



Citizen Participation in Local Government Volunteer Boards and Commissions

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Appointed Public Volunteer Boards – Initial Survey Results

The past two decades have seen an increased interest in engaging citizens in local government administration. While much of the focus has been on why citizens should be involved (King, et al., 1998; King, 2011) or new methods of involving citizens in local government, some traditional methods have yet to be fully explored. One traditional form of engagement on which we need additional information is appointed public volunteer boards (APVB).

This study reviews survey results from 13 Metropolitan Statistical Areas and 17 states to highlight differences across states and describe how local governments use APVB. The survey collected data from 297 local governments and provides information on 1,988 appointed public volunteer boards and 12,031 board members. The result is a fuller understanding of how citizens are engaged through this extremely common mechanism.

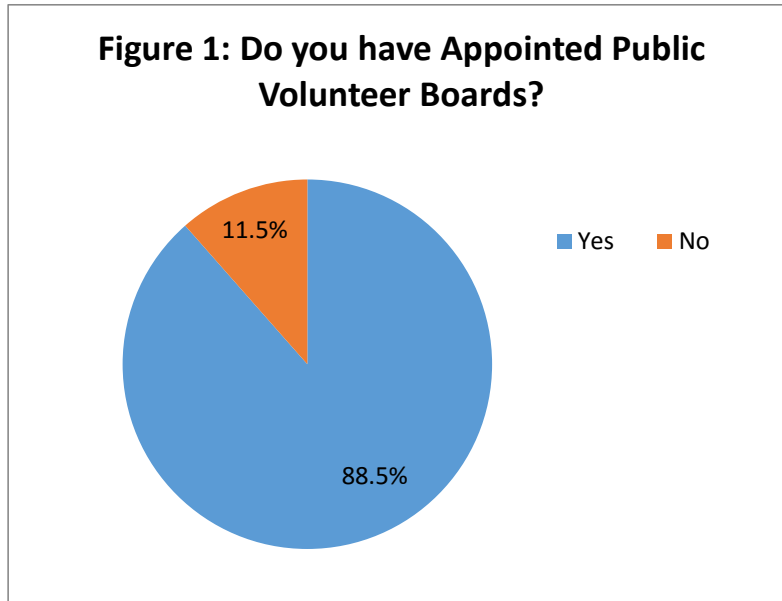
How Common Are They?

Our first order of business is to identify the prevalence of boards in local government. The 297 local governments that responded to the survey provided information on 1,988 appointed public volunteer boards and 12,031 board members. Extrapolated to the approximately 36,000 towns and municipalities in the United States, an estimated 240,000 APVB with approximately 1,450,000 board members are operating at the local government level. By comparison, approximately 80-90 million citizens vote in non-presidential election years and 262,000 residents serve as municipal or town elected officials (United States Election Assistance Commission, 2015; Lawless, 2011). These findings place the level of citizen participation

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through appointed volunteer public boards squarely between the two most common formal means of citizen participation, voting and serving as an elected official.

When asked whether their local government makes use of APVB, 88.5% of municipalities indicated in the affirmative (Figure 1).

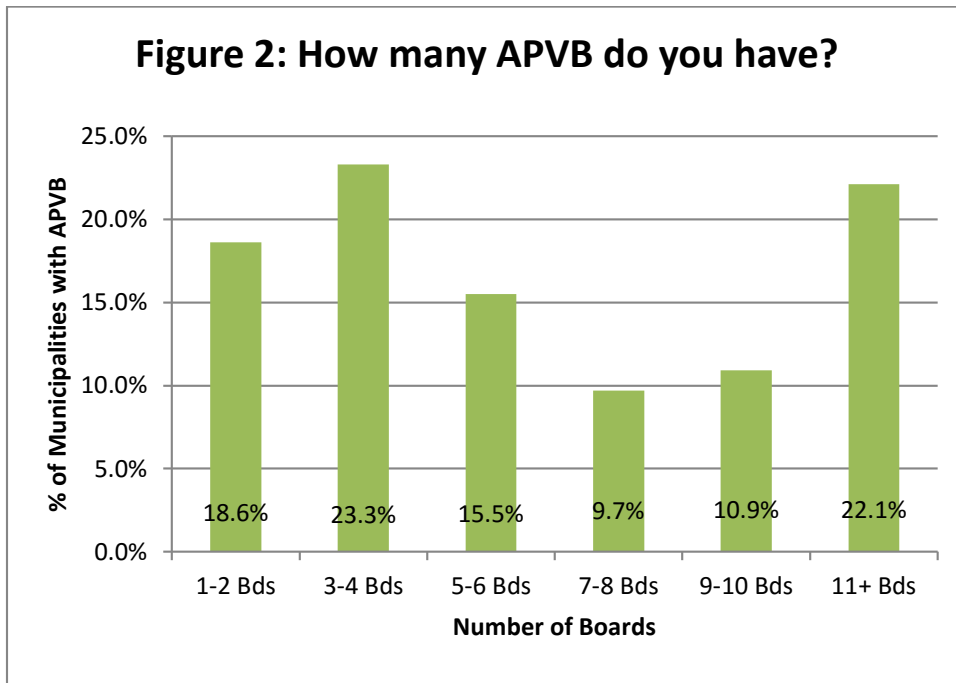


Given their prevalence, one would expect municipalities to create boards for a wide variety of purposes. In fact, Table 1 shows that APVB are used for almost all aspects of local government policy. The most common type of board concerns basic municipal services, such as Zoning and Planning (16.3% of all boards) and Parks and Recreation (9.8%). However, the finding that 44.2% of APVB concern other areas of local government is a testament to the wide variety of areas where local governments engage citizens.

