



## Stakeholder Voice in Water Resource Planning

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**Abstract.** Stakeholder engagement for natural resource management at the state and local levels has become an important governance practice. This study examines the association of individual traits (aggressive communication, comfort with technology, and argumentativeness) with stakeholder participant voice in a water basin planning virtual meeting setting. Individual participants of the Edisto River Basin Council (RBC) meetings are the subject of the study. South Carolina decentralized water planning to the river basin level, creating RBCs and appointing interested and relevant stakeholders as members. While the river basin planning process did not envisage virtual (Zoom) meetings for the regular meetings of the RBC, the COVID pandemic required this to begin the planning process. Moreover, meeting participants possess diverse interests, powers, and individual traits that may affect the use of voice and engagement.

There is well-established literature on stakeholder participation in resource planning. However, there are gaps in the literature regarding use of voice in virtual meeting settings in water resources planning, especially in settings like water-abundant areas in the Southeastern United States. Using the Edisto RBC as a pilot basin and quantitative surveys, preliminary results found that while RBC participants were on average comfortable with technology, they generally avoided conflict, they exhibited average communication apprehension in a meeting environment, and virtual meetings appear to limit participant's use of voice. Consequently, meeting planners must recognize that not all participants express themselves optimally in virtual meeting settings. In this vein, planners must work to develop opportunities for as much active engagement and sharing as possible.

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### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to broaden our knowledge of stakeholder voice where participants are limited to virtual platforms for communicating their interests, negotiating with other parties, and engaging in decision-making in water resources planning. The theoretical framework for this study is based on a combination of stakeholder voice and stakeholder theory (Bopp and Volda 2020; Buren and Greenwood 2009; Reed et al 2017; Lukasiwicz and Baldwin 2014). The study focuses on stakeholder voice in water resources planning in South Carolina. Using a mixed-methods approach, this paper contributes to the literature on stakeholder voice and participation in water resources planning where the default meeting platform is an online

service. The study applies a communication apprehension framework, argumentativeness scale, and assessment of comfort with technology to assess the individual traits of participants.

Recognizing the importance of stakeholder voice, South Carolina included the RBC model as part of its regional water strategy in its new water plan (SC Water Planning Framework 2019). The active involvement and voice of each stakeholder is essential for the success of this strategy. This model of planning is essential for the legal authority for water planning in South Carolina, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) (SC Code Ann., Section 49-3, 1993). This study provides additional understanding and assessment of these processes, highlighting traits and factors that could influence the performance of a critical portion of

the water plan. The performance of the Edisto RBC, being the first stakeholder planning process, provides valuable learning for the establishment of other RBCs in the state and in other parts of the Southeastern region of the United States.

## BACKGROUND

The SCDNR recognized the importance of effective public participation as specified in the new water planning framework (SC Water Planning Framework, Section 3.7, p. 38, 2019). The framework anticipated communication within the RBC and with the public, with a focus on transparency, timeliness, and accuracy of information exchange. To implement this objective, public participation in RBC meetings was also specified. During the meetings, RBC members are expected to speak, while the members of the public can speak at the time designated for public comments. Therefore, RBC meetings are designed to elicit the voice of both RBC members and members of the public. The framework envisaged the use of websites for the publication of notices and emails for communications of meeting notices, but it did not mention virtual RBC meetings (SC Water Planning Framework, Section 3.7, p. 38, 2019).

From the lens of stakeholder voice in water resources planning, inclusive of broader stakeholder theory, this study argues that individual stakeholder traits and experience using virtual meeting platforms influence stakeholder voice in a natural resource planning group. Furthermore, applying the communication apprehension framework, this study argues that individual stakeholder voice traits influence participation in virtual meetings (McCroskey 1977). Given the propositions stated above, this study puts forth the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Individual stakeholder behavior indices of communication apprehension will be related positively to stakeholder participation in the Edisto RBC virtual meetings.
- Hypothesis 2: Individual stakeholder comfort with virtual technology indices will be positively related to stakeholder voice in the Edisto RBC.
- Hypothesis 3: Individual stakeholder argumentativeness will be positively related to stakeholder participation in the Edisto RBC virtual meeting.

