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Cultural Discourses of Public Engagement: Insights for Energy System Transformation

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ABSTRACT: Our case study explores the public’s roles in energy transition by examining public participation processes and their meanings in Boulder’s Energy Future. Drawing on Cultural Discourse Analysis (Carbaugh, 2007b) as an analytical framework, we investigate discourses of public participation active in city council meetings as resources for generating insights about how to design more meaningful engagement practices. Our analysis traces meanings attached to attending and speaking at city council meetings, emailing council, outreach and education efforts, task force service, and voting. These practices and meanings provide insights for designing future public participation as well as theorizing public participation in energy governance.

KEYWORDS: public participation, energy system transformation, energy governance, cultural discourse analysis, municipalisation, resources for design, discourses of public participation

1. INTRODUCTION

Shifting the nature of how energy is used, delivered, produced, or sourced within a city—energy transition (Araújo, 2014)—could easily be seen as a matter of wires and electric grids, wind turbines, and hydroelectric generators. Indeed, infrastructure networks play a fundamental role within sustainability transitions (Bolton & Foxon, 2015). Nonetheless, energy infrastructure is deeply embedded in broader socio-technical contexts (Goldthau, 2014). Transformation of technical systems is not determined by scientific, technological, or even economic rationality; energy system transformation is fundamentally social, political, and cultural (Bolton & Foxon, 2015). Yet the political processes that support energy transition at the community level are still being developed. Energy communication research has focused on discourses of decision-making about energy in the context of crises, considering how various stakeholders come into play when a decision must be made about energy technologies (Endres, Cozen, Barnett, O’Byrne, & Peterson, in press). This has taken the form of examining public positions about energy issues (e.g., stances on nuclear power or climate change) or public understanding of new energy technologies (e.g., knowledge about fracking or smart grids). Rather than focus on public opinion about specific energy options, we focus on the role of the public within energy transition. How should the public participate in energy system transformation? What forms of public engagement does energy governance require? What public participation infrastructure is needed to support a just energy transition? What does energy democracy entail?

We introduce big questions about the principles and practices of public participation within energy system transformation—about the public’s roles in decision making, public participation infrastructure, and design of public processes. We are acutely aware that these questions will not be answered in this chapter. Nonetheless, these questions guide our inquiry, setting the stakes from which to proceed and framing the need to better understand the possibilities for public participation within energy system transformation. We presume that simply replicating public participation practices from other environmental arenas is insufficient given the dissatisfaction, distrust, and incivility that characterize conventional public participation (Nabatchi & Leininger, 2015). Instead of immediately turning to public participation theories or innovative practices (e.g., deliberation, collaborative learning, joint fact finding), we examine cultural discourses about public engagement active within a community that is going through energy system transformation. This move reflects our argument that examining cultural discourses can generate insights about how to design more meaningful public engagement that shapes the future of a community’s energy system.

As an analytical framework, Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA) highlights community meanings and taken-for-granted cultural premises that can be located in everyday talk (Carbaugh, 2007b). CuDA builds on the premise that “communication both presumes and constitutes social realities” and provides “meta-cultural commentary,” meaning that people “say things explicitly and implicitly about who they are, how they are related to each other, how they feel, what they are doing, and how they are situated in the nature of things” (Carbaugh, 2007b, p. 168). Cultural discourses provide insight into public participation in three overlapping ways.

First, public participation varies across cultures—from the organization of government structures (e.g., formal and informal opportunities for participation), to who has opportunity to speak before public decisions are made (e.g., structure of meetings), and who can participate (e.g., women) (see Sprain, 2006 for review). What counts as public participation also varies; for example, participation in the Young Communist Union in the Soviet Union was not considered political participation while social movement activities in Chile were seen as a form of political citizenship (Sprain, 2006). Some cultural systems also have novel forms of political participation, such as "work go-slowls" in China (Sui, 1999). Cultural discourses can help reveal the locally active forms and meanings of public participation that should not be presumed to be universal.

Second, cultural variety can result in significant gaps between how different groups engage in public participation. Sprain, van Over, and Morgan (2016) traced cultural meanings for participation in two environmental decision-making processes, arguing that multiple, and at times contested, meanings and premises emerge within the same public participation process. Tribal communities maintained cultural premises “that one cannot speak and act freely in a documented public space with unknown others” (p. 256) and “speech only yields influence at the right times and places and through the right actions” (p. 257), which clashed with expectations that community members would speak on-camera at broadcasted public meetings. Likewise, cultural analysis can help prevent introducing approaches to public participation likely to fail given inherent clashes with local practices, as Dean (2016) cautions that introducing agonistic procedures into solidaristic institutional cultures may result in alienation.

These cultural analyses of public participation underscore how attentiveness to local means and meanings of participation can also be leveraged towards intervention—our third reason for considering cultural analysis. Coming to a richer understanding of local
communication practices and norms for interpretation allows scholars and practitioners to develop a deeper understanding of people’s social worlds and the environmental actions that best reflect their understandings (Morgan, 2003). Thus, cultural discourses may provide intentional resources for developing public participation processes that build from cultural practices. This possibility suggests that cultural knowledge is not simply a matter of minimizing cultural clashes, but instead extends the possibility of drawing on cultural knowledge to design public participation from locally-relevant forms of strategic action (Sprain & Boromisza-Habashi, 2013; Townsend, 2013).

Cultural discourses are valuable inputs because designing meaningful public engagement is a deceptively difficult task. A significant gap between ideals of public engagement in environmental decision-making and actual processes and practices for participation is widely recognized (Bulkeley & Mol, 2003; Dahl, 2005). While many studies of public engagement seek to name and assess the gaps (e.g., Reed, 2008; Newig & Fritsch, 2009), fewer studies thoughtfully engage with ways situated talk reveals local premises for public participation that, in turn, suggest possible ways to make public processes and practices more meaningful to participants (Sprain, van Over, & Morgan, 2016). This approach, we argue, better positions us to contribute to designing meaningful public participation and theorizing energy democracy.

To support this argument, we examine cultural discourses of public participation within a community undergoing energy system transformation. We briefly review the literature on public participation in environmental governance. Then we introduce our case study—Boulder’s energy future—and discuss our involvement with the city. Next, we detail our methods of data collection and analysis, including how CuDA provides a framework for our study. The analysis is organized around five forms of public participation active within our case study and their associated meanings. From this analysis, we suggest some of the particular insights for designing public participation within Boulder before identifying broader implications for energy system transformation and energy democracy.

