Why Citizens Do and Do Not Attend Public Meetings about Local Cancer Cluster Investigations

Katherine A. McComas, John C. Besley, and Craig W. Trumbo

Why do citizens choose to attend or not to attend community public meetings about possible cancer clusters? To answer this question, we examine self-report data collected during a series of mail surveys conducted in six communities experiencing current health investigations into suspect levels of cancer or cancer clusters. We analyze the data using quantitative content analysis while also providing qualitative summaries and categorizations of survey participants’ reasons for attending or not attending a specific public meeting in their community. In addition, we use survey data related to respondents’ past participation and sociodemographic characteristics. The results found that rational reasons (e.g., to get information) dominated citizens’ justifications for attending the public meetings, whereas socioeconomic and mobilization factors (e.g., did not hear about meeting, too busy) were most commonly cited as reasons for not attending. Less common but still present were relational considerations, such as believing the people in charge were fair. Taken together, the findings suggest that the majority of citizens who attended the public meetings could be categorized as the curious, the fearful, and the available. In comparison, the majority of citizens who did not attend could be described as the uninformed, the indifferent, the occupied, and the disaffected.

KEY WORDS: public meetings, public participation, cancer clusters, community involvement, representation

Introduction

Each year, research suggests that citizens grow alarmed enough to make over one thousand requests to state health departments to investigate suspect levels of cancer in their communities (Trumbo, 2000). Most of these initial inquiries are resolved without further investigation, whereas up to 30 percent can trigger formal investigations into the possibility of a cancer cluster (Greenberg & Wartenberg, 1991). Investigations into local cancer clusters almost always include some sort of risk communication effort with citizens (Greenberg & Wartenberg, 1991). Some of this risk communication occurs on an individual level, some in the mass media, and some in a community forum, such as a public meeting. Despite the compelling nature of a potential cancer cluster as a meeting topic, some public meetings attract few community members, while other public meetings draw large crowds. While low attendance may seem to indicate low interest, the reality is likely more
complex, as Heberlein (1976) suggested three decades ago in his assessment of environmental public hearings (a type of public meeting):

The individual who believes the issue affects him, has knowledge of the time and location of the hearing, is free from competing demands, views himself in a responsible role, is knowledgeable about the project and believes his presence will have an impact will be likely to attend a hearing. (p. 201)

Understanding the reasons why people opt to attend or not to attend public meetings about local cancer clusters is the focus of this article. By examining this question, we seek to gain insight on a wider problem vexing public participation efforts, namely, the challenge of representativeness. In terms of public meetings, representativeness can be defined as the degree to which people who attend a given public meeting represent or share similar characteristics (e.g., demographics, attitudes, values, opinions) with people who do not attend yet who still have some type of stake in the issue (e.g., live in the affected area). Although people who conduct public meetings are not legally required to ensure the representativeness of attendees, several compelling reasons suggest why they should value representativeness. From a normative sense, representation is considered vital to the functioning of a healthy democracy by helping to ensure that people can have a voice in decisions that affect them (Fiorino, 1990). From a substantive sense, while serving democratic principles, having a representative sample of stakeholder input can ensure the accuracy of risk characterizations (Stern & Fineberg, 1996). In addition, having an audience representative of key stakeholder groups can assist risk communication efforts by helping to relay information back to stakeholders not able to attend. Finally, research has shown that representativeness is a key criteria for evaluating fairness in decision making (Leventhal, 1980; Renn, Webler, & Kastenholz, 1996; Renn, Webler, & Wiedemann, 1995). If attendees are unrepresentative of a wider population, people may view the meetings as unfair, which can undermine the perceived legitimacy of the process, as well as trust in the authorities.

A handful of studies have examined representativeness at public meetings. These studies typically compare survey responses of public meeting attendees to nonattendees to determine whether attendees resembled nonattendees on a host of demographic or attitudinal questions (Gundry & Heberlein, 1984; Johnson, Johnson, Edwards, & Wheaton, 1993; McComas, 2001). Although these studies provide a useful understanding of patterns in attendance, to our knowledge, no systematic study has investigated why people do or do not attend public meetings in the first place. Along these lines, understanding why people do and do not attend public meetings provides a useful first step toward determining interventions to enhance their representativeness.

In addition, we believe that analyzing citizens’ own reasons for attending or not attending public meetings about local cancer clusters can also complement existing political science research aimed at investigating why people engage in public participation. In general, most research on public participation in the
United States has focused on predicting engagement based on individual resources such as socioeconomic status, cognitive factors such as efficacy, trust, and knowledge (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Putnam 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 2000) or exploring the relative influence of various forms of participation on citizen attitudes toward specific issues or authorities (Baker, Addams, & Davis, 2005; Beierle & Cayford, 2002). These research paths provide an important foundation for the current study. Rather than relying on potential predictors of attendance, however, this study uses open-ended, self-report data collected during a survey of six communities, where formal investigations into local cancer rates were taking place and public health officials were using community public meetings to communicate with area residents.

Background on Public Meetings

We use the term “public meeting” broadly to describe any organized, social gathering of three or more people that is open to anyone to attend. This definition includes public hearings, which are often legally required public meetings. Although public meetings are often associated with government agency initiatives, anyone can organize a public meeting, such as religious organizations, citizens’ groups, and neighborhood associations. Accordingly, public meetings serve many purposes, both formal and informal. Some serve multiple purposes, such as when the people attending the meeting have different objectives than the people conducting the meeting.

Most government agencies must follow legal procedures for informing people and allowing them to comment on projects that could have a significant impact on their lives. Often, agencies meet these requirements by holding public meetings. Among the benefits of public meetings are their openness to any member of the public; therefore, agencies can presumably reach a wide audience with key information while simultaneously accessing a varied range of knowledge and experience among meeting attendees. Among the drawbacks are the sometimes limited nature of public participation at public meetings, which can frustrate attendees seeking a greater role in decision-making process. Indeed, poor communication leading up to public meetings can mean that attendees’ expectations are out of sync with organizers’ objectives.

