Grassroots Expertise at a New York City Community Board

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Democratic theory predicts that the use of expert knowledge can conflict with democratic participation in policy-making, but neighborhood-level participatory bodies in U.S. cities frequently deploy quantitative analysis and other forms of expertise as they engage land use processes. An ethnographic approach permits us to investigate the fine-grained human interactions around one such potentially problematic instance. Participatory observation and in-depth interviewing of board members and staff from a New York City community board in a low-income neighborhood show that they can partially overcome the challenge of expertise by developing their own technical capacity. Expertise enhances board members' influence, but members nevertheless encounter difficulties, including the problem of simultaneously performing advisory and representative roles.

In cities across the United States, neighborhood councils established by local governments are incorporating citizen participation into decision making while engaging issues that require them to use expert knowledge, including quantitative analysis. But at least since Dewey (1925), scholars have noted the strong potential for technical policy expertise to undermine democratic participation. Democratic theorists have argued that this tension becomes particularly acute in deliberative contexts either because some participants have far greater ability than others to use technical expertise as a persuasive resource, or because technical proficiency marks some participants as having higher status than others, or because technical discourse itself is value-laden (Young 2000, Fung and Wright 2001, Gaventa and Cornwall 2001, Dzur 2004, Hayward 2004). The question arises whether non-expert participants in neighborhood councils can use expert knowledge effectively either in forming consensus or taking sides in conflict.

Few studies have sought to shed empirical light on this question, which brings together "hard" and "squishy" aspects of political life as well as social science. The inequalities of status and persuasive power that concern democratic theorists play out within fine-grained interactions among participants, or even within participants' heads, as they adopt the values latent in technical

discourse. Although the expertise in question is often quantitative in nature, an ethnographic approach is appropriate to identify its effects on participation.

This article investigates the use of expertise among grassroots members and staff of one neighborhood council in New York City, Manhattan Community Board 11 in East Harlem, as they seek to influence land use and housing decisions – fields in which expert discourse is highly legitimate. It finds that, as expected, the salience of expertise in these deliberations shapes inequality of influence. It further finds that board members respond by using technical information provided by experts and by developing their own technical capacity. This strategy is effective up to a point, but two barriers limit effectiveness in ways that more capacity cannot remedy. First, board members who develop expertise still lack complementary instrumentalities, such as access to insider information. And second, they find it difficult to juggle performance of their expert role with other roles they must play in deliberations, especially the role of representing the community. Although New York's community board system has unique features and the East Harlem board members have more technical capacity than usual for low-income neighborhood councils, the challenges of role conflict are likely to be present in councils in other contexts.

New York's Community Boards

Since 1975, the New York City Charter has authorized community boards representing 59 geographic districts and granted them the power to review, to advise, to investigate, and to inform, but not to make authoritative decisions. The charter specifies 20 distinct functions for the boards, focusing on city services, the city budget, and most importantly, "initial review of applications and proposals of public agencies and private entities for the use, development, or improvement of land located in the community district" (NY City Charter § 2008 d (1) and d (17)). The city's borough presidents appoint all board members, half of them designated by city council members. These elected officials have the power to select members with whom they expect to agree and to remove

them at the end of their two-year terms if they turn out to disagree. Occasionally this power has enabled elected officials to determine the outcome of specific board decisions (Williams 2006). But despite these rather weak formal powers, the boards often serve as the focal point of local controversies, attracting the efforts of thousands of the city's most politically active people.

The city's community boards represent a considerable investment of money and volunteer effort. They average 46 actual members, out of a maximum of 50, and an average of three quarters of the members attend an evening meeting each month.¹ Board members include leaders of community organizations, tenant associations, advocacy groups, labor unions, and political clubs, as well as business people and staff of service organizations. The activities of the boards go far beyond mandated monthly meetings. Each month, the East Harlem community board holds 18 scheduled meetings of committees, standing subcommittees, and other bodies, in addition to its full board and executive committee meetings. Three full-time staff members also carry out parts of the board's work, and the board makes use of planning consultants and other sources of technical assistance. Citywide, the government budgets \$15.2 million for board operations, plus \$1.2 million for a mayoral office that supports the boards, and borough presidents' offices, the Department of City Planning, the Independent Budget Office, and private philanthropies provide additional support (Office of Management and the Budget 2011). These resources are dwarfed, however, by the capacity of the city agencies and private developers whose activities the boards seek to influence.

The community boards were established during a period when neighborhood councils were becoming more common throughout the United States. Intellectuals of the left and right saw these councils as sites for the renewal of active citizenship (Looker 2015), while city administrations saw

¹ The average board size was taken in 2012 from the 48 boards for which recent memberships could be found online; the attendance rate is averaged from the attendance rates at recent meetings of 27 boards for which recent minutes including attendance or recorded votes could be found. It is also noteworthy that lower-income districts tend to have fewer members appointed, and that geography affects both the number of members appointed and the attendance rate, with noticeably fewer members showing up in the Bronx and Queens.

them as a constructive response to concerns about urban renewal and a way to combat public disaffection, especially in low-income black and Latino neighborhoods (Yates 1973, Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations 1979). During subsequent decades, city governments continued to create neighborhood council schemes in an effort to connect citizens with government and improve declining public trust (Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006; Jun and Musso 2013). Similar elite-facilitated deliberation projects have also proliferated far beyond the urban neighborhood context, and they are often deployed in efforts to construct a consensus (Walker, McQuarrie, and Lee 2015; for British examples see Jones 2003 and Taylor 2007).