2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

Public participation is a broad concept, which gets referenced through multiple, overlapping terms: public consultation, community engagement, public involvement, stakeholder participation, community consultation, citizen involvement, public deliberation, community capacity building, collective inquiry, collaborative problem solving, grassroots participation, civic engagement, citizen engagement, and political participation. Given this variety, public participation is “an umbrella term that describes the activities by which people’s concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues” (Nabatchi & Leininger, 2015, p. 14). In turn, public participation is a polysemous concept that can reflect differing normative conceptions of social organization and citizens with it (Dean, 2016). For example, the empowered self-interest of the neoliberal, consumer-citizen and the other-oriented, reasoning citizen of deliberative democracy can both be understood as forms of public participation. Scholars have developed typologies for forms of public participation that categorize public participation by political ideology or put forms along a continuum from least to most legitimate (see Dean, 2016 for a contemporary review). This impulse to build typologies reflects a desire to simultaneously recognize a range of forms of public participation while noting that they reflect significant differences in design features (e.g., the democracy cube’s attention to participant selection methods, modes of
communication and decision, and extent of authority and power (Fung, 2006) that influence the meaning, legitimacy, and outcomes of public participation. Drawing on this work, Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) provide three overarching categories of participation: thick, thin, and conventional participation. Thick participation enables people to work together in small groups to learn, decide, and act through processes such as deliberation, action planning, and design charettes; they consider it generally the most meaningful and powerful form of participation. Thin participation activates people as individuals to participate by sharing their ideas in a way that only takes a few minutes, such as signing petitions, liking a cause on Facebook, or ranking ideas in a crowdsourcing campaign. Conventional participation processes include established institutional forms of participation like meetings or hearings that were likely developed to provide citizens with checks on government power.

Environmental communication scholars have long described, interpreted, and critiqued conventional public participation practices—due in large part to mandates that require governmental agencies to hold public participation processes in conjunction with proposed actions to consider resulting environmental impacts. Conventional participation often frustrates citizens and public officials alike, increasing feelings of citizen powerlessness, discouraging officials who have to deal with hostile citizens, and contributing to the belief that public participation actually degrades the quality of decision making (Nabatchi & Leininger, 2015). The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 contributes to these patterns since it institutionalized public participation efforts in environmental planning and impact statement development without stipulating necessary forms (e.g., public deliberation or consensus processes) of involvement (Kinsella, 2004), leaving it up to individual agencies to develop whatever they take to be effective public participation efforts. As a result, mandated agencies tended to adopt the model of the public hearing, which has become the institutionalized standard; however, the public hearing model is notorious for creating distance between parties and limiting diverse stakeholder input, contributing to conflict-ridden interactions and adversarial positioning (Walker, 2004; Wills Toker, 2004; Senecah, 2004; 2007; Buttny & Cohen, 2015). Moreover, scholars recognize that simply having opportunities for participation does not mean that participation is effective, meaningful, or even given credence in environmental decision-making processes (Depoe & Delicath, 2004).

Environmental Communication scholars have sought to address tensions and conflicts through theoretical reconstructions of communication practices found in actual public participation processes. To do this work, they often focus on process failures from the public’s perspective. Ångman (2013) looked to the ways in which discursive openings and closures occurred in natural resource management public processes, focusing specifically on how the structuring of the process created discursive closures that limited participation. Openings were subsequently created by participants that allowed them to challenge and negotiate the dynamics of power within public meetings. Similarly, Buttny (2010) explored meta-discursive strategies—linguistic formulations that reflect assumption about how the process should/could be working from the participants’ perspective—used by citizens to express opposition during a zoning board public hearing. His discussion illuminated situated notions of public participation and participant’s frameworks for evaluating official’s communication (i.e., perceived accountability and listening, perception of hearing as formality for a decision already made, and openings for dialogue and response from officials, point to pre-existing distrust of institutions). These studies highlight the relevance of orientating to situated commentary about
engagement embedded in micro-communication practices that reflect the meanings participants assign to the process (see also, Martin, 2007).

2.1 Making Participation More Meaningful to the Public

Environmental Communication scholarship has also theorized the challenges and failures of public participation as dynamic communicative processes (for additional discussion, see Depoe & Delicath, 2004; Senecah, 2007); in turn, reimagining, configuring, and evaluating innovative public participation structures (e.g., Walker, 2007). These scholars are guided by the question: How can we come to better envision and assess “meaningful” processes for citizen participation in environmental decision-making? While this question might suggest the development of measures of effectiveness, notions of “meaningful” participation are contextual—dependent on purposes, expectations, and outcomes of participation (Depoe & Delicath, 2004). As meaningfulness is situated, multiple, divergent meanings for public participation can be simultaneously activated in talk (Lassen et al., 2011). Government agencies might assess the process as meaningful based on the number of meetings held or public comments received yet the public very often finds these measures insufficient (i.e., far from “meaningful”) (Walker, 2004). We also challenge traditional model critiques, entertaining the possibility that technocratic knowledge could be made meaningful (Endres, 2009), lacking scientific understanding may not preclude meaningful civic engagement (Guston, 2014), and dissent can be constructive (Peterson, Peterson, & Peterson, 2006).

Environmental communication scholarship turns its attention towards reimagining processes by developing theoretical frameworks and concepts that foster critical reflection (e.g., Senecah, 2004; Walker, 2004; Martin, 2007). Rather than develop normative expectations for judging good and bad participation, we argue that cultural discourses provide important insights into the process of designing public participation. Many public participation practitioners do research before initiating a public participation process. Deliberative inquiry (Carcasson & Sprain, 2016), for example, starts with deliberative issue analysis, which can include analyzing public discourse, stakeholder interviews, open-ended surveys, and focus groups. In addition to doing situated research about the issue, we argue that practitioners would benefit from considering local forms and meanings of public participation. This does not, of course, require that practitioners cannot introduce new forms of public participation. Indeed, intervention and improvement of public participation can be the goal from the outset. Nonetheless, we argue that understanding the existing social system and forms and meanings of public participation can provide useful guidance for public participation practitioners.

3. BOULDER’S ENERGY FUTURE

The city of Boulder, Colorado has been taking steps for more than a decade to address climate change. In 2002, Boulder voters passed a resolution to hold the community accountable to Kyoto Protocol goals and reduce emissions by 7% from 1990 levels by 2012. As a result, the city took many innovative actions, including developing extensive recycling and composting programs, expanding their bicycle trail system, and adopting a Climate Action Program tax in 2006, the nation’s first carbon tax (City of Boulder, 2015). Despite successful initiatives, these programs did not sufficiently reduce carbon emissions, and the city failed to achieve its climate action goals. As continuing actions were considered and assessed, it became clear that a
transformation of the city’s existing energy system would be necessary to reduce carbon emissions; increasing energy efficiency and reducing consumption would not be enough.

