

# Review of *America, the Owner's Manual: Making Government Work For You*

by Bob Graham with Chris Hand:  
A Learn-By-Doing Approach  
Makes this Book a Field Guide for  
Effective Citizen Participation

Review by Qian Hu  
*Arizona State University*

## INTRODUCTION

*America, The Owner's Manual: Making Government Work For You*, by Bob Graham with Chris Hand, comes just in time. Although strong arguments based on the high voter turnout rate in the 2008 presidential election may be made for the American democratic process, on a deeper level, the public's "commitment to engaging in all aspects of the democratic process is still starving for sustenance" (Graham & Hand, 2009, p.23). After all, voting participation cannot reflect the entire picture of a healthy democracy. According to the National Election Studies conducted by the University of Michigan, public trust in government has been declining since the 1960s (Moon, 2002). There seems to be neither a panacea nor any shortcuts to restoring public trust in government and motivating people to get actively involved in various aspects of public affairs. Yet, Graham and Hand make their own efforts toward the goal of rescuing democracy by educating citizens with what they call "skills of effective citizenship" (Graham & Hand, 2009, p.22).

In this book, they focus on the practical strategies of citizen participation rather than its abstract theories. To make the book more helpful for real-life practices of citizen participation, each chapter starts with detailed case descriptions of various citizen-involvement activities, and ends with checklists of steps and strategies. This book not only can benefit citizens who are actively involved in public affairs and who may have already encountered challenges in their interaction with government, it also can benefit college students who are learning how to effectively play their civic roles. Rich in cases of citizen participation, this book can be used as a general textbook for undergraduate-level classes and a case-study book for MPA introductory-level, civics-oriented classes.

Bob Graham, the first author of the book, has 38 years of working experience in the public sector, garnered from serving as the Governor of

Florida for two terms, and in the U.S. Senate for three terms. After retiring from public office, he spent two years at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government as a research fellow. His experiences at Harvard and at Miami Carol City High School, where he was a civics teacher, fueled his passion for citizen participation and inspired him to "produce new generations of engaged citizens" (Graham & Hand, 2009, p.23). As a former public servant, he observed that citizens, even the highly educated ones, might still lack basic skills to effectively participate in public affairs. Later, his experiences as an educator enhanced his belief that academic institutions need to assume the role of preparing students to engage in all aspects of the democratic process—not just voting. The book's coauthor, Chris Hand, also was quite dedicated to public service and served as a press secretary, speech writer, and financial officer, and he is currently working as an attorney in Jacksonville, Florida. In sum, the richness of both authors' work experiences in government enables them to shed light on what is missing and what can be accomplished through effective citizen participation.

#### TARGETED READERS AND HOW TEACHERS CAN USE THE BOOK

Like many civics books, this one expresses a grave concern about the gradual decrease in civic participation and calls for more attention to be paid to deteriorating "civic health" in the United States. But unlike many profound, theoretical books, two public administration practitioners wrote this book with the goal of informing citizens via a step-by-step guide about how to interact directly with the government, express their concerns, and make government work for them.

This book is a valuable resource for plenty of undergraduate civics classes and MPA civic-oriented classes such as citizen participation classes, civic leadership courses, community building and development classes, and community conflict resolution courses. This book provides vivid examples that may help instructors overcome the difficulty of explaining some abstract democratic concepts, values, and processes. Instructors could select examples from the book for case studies or use these detailed cases to explain and illustrate the complexities of the political world. This way, students may more easily understand which government agency they should talk to regarding specific issues, and what procedures they should follow for solving a particular situation. Exercises at the end of each chapter also could be employed for in-class discussion or assignments. This book also is written for citizens who want to learn tips and strategic steps for dealing with government agencies or other institutions in order to solve problems that range from potholes to community safety issues. Each chapter ends with a practice summary checklist, which provides a comprehensive overview of the steps needed for effective citizen participation, thus making it easier for citizens to apply various strategies to actual scenarios.

## CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

Each of the book's 10 chapters starts with a real-life case description, culled from a variety of typical issues that include conflicting interests when building roads or schools, skyrocketing insurance rates due to hurricanes, and problems arising from drunk driving. Through each chapter's case, the authors highlight one important component of effective citizen participation. Chapter topics include "defining the problem," "gathering the facts," "identifying the right level of agency," "determining public opinion and building public support," "persuading decision makers," "making a time schedule," "engaging the media," "gaining financial support," and "learning from victory as well as defeat" (Graham & Hand, 2009, pp. ix-xiv, p. xvi). In fact, these 10 chapters center on one major theme of how to mobilize available resources (public support, possible coalitions, media attention, and financial resources) so that one's problems become more visible in the public domain and get addressed by the proper government agency or involved institutions.

### *Knowing the Situation Better*

The first three chapters discuss (a) defining problems or concerns, (b) collecting reliable data, and (c) identifying the relevant agencies. Stated simply, these three chapters advise citizens on how to understand the situation better before they directly interact with a government agency. These three aspects may appear to be obvious, but that interpretation is deceptive. In reality, many citizens make all kinds of mistakes at the beginning of their interactions with government agencies (e.g., expressing concerns that are too vague, identifying the wrong agency, etc.). The authors maintain that problem-solving only occurs when citizens can make their concerns specific, clear and attention-grabbing. They offer specific steps to achieve this goal, such as (a) defining the problem in a concrete context and focusing on the issue, (b) defining the problems in "political terms" and "public terms," and (c) making the concerns as visible as possible (Graham & Hand, 2009, p.39). In Chapter 2 they discuss the importance and the approaches of utilizing the media (newsletters, magazines, the Internet, etc.) and using multiple sources of information to collect reliable data. With the problem clearly stated and with credible data collected, Chapter 3 articulates the next step of identifying which level of government and which specific agency is responsible for dealing with the problem. While many public administration courses (such as policy analysis) emphasize the *importance* of identifying and defining a problem, the first three chapters of this book explain in depth *how* to define a problem that involves government affairs.

