Lecture Notes in Education, Arts, Management and Social Science,
2026, Volume 4, Issue 7
https://bbwpublisher.com/journal/LNE
Online ISSN: 2705-053X
Print ISSN: 3083-1091

Optimizing Citizen Participation in Government Performance Evaluation

Ziwei Guo

School of Law and Humanities, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan 430070, Hubei, China

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Citizen participation helps to improve the accountability and responsiveness of government performance evaluation, but in Chinese practice, citizen participation remains largely at the symbolic level. The existing institutional arrangements face constraints such as distortion of evaluation data, non-standard procedures, and insufficient use of evaluation results. Based on Smith's policy implementation model, this study analyzes the four root causes of this gap: vague policy design, insufficient commitment of implementing agencies, limited citizen ability, insufficient mutual trust, and a government-centered administrative environment. Based on this, the study proposes to clarify the rules of participation, ensure the accessibility of performance information, broaden the channels of participation, strengthen the capacity building of citizens, and improve the implementable feedback mechanism to promote citizen participation from symbolic to substantive.

Keywords: Citizen participation; Government performance evaluation; Smith's policy implementation model

Online publication: July 26, 2026

1. Introduction

Citizen participation has been introduced into public-service performance evaluation to address the limits of expert-led assessment. Government-led models allow citizens to contribute to indicator design, although many proposed indicators are excluded as impractical [1]. Citizen-led digital evaluation gives the public a stronger voice but raises concerns about data credibility and the representation of vulnerable groups [2]. Deliberative mini-publics do not necessarily produce greater perceived legitimacy than autonomous participation [3]. Research indicates that the effectiveness of participation mechanisms is influenced by a series of organizational and administrative factors. The emphasis on incorporating external feedback in performance management reforms has promoted the formation of "back-stage" participation mechanisms [4]. The result-oriented system that directly links citizens' opinions with service improvement helps to enhance the actual effect of participation [5]. The degree of financial dependence also, to a certain extent, strengthens the responsiveness of local governments [6], while an excessive administrative burden significantly hinders public participation [7].

In China, government performance evaluation increasingly emphasizes people-centered approaches, and citizen participation has received more attention. It helps to improve the objectivity and transparency of the assessment, and also encourages the government to respond to public needs in a more timely manner. However, from a practical point of view, most citizen participation still stays at the procedural level, which has a limited impact on the evaluation of decision-making and service improvement. This paper focuses on the specific performance of this gap, analyzes its causes with the help of Smith's policy implementation model, and then puts forward countermeasures to promote citizen participation from form to substance.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. A ladder of citizen participation

Arnstein's participation ladder divides citizen participation from low to high into three levels: non-participation, symbolic participation, and citizen power. In the non-participation level, the power holders are only managed or mobilized in the name of participation, and citizens do not really enter the decision-making process; at the level of symbolic participation, although citizens can obtain information or be consulted, their voices may not have a practical impact; the level of citizen power is different, and the public can participate in consultation and share decision-making power, thus playing a substantive role in governance [8]. The reason why this distinction is useful is that in the performance evaluation of the Chinese government, citizen participation is still generally between symbolic participation and civil power: citizens have a certain space for information acquisition and opinion expression, but there is still a clear gap from real participation in consultation and sharing of decision-making power.

2.2. Smith's policy implementation process model

Government performance evaluation is closely related to the process and effect of public policy implementation, and it is an important part of the public policy cycle. Therefore, the public policy analysis framework and related theoretical perspectives can also be used to analyze the government performance evaluation model.

Smith believes that policy implementation is mainly affected by four factors. First, the idealized policy refers to the scientificity, adaptability, and operability of the policy text. Second, the executive body, that is, the institution that undertakes policy implementation, involves personnel, organizational form, leadership style and ability, policy understanding, and implementation ability. Third, the target group, that is, the direct target of the policy, its degree of organization, institutionalization, and acceptance and support for policy content and implementation methods will affect policy implementation. Fourth, environmental factors, namely the external conditions of policy implementation, including the political, economic, cultural, demographic, and technical environment [9].