In 2010, Boulder’s franchise agreement with Xcel Energy, their privately-held energy provider, expired. Xcel’s energy source portfolio ranks high in carbon-intensity. Starting as early as 2005, the city began studying other options for power generation to reduce CO₂ emissions into the atmosphere that would put them on track to reach their goals. While the city continued negotiations with Xcel for nearly two years after not renewing the 20-year franchise agreement in 2010, ultimately, it become necessary to move forward with exploring the creation of a municipal power utility. In 2011, Boulder citizens voted on two measures that allowed municipalization efforts to continue. Measure 2B increased the utility occupation tax, formerly the franchise fee, allowing the city to raise nearly 2 million dollars by 2017 to afford starting a power utility (Boulder Weekly Staff, 2011). Measure 2C amended the city charter to allow for continued exploration and creation—if deemed feasible—of a municipal utility. This ballot initiative stipulated that reliability and rates must be comparable to those of Xcel, ensuring the minimal impact for consumers (Boulder Weekly Staff, 2011).

Since 2010 and 2011, Boulder has actively explored municipalization through expert studies and processes that surveyed the environmental, financial, legal, and technical dimensions of creating a local energy system. A ballot measure that would have jeopardized municipalization was defeated in November 2013, and the following May the city council created a local power utility in the charter. Since 2014 limited civic action has occurred as the project moved through various legal and regulatory processes and system transition planning stages (City of Boulder, 2015). As of June 2016, the city has returned to negotiations with Xcel to see if they can broker a deal to shift the energy supply without municipalization.

Given our argument that cultural discourses can inform the design of public participation, we note that we are currently working with the City of Boulder on public engagement with climate action and energy. The city has explicitly expressed interest in expanding the range of innovative public engagement approaches it uses. This case study and the analysis within it hold practical significance for us as it serves as a preliminary step for designing more innovative forms of public engagement that also connect with communities and publics not currently reached by the city’s existing efforts. We work with the city as researchers who also have experience as deliberative practitioners designing public engagement on a variety of environmental issues (see Carcasson & Sprain, 2016; Sprain, Carcasson, & Merolla, 2014; Sprain & Carcasson, 2013). Whereas this chapter is written before our design of public processes, our ongoing practitioner work helps explain our position within Boulder and some of the motivations for this research.

4. METHODS

Our analysis focuses on public comments and council discussions during city council meetings on Boulder’s Energy Future from 2010–2016. Our corpus includes 32 transcribed meetings totalling over 800 single-spaced pages. We have also conducted fieldwork at city council meetings, public meetings on energy issues, and community and campus events related to energy. We have also read the local paper and looked at thin forms of public participation, such as Inspire Boulder an online public participation incubator (see Sprain, 2014). Our focus on city council meetings as a site of public discourse reflects our interpretation that these meetings best represent formal decision-making about energy to date. If forms of public participation are
not discussed during these meetings, we presume that they have less significance and influence on decisions. For example, Inspire Boulder is only mentioned \textit{once} in over 800 single-spaced pages of transcripts as part of a report about how a city staff member is “trying to reach out to different parts of the community.” This means of public participation receives no further discussion, making us reticent to formulate cultural claims about it. It is, of course, possible that there are cultural discourses about public participation within Boulder that do not appear in our meeting data. For example, our data is surprisingly scant on criticisms of existing forms of public participation even though we know that there are some significant concerns about trust, public engagement, and the city council within Boulder. This is a limitation of focusing this analysis on council meetings.

CuDA is developed from the ethnography of communication (Carbaugh, 2007b). Broadly, the ethnography of communication explores the use of locally available, symbolic resources and how these shared systems are made culturally meaningful to speech communities in speech events (Hymes, 1974). CuDA provides a framework for doing cultural analyses of social interaction to understand cultural communication practices. Through CuDA, an analyst describes the form(s) of the focal practices and their meanings to participants by focusing on enactments of those practices (as opposed to interviews about them). Then the analyst interprets the range of meanings that are active within the practice—the radiants of being/identity, acting, relating, feeling, and dwelling (Carbaugh, 2007b; Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2013; Scollo, 2011). These interpretative accounts of meanings draw on a rich set of concepts from the ethnography of communication, including attention to key terms, cultural propositions (definitions, premises, beliefs, or values), cultural premises, semantic dimensions, and norms.

We set out to ask: What cultural discourses of public participation are active within Boulder’s energy municipalization process? What forms of public participation provide means of communicative action in Boulder, and what are their meanings? How can these cultural discourses become inventional resources to design better public participation processes and theorize energy democracy? By teasing out these complexities we can come to a better understand the connections between communicative action and participatory ideals that can, in turn, aid in the design of strategic action to address gaps.

5. ANALYSIS

Five forms of participation are talked into being as locally significant during city council meetings: attending and speaking at city council meetings, email and individual contact between citizens and council members, city-initiated education and outreach efforts, voting, and task force membership. We offer an overview of these first three forms followed by a more extended analysis of the cultural discourses that situate voting and task forces as significant forms of public engagement.

5.1 Attending and Speaking at City Council Meetings

Given the widely institutionalized practice of public comment periods during open hearings, it comes as no surprise that attending and speaking at city council meetings is a relevant, locally-available means of engagement. While public comment sessions reified more rigid dynamics for interaction that limit participation (well established in the literature), our analysis underscores the ways in which attending and speaking is given meaning. At the beginning of
every public comment period, the mayor provides “the rules for decorum” which includes outlining institutionalized policies that limit extended public comments:

Alright folks, let’s go to the public hearing, um thanks for being so patient, um but you can see this is not surprisingly complex, and we’ve had lots of questions too. So there are at the moment 50, as in 5-0, people signed up, um everybody will get their- up to two minutes, if you can be a little shorter that’s great, we will definitely hear from all of you, . . . [content omitted] everybody gets two minutes, and lemme just say that um I’m really gonna cut you off at two minutes, um and we’re gonna be very strict about this, and that’s simply a matter of fairness, I mean the easiest way to be absolutely fair to everybody is to treat everybody the same rotten way [[(laughs)]]) which is to- which is to cut you off when the buzzer sounds. So just be careful about your two minutes (Council 4/16/13).