Furthermore, the study attempted to identify the factors that limit individual Edisto RBC meeting participants from speaking during RBC meetings.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

At the time of deploying the survey for this study, the Edisto RBC had met a total of 8 times. Every individual (RBC members, RBC Alternates, and members of the public) who had attended at least 1 meeting of the Edisto RBC were invited to respond to an online survey developed for this study. Participants were solicited utilizing a prepared, IRB-approved (IRB2020-123) recruitment script via email. Participants were invited to volunteer and respond to the online survey deployed in Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT, 2020). Participants included RBC members, RBC Alternates, and other members of the public. Members of the public for the study was defined as stakeholders in the Edisto River Basin planning process who are not current members of the Edisto RBC or who are not RBC member alternates. Therefore, participants who attended as planning committee members or to provide technical support were excluded from the study. A total of 83 participants who attended at least 1 meeting of the Edisto RBC were sent the email invitation to participate. Out of that number, 27 completed responses were received, representing 32.53% of people who had attended at least 1 out of the 7 meetings at the time the survey was deployed. The study received responses from each participant type: RBC Member (10 responses), RBC Alternate (3 responses), and Member of Public (14 responses). The study used SPSS (IBM Statistics 27) to analyze the data for the preliminary results.

The survey featured 15 questions (Appendix). The first 2 questions covered the respondent's interest group and in what capacity the respondent attended the RBC meetings (RBC member, RBC alternate, or Member of Public). Question 3 covered the communication apprehension scale questions, question 4 required a response to the argumentativeness scale questions, and question 5 asked respondents about their level of experience using Zoom online meeting technology. Questions 6 and 7 required the respondents to answer if they had asked a question and/or made a comment in an RBC meeting, while question 8 assessed respondents' comfort using online technology. Question 9 assessed whether respondents received feedback when they asked questions or made comments and how satisfied they were with the feedback received. Finally, questions 10 and 11 invited the respondents to describe their assessment of primary factors that limited participants from making comments and asking questions during RBC meetings, and questions 12 through 15 covered participant demographics such as gender, age, ethnicity, and highest level of education completed.

## MEASURES

Participants completed a questionnaire that assessed their communication apprehension, comfort with technology, and argumentativeness. Two questions indicated meeting

participant voice: “Have you asked a question in an Edisto RBC meeting?” and “Have you made a comment in an Edisto RBC meeting?” A composite variable “voice” was created for analysis. Two open-ended questions—“In your assessment what primary factor limits participants from making comments and asking questions during RBC meetings?” and “In your assessment what other factors limit participants from making comments and asking questions during RBC meetings?”—were used for the qualitative analysis. The study considered voice to include speaking and use of the chat feature by meeting participants.

### COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION ASSESSMENT

Communication apprehension was operationalized with the PRCA-24 communication apprehension scale (PRCA-Personal Report of Communication Apprehension) (McCroskey 1977). (The PRCA-24 communication apprehension scale includes two other dimensions: Interpersonal and Group Discussion.) This 24-item measure assesses participants’ feelings about communicating with others (e.g., “Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting”). Answers were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). This study used a short form of the communication apprehension scale focused on meetings and public speaking dimensions. These were the only 2 variables that were relevant to the study setting, virtual Zoom meetings. The 12-item measure for which a higher score indicates that the individual feels apprehensive resulted in an alpha coefficient of .94 ( $M = 28.37$ ,  $SD = 9.09$ ). The PRCA scores range from 24 to 120, with the scores below 51 representing people who have very low communication apprehension and the scores between 51 and 80 representing people with average communication apprehension (Table 1). The score from the study suggests that the group of individuals in the Edisto RBC exhibit average communication apprehension in a meeting environment.

### ARGUMENTATIVENESS ASSESSMENT

Argumentativeness was operationalized with the Argumentativeness Scale (Infante and Rancer 1982). This 20-item measure assessed participants’ feelings while arguing controversial issues with others (e.g., “When I finish arguing with someone, I feel nervous and upset”). Answers were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *never true* (1) to *always true* (5). For our study, we obtained an alpha coefficient of .91 ( $M = 65.28$ ,  $SD = 11.92$ ). The argumentativeness scale compares the difference between the scores of the tendency to avoid arguments with the tendency to seek out arguments. Our score for tendency to avoid getting into arguments (NoArgument) was 80 and the score for tendency to seek out arguments (YesArgument) was 68, a difference of 12. This score indicated that, on average,

participants in the Edisto RBC meeting avoid getting into arguments in this setting.