Early on, observers began to question the legitimacy of many public meetings as methods of public participation. Heberlein (1976), for instance, suggested that government agencies often used them to co-opt citizens by allowing them to “let off steam and complain about the project” (p. 200) while denying them the future right to claim their views were not sought. Others have suggested similar uses of public meetings, among them Checkoway (1981) who argued that agencies frequently held public meetings to build support for agency plans, diffuse antagonism, or legitimate decisions that were already made. Berry, Portney, Bablitch, and Mahoney (1997) provided the following summary:
If an agency wanted to insulate itself from the influence of citizen groups and wanted to insure that its policies would undergo as little change as possible, it would be much better relying on public hearings to meet its citizen participation mandate. (p. 17)

Examining public meetings in light of Arnstein’s (1969) public participation continuum, which ranges from citizen control to outright manipulation, most public meetings would likely fall in the mid-range and be considered informative or consultative. Informative meetings are held primarily to provide information to audiences, such as via the use of technical presentations to disseminate health risk statistics. Consultative meetings have informative aspects but also emphasize gathering citizen input on proposed projects or ongoing investigations. Neither of these meetings requires agencies to act on citizen input, much less vet their final decisions before making them. Consequently, few agency-sponsored public meetings would embody what Arnstein and others, such as Fiorino (1990), might view as ideal participation, which involves (among other things) true partnerships and/or shared decision making between citizens and decision makers. In defense of public meetings and the agencies who conduct them, not all public meetings are held for decision-making purposes. This does not mean that they have no place in the public participation “tool box,” but it does entail recognizing that public meetings have some important limitations, among them their poor reputation.

On the other hand, some studies have suggested that public meetings can have positive impacts, both on decisions and on participants, although this literature has not tended to include opinions of attendees (Cole & Caputo, 1984; Kihl, 1985). One exception is a more recent study that included interviews with 55 citizens who participated in local civic meetings (e.g., school board, city council) in Santa Ana, California (Adams, 2004). In contrast to arguments about the futility of public meetings, this study found that people who attended public meetings considered them useful forums for voicing their opinions and influencing the political agenda.

Despite the conflicting opinions on their worth, public meetings remain a “workhorse” of public participation for government agencies. One lingering question is whether citizens hold some of the same views of public meetings as their critics and how this might impact their willingness to attend. If, for instance, citizens view their role as mere “tokenism” (Arnstein, 1969), they may be unwilling to exert the effort. Others may still attend yet come ready to battle to ensure their voices are heard. To examine these issues more fully, the next section reviews research examining citizen participation in political activities in general, linking it to relevant research on public meetings wherever possible.2

Why Do People Participate?

Rational Incentives

It is important to consider that people may have very practical or rational reasons for attending public meetings. They may attend out of curiosity or
concern, or they may choose not to attend because they are busy. Some may attend to provide input to public officials. While much has been made about the degree to which participation in civic life is rational (Downs, 1957; Leighley, 1991; Olson, 1965; Whitely, 1995), we believe that some citizens seem likely to provide rational explanations when asked why they did or did not attend the meetings. Some of these reasons may be relatively mundane (“wanted to hear what the authorities had to say”) while others might suggest motives that fall under the rubric of seeking selective or collective incentives (Finkel, 2000; Opp, 1989). For example, without necessarily seeking individual benefits, some people may attend public meetings because of the opportunity to criticize elected officials, show support for particular policies, or offer support to other community members (Adams, 2004). In a similar manner, Checkoway (1981) counseled citizens to use public meetings to air grievances and build community solidarity rather than attempt to influence policy.

Given the ongoing debate about what constitutes rationality in civic life, we make no attempt to fully define what constitutes rational citizen behavior vis-à-vis public meetings. Instead, we use the term “rational” to describe when people say that they attend public meetings for the practical purpose of seeking specific goals or objectives (e.g., acquire information, provide input). It is also likely that citizens actively weigh the costs of attendance (e.g., missing work, input not having an impact) against the benefits (e.g., new information, exercising civic rights); when the costs outweigh the benefits, they have less incentive to attend (Whitely, 1995).

An additional component of rationality is the degree to which people actually feel threatened by the issue at hand. Namely, greater concern can increase people’s need to seek information and potentially ease their fear. Concern about risk, inasmuch as such concern is used to justify attending a public meeting, is consequently also considered a rational reason for attendance. Along these lines, research has shown that people with higher levels of concern about a specific topic are more likely to attend public meetings about that topic (Gundry & Heberlein, 1984; McComas, 2003b; McComas & Scherer, 1998). This fits well with information-seeking theories, such as Grunig’s situational theory of publics (Grunig, 1983; Grunig & Repper, 1992), which argues that information-seeking behaviors depend on problem recognition, constraint recognition (similar to self-efficacy), and level of involvement. According to the situational theory of publics, high problem recognition, low constraint recognition, and high involvement encourage active information-seeking behaviors, such as attending public meetings.

Attending out of curiosity or simply to hear what the authorities or other citizens have to say are other very rational explanations for attending. One study found that 77 percent of the people attending a public meeting about a local landfill were interested in listening to the authorities’ technical presentations about the landfill (McComas, 2003c). Another study found that people believed public meetings were a good way to learn how other people in their community felt about the issue (McComas, 2003a).

The timing in the decision-making process may also very reasonably influence decisions to attend public meetings. If the meeting is early in the process, its topic
may not be salient enough to motivate people to attend. For example, Renz (1992) examined public meeting attendance during the siting of an incinerator and found that early in the siting process, meetings had very low attendance; however, attendance grew substantially when the incinerator’s construction seemed imminent. On the other hand, if the meeting occurs late in the decision-making process, people may not attend because they believe that the decisions have already been made and, therefore, their input will not matter. People may also choose not to attend meetings that occur late in the process because of “participant fatigue” brought on by several months, or even years, of attending public meetings and thinking about these issues.

At some point, the costs of participation may appear to outweigh the benefits. Early on, rational actor researchers identified the collective-action problem (Olson, 1965), which can arise when participation for the common good outweighs the benefits accrued to any individual. In response, scholars have denoted a “paradox of participation” as occurring when individuals participate even when the probability of their influencing the outcomes is minor to nonexistent (Leighley, 1991; Whitely, 1995). Because the collective action problem is most relevant for large-scale participation activities, such as voting in a national election, some question exists about the degree to which it applies to community public meetings, where the influence of any one individual is greater. Even so, some participation scholars have suggested that having opportunity to voice grievances or receive information at public meetings may help defray participation costs, as might offering refreshments or cash incentives to attend (Renn et al., 1995).

Socioeconomic Status and Mobilization Incentives

As a means of predicting public participation in political activities, resource-oriented scholars, such as Verba and his collaborators, have highlighted individual-level factors, such as socioeconomic status (SES) and political efficacy. In general, this research has found that people most likely to participate are those who have the greatest capacity to participate because of levels of education and relevant political experience, and those who believe that they can make a difference (Almond & Verba, 1989; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). A related body of research looks at the mobilizing role of media use, interpersonal discussion, and knowledge in fostering citizen engagement (McLeod et al., 1999; Norris, 2000; Shah, 1998; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001), suggesting that people who pay more attention to political news and engage more often in political discussion are more likely to participate.