This excerpt defines the resources and rules for participation, specifically how the public is able to participate and their time limits. Anyone who “signs up” can participate so long as they keep their contributions to two minutes; the intent is to be “fair to everybody” and “treat everybody the same rotten way.” Saying that we “treat everybody the same rotten way” suggests some acknowledgement of the criticism of public hearings, yet reinforces the boundaries for participation. The mayor continues to talk into being the rules for participation, saying:

Other than that, again please follow the rules of decorum, respect what people are saying, we don’t need applause, we don’t need boo’s, we get it, we understand who’s in the audience, that’s fine, we’re delighted to have a large group of people from diverse communities and with diverse interests, it’s exactly what we wanted (Council 4/16/13).

By reiterating “the rules of decorum” the mayor further constrains the ways that the public can interact with the council and with each other. Decorum should minimize the theatrical performative nature of addressing council in front of a public audience. In turn, speakers are constituted as having diverse, conflicting perspectives, which need to be managed; yet this is the sort of diversity that is desirable in public participation. Council members frequently invoke this cultural discourse when responding to public comment periods, preferencing substantive responses to issues by acknowledging public participation:

I wanna thank the members of the public for coming forward to express their views on this, this is something- uh we value your input and your insights, and your challenges and questions to us as well (Council, 11/15/12).

Despite the framing that council is interested in hearing from the public, statements made during public comments sessions prompt limited, if any, individual interaction between the council and the public; immediate uptake (e.g., acknowledges, responds to, and/or asks follow-up questions) is rare, occurring in instances in which a new perspective is offered or technical information requires clarification. These patterns broadly fit the observations in the literature on public participation within public meetings (see Buttny & Cohen, 2015). Within Boulder, we noticed one practice that differed from many public meetings: a tendency for people to begin their statements by credentialing themselves as representing organizations and groups. Unlike Eliasoph’s (1998) research where speakers were instructed to “just speak for yourself,” many citizens started their comments by situating themselves as representatives:

“Hi, my name is Carolyn B******, I’m here representing the Rocky Mountain Peace and Justice Center (Council, 6/7/11).”
In the same meeting another citizen orients to this norm by introducing himself: “Hi, I’m Greg H*****, I represent myself, um and uh I’m a citizen of Boulder” (Council, 6/7/11). Buttny and Cohen (2007) write that citizens face “the speaker’s problem” of how to be credible and engage with officials in discussion during public hearings. This practice of introducing oneself as a representative seems to be a way of trying to establish credibility and gain attention to the extent.

5.2 Email

Another opportunity for the council to engage with the public is through sending emails, which enables residents and members of the business community to express questions and concerns. Council members make comments—such as “I’ve gotten a lot of emails, and I think you all have gotten probably the same ones I’ve gotten uh with the concerns from some of the uh industrial users especially” (Council, 11/5/12)—that serve to reference interactions with relevant stakeholders and suggest those concerns are being heard (or represented), while also allowing council members to raise concerns that fit with their positions in the discussion.

When explaining the rules for public comments the mayor says, “I mean we know we’re cutting you short with two minutes, if you have longer comments, please email them, council absolutely reads email” (Council, 4/16/13). While in practice such a statement functions to preclude extended individual comments, from the council’s perspective, suggesting that citizens email the council frames a speaker–listener relationship in which the mayor assures that public that the council is available and responsive. On occasion, a citizen or industry representative will reference statements, proposed amendments, media presentations (e.g., PowerPoints), and other materials that frame their two-minute long comments that they emailed the city council prior to the meeting.

These cultural discourses function to define public–city council relationships in terms of speakers and listeners, with the council listening to the public and considering their concerns. Email is celebrated as a means for the public and the council to relate in ways that are presented as listening but can closes conversation by reinforcing council members’ positions.

5.3 Outreach and Education

The city seeks to include the public in Boulder’s energy future discussions through “education and outreach.” These efforts provide the public with opportunities to learn about energy infrastructure, system transformation, city government processes, environmental impacts, and fiscal concerns. Two primary means for outreach are roundtable discussions and public presentations, which offer the public access to more technical explanation and opportunities to respond and question municipalization processes and related issues such as climate change (e.g., “it’ll be a roundtable where you- you will get a presentation and there’ll be an opportunity for public to respond” [Council, 11/15/12]). More recently, such presentations have been tied to efforts to engage the public in more individualized actions—such as installing solar panels and purchasing electric cars—that help the city move closer to citizen-defined climate action goals.

Cultural discourses referencing outreach and education underscore the expectation that the public should be educated about and included in energy system transformation discussions.
and decisions. If the public is to be considered active participants, then the city needs to share requisite information about energy system transformation in ways that insure that the public has access to knowledge (e.g., “citizens are given full access” [Council, 6/7/11]) and that the city is responsive to and caters its outreach efforts towards the public’s understandings. This sentiment is articulated in the following comment, made by a volunteer for RenewablesYES (a.k.a. Citizens for Boulder’s Clean Energy Future):

First, the city, staff, and council need to listen to citizens in terms of what they want. Second, the citizens want to hear and listen to a complete comparison of the risks and benefits of the two potential energy options that are being considered. The city has begun its outreach to listen to citizens, and we appreciate that (Council, 6/7/11).

Outreach and education efforts prepare citizens with the information necessary to be part of decision-making processes. Offering opportunities for the public to consider “risks and benefits” helps citizens make “informed decisions” about municipalizing.

To a degree, education and outreach efforts presume that the public initially lacks knowledge; yet, educating the public also presumes that “they care” about transition and are prepared to “listen, understand, and decide what’s acceptable to them.”

People are becoming aware of where their energy is coming from, and they care. I hope we don’t put blinders on and go down one path without carefully evaluating all options. At this point, we don’t have enough information to make an informed, fact-based emotional- non-emotional decision. I hope for clean, green, locally sourced renewable energy for Boulder. I have high hopes because this is Boulder, where citizens want to know and want to be involved. Please make sure that these hopes are considered, and that the related details are spelled out in the Xcel proposal so that the citizens of Boulder can listen, understand, and decide what’s acceptable to them (Council, 6/7/11).

Boulder is constructed as a place “where citizens want to know and want to be involved” and where people have “high hopes” for “clean, green, locally sourced renewable energy.” Tailoring outreach efforts towards these interested, invested citizens and offering educational opportunities that build on existing public understanding and commitments is essential. Furthermore, municipalization is framed as an effort that must be done in line with citizens’ objectives:

. . . I mean when we have talked about a municipalization, we’ve- we have recognized the importance of outreach to the community so that we move in- in step with the community, changing the- the habits that people have about using electricity and how they um and- and what sources they get it from (Council, 6/7/11).