	Frequency	Percent
Zoning & Planning	324	16.3%
Parks & Recreation	195	9.8%
Economic Development	139	7.0%
Historical	76	3.8%
Tax/Assessment	75	3.8%
UCC/Code Appeals	66	3.3%
Public Safety (Police, Fire, EMS)	66	3.3%
Environment	61	3.1%
Library	55	2.8%
Housing	52	2.6%
Other	879	44.2%
Total	1988	100.0%

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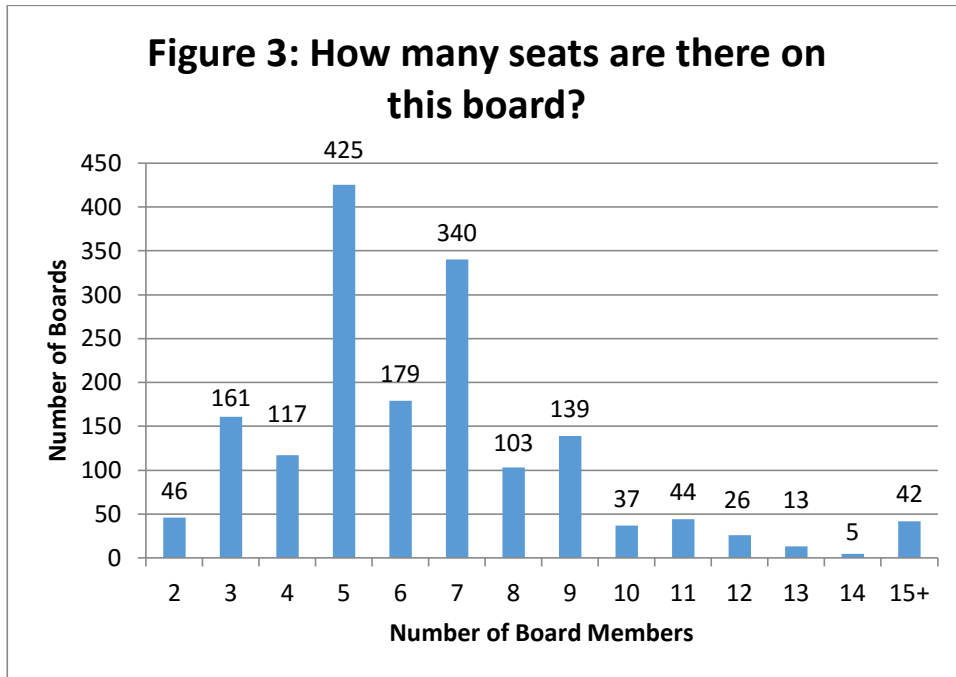
Municipalities with boards were also asked to identify how many APVB exist in their jurisdiction. The number of boards in local governments ranged from one to 50 (See Figure 2). The average number of boards per municipality is approximately 8, the median number of boards is five with a mode of three boards. The average of eight boards per municipality is skewed by a small number of governments with a high number of APVB. Approximately 8.1% of municipalities (and 50% of municipalities in Massachusetts!) reported having 19+ boards. It is notable that only 8.9% of local governments with boards have only one board. In other words, the vast majority (91.1%) of municipalities that use boards have at least two APVB.



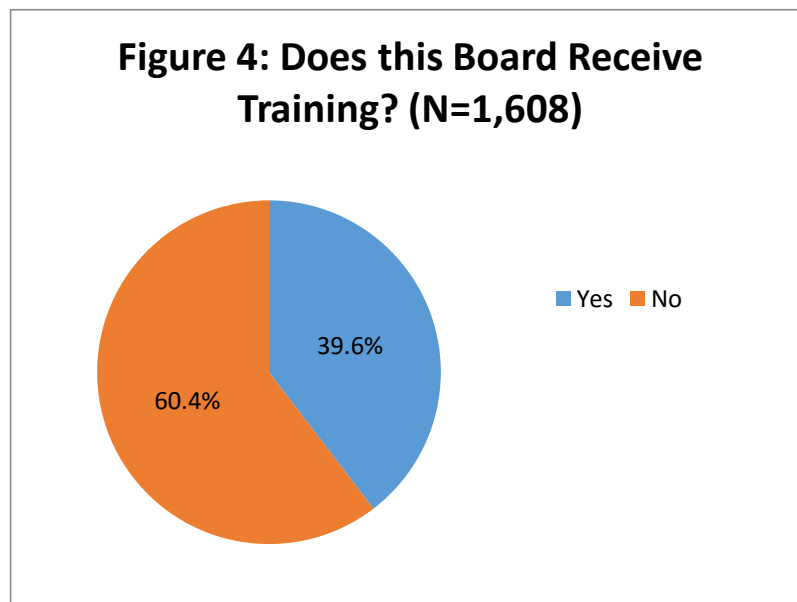
Basic Board Operations

Board size is a basic descriptive element of board operations that has not been widely reported in the past. Respondents reported having boards that ranged in size from one member to 38 members with a median and mode of five board members. Figure 3 shows that of 1,690 boards in the sample, 90% have nine or fewer members and approximately 65% of APVB have an odd number of members, presumably to reduce the occurrence of ties when voting in meetings.