While key to understanding structural constraints on participation, SES and mobilization models have often been necessarily abstract in their focus on the overall picture of the individual. In this regard, such research has primarily relied on large-scale surveys to examine the statistical relationship between a package of attributes and the individual’s participatory behavior. In addition, much of the research examining SES or mobilization incentives tends to focus more on traditional acts of political engagement, like voting, than on nonelectoral political
activities, such as attending a community public meeting. Still, this research raises some important considerations for public meeting attendance, such as how an individual’s social and economic circumstances, as well as the context of the meeting, may influence their attendance.

Along these lines, studies of specific public meetings have shown no clear socioeconomic patterns when comparing attendees to nonattendees. Sometimes attendees have similar incomes and education; other times they do not (Gundry & Heberlein, 1984; McComas & Scherer, 1998; Sinclair, 1977). A more consistent finding is that attendees of public meetings about local health risk are often more likely to have children under the age of 18 living at home (McComas, 2003b), which may make the topic more salient to them. On the other hand, having young children at home or other family duties may also impede someone’s ability to attend public meetings, such as when child care is unavailable (Bryan, 2004). Other socioeconomic factors that may affect meeting attendance include an individual’s health, age, access to transportation, and occupation.

Relational Incentives

A third body of research focuses on explaining participation based on citizens’ experiences with authorities and their decision-making procedures. We characterize these as relational incentives because they are grounded in the relational model of procedural justice (Tyler, 1989, 1994, 2000; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Procedural justice argues that people care about the fairness of the decision-making procedures (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Early research suggested that their fairness evaluations were strongly related to their control over the process (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Subsequent research found that people valued other factors related to the enactment of the procedures, including the perceived trustworthiness and neutrality of authorities, and the degree to which they were treated with respect (Tyler, 1989; Tyler & Lind, 1992; Tyler, Degoey, & Smith, 1996b). These relational judgments, in turn, contribute to the perceived fairness of the process.

Research has shown that perceived procedural fairness can influence a host of outcome variables, such as satisfaction with the procedures (Thibaut & Walker, 1975) and the authorities in charge of the procedures (Colquitt, 2001; Lauber & Knuth, 1997; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), and willingness to accept the outcomes (Tyler, 1994; Weiner, Alexander, & Shortell, 2002). Consequences of perceiving a process as unfair include reduced organizational commitment (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Fuller & Hester, 2001; McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992) and decreased volunteering on the organization’s behalf (Colquitt et al., 2001; Tyler, Degoey, & Smith, 1996).

We believe that relational explanations can provide an important link between predictors of participation and participation’s outcomes. More specifically, procedural justice suggests that any attempt to discuss the effects of participation should begin by assessing participants’ perceptions of the process, including fairness evaluations of the authorities in charge. Scholars have recognized the importance of fairness in public participation processes. For example, research has offered
evidence that the perceived fairness of public participation procedures can influence the audience’s satisfaction with the process (Lauber & Knuth, 1997, 1999; McComas, 2003a; Renn et al., 1995; Smith & McDonough, 2001; Webler & Tuler, 2000) and acceptance of the outcomes (Arvai, 2003). Others have argued that increased attention to fairness is essential to efforts seeking to rebuild trust in society’s systems of risk management (Lofstedt, 2005). Particular to public meetings, research has shown that even when people have never attended a meeting, they still value qualities of public meetings that suggest fairness criteria, such as meeting organizers’ openness to alternative viewpoints and willingness to respond to citizen viewpoints (McComas, 2003a).

Research Questions

The literature reviewed above suggests several possible explanations behind citizen choices to attend public meetings about potential cancer clusters. To examine which explanations would appear most frequently, and how explanations would be associated, we posed some general research questions (RQ):

RQ1: When asked why they attended the most recent public meeting about cancer rates in their community, what are respondents’ (who attended this meeting) most common responses?

RQ2: What are the associations among reasons for attending the public meeting, including demographics and previous meeting attendance?

RQ3: When asked why they did not attend this public meeting, what are respondents’ (who did not attend this meeting) most common responses?

RQ4: What are the associations among reasons for not attending the public meeting?

In addition, although the discussion of rational, SES or mobilization, and relational incentives does not specifically address regional variations, the structure of the data described below necessitates consideration of contextual factors. Although it does not lie at the heart of the analyses, the following research question is also therefore proposed:

RQ5: How do responses differ among communities?

Methods

Data Collection

Data were drawn from survey research conducted in six communities where public health agencies were actively communicating with community members about local cancer rates through the use of public meetings. We identified the communities using the Newsbank and Lexis-Nexis databases and then contacted public health officials and community groups to learn of upcoming public meet-
ings. We also regularly monitored health department and citizen group websites for upcoming meeting announcements. Once we learned of an upcoming event, we negotiated access to meeting sign-in sheets (for meeting attendee mailing lists), arranged background interviews, and collected all available news content relevant to the site. One of the authors then attended each meeting to observe and to collect the sign-in sheets.

Immediately following each community's public meeting, we mailed questionnaires to a random sample of approximately 500 community residents ("non-attendees") as well as to people ("attendees") listed on the sign-in sheets. Because each community was focusing on a different cancer risk profile, the size of the populations from which the sample was drawn varies. In several communities, we drew essentially a census of the residents living within an impacted area, whereas in others, we sampled a larger population. Table 1 summarizes relevant characteristics of each cluster investigation included in this study. Rather than providing a representative picture of each community, the primary goal was to enable a comparison of attendees and nonattendees. Although we do not believe that these communities are uncharacteristic of communities facing similar cancer cluster investigations in the United States, we also do not maintain that they should be considered a representative sample of such communities. More generally, each community faced uncertainty about whether health concerns were a statistical anomaly or related to some unknown environmental factor. Also, even though each community was at a different point in its health investigation, the underlying health concerns had existed for several years.

We also do not maintain that these public meetings are representative of all public meetings held during cancer cluster investigations. Within our study, we endeavored to keep some aspects constant among the meetings sampled. Specifically, for inclusion in our study, the public meeting needed to include some public health authority presenting either evidence about the status of the ongoing investigation or information related to area residents' health concerns about area cancer rates. As Table 1 indicates, most of these meetings used traditional public meeting formats, with an audience seated facing a speaker or speakers and which began with a formal presentation followed by audience questions and comments. Some meetings used an availability or "open house" format prior to the traditional public meeting. As noted earlier, the investigations in each of these communities had been occurring for some period of time, and the content of the public meetings was primarily centered on updating the status of ongoing investigations rather than presenting definitive evidence related to the cancer cluster. All meetings included in this study were widely publicized on the sponsoring health agencies' websites and in local newspapers (online and print). Many of the communities had active advocacy groups who also posted public meeting notices on their websites.