### COMFORT WITH TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT

Comfort with technology was operationalized with the Online Learning Readiness Scale (OLRS) (Hung et al. 2010). This 18-item measure assessed participants’ feelings about comfort with the use of technology (e.g., “I feel confident in using online tools [email, discussion] to effectively communicate with others”). Answers were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *never true* (1) to *always true* (5). This study utilized the Online Communication Self-Efficacy (OCSE) section of the OLRS. The OCSE assesses the confidence of online meeting participants using online tools and effectively communicating with others. The results from the OCSE resulted in an alpha coefficient of .82 ( $M = 15.64$ ,  $SD = 2.60$ ). The mean OCSE score suggested that individuals in the group were, on average, comfortable with technology.

### DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analyzed using the SPSS software (IBM SPSS Statistics 27). Communication apprehension had two dimensions: meeting and public speaking. The study conducted a reliability analysis showing that the meeting dimension had an alpha .88 and the public speaking dimension had an alpha of .90. In addition, the study created composites indices for communication apprehension, argumentativeness, comfort with technology, and participant speaking in at least one RBC meeting, and then conducted a Pearson correlation test.

The qualitative analysis relied on the open-ended questions that invited participants to describe the factors that limited verbal expression in RBC meetings. It must be noted that the medium a survey respondent used (i.e., laptop, tablet, PC, or mobile device) may impact their responses to this question due to challenges such as typing long sentences in mobile devices, among others.

## PRELIMINARY RESULTS

### QUALITATIVE RESULTS

After analyzing the data, elements described in Table 2 emerged as reasons why individual participants in the Edisto RBC did not verbally express themselves in the RBC meeting.

One of the recurring themes was that members of the public did not feel empowered to express themselves during RBC meetings. This feeling was buttressed with the use of the term “body language” to describe how the meetings were designed to limit verbal expressions. Furthermore, respondents noted that limiting public comment to a particular point in the meetings did not encourage verbal expression.

Some respondents stated that individual feelings of shyness and discomfort influenced verbal expression. Another

individual trait respondents noted was fear of confrontation, thus avoiding conflict. These individual traits suggest weak argumentativeness, but it is possible that these are the individuals' feelings expressed in the context of the RBC meetings, and not a reflection of the individuals' feelings in meeting settings generally. Therefore, isolating the triggers to such feelings becomes essential to understanding power dynamics in these settings and the ability to encourage verbal expression of participants in RBC meetings and settings like this.

Although participants were, on average, comfortable with technology, one of the qualitative results showed unfamiliarity with Zoom functionalities. This result suggests that it was possible for an individual to be comfortable with technology but struggle with a specific application. While the study did not explore how long respondents had used Zoom prior to joining the Edisto RBC, it did not assume respondents had prior experience using Zoom.

Some respondents did not feel any connections with other RBC members and reiterated the need for a face-to-face meeting to build relationships within the RBC. This response suggested that the virtual meeting platform did not offer the opportunity to bond with their colleagues, hence their inability to vocally express themselves as they would have done if they were already bonded. Some respondents also noted the reliance on previous relationships they had with some participants before joining the RBC as a platform for further developing relationships among the participants.

Respondents noted a lack of sufficient knowledge of issues discussed in the RBC as a reason some participants do not verbally express themselves in RBC meetings. This response suggests that participants in the Edisto RBC meetings have different levels of knowledge of water planning issues. This difference in knowledge could act to shut out less-aware participants or empower those with more advanced knowledge.

**QUANTITATIVE RESULTS**

Preliminary quantitative results revealed a significant association between individual communication apprehension and stakeholder voice. However, the preliminary results did not reveal any significant association between the individual traits of argumentativeness and comfort with technology and stakeholder voice.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to use stakeholder voice theory to empirically explore the relationships between individual meeting participant traits (communication apprehension, argumentativeness, and comfort with technology) and speaking openly in a virtual (Zoom) RBC meeting. Although the preliminary results do not find a significant positive association between participant argumentativeness and comfort with technology and participant voice, the survey revealed some useful descriptions of the Edisto RBC meeting participants and several areas of future research.