Observers of New York City's community boards have focused on the boards' conflictual, rather than consensual side, noting both internal conflicts and those between neighborhoods and "downtown" pro-growth interests (New York City Affairs 1980, Marcuse 1987, Marcuse 1990, Pecorella 1994, Davila 2004, Hum 2010; see also Polletta 2015 for an argument that deliberative and contentious strategies can coexist in a community forum). The strictly advisory role of New York's community boards places them on the "placation" rung of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, but scholars have argued that participation can be influential even in the absence of formal authority (Berry, Portney, and Thompson 1993, Chaskin and Abunimah 1999, Fung 2006). Marcuse (1990) argues that gentrification has given the boards a degree of power since the 1970s, as developers and politicians sought the boards' support for development projects in changing low-income areas. Pecorella (1994, p. 194-5) concludes that "the boards are merely advisory, but they have opened land-use review in New York to public scrutiny," suggesting that their limited formal powers give rise to a consequential informal influence. The boards allow neighborhood interests to coalesce, to obtain recognition and legitimacy, and to develop and publicize arguments and reasons for government action, but whether those interests and arguments ultimately prevail is up to the rest of the political system.

Research Setting and Methods

Manhattan Community Board 11 represents the neighborhood of East Harlem, a historically low-income area that is now being affected by market-oriented as well as subsidized real estate development. It is generally seen as a Puerto Rican neighborhood, but has also long had a substantial African-American population and now has a growing number of Mexican-born and other residents (Davila 2004). East Harlem has the city's largest concentration of public and subsidized housing (46 percent of the occupied housing stock) and one of the poorer populations (44 percent of households below 200 percent of the poverty threshold – 15th largest share out 55 Census Bureau-defined sub-borough areas).² The rents on its private unsubsidized apartments, however, are in the city's middle range, and the median contract rent for recent movers, reflecting the current housing market, is well above the middle. Beginning in the 1990s, more than 5,000 subsidized rental apartments have been created in the district,³ much of it using vacant buildings and land abandoned by owners in previous decades. Developers have also built a significant amount of market-rate and owner-occupied housing.

From February to May 2012, my participant observation included attending three meetings each of the full East Harlem Community Board, its Housing Committee, and its City Properties and Land Use Committee. I volunteered at the board's office for a morning or afternoon each week for ten weeks, examined minutes and other records, and conducted six formal interviews and a number of informal ones. I was not a disinterested observer. My previous work as a policy analyst and low-income housing advocate had already brought me into contact with several of the board's members and staff. This allowed me to immediately begin interactions focused on housing policy information-processing, carrying out simple analytic work and occasionally taking advocacy positions on the issues before the board.

² These figures are calculated from the 2011 New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey.

³ Calculated from data from the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy's Subsidized Housing Information Project, available at furmancenter.org/data

The Search for Expertise

The affordability of housing that developers propose to build in the district is a central technical issue for the East Harlem community board. Can the district's actual residents afford the proposed housing? This question has both an experiential and a technical aspect. Many community members are well aware that they and their neighbors cannot afford the new housing, but they lack knowledge of Census rent and income statistics and thus have difficulty putting their understanding into a form that is legitimate in policy discussion. They also lack the knowledge of housing policy and finance needed to compare the affordability profile of a given housing proposal to realistic alternatives. As a result, board members are driven to seek expertise in order to articulate the needs of the community they represent. My volunteer work at the board's offices allowed me to observe, and contribute to, the board's efforts to translate the need for housing affordable at lower income levels into realistic and technically legitimate responses to specific proposals. Although the board welcomed my additional information and processing capacity, my contribution had little obvious impact, because the board was less constrained by a need for better information about their own community's needs than by a lack of information about other parties' preferences and capabilities.

Most housing proposals presented to the East Harlem community board for review come from privately-owned developers seeking to build with multiple subsidies channeled through city agencies, especially the federal Low Income Housing Tax Credit. In return for the subsidies, private developers agree to rent some or all of the new or renovated apartments to households with incomes in certain ranges, and to charge correspondingly affordable rents. Each subsidy program has its own income limits, which are expressed as percentages of the Area Median Income. The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development calculates this "AMI" by finding the median income for the city plus the northern suburbs of Westchester, Putnam, and Rockland counties, then adjusting upward based on the area's high housing costs. The AMI is much higher than the city's

actual median income, let alone the median for a low-income neighborhood like East Harlem (Waters and Bach 2013). Thus apartments set at 50 percent of AMI, a typical level, are available to households with incomes around than \$38,000 a year for a family of three, close to the city's median and far higher than the East Harlem median.