Following Dillman's (2000) tailored design method, we sent attendees and nonattendees the same questionnaire with a letter inviting their participation, followed by a reminder postcard, and then an additional questionnaire and letter. Each community also received the same questionnaire with some minor
Table 1. Community Profiles and Response Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community, Meeting Date, and Respondent Breakdown</th>
<th>Overall Response Rate</th>
<th>Nature of Cancer Cluster and Public Meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plant City, FL</strong></td>
<td>11.6% (61.5% for attendees)</td>
<td>In Plant City, public health officials were exploring whether pollution from the Coronet industrial site had caused an increased cancer risk. At the meeting included in this study, state health officials presented research on the ongoing investigation into possible health effects. Concern did not focus on any specific type of cancer; however, initial epidemiological research suggested some types were occurring more than would be statistically expected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 13, 2004 Attendees (N = 8) Nonattendees (N = 56)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Granada Hills, CA</strong></td>
<td>25.4% (88.9% for attendees)</td>
<td>In Granada Hills, the health investigation focuses around the Sunshine Canyon Landfill, a large landfill in the northern section of the San Fernando Valley. The meeting included in this study focused on a presentation of the results of an initial health survey by Los Angeles County officials in the area near the landfill. Concern did not focus on any specific type of cancer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 9, 2004 Attendees (N = 24) Nonattendees (N = 102)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Oakridge/Kingston, TN</strong></td>
<td>25.9% (86.2% for attendees)</td>
<td>The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) continues to study health effects in these neighboring communities, which sit adjacent to the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the Department of Energy’s primary research facility and a key center for nuclear research over the 50 years. The ATSDR sponsored the meetings included in this study, which were information sessions at which a prominent scientist discussed potential health effects. There is no one specific type of cancer concern in the communities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 18 and 19, 2005 Attendees (N = 25) Nonattendees (N = 103)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Southampton, MA</strong></td>
<td>30.0% (63.6% for attendees)</td>
<td>Concern in Southampton primarily focuses on the historical contamination of the Barnes Aquifer by trichloroethylene (TCE). At the public meeting included in this study, public health officials were the primary speakers; however, the meeting was actually hosted by a citizens’ group. There is no one type of cancer that residents are concerned about.</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 2, 2005 Attendees (N = 28) Nonattendees (N = 132)</td>
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personalization by community. From the design of our sample, we could identify who had attended the most recent public meeting; however, to identify attendees who did not sign in at the meeting but who received a questionnaire as part of the community sample, we also included a question asking whether the respondent had attended the most recent meeting. Even if they did not attend this most recent meeting, it is possible that some nonattendees had attended previous public meetings. To collect this data, we asked individuals whether they had ever attended any public meetings about cancer rates in their community; if they had, we requested them to write in how many meetings they had attended. We also asked whether they had attended public meetings on other subjects or had, in fact, never attended any public meetings. We next asked individuals to comment on why they did or did not attend the most recent public meeting about the local cancer investigations. People who attended the meetings were asked to write their “main reasons for attending.” People who did not attend were asked to write their “main reasons for not attending.” We provided blank lines in the questionnaire for people to write as many reasons as they wished.

Table 1 provides the overall response rates for each community, as well as the breakdown between meeting attendees and nonattendees. Our overall response rates ranged from a high of 30 percent in Southampton to a low of 12 percent in Plant City. Although the intent of our study is to examine patterns in responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community, Meeting Date, and Respondent Breakdown</th>
<th>Overall Response Rate (^a)</th>
<th>Nature of Cancer Cluster and Public Meeting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Endicott, NY</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>August 23 and 24, 2005</td>
<td>26.5% (75.8% for attendees)</td>
<td>Cancer concerns in Endicott are related to TCE pollution believed to have primarily originated with an IBM plant located in one area of the community. State health officials have reported slightly elevated levels of several forms of cancer, and investigations and remedial actions are ongoing. The meetings included in this study were an informational meeting followed by an availability session the next day. At the meetings, state health officials provided an update on the health investigation.</td>
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<td>Attendees (N = 50)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonattendees (N = 86)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>County of Marin, CA</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>August 25, 2005</td>
<td>24.7% (62.5% for attendees)</td>
<td>The meeting in Marin County was scheduled to review the results of several different projects seeking to better understand Marin County’s elevated breast cancer rates. Concerns about these rates are more than a decade old, but they continue to be the focus of substantial community and scientific attention.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attendees (N = 30)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Nonattendees (N = 103)</td>
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\(^a\)Adjusted for bad addresses.
and not generalize to the wider community, the results must be considered in light
of the possible bias introduced by low returns. We discuss the implications of the
low response rates more fully in the limitations section. In comparison, the
response rates were much more favorable among individuals who had attended
the public meetings with a high of 89 percent in Granada Hills and a low of 62
percent in Plant City.

Respondents were generally cooperative in writing comments. Specifically, 156
people (95 percent of attendees) wrote comments about why they attended and 539
(93 percent of nonattendees) wrote comments about why they did not attend for
a total of 695 comments drawn from six communities. Because many more people
did not attend public meetings, there were proportionately more comments on
deterrents than incentives for attending public meetings. Each respondent’s expla-
nation was treated as an independent unit of analysis.

We asked standard demographic questions of our respondents. The mean age
was 58 years (SD = 14.8), and the average number of years respondents reported
living in their communities was 28 (SD = 19.9). In addition, most of our respon-
dents were female, had at least some college experience, earned household
incomes between $50,000–$74,999, and had at least one minor child living at home.
When asked their ethnicity, 88 percent indicated White/Caucasian. When com-
paring demographic characteristics between attendees and nonattendees, we
found that only gender was significantly different, with men representing 60
percent of nonattendees but just 43 percent of attendees. The significance of this
relationship holds even if the Marin responses (a breast cancer-oriented meeting)
are excluded.