**Table 1.** Communication Apprehension Summary

	PRCA Model Mean Score	This Study Mean Score
<b>Total Mean Score</b>	65.3	51.84
<b>Meetings</b>	16.4	13.19
<b>Public Speaking</b>	19.3	15.19
<b>Interpersonal</b>	14.2	Not Applicable
<b>Group Discussion</b>	15.4	Not Applicable

**Table 2.** Open Response Summary

S/N	Element	No. of Occurrence
1.	Members of public did not feel empowered for vocal expression.	6
2.	Shy and uncomfortable.	3
3.	Fear of confrontation, thereby avoiding conflict.	4
4.	Unfamiliarity with Zoom functions.	6
5.	Feeling intimidated by diverse interest groups in the virtual room.	4
6.	No feeling of connection with other participants.	4
7.	Insufficient knowledge of subjects discussed during meetings.	4
8.	Meeting presentations were rushed for participants to follow.	5

First, some public participants did not feel empowered to express themselves during RBC meetings. This feeling was buttressed with the use of the term “body language” to describe how the meetings were designed to limit verbal expressions. Furthermore, respondents noted that limiting public comment to a particular point in the meetings did not encourage verbal expression. While this may be an important meeting management approach, understanding how to mitigate or minimize this tactic is critical for broad and inclusive stakeholder engagement.

Second, although all meeting participants were, on average, comfortable with the use of technology, only 40% of the respondents have either asked a question or made a comment in a meeting. The participation rate does not reflect the level of comfort with technology observed in the study. The low participation rate may be because the meetings held so far were more instructional and educational sessions but held in a business meeting environment.

Third, participants exhibited average communication apprehension in a meeting environment, were on average comfortable with technology, and on average avoided getting into arguments in the Edisto RBC meeting. In addition, in responding to the question “In your assessment what primary factor limits participants from making comments and asking questions during RBC meetings?” participants mentioned not feeling empowered to participate as non-RBC members, lack of connection to other members/meeting participants, and feelings of intimidation. Some of these factors noted by the respondents could prove informative for further examination of a relationship with stakeholder voice. Moreover, the responses showed areas of power concentration, such as advanced knowledge of water planning. These results highlight the need to understand the individual voice traits of meeting participants in these settings when planning and implementing meetings so that groups like the RBC can accomplish their goals effectively. Moreover, it is critical that power dynamics are understood and managed in these settings so that all participants feel empowered to express themselves. To ensure that the South Carolina water planning process is in line with global standards as described in the IWRM framework (UNESCO 2009), the water planning process must encourage stakeholder voice regardless of individual traits. To achieve this level of engagement, stakeholder planners must recognize that not all participants express themselves optimally in virtual meeting settings. In this vein, planners must work to develop opportunities for as much active engagement and sharing as possible. Furthermore, this work around improving stakeholder voice is in line with Sustainable Development Goal 6 (Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all) of the United Nations (2015) and is important across all natural resource settings.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Edisto RBC members, alternates, and other members of the public had never met each other physically on the platform of the council; therefore, the survey may suffer from social desirability issues as respondents seek to portray some specific image about themselves. The study was limited to the Edisto RBC, alternates, and other members of the public with email contact information, and the results should not be generalized to other RBCs or similar natural resource planning environments. To be able to pass the external validity test, the study should extend to RBCs across a wider sample. Because of the sample size, the analysis may be missing relationships that exist.

Future study will build on the results and expand the study sample to include more participants in state RBC meetings and similar RBC meetings in river basins in other states. It must be noted that this study is merely correlational. Future study should determine other factors that may associate with stakeholder voice and determine if any significant factors are causal. For example, there is opportunity to study the relationship between communication styles and stakeholder voice in a virtual meeting environment. Furthermore, a content study of the expressions, verbal and written, of meeting participants will produce valuable results related to stakeholder voice in the Edisto RBC.

This research is incomplete as the Edisto RBC is in its early stages of establishment. At the time of this preliminary study, the Edisto RBC was not fully organized according to the state planning framework; for example, the Edisto RBC had not elected its leadership when this study was launched. The Edisto RBC with a complete structure and elected leaders may present a different outlook regarding the voices of participants. Even with these limitations, this study provides an important window into critical issues of consideration for effective natural resource stakeholder engagement and presents several opportunities for future research.

