
Undermining Governmental Legitimacy: Failed Expectations of Community Accountability

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Introduction

The rise of right and left-wing populism both in the United States and globally seems to have taken many political analysts both in and out of academe by surprise. One of the major reasons for this lack of vision is due to what might be called ‘ivory tower myopia,’ or the lack of attention to what takes place at the ground level. Historically, populism has risen in electoral democracies when the people’s expectations of accountability to them and attention to their needs are unmet. It is not an individual phenomenon dependent on a charismatic leader, but a collective one based on social conditions. Theoretically and historically-informed ethnography makes it possible to observe how governmental legitimacy is undermined at the grassroots level. We, the authors, have been community activists, and at times vision is due to what might be called ‘ivory tower myopia’, or the lack of attention to what takes place at the ground level, deeply engaged in New York City partisan politics, which provided us with access to local decision-making processes. In this regard, Jerome Krase discussed how notions of the ‘ideal’ community serves as a practical guide for local organizations to best present themselves, their goals, and needs to authorities, and how authorities claim legitimacy by demonstrating responsiveness to community demands (Krase 1977, 1979). New York City’s Community Planning Districts use the same community paradigm to present themselves as being responsible to the public. Theoretically, for this legitimacy they rely on what Max Weber termed ‘Legal-Rational Authority’ (1978: 215). Paradoxically, that legitimacy, bestowed by the public, actually rests on what Weber called ‘Traditional Rationality’ (Weber 1978).

For Italo Pardo and Giuliana B. Prato, ‘A key task of governance is to establish and nurture the connection with citizens’ values, needs and expectations, the strength of which depends upon the observable quality of the link between political responsibility and trust and authority in the exercise of power’ (2010: 1). Therefore, what citizens expect from government is a key variable. The 1960s was a turbulent decade for American cities. New York was no exception as it was punctuated by mass anti-government demonstrations and several riots in alienated African-American neighbourhoods. Concomitantly, citizen demands for increased accountability and even community control of city services such as education and development increased. In 1969, during the mayoralty of John V. Lindsay, the New York City Planning Commission decentralized some governmental authority. As noted by the Commission’s Chair, Donald H. Elliot (1966-73), ‘Mayor Lindsay was very interested in having a community participation component as part of the development process. Following the Robert Moses era that mostly ignored public opinion, Lindsay wanted local communities to have an impact on government decisions.’ (Center for New York City Law, 2017) The city

was divided into 62 (currently 59) Community Districts, each with its own Community Board. Each Board consists of up to 50 unsalaried members appointed by the Borough President, with half nominated by the City Council members who are elected to represent residents in that district. Board members must reside, work in, or have some other significant interest in the community.

Jerome Krase and Charles La Cerra explained that, although seemingly progressive on the surface, Lindsay, at first a Republican Party reformer, employed the decentralization rubric to get around the almost total control of the city by Democratic Party bosses. In addition, community associations in poverty areas provided residents with alternative methods for local problem-solving. In more middle-class neighbourhoods, educated and sophisticated voters used them to pressure political clubs to become more democratic. The Community Boards also created opportunities for political entrepreneurs by fostering competition for limited resources. Individuals, groups, and local social service providers became constituency seeking ‘favours.’ The ‘Great Society’, ‘Community Action’, ‘Model Cities’, and other Federal programs were also ripe with patronage and provided new jobs and spoils for urban political machines to distribute. Consequently, nominally independent local agencies quickly came under the control of local bosses (Krase and LaCerra 1992, also Krase 1997). Even groups elected by the community, such as Community School Boards, slowly gravitated toward the usual politics as teachers’ unions and suppliers saw the need to control Board decisions and joined with regular political clubs to elect sympathetic elect board members. City newspapers often exposed the corruption created by these new opportunities. Despite these scandals, the ideal of accountability to the local community maintained its ideological appeal. By the turn of the 21th century much of the power decentralized in the 1970s was re-centralized and Community Districts lost much of their potency.

What follows is a comparison between reactions of local residents to controversial decisions in two Brooklyn Community Districts that, although they concern very different constituencies, share the same problem of establishing and maintaining their legitimacy. In both cases, actions by the respective Community Boards raised doubts as to whether the concerns and indeed the welfare of many local residents were given sufficient weight in the decision-making process.

SELECTED POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS 2010		
Source NYCDPCP (https://communityprofiles.planning.nyc.gov)		
	Community District 6	Community District 9
Total Population	104,709	98,400
White Non-Hispanics	63.8%	18.4%
Black (Non-Hispanic)	6.9%	67.6%
Hispanic	18.6%	9.7%
Foreign Born	17.5%	41.8%
Unemployment	6.5%	13.4%
NYC Poverty Measure	9.0%	23.1%
Education (Bachelor Degree or higher)	70%	26.7%

Community Board 9 - Rezoning (by Jerome Krase)

I have been an activist-scholar in Community District 9 since the 1960s, and I continue to serve on one of the District's committees. The current fight against upscale residential development was spurred by a city-wide re-zoning plan devised during the Mayoral administration of Michael Bloomberg. In predominantly non-white areas like Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant, it has a distinctly racial tone as described by Shannyce Lashley, a reporter who covered a public meeting, 'Bed-Stuy in Crisis', at which I spoke.