Development and Implementation of Coding Scheme

Two of US developed the coding scheme with the goal of producing a list of
categories that was parsimonious, complete, and relevant to the literature review.
The scheme includes categories designed to reflect the theoretical explanations for
participation described above. In this regard, we coded for (i) rational explana-
tions, (ii) SES/mobilization explanations, and (iii) relational explanations. For
example, rational explanations included codes such as “to get information from
authorities,” “to make comments or ask questions,” and “concerned about risk,”
which suggest that individuals sought specific goals through their attendance.
Other rational explanations for nonattendance, which suggested a weighing of
costs of attendance versus benefits, included “meeting did not seem relevant
because risks were of little or no concern.” In comparison, responses that included
comments related to having “poor health,” “low self-efficacy,” or being “too busy”
to attend because of work or family duties were coded as SES or mobilization
explanations. Also coded as SES or mobilization explanations were responses
indicating that the individual attended the public meeting “to offer expertise” or
to “support other citizens.” Finally, relational explanations made explicit reference
to the behavior of authorities, e.g., “believe that authorities are unfair or biased,”
as well as behavior of other attendees, e.g., “believe that other citizen behavior at
the meeting is inappropriate,” as factors considered when making decisions about whether or not to attend the public meeting. The full coding schema is available from the authors upon request.

We coded every comment using QDA Miner, a software that facilitates combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis, including the calculation of reliability statistics for multiple coders. Responses were often given more than one code, but none of the responses required more than three codes. While many content analyses report only percentage of agreement between coders, it is important to adjust for the possibility by chance, and several coefficients have been developed for such assessments (Krippendorf, 2004). The initial Krippendorf’s $\alpha$ averaged 0.78, somewhat above the recommended minimum of 0.70. This average is lower because of the inclusion of several infrequently used categories such as “to offer expertise” or “didn’t like public meetings.” After comparing reliability, we reviewed each discrepancy in coding and came to full agreement regarding the best coding. We based the analysis on these agreed-upon categorizations.

Results

RQ1: Reasons for Attending the Public Meeting

By far, “to get information from authorities” (60 percent) and “concern about risk” (36 percent) were the most common reasons given for attending public meetings (see Table 2). These are both very practical reasons and fit well with a rationalist approach to understanding participation. “To get information from other citizens” (five percent) and “to make comments or ask questions” (three percent) were other less frequently mentioned rational explanations.

With respect to SES or mobilization explanations, 5 percent of attendees mentioned going “to support other citizens,” 3 percent “to offer their expertise” to fellow citizens, and 1 percent said that they had “received an invitation.” As for relational explanations, 5 percent of attendees included a negative comment in their explanation, which suggested that they attended because they “believed that authorities are unfair or biased.” At first glance, this response seems contradictory; however, some quotes prove helpful. For example, one respondent from Granada Hills said that they attended because “[t]he way the notice was worded, I knew it was favorable to the dump, I wanted to see HOW BAD!” (emphasis theirs). Interestingly, several of the other negative relational explanations by attendees were also from Granada Hills, a relationship reflected in the positive correlation between the two variables (discussed below). A respondent from Oak Ridge also echoed such concerns saying that they attended the meeting “to find out whether the [Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry] has improved their attitude toward the public. They are always trying to convince us that it was impossible to get poisoned by emission from the [Oak Ridge National Laboratory].” Finally, a small number said that they attended because they were “required by work” (3 percent).
Table 2. Explanations for Public Meeting Attendance (N = 156)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>% Given</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Rational Correlations</th>
<th>SES/Mobilization Correlations</th>
<th>Relational Correlations</th>
<th>Community Correlations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rational explanations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get information from authorities</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>— To get information from other citizens (0.23)</td>
<td></td>
<td>— Previous meeting attendance (0.22)</td>
<td>— Endicott (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>— Concerned about risk (0.13)</td>
<td></td>
<td>— To offer expertise (0.08)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned about risk</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>— To get information from authorities (0.13)</td>
<td></td>
<td>— Female (0.10)</td>
<td>— Endicott (0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get information from other citizens</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>— To get information from authorities (0.23)</td>
<td></td>
<td>— Received an invitation (0.08)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make comments or ask questions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>— To offer expertise (0.17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>— White (–0.10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES/Mobilization explanations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To support others (Solidarity)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>— Received an invitation (0.25)</td>
<td>— Marin (0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received an invitation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>— Concerned about risk (0.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td>— To offer expertise (0.17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational explanations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>— To support others (0.25)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believed that authorities are unfair or</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>— Previous meeting attendance (0.29)</td>
<td>Granada Hills (0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biased</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marin (–0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other explanations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason unclear</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required by work</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Because comments can include more than one code, percentages total more than 100 percent.
*All correlations are significant at $p < 0.05$. 
RQ2: Correlations among Reasons for Attending the Public Meeting

Respondents’ reasons for attending the meetings were significantly correlated with a number of other variables. Those who stated that their goal was “to get information from authorities” were also more likely to say they wanted “to get information from other citizens” and that they were “concerned about risk” associated with living in their neighborhood or community. In addition, “to get information from authorities” was also positively correlated with previous meeting attendance and education. Attendees who were “concerned about risk” were also more likely to be female and to have “received an invitation” to attend the meeting.

People who said that they attended “to make comments or ask a question” about the investigation were more likely to have had previous meeting attendance. In an interesting twist, people who were more likely to “believe that authorities are unfair or biased” were also more likely to have records of previous meeting attendance. Solidarity, meaning the desire “to support other citizens” in the community, was positively associated with being “invited to attend” and a desire “to offer expertise” to fellow citizens.

RQ3: Reasons for Not Attending the Public Meeting

The third research question examined why respondents did not attend the most recent public meeting about the cancer cluster investigation. As with the reasons provided for attending, the stated reasons for not attending fall into a handful of categories that are consistent with existing research on participation (see Table 3). By far, SES or mobilization explanations dominated responses. For instance, 39 percent of nonattendees said that they “did not hear about the meeting.” Another 38 percent said that they were “busy.” The largest group of these respondents (21 percent) did not elaborate on the nature of the time conflict (“busy, no reason given”); however, 11 percent of nonattendees said that they were “busy because of work,” and another 6 percent said that they were “busy because of family duties or vacation,” which included lack of child care. “Poor health” was cited by about 6 percent, while smaller numbers pointed to “transportation difficulties” and “low self-efficacy,” which included such things as hearing and language limitations. Two percent said that they simply “forgot about the meeting.”