By positioning the need to “move . . . in step with the community” Council member Macon recognizes that energy system transformation requires coordinated actions between individuals and governments. While the government can seek to change the utility infrastructure (e.g., supply) and pass ordinances (e.g., rate structures), making progress towards climate action goal requires the public to both support government initiatives and change their own consumption habits; publics and government must move together. Macon recognizes transformation as a slow, time-bound process; it cannot be rushed without risking alienating the public’s support, which is why outreach is important. Successful transformation hinges on the public and the government committing to a shared timeline for action that produces incremental, iterative transition. Decisions about any one proposal (e.g., municipalization) may be insufficient for energy system transition; instead, education and outreach about specific
proposals that engage the public must engender coordinated actions necessary for large-scale energy system transformation.

5.4 Voting

Our analysis of “voting” traces meanings of voting as a political action, particularly before and after a specific vote happened. These discourses suggest that voting serves multiple communicative functions (i.e., confirmatory vs. advisory) and possesses contradictory characteristics (i.e., clearly stated vs. open to interpretation). Most commonly, voting is considered necessary for decision-making because it allows the public to mandate a course of action and holds the council accountable. Voting serves a confirmatory function; it is a democratic process that allows citizens to express support or disapproval of government actions. Comments from the public establish voting as a necessary political process.

I think obviously this is going on the ballot, it should go on the ballot. I think the city’s done as much work as it can, and now it’s time to bring it to the people and see what they think, and I just hope that the ballot language reflects the choice very clearly and very honestly, because it is the biggest issue we ever are gonna face, probably in our lifetimes. So my only request to you folks on council and staff is to make sure the language really represents the magnitude of this decision, and the honesty-honestly reflects what is at stake so that we know what we’re getting into and people who read it and haven’t studied as much as the rest of us have can instantly understand it and make an as informed decision as possible. (Council, 8/2/11)

Statements such as “it should go on the ballot” and “it’s time to bring it to the people and see what they think” invokes voting as a means to present the issue to the general public, distilling the issue in ways that ensure that the public understands enough about technical transformations to the energy infrastructure to be part of the decision-making process. Including the public in making decisions about ongoing municipalization actions presumes that citizens recognize the “magnitude of this decision” and are able to make an “informed decision” about whether or not the city should move forward. By emphasizing “that the ballot language reflects the choice very clearly and very honestly” voting is characterized as providing specific parameters to mandate action.

References to citizens voting do not end with the passage of initiatives 2B and 2C in the November 2011 election. The 2011 vote is leveraged in as a rhetorical resource to argue that the public supports ongoing municipalization efforts, and that the city council and staff are accountable for carrying out the clearly stated mandates of the vote. During a meeting when the council discussed achieving the metric set forth in the 2011 vote, Boulder citizen Ruth addressed the council, saying:

[I]n 2011 the voters approved ballot issues to 2b and 2c for exploring the possibility of creating a municipal utility, and along with that was approval for certain performance targets, listing the conditions necessary for moving forward. This language is now part of the city charter. . . . [I] Remind you that the voters approved a specific list of performance targets in 2011, and if opponents want to further extend the performance targets, they will need to do so in the charter or convince the majority of council to vote against possible munity formation on the basis of criteria not in the charter. . . . And remember, the vote might have been close in 2011, but the 2b 2c campaigns won, and we have an obligation to the voters to carry through with their vote to explore municipalization (Council, 11/15/12).
Ruth’s comments leverage the 2011 public vote as an apparent confirmation of the public’s support. The voters approved “performance targets” that are “now part of the city charter” serving as specific criteria and benchmarks; they are explicit and confirmed by the public to authorize continued efforts towards municipalizing. The cultural premise is that voting provides clearly stated criteria and benchmarks that confirm public support and mandate actions for the governing city council.

A second, contradictory meaning of voting is also active in these meetings: voting provides advice to governing bodies during decision-making processes. Voting has an advisory function when members of the public argue that additional votes are necessary to gage ongoing public support, clarify the meanings of charter language adopted in 2011, and run more inclusive processes that would allow Boulder County residents—who would be part of the utility service area but were excluded from the 2011 vote of Boulder citizens—to participate. The city council was voting on whether or not to authorize city staff to continue to explore the logistics of forming a municipal utility in 2012. The public comment period lasted over two and half hours with 44 people speaking both for and against continued exploration. Whereas speakers who supported moving forward leveraged the 2011 vote as a measure of public support, skeptical participants called on the council to engage with the public further before taking any more actions, suggesting that an advisory vote would provide an updated indicator of support. Angelique provides a detailed proposal to put an advisory vote in front of Boulder citizens before the city council votes:

In terms of the vote I just wanted to clarify we didn’t necessarily mean to suggest it would be a vote which would be contingent, um in other words perhaps it would be an advisory vote of the kind that you are suggesting for the transportation um uh maintenance fee or tax, so um we recognize that there are legal implications to being able to compel the discussion on the condemnation, but we’d like to understand what might be some possibilities for an advisory or an informatory or some kind of vote like that going forward (Council, 4/16/13).

An advisory vote could serve to remind the council to put the interests of the public at the center of decision-making. While the public would have an additional opportunity for participation in an advisory vote, functionally, the influence of this participation could be limited because the government would not be accountable to it.

Another meaning of voting is also contested—whether the 2011 vote represents public support for exploring the feasibility of municipalization or public support for municipalization. At a November 2012 meeting, city council is preparing to vote on whether or not the plan for municipalizing developed by city staff meets the charter requirements from 2011 public vote. Citizens debate whether the 2011 vote authorized exploring whether the city “can” municipalize or whether it “should” do so. Angelique E. also addressed the council at this meeting:

Um as you know, how we got here is with a v- a narrow vote of the- of the voters, um and in that vote, there were um specific rates, uh sorry, specific metrics that we all probably know by heart at this time, um with relation to rates, reliability, and um renewables. And you are authorized, or assert authority to go forward with some pretty significant actions, including negotiating to purchase Xcel’s ac- assets, condemning Xcel’s assets if negotiations fail and issuing bonds and so on, if- and this is the big if, and only if, you c- it can be demonstrated before its formation that the municipal plan-utility plan meets those metrics as laid out in the charter, now of course we cannot change the charter, the charter is written, if we wanted to change it we’d hafta go to a vote of the council. So what I’m um asking you tonight rather is to when you vote, uh you’re really voting on whether to approve a set of metrics that define what that charter means. So it’s not an ask that you add something to the
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charter, it’s merely that you define what it means. Um because meeting that minimum threshold is- is a really important choice, and there are many aspects in the things that we’ve put forward to you that we feel are critical in determining the can, and not the should. (Council, 11/15/12)

Implying that the council’s vote determines “what [the] charter means” positions council as making the more important decision: Can the minimum thresholds set forth by the public be achieved? Rather than suggesting that the charter language is a mandate to municipalize approved by the public, the metrics set forth are framed as guidelines for the council to interpret as they determine how to proceed. The implication is the public gets to vote on the policy question: Do we approve of the explicitly given metrics and authorize the city council to act on our behalf?