On my first day at the board's offices, District Manager George Sarkissian and Assistant District Manager Angel Mescaín showed me a list of tax credit developments that were either recently completed or under construction. After this conversation, they asked me to examine the board's file for one of these projects, a development known as 1951 Park. The folder contained four documents relating to the board's role in the city's land use review process, its key formal involvement in development proposals. The documents were:

- HPD's notice of the proposal and an attached Environmental Assessment Statement, prepared by a consultant.
- The letter from the board to the Manhattan borough president, signed by the board chair, supporting the project.
- City Planning Commission forms for the project, filled out by the board and signed by the chair.
- A checklist, designed by the board and filled in by the developer. The checklist included instructions, an explanation of what the board required in order to extend support, five pages of questions for the developer, and one page with spaces to be filled by the district manager, the land use committee, and the full board.

The checklist was not complicated but did indicate that the board was taking an active role in the approval process. The board had recently approved another development only after initially rejecting it and then joining with the local city council member in negotiating a new proposal. The files for this project contained more materials, reflecting the greater degree of board involvement, including a letter memorializing the agreement and some handwritten notes from face-to-face

meetings. Neither folder contained any independent research material, however. It was clear that even at its most involved, the board depended on other interested parties for information. The information dependency reinforces the board's tendency to "play defense" when vetting proposals generated elsewhere instead of generating an affirmative development vision of its own.

The 1951 Park proposal gave me an opportunity to contribute to the board's information processing. The Environmental Assessment Statement for the project described the affordability of the apartments in the proposed development, which would include:

- 63 apartments for households with incomes up to 40 percent of the Area Median Income, which comes to about \$32,000 a year, roughly the median for the community district.
- 186 apartments for households at the higher level of 40 percent to 60 percent of AMI.
- 63 apartments for households from 80 percent to 130 percent of AMI.

Only 20 percent of the apartments in the project would be affordable even to residents in the middle of the district's income distribution, revealing how poorly present-day affordable housing developments match the needs of low-income neighborhoods. But 1951 Park actually does better than most. This led me to take a closer look how this project's income targeting fit within the community's income profile, using data downloaded from the Census Bureau's website. My analysis divided the neighborhood's population into income bands comparable to the ones used in allocating subsidized apartments, then calculated how the number of apartments in the 1951 Park project for each income band related to the number of households (in thousands) in that band in the local population (Figure 1). The project disproportionately benefits households just above the neighborhood's median income, with a secondary concentration for those just above the local 75th percentile. The poor are shut out, as usual.

When the board's staff saw this analysis two weeks later, Sarkissian found it useful but not surprising. My reaction was that it might be a little unfair to the developers, because they did not determine the income eligibility bands, which are set by the subsidy programs and the amount of

subsidy that HPD decides to give them, but Sarkissian cut me off and told me that this was too charitable to the developers, who can decide how much subsidy, and which forms, to seek. He pointed out that during the housing boom, developers were bringing projects that had far fewer affordable apartments than they did in 2012, typically 50 percent market, 30 percent middle income, and 20 percent low income. The 2007 housing market collapse exposed something that the board might not have been able to determine any other way – that developers could make a profit even with much larger affordable components than had been on the table during the boom.

Figure 1: Affordability at the 1951 Park Avenue development

	East Harlem Community		Proposed Project		Ap'ts Per Thousand
	Households	Share	Apartments	Share	
Up 40 percent of "Area Median Income"	22,912	51.2%	63	20.1%	2.75
40 to 60 percent	6,948	15.5%	188	59.9%	27.06
60 to 80 percent	4,067	9.1%	0	0.0%	0.00
80 to 130 percent	5,969	13.3%	63	20.1%	10.55
130 percent plus	4,844	10.8%	0	0.0%	0.00
TOTAL	44,740	100.0%	314	100.0%	7.02

Source: American Community Survey 2006-2010 for Public Use Microdata Area 3804.

Developers do not formally need the board's support to go forward, but they seek it because the board's decision shows legitimate community support for their plans. This gives the board leverage in pursuing its preferred outcome, which during the time of this study was maximum affordability. Expertise is part of a strategy for using that leverage, and so is a degree of judiciousness in its granting or withholding of approval. By discriminating between proposals that maximize affordability and those that don't, rather than simply opposing all proposals as

insufficiently affordable, the board shows that it is a sound representative of the community's true interests. The board's checklist helps it to develop and demonstrate its expertise and to bring it to bear on specific proposals. But the major uncertainty facing the board concerns how much affordability they could attain. To find out, the board would need access to information about developers' costs and the availability of subsidies. Otherwise, even the most capable board can do little more than engage in brinksmanship with developers and agencies in order to determine the highest level of affordability attainable. Analyses like mine are only useful to the extent that they can demonstrate the need to get more out of any given proposal, but they do not overcome the information asymmetry and the board's defensive position with respect to developers and agencies.