With regard to rational explanations, approximately 15 percent of nonattendees said that “the meeting did not seem relevant because the risks were of little or no concern,” and 6 percent said that they felt they could (or would) “get equivalent information from other sources,” such as the news media, personal physicians, or citizens’ groups. Another 3 percent said that they “didn’t like public meetings or consider them effective.” As one Southampton nonattendee commented, “Although I have a strong personal interest on this subject, I have found that the meetings so far have seemed like a waste of my time.” Another respondent
Table 3. Explanations for Public Meeting Non-Attendance (N = 539)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>% Given</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Rational Correlations</th>
<th>SES/Mobilization Correlations</th>
<th>Relational Correlations</th>
<th>Community Correlations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rational explanations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Meeting did not seem relevant because risks</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>— Male (0.13)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of little or no concern</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could get equivalent information from</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>— Education (0.10)</td>
<td></td>
<td>— Believed that other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other source</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>— Income (0.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td>citizen behavior at</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not like public meetings or</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>— Busy, no reason given (0.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td>— Endicott (0.13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>considered them ineffective</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>— Southampton (−0.08)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SES/Mobilization explanations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not hear about the meeting</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>— Age (−0.20)</td>
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<td>— Endicott (−0.30)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busy, no reason given</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>— Could get equivalent information from other source (0.08)</td>
<td>— Previous meeting attendance (−0.25)</td>
<td>— Southampton (0.13)</td>
<td>— Oak Ridge (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busy, work</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>— Education (−0.16)</td>
<td></td>
<td>— Marin (−0.12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busy, family duties or vacation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>— White (−0.12)</td>
<td></td>
<td>— Plant City (0.10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>— Number of children at home (0.12)</td>
<td></td>
<td>— Granada Hills (0.14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor health</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Age (0.20)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Transportation difficulties (0.12)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Income (–0.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Education (–0.09)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>— Number of children at home (–0.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Endicott (0.11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forgot about the meeting</th>
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<th>0.14</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>— White (–0.21)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Female (0.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Age (0.10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Income (0.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Poor health (0.12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Income (–0.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Plant City (0.10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low self-efficacy</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>0.10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>— White (–0.21)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Female (0.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Age (0.10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Income (0.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Poor health (0.12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Income (–0.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Plant City (0.10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transportation difficulties</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>0.11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>— Previous meeting attendance (0.29)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Granada Hills (0.17)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Marin (–0.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relational explanations</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>0.21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>— Could get equivalent information from other source (0.11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Education (0.10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Endicott (0.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other explanations</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>0.16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>— Forgot about the meeting (0.15)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Oak Ridge (0.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Because comments can include more than one code, percentages total more than 100 percent.

All correlations are significant at $p < 0.05$. 
in Marin wrote that “I didn’t know [the meeting] was happening, but probably wouldn’t have attended (I don’t think it would have any impact on the cancer investigation).”

As far as relational explanations, 5 percent of nonattendees said that they skipped the meeting because they “believed authorities are unfair or biased.” In the words of a Plant City respondent, “Why waste my time? Big business always wins in the long run.” Another person in Granada Hills commented that “whoever has the most money and political power will get what ‘they’ want, not what is good for the community!” One percent of nonattendees indicated they “believed that other citizen behavior is inappropriate.” For example, a respondent in Southampton wrote that “Too many irrational people prattle on and on about issues irrelevant to the main issue.” A nonattendee from Endicott expressed a similar view: “I find public meetings frustrating. People ask repetitive questions and use them as a forum for their own agendas.”

**RQ4: Correlations among Reasons for Not Attending the Public Meeting**

The analysis revealed several correlations among reasons for nonattendance. Specifically, people who responded that the “meeting did not seem relevant because the risks were of little or no concern” were more likely to be male. Those who said that they “could get equivalent information from other sources” also tended to “believe that other citizen behavior at meetings is inappropriate”; they also reported higher levels of education and income and were more likely to indicate they were “busy, no reason given” when asked why they did not attend.

The most common excuse for a respondent’s absence—“did not hear about the meeting”—was given more often by younger people, as well as those with higher education. Those who responded that they were “busy, no reason given,” were also less likely to have “previous public meeting attendance”; as noted above, they were also more likely to say that they “could get equivalent information from other sources.” Non-White respondents and respondents reporting higher education were less likely to cite “busy, work” as an excuse for not attending the public meeting. Respondents with more children living at home were slightly more also likely to cite “busy, family duties” as a reason for nonattendance. “Poor health” was positively correlated with age and “transportation difficulties” but negatively correlated with income, education, and the respondent’s number of children living at home. Respondents who said that they “forgot about the meeting” were less likely to be White but more likely to be female, and “low self-efficacy” was positively correlated with age and income.

Nonattendees who “believed that authorities are unfair or biased” were also more likely to indicate previous meeting attendance. Nonattendees who said that they “believed that other citizen behavior at meetings is inappropriate” were more likely to indicate they “could get equivalent information from other sources.”
Another way to contextualize the data is in relation to the community. Although the relationships between communities and explanations for public attendance or nonattendance do not advance any specific theory of participation, they do, however, underscore that contextual factors play a role in public participation efforts. As should be expected, there were a number of significant associations between respondents’ explanations and their community of residence (see Tables 2 and 3). The results show that nonattendees from Endicott were less likely to respond that they “did not hear about the meeting”; however, they were also more likely to report “poor health,” a sense of information sufficiency (“could get equivalent information from other source”), and annoyance at “other citizens’ behavior” as reasons for nonattendance. Among reasons for attending the meeting, Endicott respondents highlighted that they were “concerned about risk” and that they had a desire to obtain “information from authorities.”

In Granada Hills, nonattendees were more likely to say that they “believed authorities are unfair or biased” and that the “meeting topic was irrelevant or the risks of little concern”; they were also more likely to cite “busy, family duties” as an impediment to attending the meeting. Nonattendees from Marin County also tended to note that the “meeting topic was irrelevant or the risks of little concern.” They were less likely to cite “busy, work” or government bias (“believed that authorities were unfair or biased”) as reasons for not attending. In comparison, attendees were less likely to say that the “meeting topic was irrelevant or the risks of little concern” and more likely to refer to group solidarity (“to support others”).

Among Oak Ridge nonattendees, many pointed to meeting relevance as a factor in their decision not to attend the meeting (“meeting topic was irrelevant because the risks were of little or no concern”). Many also indicated that they “did not hear about the meeting.” Similar to Marin, Oak Ridge nonattendees were less likely to point to busy lives (“busy, no reason given”) for their absence at the meeting. In Plant City, work duties (“busy because of work”) and forgetfulness (“forgot about meeting”) were both significantly associated with nonattendance. Finally, residents from the Southampton area were more likely to say that they did not attend because they “did not hear about the meeting” or because they felt that they “could get equivalent information from other source.” Southampton nonattendees were less likely say that the “meeting topic was irrelevant because the risks were of little or no concern.”