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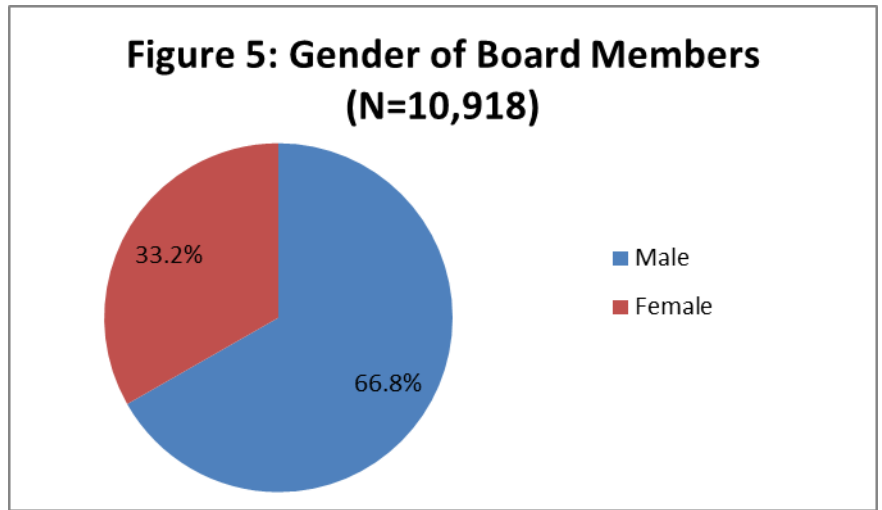
In theory, one would expect local governments to provide board members with the basic resources needed to be effective in providing policy advice to elected officials and staff. Training on board responsibilities and operations is one of those basic resources. However, municipal officials indicated that fewer than 40% of boards received any training at all (Figure 4).



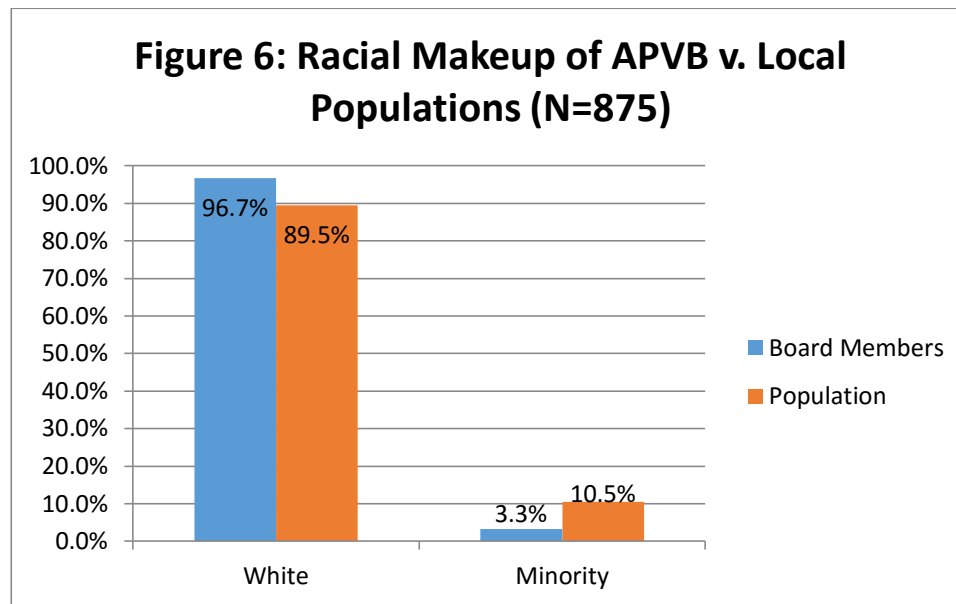
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Are Boards Representative?

U.S. Census data show that 49.2% of the citizens in municipalities that responded to the survey are male. Racial makeup data from the U.S. Census also shows those same communities are 89.0% white. However, board membership in the sample heavily favored men and was overwhelmingly white. Figure 5 shows that gender information was provided for 10,918 board members with 7,288 (66.8%) identified as male and 3,630 female.



Over 96% of the 7,946 board members for which race data was provided were white (See Figure 6) with 3% identified as black and 1% of another minority race. It is apparent that women and minority members of the community are under-represented on APVB.



Summary

The survey results presented here are a first step to understanding the role of volunteer citizen boards in local government. Further efforts, including case studies, interviews, and additional surveys are necessary to improving the study and practice of engaging citizens through APVB.