The Smith model integrates idealized policies, implementing agencies, target groups, and environmental factors into the core variables that affect policy implementation. This model provides a theoretical framework for analyzing the operation process and actual results of citizen participation in government performance evaluation in China.

3. The deviation between ideal and practice

3.1. Distortion of evaluation data

Citizen satisfaction surveys are the most common form of public participation in government performance evaluation, but subjective perceptions do not always reflect administrative performance. In Nanjing's Ten Thousand Citizens Evaluate the Government initiative, participants tended to select 'basically satisfied' when they were unfamiliar with a department, while major incidents could produce disproportionately low ratings [10]. Online evaluation creates similar problems, including unverifiable participant identities, inflated participation figures, and opaque statistical procedures. Without adequate information and sampling controls, both survey and online results may misrepresent actual service quality.

3.2. Disorder in the evaluation process

Citizen participation in performance evaluation lacks unified rules governing when citizens should participate, how representatives should be selected, which channels should be used, and how results should be disclosed. Local implementation therefore depends heavily on the preferences of individual governments, producing substantial variation and uncertainty.

Procedures are also weak. Citizens may receive little notice before a survey, and questionnaires may use incomplete or poorly designed response options. No consistent mechanism selects participants with relevant experience or ensures representation of affected groups. Government portals often reduce evaluation to simple yes-or-no choices, while limited information prevents citizens from assessing departments accurately. These conditions make participation episodic and formal rather than an integrated part of performance evaluation.

3.3. Ineffectiveness in the use of results

Evaluation results are often weakly connected to accountability and service improvement. Although public satisfaction may formally affect rewards or sanctions, some departments respond by manipulating samples or data rather than addressing the underlying problems. Campaign-style evaluations may attract short-term attention but rarely create sustained monitoring or rectification. When authorities do not explain how public feedback was used, citizens have little reason to regard participation as consequential.

4. Causes of the gap between ideal and practice

4.1. Idealized policy: Vague objectives and inadequate protection

The policy objectives of citizen participation are often summarized only by broad statements such as 'democratic evaluation' and 'scientific evaluation,' but they do not explain how much weight citizen evaluation should take, which stages must allow public participation, and what procedures should be followed in different ways of participation. Once the goal is blurred, the executive department has a larger discretionary space, which can limit or even ignore public opinion. At the same time, due to the lack of unified rules for information disclosure, feedback, and accountability, it is difficult for citizen participation to truly become a stable part of performance evaluation.

4.2. Implementing agencies: Lack of motivation and trust

Executing agencies may conflict with citizen evaluation; a very realistic reason is that they are also the

object of evaluation. The long-term top-down management system has brought path dependence; once the public rating is not ideal, it may harm the interests of departments or individuals. As a result, officials tend to regard citizen participation as an external pressure, and even doubt whether the public's judgment is reliable. Affected by these factors, they are often reluctant to disclose information, are reluctant to accept public influence, and will not actively make improvements based on evaluation results.

4.3. Target group: Lack of capacity and motivation

Effective citizen evaluation is based on citizens' understanding of departmental responsibilities, service standards, and evaluation indicators. In reality, many citizens lack both access to relevant information and experience in dealing with special administrative affairs, and independent judgment is difficult to form. Insufficient information can easily lead to arbitrary ratings and weaken the public's trust in citizen evaluation data. If citizens think that their participation is difficult to affect government behavior, they are often reluctant to invest time in evaluation.

4.4. Environmental factors: Lack of cognition and trust

4.4.1. Social environment: Mutual distrust

Mutual distrust will aggravate the lack of participation. If citizens doubt the fairness of the evaluation, or think that their opinions are difficult to be adopted, the enthusiasm for participation is usually not high. If officials doubt citizens' motivation or ability, they may limit information disclosure and compress public participation. The two responses reinforce each other: the degree of openness of the government is limited, and it is difficult for citizens to obtain sufficient information and participate effectively; insufficient participation is often used as a reason to continue to maintain administrative control.