### *Resources, Resources, Resources*

The foci of Chapters 4 to 9 can be synthesized into three simple words, "People," "Money," and "Time," in a section that covers the most significant

factors of successful citizen participation. Chapters 4, 5, 7, and 8 present suggestions for (a) achieving broader public support, (b) influencing decision-makers' opinions, (c) forming and sustaining coalitions, and (d) gaining media attention for the situation. In Chapter 5, the authors offer 16 pages of practical tips on how to build positive relationships with decision-makers, such as knowing about them before a meeting, respecting staff members, grasping opportunities to meet decision-makers in person, and talking to the right people. All suggestions made in the book could serve as a reference for those having difficulty establishing relationships with decision makers. These micro-level suggestions differ from the many macro-level suggestions proposed in classic public administration books, because they target the actual interaction process with decision makers. Chapter 7 introduces a model for building effective alliances with a case where the goal was to protest drug transactions in a neighborhood, and where local residents started to build coalitions through protest marching, attracting stakeholders, and developing relationships with police. Graham and Hand recommend that citizens (a) clearly define their questions in order to gain support from larger groups of people, and (b) maintain those relationships through meetings, gatherings, or other group activities. When engaging the media, they note the advantages and disadvantages of each type of medium, and suggest that citizens should first choose the proper forms of media, and then establish benign relationships with journalists. In other words, TV may not always be the best choice to cover the story, because TV has strengths in coverage breadth, but often lacks depth and detail.

Timing is another crucial factor that determines the success of citizen participation. Chapter 6 is devoted to reminding citizens that government has many inflexible deadlines due to legislative sessions, elections, and the fiscal year. Hence, citizens should avoid handing in last-minute reports or requests and instead make timely plans. Money or financial support is another inevitable topic of citizen engagement. In Chapter 9, the authors maintain that citizens should make smart budget plans at the beginning of their quests, and collect money within legal and ethical boundaries. The discussion on timing and financial support may seem intuitive, but without a good time schedule and sufficient financial support, effective citizen participation is easier said than done.

The last chapter outlines actions that help people learn from mistakes and successes. The authors conclude that, when one succeeds, it is of utter importance to establish a relationship with one's opponents, and to develop long-term plans or foresight. Conversely, when one fails, they say it is necessary to seek opportunities for the future, figure out the reasons for failure, and prepare for the next round. They also note that, regardless of a win or loss, it is always important to express appreciation and end a campaign pleasantly.

#### STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The overall strength of this book rests in its detailed narratives of real-life cases and its systematic, step-by-step advice for effective citizenship. It provides concrete examples of how citizens can utilize resources to solve real-life problems, and presents detailed steps to follow for achieving their goals. This book also is user-friendly for a wide range of readers. All suggestions and strategic steps for practicing citizen participation are straightforward, easy to follow, and made without profound constructs and theories. Moreover, the authors provide a convenient checklist at the end of each chapter to remind readers what could or should be done. Overall, the book qualifies as (a) a resourceful field guide for citizen participation, (b) a supplemental book for a theoretical civics course, and (c) a textbook for courses in community building and development, civic leadership, or community conflict resolution.

This book has some limitations. Because it is broadly written for educational institutions that want to cultivate citizenship, it would be helpful to include a richer sample of cases directly related to campus life, such as cases on tuition hikes or dormitory life. The sample cases chosen in this book also assign too much weight to those that involve conflicting interests of land use or urban development.

Another weakness comes from the structure of the book. Although each chapter is well-structured and consists of (a) a case description, (b) discussion on the strategies and lessons learned from the case, and (c) concrete steps to follow when confronted with similar circumstances, the connections between these 10 chapters seem somewhat weak. Ties linking the 10 topics covered (one per chapter) could have been enhanced by common themes, such as financial support, people's support, or a time schedule. For example, the first three chapters could be organized as one big chapter with a focus on identifying the problem and agency. To connect the chapters more tightly, the authors could have considered highlighting only some aspects of these steps, rather than discussing each one in equal length.

#### CONCLUSION

Overall, this book differs greatly from other civics books due to its foci on very practical strategies and detailed guidance for citizens to effectively engage in the democratic processes — something that is needed for a public administration program with emphases in both theory and praxis. Compared to many public administration books that discuss citizen-participation issues in a theoretic manner, this book's approach is fresh, and it successfully fills a common gap by linking the theoretical world to real-life practices of civic engagement. As former South Carolina Governor Richard W. Riley commented, it “provides a road-map — a how-to guide — to help each of us do a better job of making our democracy work for all people” (Graham & Hand, 2009, back cover).

REFERENCES

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Qian Hu is a Ph.D. candidate in public administration at Arizona State University's School of Public Affairs. Her research interests include public administration theory, and science and technology policy. She currently is conducting research on the applications of virtual reality technology to the urban planning field. She has published in *American Behavioral Scientist* and *Journal of Nanoparticle Research*.