No matter the communicative meanings of voting, voting is seen as a deeply valued form of participation—particularly by those not included in the vote. Residents of Boulder County and the unincorporated area of Gunbarrel would be included in Boulder’s municipal utility service area (i.e., “the 5800”) but live outside Boulder city limits. Regardless of whether they support or oppose municipalization, many of these speakers question on what grounds the Boulder city council presumes to move forward without allowing all affected to vote. Diana, a Gunbarrel resident, addresses council:

I am in favor of renewable energy, [but] I am very disturbed by uh the fact that I never got a chance to vote. I think at a minimum a survey should be taken of the voters of the area, or the property owners, or the people who pay utilities.... Um you know if you’re gonna have a vote, then schedule it in the 2014 or the 2016 vote, and really get a serious commitment from the other people. I don’t think condemning the Xcel um utility at this time as taking into account um true impact on all the surrounding counties, I’m within the 5800, but you’re gonna impact those outside. You have not consulted them, you don’t know what impact it’s gonna take on their rates... I really am in favor, I mean my husband’s an environmental scientist, we are killing the climate. And I’m in favor of what you’re doing, [but] I’d like a chance to vote on it. I’d like a chance for you to hear the people that are voting on it (Council, 4/16/13).

Having opportunities to participate is situated as a matter of having the “chance to vote” and actively engaging voters such that the city council is acting in ways that are accountable to the entire customer base, not just the citizens of Boulder. Beyond challenging the democratic ethos of Boulder, Diane’s comments underscored that if the city seeks to actively support public participation they cannot exclude people. For Gunbarrel and Boulder County residents, an advisory vote offers the potential for inclusion (or at least constructed of sense of being considered).

The importance of “voting” as a form of public participation also implies expectations for a democratically governed electric utility. “Voting” talk suggests not only citizens’ desires for a municipal utility, but also for the democratization of the energy system. As Kate, a Boulder resident says:

But when Xcel signed us up for 16 more years of coal, they did not ask for my vote. However, here in Boulder, we did vote. I urge you to waste no time in moving toward a democratically accountable municipal electric utility (Council, 4/16/13).

Such a statement highlights a “vote” to move towards municipalization is also participation in ongoing processes to allow the public to make decisions about the future of their energy systems. Like Kate’s call “to waste no time in moving toward a democratically accountable municipal electric utility,” Ashwin, another Boulder citizen, situates
democratically-governed municipal utility, where the public is able to have influence, as superior, commenting:

Xcel and the publically sanctioned monopoly model undermines democracy. We do not elect the Public Utilities Commission that regulates Xcel, and they don't allow public comment like this, like we can do with our city. Um Xcel won't just resist decommissioning coal, because they haven't fully uh profited off of their assets, but they will actually stifle the democratic process that allows us to select our energy sources in democratic fashion (Council, 4/16/13).

Speaking about a democratically-governed municipal utility provides a foil to the corporate model and the governing commission, both who make decisions without consultation nor are accountable to the public.

5.5 Task Forces and Working Groups

To date, thirteen working groups (some are also called task forces) have been created on topics such as rates, governance, resource modeling, solar, energy services, reliability and safety, and Boulder-Xcel partnership. Each working group is given a set of goals, which often relate to issues that come up in council meetings that have not been fully resolved during council meetings. The working groups meet together (often with a facilitator and city staff) over several months to discuss these issues and generate a report that is also presented to council. Solar Working Group member Yael captures the overall purpose in his introduction to council:

in line with developing the utility of the future vision and how important of a role local solar plays, we formed this working group to both, um, address concerns that were out there in the industry, locally, and well as look at what the future of solar could be in Boulder with or without a municipal utility. Um, this group did a tremendous amount of work in a very short time. They did meet formally 5 times as a large group, um, from last September through June, but, um, I just wanted to note that they met numerous times in subcommittees to really roll up their sleeves and get this work done. They developed a huge matrix of opportunities, um, that came about from a few brainstorming sessions, and then really distilled that down to form the recommendations that are in front of you tonight. Um, they looked at things like some of the barriers to solar that we're gonna be facing, some of the goals that we could be looking at, incentive structures, tariffs, different technologies, um, we're just really really grateful for their contribution to this. (Executive session 8-19-14)

Our data does not include direct observation of the working groups, but their interactions are characterized by council, staff, and working group members as what Nabatchi and Leininger (2015) would call thick participation. They brainstorm, prioritize, and, ultimately, make recommendations for council’s consideration. These sessions should be “open and honest,” providing opportunities to discuss multiple perspectives. Council disagrees about some of the procedures for the working groups, including whether they need to come to consensus. The corresponding discussion provides several premises about the ideal form and purpose of the working group’s reports:

we were given a working um a handout last meeting that talked about the procedures for how the group would report itself, in particular one of the big things was no quotes, no votes. And um I for one just wanted to make clear um that I think what wouldn't be helpful from this group is to have a vote on particular options, what would be useful from this working group is their expertise. There are a bunch of smart people that represent a bunch of different perspectives, they're not all the perspectives, but it could be useful information, and so I guess I just wanted to clarify that I like the no votes, no quotes thing, I want their expertise, I want their analysis on whatever option or couple
options that they think are really worth talking about, um and that's what would be useful to this group who ultimately is the one that makes the votes, and not theater, not drama about votes and that sort of thing, not headlines that are a distraction, but their best thinking. And so I just wanted to see if that was also the sense that that would be most useful coming from the working group…(Council 4-16-13).

