaborate with them to achieve common ends.

Within this governance framework, 'real' power to make public decisions is socially produced through negotiation by state and non-state actors. Governance in this sense is neither anti-government nor intended as a substitute for government. It occurs when elected and appointed government officials and engaged members of communities actively negotiate and adapt to one another's positions on important public issues. This is precisely what I saw happening in my Somerville research. Agreements about public issues *emerged* as decisions made *both* by those elected to positions of state authority *and* those outside state authority who challenge them.

It would, of course, be problematic to depend exclusively on the agency and the initiative of civil society actors to create the collaborative relationships with government valuable to building more shared and democratic governance. For example, in communities unlike Somerville where there is little civic and political engagement on the part of residents, or where engagement is poorly organized or largely ineffective, democracy would not be served by leaving the creation of collaborative governance entirely up to non-state actors.

I am not, then, arguing that civil society associations and organizations should be the only initiators of governance relationships between civil society and the state. I understand too that both the state and civil society are in need of changes that would make them more democratic (Fung, 2003b). Also some actions conducive to more democratic participation (such as providing resources and equalizing wealth and income inequalities) can likely only be performed by the state and not only at the local level (Garcia, 2006). What I am arguing for is greater attention to and reliance on association initiated and contained relations with the state, with greater value and emphasis placed on those relations as a foundation upon which to construct collaborative democratic governance.

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