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**APPENDIX. STAKEHOLDER VOICE IN WATER RESOURCES PLANNING SURVEY—EDISTORBC**

**Q1 Which interest group do you represent?**

Industry and Economic Development (1); Water Based Recreational (2); Local Governments (3); Agriculture, Forestry, and Irrigation (4); Environment (5); Electric/Power Utilities (6); Water/Sewer Utilities (7); At large (Other member of the public not in a group mentioned above) (8)

**Q2 In what capacity do you attend the Edisto RBC meeting?**

RBC Member (1) RBC Alternate (2) Member of the public (3)

**Q3 Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you:** 1: *Strongly Disagree*; 2: *Disagree*; 3: *Neither agree nor disagree*; 4: *Agree*; 5: *Strongly Agree*

*Strongly Disagree (1) Disagree (2) Neither agree nor disagree (3) Agree (4) Strongly Agree (5)*

Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting; I feel relaxed while giving a speech; I am afraid to express myself at meetings; Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable; I am very relaxed when answering questions at meetings; I have no fear of giving a speech; I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express my opinion at a meeting; My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech; I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence; While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know; Usually, I am comfortable when I have to participate in a meeting; Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.

**Q4 Please indicate how often each statement is true for you personally while arguing controversial issues by selecting:**

Never True    Rarely True    Occasionally True    Often True    Always True

Never True (1)    Rarely True (2)    Occasionally True (3)    Often True (4)    Always True (5)

While in an argument, I worry that the person I am arguing with will form a negative impression for me; Arguing over controversial issues improves my intelligence; I enjoy avoiding argument; I am energetic and enthusiastic when I argue; Once I finish an argument, I promise myself that I will not get into another; Arguing with a person creates more problems than it solves; I have a pleasant, good feeling when I win a point in an argument; When I finish arguing with someone, I feel nervous and upset; I enjoy a good argument over a controversial issue.; I get an unpleasant feeling when I realize I am about to get into an argument; I enjoy defending my point of view on an issue.; I am happy when I keep an argument from happening; I do not like to miss the opportunity to argue a controversial issue; I prefer being with people who rarely disagree with me; I consider an argument an exciting intellectual challenge; I find myself unable to think of effective points during an argument; I feel refreshed and satisfied after an argument on a controversial issue; I have the ability to do well in an argument; I try to avoid getting into arguments; I feel excitement when I expect that a conversation I am in is leading to an argument.

**Q5 Please indicate how would you rate your experience using the following:** No Experience (1) Little Experience (2)

Good Experience (3)    Excellent (4)

Virtual meeting platforms before attending your first Edisto RBC meeting? Zoom meeting platform before attending your first Edisto RBC meeting?

**Q6 Please select the most suitable response to the following statements?** Yes (1) No (2)

Have you have asked a question in an Edisto RBC meeting? Have you made a comment in an Edisto RBC meeting? Did you receive a response to the question you asked in an Edisto RBC meeting? Did you receive a response to the comment you made in an Edisto RBC meeting? (4)

**Q7 If you have made a comment or asked a question in an RBC meeting, what medium did you use?**

Sending a ZOOM Chat during Edisto RBC meeting. Speaking during the ZOOM Edisto RBC meeting. Sending Email to the Planning Team. Phone call to the Planning Team. Other.

**Q8 How would you assess your Online communication self-efficacy?** Never True (1) Rarely True (2) Occasionally True (3) Often True (4) Always True (5)

I feel confident in using online tools (email, discussion) to effectively communicate with others; I feel confident in expressing myself (emotions and humor) through text. I feel confident in posting questions in online discussions; I feel confident in using online video tools to effectively communicate with others.

**Q9 How would you rate the response you received to your question, and to your comment?** Very Poor (1) Poor (2) Satisfactory (3) Excellent (4)

**Q10 In your assessment what primary factor limits participants from making comments and asking questions during RBC meetings?**

**Q11 In your assessment what other factors limit participants from making comments and asking questions during Edisto RBC meetings?**

**Q12 What best describes your gender?** Male; Female; Prefer not to say

**Q13 What is your age?**

**Q14 What best describes your ethnicity?** White; Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; Other.

**Q15 What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?** Some High School; High School; Bachelor's Degree; Master's degree or higher; Trade School; Prefer not to say.