Discussion

The results highlight that survey respondents recounted their decisions to attend local public meetings using explanations consistent with rational choice, SES or mobilization, and relational research on public participation. Among meeting attendees, there were purposeful statements about seeking goals or objectives through public meeting attendance, such as getting additional information or providing input to authorities. There were also indications of weighing
costs versus benefits, including whether individuals believed they could get equivalent information from other sources or considered public meetings effective. All of these findings support research suggesting rational approaches to public meeting attendance. As past SES or mobilization-oriented research would predict, the results also found that attendees were more likely to be affluent and educated, thus having a greater capacity to participate. Other SES or mobilization explanations that the respondents provided included being invited to attend or going to support or help others at the meeting. Relational incentives were also apparent, as some respondents pointed to biased authorities or insufferable neighbors as factors in their decisions to attend or not to attend the public meeting.

What does this tell us about public meeting attendance, or, perhaps more importantly, what does it tell us about nonattendance? To answer these questions, it seems useful to categorize certain patterns appearing in the results. Others have offered their own impressions of who attends public meetings. Heberlein (1976) once characterized the public meeting roll call as comprised of three groups: (i) policy “elites” or professional experts responsible for organizing the meetings; (ii) citizens who are acutely affected by the meetings’ outcomes and often quite informed about the issues; and (iii) citizens who are neither directly affected by the decisions nor particularly informed about the issues yet who attend the meetings and speak out nonetheless. While this last group emerged as a sore subject for some respondents in the current study who claimed that poor behavior by their fellow citizens keeps them away from public meetings, our results suggest additional groupings of people who attend public meetings about local health risks, as well as a parallel set of reasons for not attending.

Who Attends Public Meetings: The Curious, the Fearful, and the Available

The Curious. The overwhelming reason to attend the public meeting among all six communities was “to get information from authorities” regarding the potential cancer cluster. “To get information from other citizens” was also mentioned by attendees. This goal-oriented behavior is consistent with a rational approach to understanding participation and also reinforces previous public meeting research suggesting that acquiring information—both official and unofficial—is an important motivation for public meeting attendance (Adams, 2004; McComas, 2003a, 2003c). The results also found that people chose to attend the public meeting out of curiosity to see how poorly authorities were behaving. This finding suggests that the curious are not only seeking information about local cancer rates but also authorities’ treatment of local residents.

The Fearful. Given that the present study is concerned with attendance at public meetings held to discuss local cancer rates, it is understandable that “concern about risk” factored into citizens’ rationales to attend. Past research on public meetings about local health risks similarly found that people who attend are generally more concerned about the risks than people who do not attend (McComas, 2003b). As noted above, concern provides a strong motivation for
seeking information. Based on information-seeking theories discussed above (e.g., Grunig & Repper, 1992), we would also expect that respondents perceiving more risk would be more likely to seek information, such as by attending a public meeting. Female respondents were also more likely to mention concerns about risk, which also supports previous research on gender influences on risk perception (Finucane, Slovic, Mertz, & Satterfield, 2000; Flynn, Slovic, & Mertz, 1994).

The Available. The relationships between attendance and some of the SES or mobilization explanations included in our analyses generally point to the fact that some individuals are simply more able to adjust their lives to attend a public meeting than others. This does not mean that citizens who attend public meetings do not have other time constraints. To the contrary, Putnam (2000) has pointed out that those with the least apparent amount of free time are also those that are most involved. It is perhaps because of their level of concern about risk or involvement with the issue that they are more motivated to juggle their schedules and attend public meetings. In the results presented above, additional factors such as “poor health” seem to diminish attendance while education, income, and community “solidarity” made attendance more likely.

Who Does Not Attend: The Uninformed, the Indifferent, the Occupied, and the Disaffected

The Uninformed. The largest proportion of nonattendees said that they “did not hear about a meeting,” which we coded as an SES or mobilization explanation. Clearly, people have to know about the public meeting if they are going to attend it, making it likely that some citizens did not attend simply because they did not hear about it. Alternatively, people may have been exposed to advertisements but simply not paid attention to them because the topic was not salient. It also suggests that they were not tied to local social networks that were actively communicating about the potential cancer cluster. Although this does not mean that there was inadequate meeting notification, a higher profile in the local news media may have translated into more meeting awareness. For example, the health investigations in both Southampton and Oak Ridge went largely uncovered by the local news media, and in both these communities, respondents were more likely to say that they did not know about the meeting. In comparison, the local newspaper in Endicott provided regular coverage of the investigation, and respondents from Endicott were less likely to say that they did not know about the meeting. Future research could examine the relationship between community media coverage, public meeting attendance, and concern.

The Indifferent. The second most common single response for not attending the public meeting was that respondents believed that “the meeting was not relevant to their situation” because the risks were not significant. In some cases, respondents mentioned being aware of reports stating that the cancer rates were lower than reported. In other cases, respondents did not feel a member of the at-risk
populations. Examples included respondents who had just moved to the area or were male in a community where concern surrounded breast cancer rates. These results were especially apparent in Oak Ridge and Marin County, two communities with longstanding investigations into area cancer rates. In Marin, evidence for high cancer rates is relatively clear; however, the underlying reason for the increase remains somewhat unclear. In Oak Ridge, the presence of a major nuclear research facility with a history of secrecy is clear source of concern for some people, but, like in many communities, the epidemiological research attempting to link pollution to actual cancer incidences has been largely inconclusive.

The Occupied. Another primary reason why respondents said that they did not attend the meeting was because they were “busy.” Most respondents did not elaborate further, whereas others mentioned work, family duties, or out-of-town trips as reasons for missing the meeting. Certainly, claiming to be busy is an understandable and all-too-common excuse for not participating in voluntary activities, such as attending a public meeting. Given that our data collection focused on a specific meeting in each community, it seems particularly likely that some people who would have attended were unable to attend because they had other obligations. It also seems probable that for some people, saying that they are busy essentially serves as a euphemism for saying they are uninterested.

The Disaffected. Despite the low overall percentage of respondents providing relational arguments for nonattendance, there were responses unequivocally reflecting the sentiment that the public participation process was somehow flawed or the authorities untrustworthy. We have categorized these individuals as the “disaffected” because it appears that prior experience with public meetings—either personal or vicarious—has turned them off of public meetings. Along these lines, it is interesting to note that, irrespective of whether respondents had attended this most recent meeting, previous attendance was significantly associated with “believing the authorities in charge are unfair or biased.” This finding suggests that something about previous experiences with public meetings may be discouraging citizens from future attendance. It is also interesting to note that nonattendees who “believed that other citizen behavior at the meetings was inappropriate” were, however, more likely to believe that they “could get equivalent information from other sources,” further justifying their decisions to skip public meetings.