4.4.2. Cultural environment and government-centered administration

The administrative tradition of government centralism places officials in the position of decision makers and citizens in the position of public service recipients. This division of roles weakens the willingness of the official to share the right to evaluate, and also reduces citizens' expectation of having a substantial impact on their own opinions. Participatory projects such as "Ten Thousand People Evaluate the Government" in Nanjing may also mainly serve vertical administrative control in practice, rather than horizontal accountability. Participation is thus more often used as a management tool, and its significance as a source of independent public supervision is marginalized.

5. Path exploration: From deviation to alignment

5.1. Enhancing citizen initiative and capacity

5.1.1. Strengthening publicity and cultivating awareness

The government should establish a multi-channel communication system and actively promote knowledge of performance evaluation. Mass media such as television have a wide range of influence and can be used to produce and broadcast special programs. Government officials, experts, and scholars are invited to interpret evaluation indicators, evaluation processes, and the value of citizen participation. By showing typical cases of public participation in promoting service optimization and improving people's livelihood, it helps citizens intuitively understand the actual effectiveness of participation. Community and administrative villages

can organize simulation exercises and practical training in public affairs governance, so that citizens can further understand the rights, obligations, and procedures of participation, and improve the ability to choose appropriate participation methods and take effective actions in real assessment scenarios.

5.1.2. Empowerment education and capacity building

If government officials doubt the public's ability to participate and thus exclude the public from the governance process, effective citizen participation will be difficult to achieve. To establish a participatory performance evaluation system and improve the level of citizen participation, it is necessary to promote citizen empowerment and capacity building simultaneously.

The content and methods of education should be designed according to the characteristics of different groups of citizens. Through systematic training, we can help the public master the basic theory, index framework, and operation procedures of performance evaluation, enhance their analytical thinking and logical reasoning ability, and enable them to participate rationally and effectively in local government performance evaluation.

5.2. Expanding channels for citizens' participation

Participation in channel construction should combine a unified digital platform with structured offline discussion. The online system can provide a single entrance to facilitate citizens in obtaining project information, submitting evaluations, and tracking official responses. The offline forum should engage groups directly affected by the service and provide sufficient information before the discussion. The citizen scorecard can connect two types of channels. Residents evaluate specific services based on public standards, and departments need to report on subsequent improvements. Before wider promotion, the pilot project should be evaluated in terms of representativeness, data quality, and administrative responsiveness.

5.3. Breaking information asymmetry

Citizens should keep abreast of the terms of reference of the evaluated department, the purpose and indicators of the evaluation, relevant performance data, and the calculation method of the evaluation results. Relevant information should be made public before participation, so that citizens can make judgments on an informed basis. After the evaluation, the government should publish the results of the evaluation, explain how public participation affects the conclusions of the evaluation, and clarify the corrective measures to be taken. The release of information should be in an accessible format, while personal data and other legally restricted information should be protected according to law.

5.4. Improving institutional safeguards

5.4.1. Accelerating legislation on citizen participation in government performance evaluation

At the national level, legislation should clarify the status of citizens as participants in government performance evaluation and guarantee their right to express their views, obtain information, and monitor the evaluation process. Citizens have the right to obtain the original data and detailed information on government performance evaluation in accordance with legal procedures, and government departments must not refuse or circumvent such requests without good reason. Performance evaluation laws and regulations should also establish a revision mechanism. With the continuous development of society, the content of government performance evaluation changes, and the procedures and methods of citizen participation also need to be

adjusted in time to respond to new governance needs.