The Limitations of Expertise

Given the community board's advisory role, it makes sense that members would seek to position themselves as experts even when they want to control, rather than merely inform, city agencies. After all, many of the most trusted advisors are experts. (See March and Olsen 1989, p. 32) This places demands on board members' technical abilities, and requires them to adopt a distinct style of public performance as part of the impression management (Goffman 1959) appropriate to their expert role. Agencies, much as developers, guard their authority through their control of information. In one meeting of the board's City Properties and Land Use Committee, members attempted to press officials from two city housing agencies. During the meeting, they used their charter-specified powers to obtain information and provide advice and they displayed a high degree of technical competence, but they were unable to establish that they had achieved any effective influence over the agencies.

The committee had invited officials from the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) and the Housing Development Corporation (HDC) to one of its regularly scheduled meetings to discuss the implementation of the city's "community preference" policy,

which requires developers to give residents of the district first access to half the apartments in new subsidized developments. In East Harlem, far fewer residents actually obtain apartments, because not enough apply and are found qualified. Mescaïn told me that developers often take out only one local advertisement and don't do anything else to promote developments. In one example, a developer had given residents a 30-day window to request an application form by mail, receive it, and then mail it back in – all during the Christmas holiday season. The board responded to this problem by getting the 1951 Park developers to agree to a marketing plan with a longer timeline, more advertising, cooperation with community organizations, and so forth. The plan worked, and East Harlem residents obtained their full share of the apartments. Board members and staff considered this to be one of their better victories. Now the committee had asked the two agencies to send officials to discuss institutionalizing the marketing plan for future developments, not only in East Harlem but citywide.⁴

The meeting took place in a sparsely furnished community room in a senior housing development. Eleven members of the committee sat at a group of plastic folding tables arranged in a U formation, while another eight people sat in rows of folding chairs set up opposite the tables. The attendees were dressed casually but respectably and in some cases rather stylishly. Most of attendees seemed to be wearing their work clothes, but not if they worked at places where clothes get dirty or connote low status.

Two of the three expected city officials arrived twenty minutes late after getting lost in the neighborhood. The committee began with brief other business, but once the officials were ready, committee chair Tanya Smith turned the meeting over to Michelle Miller of HPD. Miller began by saying that the agency was excited about the Community Board's marketing plan, but that they

⁴ Since the time of this study, HPD has moved its application process onto an internet platform, making it easier for prospective tenants to find out about and apply for apartments in multiple developments. This has resulted in much larger pools of applications for all developments, including both neighborhood residents and non-residents.

would begin with a Powerpoint presentation on their own plan, which they were showing to all of the community boards. Bob Morris of HPD's marketing office then spent 20 minutes going over a detailed description of the process of applying for an apartment. This was not what the committee had asked from the agencies, but all of the members paid close and polite attention and several asked follow-up questions when Morris was done. Finally, Smith asked if there was any penalty for developers who fail to meet the target of 50 percent of all apartments rented to community district residents. Claudia Diller of HDC's marketing office responded that there was not, but that developers had to prove they did outreach to try to inform residents about the opportunity to rent. Smith followed up by asking who monitors that, and Morris said that the "developer has a marketing plan submitted to us for review," and has to prove they contacted community groups.

Chairwoman Smith's tone of self-presentation in this exchange was the one that predominates in board activities – verbal, efficient, and business-like, with only the most limited hand gestures. This style of communication (which would seem to belong to a family of styles that Young 2000 identifies as potentially exclusionary) emphasizes the grammatical third person. Like other board members, Smith strove to present issues in terms of their general significance for the community. Even when board members have first-hand experience with issues, they rarely use this as a source of moral authority, as grassroots community activists often do in other contexts. The City Charter give board members a representative function, which might seem to call for a first-person style of communication, but by positioning the board as advisory, it implicitly invites board members to function as experts. This evidently calls for the use of third person, and it was this aspect of the board's role that usually seemed to predominate.

Smith then asked why so many developers had failed to meet their community preferences. Morris replied that "we're aware of the difficulties in Community Board 11, and we always have been." One problem, he said, is that the income eligibility bands for these developments, based on the HUD Area Median Income system, are much higher than most East Harlem incomes. "Frankly,"

he said, “we’re not building developments that target 20 to 30 percent of AML.” Smith replied by saying that many of the developments are quite small. They don’t need to find a lot of eligible households, just a few. “That is a failure, a complete failure,” she said. Morris began to say a few words, but another committee member, Andrea Boston, chimed in. “I don’t get it,” she said. “They’re not living up to their obligation.” She asked again about monitoring of developers’ marketing efforts. Diller explained that the agencies have logs of reported efforts, but not complete records. Boston said that they should audit the developers. “We do audit,” Diller replied.

In this exchange, city officials sought to use a technical reason to explain away one of the committee’s key concerns. This gambit did not succeed, because the committee had the competence to understand the officials’ argument and reject it as an excuse for poor performance – another example of the board’s effectiveness in playing defense. But when committee members moved beyond a technical frame to demand accountability, thus playing offense, they sought to move beyond the advisory and informational role that the City Charter creates for community boards. Having said their piece, they had nowhere to go. The officials continued to discuss the matter in a factual way – “we *do* audit” – resulting in an inconclusive exchange.