Working groups should not be about “theater” or “drama” or “votes” or “headlines that are a distraction”; instead, working groups should be about “their best thinking” and “their analysis on whatever option or couple of options that they think are really worth talking about.” By listening to and critiquing staff presentations, working groups can provide a useful input to decision making. Yet working groups do not have any decision making authority or power to control the task force process. When a particularly politicized working group on the Boulder-Xcel partnership decides that they don’t need a moderator to facilitate the discussions, a council member reasserts Council’s control over the process:

Uh, one of the things that you said that is of concern to me is that the task force itself decided that they didn’t think a moderator was necessary. And, you know, um, I think when we first started this task force there certainly were some us, myself included, that were very reluctant to even have this task force, and [for] concern that it would be basically taken over by Xcel. And that seems very much, kind of, what’s happened. And so I feel like this is a city, this is a city, um, uh, a city run process. And I think there’s some things that the city and the city council needs to make the decisions, and not the task force. It in some ways, it seems like the task force is a runaway train. And, and that has me very concerned, and so, I, I want these decisions to come back to the council. I, I think we do need to have a moderator. I don’t want Xcel running the show there. Uh, they certainly can participate, you know, how- one of these days I hope they really do participate. Um, but I just feel for them to come up with, well we don’t need a moderator any more is not acceptable, so for me I would like to see a moderator in there (Council 2/4/14).

This is just one example of where council maintained their control over the working group process. As another council member stated, “I don’t want to see them in the driver’s seat. The city and the city council should be in the driver’s seat” (Council 2/4/14).

Despite a primarily advisory role, working groups are credited for ideas in subsequent meetings. For example, a staff member begins an update from council by reporting on an grant program to reward innovative solutions for reducing greenhouse gas emissions:

. . . celebration of what we call the Boulder Energy Challenge, which was an idea that came out of a community working group a couple years ago, um, to carve out a chunk of our climate action plan tax funds and do a competition and see what kind of cool and groovy ideas might come forward from the very creative community of which we are a part and I think we’re all blown away by the great ideas that did come forward . . . (Council 11/12/14).

This specific case of celebrating creativity is connected to a broader pattern as a staff member states “we continue to use the model of community working groups to help us think creatively about our, our different areas of, of work in energy” (Study Session 4/29/14).

These working groups are understood and promoted as an opportunity for public participation. As the city’s web site (2016) opens, “The Energy Future Project has formed volunteer community working groups to obtain input from residents, businesses, and stakeholders on project focus areas.” The process for appointing working group members varies by topic, but, generally, participants should be able to “represent Boulder community interests, the residents’ interests” and have relevant topic expertise—the previous quote continues “as well as have a good perspective on what the constraints of the laws are” (Council
Several of the working groups highlighted their diverse representation in terms of industry affiliations and the neighborhoods where members lived. When introducing the formation of the broadband working group, for example, a staff member noted it will include “multiple communities of interest in the community, residence, the business community, CU faculty, um, and students, youth within the community, intergovernmental representation, and importantly, representation to talk about the digital divide concerns within the community” (Council 1/27/15).

But the third factor—relevant expertise—is a key distinguishing characteristic of the working groups. Council and working group members alike celebrate the depth of expertise within the community that, in turn, supports the working groups. Yael’s introduction above continued by introducing his co-presenter:

so without further adieu I’ll introduce John S*****, who, um, is going to be presenting the, um, report tonight for the group. He has 17 years of professional experience, um, 10 in broad, more broadly in energy and 7 more specifically in solar. He’s held roles in project, um, finance and project development for solar companies since 2007. Um, his career highlight was the development a 30-mega watt solar project that was commissioned in two thousand and eleven. He has an MBA from Georgetown and uh degree from University of Colorado in mechanical engineering, so here’s John (Executive session 8/19/14).

John is introduced by multiple different credentials—years of experience, project roles, project outcomes, and his academic degrees. Providing all of this information is not heard as inappropriate, instead it fits the cultural discourses about working groups as expert groups. As a council member remarks after the presentation:

The report was quite remarkable. Um, even though I didn’t quite understand everything, I confess. Some of the calculations got beyond me. It’s really remarkable work. And, and Sam is right. And I think this community needs to recognize the amazing amount of talent that we have out there, the expertise we have. Um, Boulder, Boulder is, uh, kinduva quite amazing place when it comes to stuff like this. We just got folks who are nationally and internationally known experts of all of these areas. And they are incredibly generous with their time and their skills and their knowledge, um, offering them up to the city. As Sam said, you know, you could pay a lot for a professional report and it wouldn’t necessarily be any better than what we get, um, with our staff and working groups (Executive session 8-19-14).

The favorable comparison to professional consultants is telling: working groups are valued because of the technical advice that they provide. A broad range of experiences and perspectives is important, but participants are not primarily seen as citizens or members of the public: working group members are experts.

This orientation for prioritizing experts can also be seen in contentious council discussions about who should be appointed to the utility board. The utility board would be the governing body responsible for making decisions maintaining infrastructure, establishing rates, and ensuring that the utility is providing reliable electricity that moves the city further towards their climate action goals. As the governance working group later reports, the advisory group should have “a variety of skills” including “engineering, finance, and economics, legal, energy strategies” and “utility operations.” Ensuring proper expertise is the first priority. But if expertise is not an issue then debate centers on whether representation should be based on being a “rate-payer” by paying for residential, commercial or industrial electricity or being a “city elector” who lives within the city boundaries.
My view is in- in Boulder, particularly in this area that we’re talking . . . about now with energy-energy efficiency, um technical confidence, we have an extraordinary pool of people- of talented people within the city, and that we don’t hafta go outside of the city to look for really good people that represent every conceivable load on the- on the electrical system, so I just see no reason to depart from the tradition we had with other advisory boards that they be people who are well qualified, but also are electors in the city (Council, 8/2/11).

This council member makes the case for having people who are “well qualified” but also “electors.” Other council members argue that “electors” are not the same as “rate-payers.” This distinction is particularly consequential in Boulder where just over 100,000 people live in the city while approximately 60,000 people commute into the city, which includes many business owners. The following interaction about who should appoint advisory board members maintains a distinction between “rate-payers” and “voters.”

Susan (business leader): …you have constituents who have sent you to office, and that are not necessarily representing rate payers, they’re representing voters. So I don’t wanna put you in an awkward position of having to answer to your constituents when you’re trying to um achieve the- the goals of the rate payers.

Macon (council person): But our constituents are also the business and the investors in this town, the people who provide jobs, these are very important people to us.

Susan: Most people in the business community are not voters in the city of Boulder, so they don’t have representation on council.

Macon: They have employees, many of whom live in Boulder.