5.4.2. Promoting procedural development for citizen participation

Throughout the whole process of government performance evaluation, the establishment of an effective mechanism for citizen participation is the primary link. The participation stage needs to be planned in advance, and the evaluation indicators and parameters should be scientifically designed to reduce temporary participation. The participation procedure needs to be further refined, and the parameters such as the starting conditions, available methods, and the deadline for submission and feedback of citizens' participation should be clarified to avoid arbitrariness and ambiguity in practice. The establishment of a collaborative mechanism for citizen participation and government performance evaluation helps to clarify responsibilities, optimize processes, strictly define participation agreements, and provide institutional guarantees for citizen participation. The selection of citizen representatives should be balanced by criteria such as the functional characteristics of the evaluated department, and should fully consider their professional relevance and familiarity with the department.

5.4.3. Supervision feedback and application

In order to ensure that citizen participation is not a mere formality, independent or cross-sectoral supervision should cover the entire process of citizen participation in performance evaluation, from how participants are selected, how data are collected, calculated, and disclosed, and how evaluation results are actually used. All should be included in the scope of supervision to ensure that each link is traceable and accountable. Officials who violate procedures, manipulate data, or refuse to respond to public opinions without proper reasons should be constrained by clear accountability rules, so that accountability can be based on evidence and supervision can be avoided. The evaluation results and departmental responses need to be released to the public in a timely manner through official channels to protect the public's right to know and supervise. The opinions of citizens should be answered within the prescribed time limit, indicating whether they are adopted; if not adopted, the reasons should also be explained. For areas where problems have been identified, relevant departments should publish rectification measures and follow-up progress, promote effective connection between supervision, accountability and rectification, and then enhance the credibility of government performance evaluation.

6. Conclusion

In the practice of government performance evaluation in China, citizen participation is still restricted by multiple factors, including vague rules, insufficient organizational commitment, obvious differences in citizen ability, and a weak mutual trust foundation. The Smith model reveals that these problems are not isolated from each other, but are generated in the interaction process between policy design, implementing agencies, target groups, and the broader environment. By clarifying the participation process, ensuring the accessibility of information, enhancing the representativeness of participation and strengthening the implementation of feedback, we can connect citizen evaluation and administrative improvement more closely, and promote citizen participation from consultative expression to substantive influence.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

[1] Ammons DN, Madej PM, 2018, Citizen-Assisted Performance Measurement? Reassessing Its Viability And Impact. The American Review of Public Administration, 48(7): 716–729.

[2] Barbera C, Sicilia M, Steccolini I, 2025, Exploring Government-Citizen Interaction in Public Service Performance Assessment: Trade-Offs, Synergies, and Critical Issues. Public Administration, 103(3): 814–827.

[3] Jacobs D, Kaufmann W, 2021, The Right Kind of Participation? The Effect of a Deliberative Mini-Public on the Perceived Legitimacy of Public Decision-Making. Public Management Review, 23(1): 91–111.

[4] Kroll A, Neshkova MI, Pandey SK, 2019, Spillover Effects from Customer to Citizen Orientation: How Performance Management Reforms Can Foster Public Participation. Administration & Society, 51(8): 1227–1253.

[5] Rivenbark WC, Fasiello R, Adamo S, 2018, Exploring Performance Management in Italian Local Government: The Necessity of Outcome Measures and Citizen Participation. The American Review of Public Administration, 49(5): 545.

[6] Hong S, 2020, Performance Management Meets Red Tape: Bounded Rationality, Negativity Bias, and Resource Dependence. Public Administration Review, 80(6): 932–945.

[7] Yan H, Ting Y, 2018, The Effectiveness of Online Citizen Evaluation of Government Performance: A Study of the Perceptions of Local Bureaucrats in China. Public Personnel Management, 47(4): 419–444.

[8] Arnstein SR, 1969, A Ladder of Citizen Participation. Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35(4): 216–224.

[9] Smith TB, 1973, The Policy Implementation Process. Policy Sciences, 4(2): 197–209.

[10] Li Y, Qin X, Koppenjan J, 2022, Accountability through Public Participation? Experiences from the Ten-Thousand-Citizen Review in Nanjing, China. Journal of Public Policy, 42(1): 43–62.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.