Another committee member, Maria Vallejo, then introduced a concern over the use of credit ratings in the application process. Morris responded factually by saying that “credit ratings are a big part of the eligibility process,” but that some developers set standards that are easier for prospective tenants to meet. Diller interjected that some developers don’t use ratings, but only look at judgments against prospective tenants who have failed to pay bills. “It’s a good thing that they are going away from credit scores,” she said, but “they are allowed to use their own credit criteria.” Morris said that HPD is “looking at” the credit criteria they allow developers to use and “we don’t disagree with you.” Morris also mentioned a task force to look at credit criteria. Boston jumped in quickly to say “I want to be on it,” prompting nervous laughter and a noticeable pause from the city officials and board members alike.

In contrast to the previous exchange, this discussion moved from the city officials giving simple factual statements, which seemed if anything to defend the developers, toward sincere-seeming statements that the city shared board members' concern. But despite the board's effort to address the officials on a technical third-person level, agency staff did not take seriously the suggestion that the advisory and representative committee members could cross over to participate in the agency's technical task force. Nor did committee members, apparently.

After discussing a few other issues, Chairwoman Smith finally asked the officials to comment on the community board's marketing plan – the stated purpose of inviting the officials to attend the meeting. Diller said that “there are many things in the plan that we are in favor of,” but that it would have to be modified to create a 60-day period for each development during which only the agencies' approved marketing to go on. This, she said, was so that everyone would have the same access. Remarkably, the board did not follow up on this statement to explore how much this requirement would limit the implementation of the community board's marketing plan.

At other meetings and in interviews, board members often said that they wanted to “summon” agency officials and developers or to “grill them.” Tanya Smith told me that “we’ve summoned folks from agencies to come to the table and talk about the issue that affects us, you know, and we don’t take no for an answer.... I’m very aggressive and there are other people that are very aggressive and you know we make sure that things happen.”⁵ But the committees cannot fully produce the power dynamic implied by this language. They can get officials to meetings and ask them questions, as the city charter provides. They can also advise the agencies as to their priorities. But the committee cannot call agencies to account through the combination of giving instructions and questioning. HPD and HDC responded to the committee's summons by attending this meeting, but proceeded to lecture it on a tangentially related subject, and the committee listened

⁵ Participant quotations not from public meetings are from interviews conducted in April and May 2012.

respectfully. Much like developers, agency officials guarded their authority through control of information. When asked specific questions, the agencies gave answers that sometimes tended to excuse the poor performance of developers. Often, they expressed sympathy with the board's goals and may well have done so sincerely. But this combination of pushing the board away with factual information and bringing them closer with sympathetic commentary preserved the agency's technical ownership of the issues that the committee raised. Agency staff might choose to act in accordance with the board's wishes but will never share informational power by revealing information unfavorable to the developers. Nor will they ever admit that their actions had been determined by the board. They represent any action they take as their own decision, leaving the board in situation of chronic uncertainty as to its own effectiveness.

The Problem of Representation

The community board's advisory role is entwined with representation. In addition to assessing community needs, board members are expected to aggregate, deliberate, and communicate community interests. This role is more explicitly public than the advisory one, placing different demands on the board members' styles of self-presentation. Through interviews and by observing a contentious meeting of the full community board, it became clear that the expert role that members take on in their efforts to advise agency decisions sometimes conflicts with their role in representing neighborhood interests. Representation itself is also a problematic task for board members, given that they are chosen by elected officials.

Several participants told me that the board is most effective when its wishes are aligned with those of the elected officials. Tanya Smith, for example, said that the board can succeed "if we use [our power] right, if we partner with our elected officials and we're not fighting with them, and when we have elected officials that are truly about the needs of the community and not what will take them to the next level politically." She also told me that "when we [community board and

elected officials] work together we work well together, but when we don't work together, then nobody wins. So when you ask me, you know, who wins, nobody wins, and the community loses each and every time." This rings true because formally powerful City Council members have an electoral incentive to respect preferences legitimated by the Community Board. But Smith's analysis nevertheless raises big questions. Is the board's position really influential when it is aligned with the elected officials, or could the officials have produced the same outcome without the board? And what does it mean when the board aligns with elected officials who nominate and appoint them? It would seem that the Community Board is expected to function both as a part of the electoral political system and as an alternative to it.

These issues emerged controversially when the full board voted in March on a proposal to modify two avenues passing through the neighborhood in order create protected bike lines, separated from motor traffic by curbs. The meeting was held at an elementary school on East 127th Street, a bland modernist slab of brick and cast concrete with a few colorful paintings on its walls. Inside, perhaps 100 people were already sitting or standing in the auditorium before the meeting and many more continued to arrive. On the wide stage sat District Manager George Sarkissian, Board Chair Michael Jefferson, and four other board officers sat behind tables. Like all of the board's meetings, this one began with a public session, where anyone who signs up can give a short speech. In addition to the usual informational announcements from community groups, members of the public spoke on topics that related to the bike lane issue – on bikes as a way to combat obesity and the effects of traffic and exhaust fumes on seniors, for example.