"New York City has a housing policy, it's very simple, black people live where white people don't wanna live until white people decide to live there again," said a resident of Bed-Stuy at the forum. "That policy is racist. Is it class based? Yes, but it's racist, and the battle for Bed-Stuy is going to be fought in the streets."
(Lashley 2014)

Although much of the battle continues to be face-to-face, increasingly today it takes place in, and through, various forms of mass and electronic media such as web blogs, list servers, websites, e-mail, Twitter, and platforms such as *Facebook*. The movement that garnered the greatest amount of attention in Brooklyn as a whole was 'Develop, Don't Destroy Brooklyn' which unsuccessfully fought against development at the Atlantic Yards and the Barclay's Center (http://www.dddb.net/php/latestnews_ArchiveDate.php). In Crown Heights, the organization that has the highest, somewhat controversial, profile is MTOPP — The Movement to Protect the People (<http://www.mtopp.org/>). Its fiery leader is Alicia Boyd, a middle-class African American home owner, whose goal was preventing approval by CD 9 of the City-wide rezoning program. MTOPP's mission statement declares: 'We must organize! We must meet with our representatives! Stage demonstrations! Call in our favors! File lawsuits! Expose the back room deals that are taking away our rights! We must use every resource at our disposal, to let these developers know that... Our Community is not for sale!!!' (<http://www.mtopp.org/mission.html>). MTOPP also engaged activist urban planner Tom Angotti to devise a grass roots plan to counter the City's rezoning plan. (Angotti 2015)

Alicia Boyd and other MTOPP activists vehemently complained about the unethical and perhaps illegal conduct of Community Board 9. Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) requests were filed and board members have also been accused of conflicts of interest. She and other activists were arrested at protests. In anticipation of disruption, in the autumn of 2014 the October meeting date and venue was changed. More police were added to deal with anticipated disruptions from MTOPP and others. At this meeting, which I attended, a motion for adjournment was made by a board member in the audience, approved by board members, and the meeting ended quickly before the public comment period on the agenda. This caused a loud protest from MTOPP members (wearing MTOPP t-shirts) standing at the back of the auditorium who had been handing out literature to attendees, and who were prepared to speak at the public comments period that was on the agenda.

In addition to being a prolific blogger whose site attracts a great deal of comment, Tim Thomas chaired the Transportation Committee of Community Board 9. His support of proposals to develop affordable housing in Crown Heights and Prospect Lefferts Gardens

drew the wrath of the MTOPP. However, even those in favour of development were wary of the government plan. In reference to the plan, his blog, ‘The Q at Parkside’ circulated a petition that stated in part:

We, the undersigned, implore Community Board 9 and the NYC Department of City Planning to immediately begin a Planning Study of Community District 9, specifically the western portion of CB9’s boundaries. The current zoning map dates to 1961. While other parts of NYC have been contextually zoned and updated to reflect a modern reality, we continue to live with decisions that were made for our neighborhood more than 50 years ago...We would prefer to undergo this process collaboratively, rather than have outside forces develop our neighborhood FOR us. We’ve seen the future — in certain buildings, like 626 Flatbush and another 23-story tower on Nostrand to our south, plus dozens of new ‘as of right’ projects throughout Central Brooklyn. We’d like to temper the urge of developers to build without an understanding of the consequences to our historic and tight-knit community. (Please Sign Petition For Zoning Study To Begin).¹

Other disputes among competing activists and neighbourhood spokespersons have revolved around the real and imagined racial biases of protagonists and antagonists on various local issues. For example, MTOPP has been accused by some of making racially divisive comments about pro-development advocates. However, the less radical, Prospect Park East Network (PPEN) also sees these and related future projects as reducing the ethnic and class diversity of the area, as well as causing divisions in the community (<http://www.ppen.org/>).

Community Board 6 — Controversial Bike Lanes (by Kathryn Krase)

In contrast to the residential rezoning of portions of Crown Heights, which threatened the affordability of housing for thousands of poor and working-class Non-white renters, the construction of bike lanes in an affluent neighbourhood might seem to lack gravitas, but for many residents such as myself, it was both an affront to aesthetic sensibilities and a demonstration of insensitivity to our real concerns about safety and convenience. The bike lane would destroy the streetscape of the historically landmarked thoroughfare. Parking spaces were lost, bikers flaunted traffic laws, and according to Seniors for Safety, created unsafe conditions especially for less agile elderly pedestrians. When the protected bike lanes were originally proposed for Prospect Park West in 2010, I honestly thought it was a joke. Why would any policymaker think it was a good idea to take away a lane of traffic on a busy roadway integral to inter-neighbourhood travel in Brooklyn? Prior to presenting the plan for the bike lanes there was significant community engagement in efforts to address ‘traffic calming’ there. Ironically, calming was needed because of the increased traffic created by earlier ‘pro-bike, anti-car’ decisions.