Susan: But you can’t require employees to vote in a particular way. And the business is the one paying the bill. So. You know. (Council, 8/2/11)

This interaction distinguishes “voters” from “rate-payers,” noting that council represents voters but not necessarily the business community. Residency within Boulder city limits becomes a criterion for determining who should be appointed to the advisory council, with some people arguing that only residents should be appointed. The grouping during this discussion introduces other ways of grouping the public (such as rate-payers) that points to the fluid nature of community identity.

Across these discussions, the public is not always a straightforward category, particularly when issues are considered in terms of those who have a stake in the issue. Rate-payers and residents are both relevant identity categories for public participation. Yet expertise is the most important identity category for working group participation. As a form of public participation, working groups should be comprised of experts who can work through complex issues, discuss diverse perspectives, and make recommendations to council. Council maintains discretion and control over any decisions and the working group process.

6. DISCUSSION

This chapter seeks to trace cultural discourses of public participation in energy system transformation. In doing so, we seek to build a richer understanding of local communication practices and norms for interpretation that people draw on to make sense of their social worlds
in order to inform the design of public participation and consider normative questions of energy democracy.

6.1 Cultural Insights for Designing Public Participation

Our analysis of city council meeting discourses is structured around five forms of public participation for energy system transformation: attending and speaking at city council meetings, email contact, education and outreach, task forces, and voting. The cultural meanings attached to each practice suggest that public participation during energy transition is necessary and celebrated; yet processes are often constrained by institutionalized rules for engagement, expectations for interaction between the council and public, and assumptions about the sorts of expert credibility and technical knowledge necessary for the public to be “informed” decision-makers. Some of these findings are familiar to public participation scholars and practitioners. Yet our analysis also reveals meanings and practices that one might not expect. When speaking at public meetings citizens rely on a discourse of representation to gain legitimacy rather than speaking for themselves. The local meanings of representation for working groups are complicated by the relevance of both residents and rate-payers as identities since many businesses may be stakeholders in Boulder’s energy without being eligible to vote or, potentially, serve on working groups. The thickest form of participation prioritizes expertise as the primary qualification for entry. Having working groups of experts who are also residents and stakeholders develop recommendations to council presents democratic contradictions. Drawing on local expertise is more democratic than paying outside consultants; yet this privileged form of participation is extremely exclusive, reinforcing technocratic tendencies to treat public issues as technical issues wherein expertise is forefrontrather than public values.

We contend that these cultural discourses serve as inventional resources for designing future public participation processes in Boulder. Whereas it is beyond the scope of this chapter to develop a comprehensive deliberative design (Sprain et al., 2014), we discuss an example of how this cultural knowledge might inform public participation interventions. The city’s orientation to expertise limits access to key forms of public participation, exacerbated by an above-average number of Boulder citizens who are also experts in energy infrastructure, public policy, and climate science. As expertise emerges as both an asset and concern for task force representation, we suggest that ongoing engagement efforts consider diversifying the criteria for expertise and representation (e.g., considering social identity groups). Crucially, this can be done by working from the existing task force model. Extending task forces to other issues belies recognizing that energy system transformation requires more than just technical, scientific expertise and resolution of technical problems like rate parity. For example, a Latinx working group could consider what access to energy transition might look like and the barriers that people face. We would, of course, recommend developing public participation opportunities outside of task forces. But appreciating a broader range of ways of knowing and what counts as expertise might best be done through the task force model rather than outside of it since it would more directly broaden the existing cultural values of expertise.

6.2 Implications for Energy System Transformation and Governance

Our case examines complexities of public participation in energy system transform and governance. Energy system transformation is highly technical process. The technical aspects of
energy system transformation can lead to a focus on narrow types of expertise that seem essential to understanding energy options. Our case demonstrates an inability to orient to and recognize diverse ways of knowing. Theorizing energy democracy must contend with careful consideration of some of the challenges of expertise within democracy, such as how to integrate experts to support well-informed viewpoints without crowding out or silencing voices of citizens and other ways of knowing (Sprain et al., 2014).

Energy system transformation is irrefutably cultural; leveraging public support for municipalizing hinges on arguments situated in community identity, shared value systems, and situated norms for interpretation, which in turn shape participatory practices. This case shows residents of Boulder and Boulder County invoking expectations of energy democracy—they claim a democratic right to vote and shape the energy system. This cultural discourse is notable because in many ways it precedes scholarship on energy democracy. As scholars begin to theorize energy democracy and activists call for energy democracy, these local cultural discourses signal the resonance of energy democracy within this community. In Boulder, expectations for energy democracy seem tied to democratic expectations that residents have of city governance—even when they live outside of the city boundaries. Theorists would benefit on reflecting on the benefits and limitations of drawing on existing democratic norms for city governance as the basis for thinking about energy democracy. These challenges are illustrated by the meanings related to the 2011 vote. Although defining metrics might seem like a matter of technical criteria, references to the “vote” also legitimize public support for political decisions. These leads to debate about two different interpretations of the vote’s meanings: Is it a signifier that the public thinks Boulder “should” municipalize? Or does it mean that Boulder explore whether it “can” municipalize and, when appropriate, weigh-in on whether it “should”? Democratic norms establish the expectation to public participation and voting as a key form, but the public rarely gains control for determining when and how public participation opportunities are available not to mention how they might be used as discursive closure.

Energy system transformation requires coordinated action between the public, government institutions, and energy institutions over time. Transformation is an ongoing process; our data shows six years of this still ongoing process. Boulder recognizes that achieving their climate action goals will only be actualized if changes occur across the system; individuals have to modify personal consumption habits, while the city needs to take larger actions such as changing the electric utility. Transformation is incremental and iterative; to transform an entire energy system means moving through many transitory processes that change material infrastructure, public policies, environmental impacts, and community understandings. And yet again, public participation is necessary at all phases of development and transition. Some of the practices here, such as translating a close vote into a clear mandate and community support while ignoring 49% of voters, have the potential to undermine adaptive governance and capacity to transform over time.

7. CONCLUSION

This chapter explores the role of the public in energy governance by orienting to local practices and meanings for participation. By taking a cultural perspective, we consider the ways in which cultural discourses configure participatory practices and have the potential to serve as resources for designing ongoing public participation processes. While some these findings are in line with public participation scholarship, our analysis extends theorizing to consider how
cultural understandings might be leveraged in design that are better adept to engage the public, enabling decision-making and facilitating coordinated actions between the government and citizens that are necessary to make Boulder’s energy future a reality. Through our attention to the complexities of participation in energy transitions, we propose that local understandings become resources for designing processes that are responsive to the cultural milieu, extend current processes, and address the unique complexities of public participation in energy system transformation.

REFERENCES