When the public meeting was over, Sarkissian left the stage to round up board members who were still outside the auditorium and Jefferson called the roll. The meeting then began with a report from the chair. Next came the report from the Public Safety and Transportation Committee, which included a committee recommendation that the board support the proposed bike lanes on First and Second avenues. This quickly produced a question from Andrea Boston about whether

there had been sufficient public input on the issue. The committee chair, Maggie Garcia, replied that there had been, and Jefferson jumped in, strongly supporting Garcia's answer, as did a representative from the city Department of Transportation (known as DOT). It was evident that Boston opposed the bike lanes, while Garcia and Jefferson supported them.

Initially, the two sides maintained the kind of third-person discourse already described, sticking to the fiction that they were seeking and providing factual information about the process for public input. This style of presentation harmonizes both with the board members' expert posture toward city agencies and with the tradition of decorum in legislative bodies. All parties in the exchange initially avoided using the words "I" and "you," but this eventually broke down. Boston began talking about her personal concerns, raising the rhetorical stakes by appealing to the need to protect children. Then she addressed board member Coleman Jonas directly and suggested that he was biased on the issue because he works for Transportation Alternatives, a group that supports bike lanes. Jefferson cut her off and tried to redirect the conversation back to process, but Jonas finally got up and said that nobody's integrity or motive should be questioned. Jonas paced a little as he spoke, but kept his hands at his sides. "I work for Transportation Alternatives, but I do not ride a bike," he said. His work for the organization relates to public transportation issues, but he supports bike lanes because he rode bikes when he was a kid.

Then Jonas turned to his most effective bit of rhetoric. Despite the implied criticism of the bike lane opponents, he preserved an upbeat tone of voice. "The same energy we put into a fight against bike lanes we need to put into a fight for own children's education" and a long list of other issues. This produced loud applause from throughout the house. Debra Carter, the board vice-chair sitting on stage, then weighed in, saying that she could support the bike lanes, but only because the city has funded the project and it will create jobs. She was less successful in keeping her cool than Jonas – holding the mike with her right hand and gesturing vehemently with her left, speaking loudly, and creating a sense of escalation. She also got applause, coming only from the area where

Boston and other bike lane opponents were sitting. After a few more questions, Jefferson said that he was ready “to forward the recommendation of the committee,” but a new anti-bike lane speaker, board member and business owner George Barda, rose to say that he believed that the bike lanes would lead to an increase in asthma, and that he had lived “in the community” for 30 years. This produced loud applause from the area where the anti-bike lane people were sitting. The subject matter was drifting further away from process and toward the substance of the pro- and anti-bike lane positions. Jefferson then began trying to wrap up discussion of the bike lane proposal, speaking over the microphone while opponents shouted over him, accusing him of being partisan and one-sided, and of not allowing them to speak.

After a brief, tension-diffusing discussion of another matter, Jefferson began to say that he would entertain a motion to forward the recommendation of the committee on the bike lanes. Boston quickly interrupted to bring up some recommendations from a work group that had been distributed at the meeting. Boston made a motion to reject the bike lanes until these recommendations were followed, and it was swiftly seconded. Jonas asked Jefferson to clarify the relationship between this motion and the recommendations. It seemed that he was trying to politely get at the fact that at least one of the recommendations could not be followed without also installing the bike lanes. But Jefferson chose to ignore the motion’s problematic construction and described it as a conditional rejection until the recommendations are acted on. A questioner from the floor asked whether the motion on the floor supports bike lanes or not. Jefferson tried to clarify without being partisan, sticking to the “conditional rejection” formulation though many people still seemed to be confused.

Someone asked if there were two motions on the floor, but Jefferson pointed out that no one had ever made the motion to forward the committee’s recommendation, so Boston’s motion was the only one on the floor. Someone would have to make a separate motion on the committee’s recommendation in order for that to be considered. Boston abruptly rose and withdrew her motion.

Maria Vallejo then made a motion to support the bike lanes, and it was seconded. After some clarification of proper wording, Jefferson asked the secretary to call the role. In the end the vote was 21 yes, 14 no, 2 abstentions. Michael quickly moved to pass the rest of the Public Safety and Transportation committee's other items on a single voice vote and move to the next committee. The DOT representative and her staff left quickly in a group.

I subsequently learned that the center of the controversy over this vote was whether then-City Council Member Melissa Mark-Viverito had improperly influenced it. She took a public position in favor of the bike lanes, and three of my interviewees told me that Mark-Viverito had also called board members about the issue. Two of them, Alice Wing and Tanya Smith, considered this an intrusion on the board's independence, even though Wing supported the bike lanes and Smith opposed them. The other interviewee, Maria Vallejo, supported the lanes and considered the calls an acceptable part of the process. "[E]very time [Mark-Viverito] has called me to support an issue," Vallejo said, "she will say, always at the end, but always, remember, you will do what you think is better."