¹ See <http://theqatparkside.blogspot.com/2015/01/please-sign-petition-for-zoning-study.html>

Community Board 6 conducted a survey, allegedly to ascertain support for the measures. To anti-bike lane groups, however, it was more of a fabrication. For example, the initial survey did not ask respondents, many of whom were canvassed along the route, for approval of what became an extensive and costly construction of bicycle lanes. The unfortunate, but timely, death of a child on the street gave the greatest impetus for the plan's approval, which claimed to be the honest result of wide consultation with 'the community'. After the lanes were finished, another pseudo-social scientific survey was conducted to demonstrate further community support for the plan after it was challenged in court by 'Neighbors for Better Bike Lanes and Seniors for Safety'. In the court papers, the group claimed that the proponents of the bike lane project misrepresented their studies as well as the project itself. Ironically, the announcement of the survey results included cautions that the survey was not very 'scientific'. *The New York Times* coverage of the survey noted: 'Polling experts caution, however, that online surveys, like any surveys in which the respondents are self-selected rather than contacted at random, are of limited value' (Goodman 2010). The survey was conducted using a relatively unsophisticated internet platform *Survey Monkey*, and on the report website itself was the Caveat: 'Not intended as a referendum or a randomly-sampled public opinion poll.' Despite these particular advisements, this and the other surveys were widely used in the sympathetic press and by proponents of the project, as evidence of broad community support for their view.

Observations made by several informants of community meetings at which pro and anti-bike lane speakers made their cases before Community Board 6 meetings and the Park Slope Civic Council revealed a similar pattern. In all cases, it appeared that the pro-bike lane supporters were in the majority. Speakers for each side were loudly, but not raucously, applauded by their supports. As to civility, however, one anti-bike lane informant reported that after being quoted in a newspaper story, online comments were 'incredibly abusive'. As a result, the informant has 'not Googled my name from then onwards because it was too upsetting'. As many others, this informant was not against a bike lane *per se* but was disturbed by how residents who expressed contrary opinions were being steamrolled by the city-wide pro-bike lane group Transportation Alternatives and their allies on Community Board 6, the Civic Council, and in Councilman Brad Lander's office. Those 'who didn't agree with them or had valid points in opposition were vindictively labelled as rich and old. And the DOT and Jeannette Sadik Khan lied throughout'.

Long after the dust had settled, Bloomberg era Transportation Commissioner, Janette Sadik-Kahn (2007-2013) and Seth Solomonow penned *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution* in which she wrote: 'the strife over Prospect Park West represented a perverse version of the historical battles between Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses.' (2017: 8), and repeated widely shared comments in the media about her opponents such as Iris Weinshall '... who lived in a *well-appointed* (my emphasis) high-rise along Prospect Park West with her husband, *influential* (my emphasis) United States Senator Charles Schumer' (168). More critical for our thesis, she mistakenly claimed 'the truth is that the community has been asking for traffic calming on Prospect Park West, including a protected bike path, for at least four

years' (171). In contrast, praise and thanks were given to Transportation Alternatives members '... who pulled together spoke out at community meetings, drafted op-eds and letters to the editor, and always made themselves available' (177). Incidentally, a prominent Transportation Alternatives member was Co-Chair of the Community Board 6 Transportation Committee.

Discussion and Notes on Methods

Obviously, the tactics for the more privileged opposition groups in Park Slope such as Neighbors for Better Bike Lanes and Seniors for Safety are different from MTOPP in Crown Heights. Due to their higher status, they used quieter, more legalistic methods, and relied on the unrequited respect of their higher social status by elected officials and employees of city agencies who claimed to represent them. But the outcomes, despite the fact that both groups were eventually vindicated as to their claims, were the same as to the government's loss of legitimacy in their eyes. A crucial issue is how the city government, via its local arms, such as Community Planning Districts, presented themselves as being accountable to the public, and how they can lose their legitimacy by failing in their, sometimes cynical, efforts.

To accomplish this complex task, we employed a number of ethnographic methods and techniques. In addition to the usual ethnographic methods such as direct observation, participant observation, interviews, informants, we employed various more and less digital (Pink et al. 2015) and virtual (Dominguez et al. 2007) methods to explore on-line discussions, websites, and on-line newspapers. Both researchers also engaged in analytic auto-ethnography (Ellis et al. 2011) as a way to explore personally the issues and processes from the inside out. Finally, comparative or multi-sited ethnographic (Marcus 1995) sensibilities made it possible to isolate commonalities between very different neighbourhoods and issues.

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