Limitations

In reviewing the results, some discussions of study limitations are warranted. First, although we did have a high measure of compliance with our request for written comments on why respondents did or did not attend the most recent public meeting, the comments that respondents provided undoubtedly represent the “top of mind” or most salient factors. It is quite likely that people would have added more positive or negative aspects if asked. The “busy” categories,
particular, are somewhat unsatisfying as these necessarily reflect the prioritization of one activity over another but fail to address why attending public meetings is not important to the respondent. The factors underlying such prioritization, if pressed, could include other rational or relational explanations for nonattendance. This limitation suggests a possible role for in-depth interviews or focus groups, specifically about public meeting attendance in future research. In addition, self-report data are also problematic in that people may develop reasons for attending or not attending the public meeting post-hoc as a justification of their behavior. Some would argue that people may not even know their own reasons why they behave the way they do. Future research may consider ways of investigating respondents’ behavior by asking similar questions from a social norm standpoint. That is, by investigating why people believe their neighbors do or do not attend public meetings, we may gain insight into people’s own reasons.

Finally, the response rates to the survey were disappointingly low in some communities, and differing response rates also meant that some communities were more represented than others. The lowest response rates were from Plant City, where our research surveyed a low income, minority neighborhood that was the focus of the health investigation. Rather than removing Plant City from our analysis, we chose to keep the data because of the diversity it added to our sample. In addition, our intention was not to generalize the data to the communities but to compare attendees’ and nonattendees’ comments. Although other work using similar survey methods generated much higher response rates among both attendees and nonattendees of public meetings about local health risks (McComas, 2003b), it seems possible that the potential cancer clusters were not as salient an issue in these communities as were the risks in previous research. Future research should consider additional incentives or alternative survey approaches to obtain higher response rates.

Because of the low response rates, it is important to view the results as suggestive rather than definitive. Still, as we would hope from a validity standpoint, respondents with more children were slightly more likely to cite family duties as a reason for nonattendance. The positive associations among poor health, age, and transportation difficulties for meeting nonattendance also point to the theoretical validity of the results presented here (Kirk & Miller, 1986), as do the negative associations among respondents’ education, income, and saying that they are too busy to participate. Specifically, these reasons point to traditional SES or mobilization factors associated with public participation (Verba et al., 1995), thus suggesting that our findings are well within reason.

Conclusions

Overall, the results suggest that rational reasons, followed by SES or mobilization explanations, could characterize most people’s responses to the question of why they attended public meetings about local cancer cluster investigations. In comparison, SES or mobilization explanations dominated their reasons for not attending, followed by rational explanations. Less common but still present for
both attendees and nonattendees were relational explanations, such as beliefs that meeting organizers were biased or that other citizens’ disruptive behavior made the meetings unappealing. In presenting the results, we offered additional groupings to characterize people who are more likely to attend public meetings about local cancer cluster investigations—the curious, the fearful, and the available—and those less likely—the uninformed, the indifferent, the occupied, and the disaffected. In offering these groupings, we do not claim that they are mutually exclusive. Indeed, it is more likely that these explanations overlap in logical ways (as the correlation analysis suggests) to reinforce people’s attitudes and behaviors toward public participation. Still, we consider these groupings useful if only to draw attention to the multiple factors underlying attendance.

To return to the issue of representativeness, the results offer some evidence that people who attend public meetings about local cancer clusters were attitudinally different than their nonattendee counterparts, if not demographically (except in gender, with women more likely to attend). Specifically, they were more interested in seeking information and more scared about the health risks. These results carry some implications for public meeting organizers. Namely, previous research has found that when people are more concerned about risk, they are often also more skeptical of official sources of risk information (Frewer, Scholderer, & Bredahl, 2003; Trumbo & McComas, 2003). Public meeting organizers need to be aware of this dynamic when conducting public meetings about local health risks and seek ways to enhance their credibility, such as by reducing potential bias in the public meeting procedures and demonstrating respect for citizens’ rights and compassion for their concerns.

The results also highlight some of the challenges associated with increasing attendance among nonattendees, namely—a lack of awareness, interest, time, trust, and previous positive meeting experiences. Although none of these challenges are mutually exclusive, each suggests a slightly different response. For example, to increase awareness and target the uninformed, public officials can augment their efforts to publicize the meetings through local media channels, direct contact, and relevant social networks. To increase interest among the disinterested, officials can target messages to specific stakeholder audiences in ways that emphasize the topic’s relevance or importance. The problem of busy schedules, the bane of the occupied, is addressed on one level by scheduling more meetings, staggering meeting times, or adopting alternative methods of participation (e.g., virtual meetings over the Internet). On a deeper level, individuals who say they are too busy may simply be uninterested, in which case, officials can try to increase topic salience for targeted stakeholders. It is also prudent to recognize that not everyone will be interested in the topic nor have time to participate. To address this challenge, meeting organizers can endeavor to have key stakeholder groups represented at public meetings to ensure that important views are heard, as well as to increase the likelihood that information is relayed back to nonattendees. Finally, a lack of trust and a related lack of previous positive meeting experience, which characterize the disaffected, are perhaps among the most difficult challenges to overcome. Increased attention to the fairness of the procedures may offer some
recourse to officials seeking to rebuild the perceived legitimacy of the process (Heath, Bradshaw, & Lee, 2002; Lofstedt, 2005). For individuals who are unwilling or unable to attend future public meetings, officials can supplement public meetings with other communication efforts, such as via agency Internet sites, local media channels, and direct contact. Officials can also explore alternative formats for public participationperhaps more appropriate than public meetings.

In sum, by focusing on citizens’ own explanations for attendance or nonattendance at specific public meetings, we believe that this study provides a useful contribution to the existing public participation literature. The findings reported here bolster existing findings while also opening up new avenues of research. Specifically, it seems clear that past research pointing to individual-level resources and constraints remains key in determining whether someone will attend public meetings. It also seems evident that people make rational choices about how to allocate their time. The finding that respondents also highlighted their perceptions of authorities, however, suggests the possibility of using relational approaches to study reciprocal relationships between attitudes toward authorities and future willingness to attend public meetings.

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1. It is important to acknowledge that simply having a representative audience attend a public meeting does not mean that there will be representative input. Certainly, there are varying levels of participation at public meetings, with some people choosing to passively observe while others seek to actively contribute. Along these lines, some research suggested that public meeting attendees were representative as long as meeting organizers could base their assessments on the views of everyone present and not simply those who spoke out (Gundry & Heberlein, 1984). That said, understanding what gets people to attend the meeting in the first place is an important part of the picture.

2. In this review, we do not intend to venerate one approach to understanding public participation over another but to demonstrate how the following bodies of research inform our analysis of respondents’ reasons for why they did or did not attend public meetings.

References