Underlying this disagreement were different views of the relationship between politics and representation. The word "political" has a negative connotation for some board members, and staff also seemed concerned that "political" behavior could get in the way of the board's other activities. "The political people need to see the value of connecting with the non-political people, and I don't think they do," Sarkissian said. "Their other agendas make them focus on the political stuff." Vallejo, on the other hand, immediately described herself as political and presented a strong defense of this identity, despite taking its controversial nature for granted. "You know that I do work in the church, the Catholic Church," she said, "and occasionally people are asking, are you Catholic? Are you Catholic or are you political? ... Sometimes with your actions you let us know that you are more political than Catholic. And I smile, and the reason that I smile is because to be a Catholic you have to be political in the sense that, ... if you really follow the Gospel values, Jesus was very political,

because he confronted the structure of the society and he confronted injustice and confronted, you know, the empire, in those days the Roman empire.”

Vallejo’s embrace of the term political also extended to the parliamentary maneuvering around the bike lane vote. She credited the opponents with good strategy in making their motion first, but faulted them for choosing to sit together in one area so that when they applauded anti-bike speeches, they sounded like a smaller faction than if they had distributed themselves around the hall. “Who organized it?” she asked. She also took credit for her own swift action after pressure from bike lane supporters (as she saw it) caused Andrea Boston to withdraw the anti-bike lane motion. “So the minute that she withdraw,” she said, “I – whoop! You saw I didn’t even allow her to finish, I got up, o-o-h. You got to be fast.” Other board members had criticized these parliamentary strategies as a waste of time, but Vallejo saw as appropriate parts of the board’s process.

Vallejo described the political identities of board members as a source of board influence over elected officials, in addition to the influence running the other way. If board members were merely tools of the elected officials, she told me, “she would be calling us every month. As it is she call us once a year. ... And they, you know, also, they highly respect the community board. ... They know the people that are there are connected to other people... and those vote for them.”

In Vallejo’s view, the board’s connections to the political world of the elected officials actually contribute to its ability to aggregate interests. It is a source of independence as well as of dependence. This is plausible for two reasons. First, elected officials may appoint politically minded board members whose votes they can’t control precisely because those members’ independent profiles make it important to maintain relationships with them. And second, the members’ own political relationships could cause them to adopt positions that reflect the views of attentive voters, thus providing elected officials with electorally useful information. But such a delicate arrangement shrouds the board’s representative capacity in permanent ambiguity. Board members criticize each other for being political and set up a dichotomy between being “for the community” and “for the

politicians” even as they acknowledge that relationships with elected officials give them leverage to translate their advisory power into policy influence.

The board members’ conflicted position yields some conspicuous silences in their public performances. Although many board members were well aware of the political machinations surrounding the bike lane issue, none mentioned them during the public consideration of the question, even though they brought forward other highly contentious aspects of the issue. Would open discussion of this matter be inconsistent with the board’s self-presentation as an advisory and representative body? It is interesting that board members sometimes slipped in their efforts to behave as proper representatives by maintaining the decorous tone of parliamentarians, but they never wavered in abstaining from talking about the behind-the-scenes aspect of the controversy.

Limits of Grassroots Expertise

My observation of the board showed that at least some grassroots board members adopt at least some aspects of the expert role, but it also uncovered three distinct barriers to the board’s effectiveness, all of which can be interpreted as aspects of role performance. First, board members seeking more affordable housing for their neighborhood tried to improve their legitimacy by presenting themselves as expert advisors. Since they were essentially advocating for their community’s needs and priorities, they might well have positioned themselves as representatives. But the prestige of expertise within the housing development field led them to translate their input into technical discourse, presenting themselves as experts on their own community. When they try to render expert judgment on whether a development proposal provides good enough affordability profile given the limitations of their policy environment, however, they run up against limits. Doing this requires access to information guarded by other parties, especially developers. Knowing their own community, and translating that knowledge into an expert discourse, is not sufficient to display this kind of judgment, leaving the members unable to fully inhabit the advisory role.

Second, the board was stymied in its attempt to combine its advisory and information-gathering roles into control over a city agency – what we might term a monitor role. As with the first example, the board seemed to avoid the position of representative, deliberately choosing a style of self-presentation appropriate to advisors. The agency responded in a manner that suggested that board members were more like petitioners – members of the agency’s public rather than their peers or superiors. The implicit struggle over the board’s role took place in part through decorum – efforts on both sides to act in manner appropriate to their preferred role definitions. But as with the first example, lack of information limited the board’s effectiveness. The agency made sure that members could not know whether they had succeeded in functioning as monitors of the agency’s performance.

Third, when the board rendered an official decision, it adopted a parliamentary style appropriate to its representative role. Board members found it appropriate to make elaborate, though inconsistent, efforts to cast their substantive arguments for and against the bike lanes as if they were addressing questions about the decision-making process, and they strictly avoided mentioning behind-the-scenes activities that could undermine their legitimacy as community representatives. Although the board’s relationships with elected officials provide the most plausible means for the board to influence policy outcomes, they could not publicly acknowledge this.

In each of these examples, board members sought to influence outcomes by playing roles legitimated for them by the City Charter, whether expert advisor or community representative. In the first two examples, a lack of information limited their effectiveness, while in the third case their efforts to act as proper representatives left them ambivalent about a likely source of political effectiveness. However, informational barriers and ambivalent relationships with elected officials do not provide a sufficient account of the board’s predicament. In each case, the board members’ effectiveness was impeded by their need to work through role performance.

Sometimes, it was a functional aspect of role performance that tripped members up. Without information that was withheld by the other parties, the board's housing committee could not exercise the kind of judgment that would show them to be proper advisors. But often it was the public, dramaturgical aspect of the needed performances that created the impediment, as board members made conspicuous efforts to use verbal language and body language appropriate to their roles. Perhaps one reason for this emphasis on role performance was the difficulty of establishing a more rationalistic standard for evaluating board member's actions. The board's housing committee could not evaluate its own effectiveness because the city housing agency withheld information, while the board as a whole could not evaluate whether it was influencing or being influenced by elected officials because of members' reluctance to acknowledge the complexity of their relations with the electeds. In each case dramaturgical performance of advisory or representative roles may have served as compensation for the unclarity.

But we should not take the dramaturgical metaphor too far. Although these performances had a markedly outward dimension, the board members may well have been striving to perform their roles inwardly as well. In their interaction with officials, members of the housing committee suffered setbacks in their efforts to use the tools of expert advisors, but these setbacks become more severe and disabling when we consider them as barriers to feeling themselves to *be* expert advisors. In the parliamentary rituals surrounding consideration of the bike lanes proposal, members of the full board, it was not so much the need to *act like* a parliament as to *be* one that made it impossible to directly address the City Council member's phone calls. All political actors face informational limits and all face strategic tradeoffs around their key relationships, but these problems take a particularly acute form for actors who are committed to resolving difficult role conflicts through dramaturgical self-presentation. When conflicts concern not just the tasks that board members attempt to perform but the public roles and identities that they seek to inhabit,

they are experienced not just as challenging but as truly paradoxical. Efforts to finesse these demands are both constraining and fated to be only partially successful.

Conclusion

Members of Manhattan Community Board 11 were able to partially overcome the theoretically expected conflict between expertise and democratic participation. Sustained involvement in the board's committees enabled them to develop technical knowledge as a resource for persuasion, partially leveling the playing field between the interests represented on the board and those of government agencies and developers. In a more limited way, they were also able to acquire the status and legitimacy that comes from the possession of technical knowledge. But they were hampered by the contradictory, even paradoxical, role the charter assigns them. In order to obtain legitimacy, the boards are asked to be representative without being elected, expert with only limited technical resources, and publicly responsible without being political.

Reformers have seen the political appointment of board members, their advisory role, and their limited technical capacity as producing inefficiency and ineffectiveness. They have proposed reforms calculated to help boards reach better grounded internal conclusions and become more persuasive in influencing external actors. These include making board positions more "merit-based," even as they remain appointed; requiring agencies to respond to board actions in a more timely way; and increasing training and consulting services for board members (Stringer 2007, Municipal Art Society 2010). But reform efforts aimed at merely increasing the efficiency of the community board system will fail because they do not address the role-performance aspects of board membership. On the other hand, reforms that make board membership elected or give the boards more decision-making authority could upset the political arrangements in which the boards are embedded. The predicament of the community boards may be an irreducible aspect of their role in the city's wider political and policy-making system.

Can we expect to find a similar mix of success and limitation when neighborhood councils beyond East Harlem and New York City engage with expert knowledge? The prominent place of New York's community boards in development conflicts provide a strong motive for board members to develop expertise that might be lacking in more consensual contexts. These conflicts have also drawn the attention of players from outside the board, such as advocates, philanthropies, and elected officials, who sometimes provide resources the board can use to develop its technical capacity. Manhattan Community Board 11 in particular represents a low-income neighborhood with a very large volume of new housing development, sharpening the affordability issue and leading to sustained attention to development issues from the board. These factors might well be more favorable than usual for the development of an expert strategy by a low-income neighborhood council. Nevertheless, the board's successes suggest that the use of expert discourse can be effective up to a point for grassroots participants when conditions are favorable.

The mechanisms that limit the effectiveness of an expert strategy, unfortunately, can also be expected to appear in other contexts. Insider knowledge is often a valuable complement to technical capacity, as can be seen when expert consultants advertise their inside connections in the fields where they are active. The formal powers granted to neighborhood councils are also typically weak, pushing participants into a combination of advisory and representative roles in order to make the most of their informal leverage. The role paradox experienced by the East Harlem Community Board is thus likely to be experienced by other would-be grassroots experts.

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