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Abstract

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Disciplines

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Comments

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Neighborhood-representing Organizations: How Democratic Are They?

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Neighborhood-representing organizations (NROs) are generally viewed as the most authentic form of citizen participation and local democracy. In this article, I question how democratic NROs actually are, both on the local level (participatory democracy) and in the external arena (representative democracy). I present a new conceptual model of the components of democracy in neighborhood organizations. A review of the literature is presented within the context of this model to show to what extent NROs are democratic. The findings indicate that the level of democracy in NROs is questionable and that the "iron law of oligarchy" is valid for this type of organization. The problem of low participatory and representative democracy is addressed, and implications for research and practice are discussed.

Neighborhood-representing organizations (NROs) serve as a bridge between the individual in private life and the large institutions of public life. They mediate between the local residents and formal government and large service institutions.¹ The goal of an NRO is to empower neighborhood residents, counteracting their feelings of powerlessness and lack of representation.² As such, NROs are viewed primarily as a means of representation that increases residents' awareness and responds to their needs and priorities by allocating services and goods. Emile Durkheim notes, "A nation can be maintained only if, between the state and the individual, there is intercalated a whole series of secondary groups near enough to the individuals to attract them strongly in their sphere of action and drag them, in this way, into the general torrent of social life."³

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The tradition of emphasizing the role of the citizen as an active member of his or her community was introduced into social work in the beginning of this century as part of the settlement house movement and by the Charity Organization Societies' emphasis on neighborhood work.⁴ According to this tradition, a key component of community organization, neighborhood organizations of all kinds serve to prevent governmental control and to promote local empowerment.⁵

According to Anthony Downs, there are two types of neighborhood-based organizations whose purpose it is to improve the quality of life for residents.⁶ The first type is any group, whether voluntary, public, or for profit, that operates within a neighborhood and serves any number of subgroups and their interests. This type may include civic associations, community housing development corporations, co-ops, and local alternative schools.⁷ Traditionally, these groups focus on a single issue, and their constituency is limited to active members or users, such as parents of children in an alternative school. In single-purpose organizations, formal membership is often required, and, at times, active membership is required to be able to benefit from the collective goods.

The second type of neighborhood organization is an NRO. An NRO is a local voluntary group managed by local residents that seeks to represent all residents, regardless of their personal involvement. Neighborhood-representative organizations pressure government agencies to be more accessible and more responsive to residents. Furthermore, NROs traditionally become involved in a variety of communal issues. Mancur Olson described the function of voluntary organizations as the provision of collective goods.⁸ In NROs, those who are not official members and who may not contribute toward the collective goods are nevertheless viewed as a constituency and are free to benefit from these collective goods.

While the boundaries between these two forms of neighborhood organizations are often blurred, there are major differences between the two groups. For example, public access to the collective goods and the community's ability to influence the organization may apply to one but not to the other.⁹ In this article, I concentrate only on NROs.

There are no reliable data available on the total number of NROs in the United States or abroad. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the number runs into the hundreds of thousands. Janice Perlman, for example, reports some 10,000 block associations in New York City alone, while the National Commission on Neighborhoods lists over 8,000 large neighborhood organizations of all types in the United States.¹⁰ Carl Milofsky, in a survey of neighborhood organizations, found that 35 percent were advocacy oriented rather than service or single-subject oriented, which indicates that about one-third of all neighborhood organizations are NROs.¹¹ In Scotland, there has been

a coordinated campaign at the national level to establish NROs, while, in Israel, local neighborhood committees (a type of NRO) have sprung up in almost every urban neighborhood.¹²

There are two popular stances concerning the level of democracy in NROs. Those taking the first stance believe that NROs are an ideal example of democracy in action. Most proponents of neighborhood-based organizations maintain that these organizations are the core of democratic society.¹³ Those taking the second stance believe, based on Robert Michels's famous "iron law of oligarchy," that even NROs are, by nature, oligarchic. A third possible stance is that representation in NROs is high while participation is low, or vice versa. This third stance is a mix of the two extreme stances presented above. In this article, I do not take the democratic basis of NROs as a given but, rather, as a basis for inquiry. My purpose is not to challenge the importance of democracy in NROs but, rather, to assess the extent to which NROs are democratic.

A review of the literature on NROs shows that any mention of democracy is usually confined to the overall description of the organizations. Those studies that did focus on the democratic functioning of NROs had a narrow perspective and concentrated largely on a limited number of organizations in one locale. Nowhere in the literature is there a broad analysis of all the components conducive to the democratic functioning of a wide range of NROs. A substantial portion of the literature on NROs is normative in nature, that is, what is ideally expected, and there is little empirical data analyzing the level of democracy in NROs.

In this article I aim (1) to develop a model to define levels of democracy, including both representative and participatory elements of democracy; (2) to review case studies and research findings in the literature on NROs and, based on the proposed model, assess their level of both representative and participatory democracy; and (3) to assess the overall level of democracy in NROs.

Defining Democracy in NROs

Many political and social scientists regard NROs as contributing to a more democratic society. John L. McKnight claims that "the vital center of democracy is the community of associations. Any person without access to that forum is effectively denied citizenship."¹⁴ This value-laden approach has led to increased calls for greater citizen participation and decentralization.¹⁵ Neighborhood-representative organizations are seen as one way to achieve this participatory democracy. Participatory democracy focuses on the extent to which an organization is open to and incorporates all residents. This view applied to NROs would focus on the organization's internal structure and relationships with its constituencies.¹⁶

Many modern political scientists, disillusioned by the concept of participatory democracy, have found this form of democracy not only impractical but also debilitating. Joseph Schumpeter and Robert Dahl, for example, define democracy, not as a process involving as many people as possible, but as a way to arrive at political decisions by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.¹⁷ The ordinary citizen, then, is involved in the democratic process by determining who will make decisions for him or her (representative democracy).

Thus far, I have described democracy as a two-dimensional concept composed of participation and representation. In this article I propose 10 criteria, based in part on Hanna Pitkin, and Carl Milofsky and Joyce Rothschild, by which to assess both the participatory and representative levels of democracy in NROs.¹⁸ Pitkin proposes a more detailed model of democracy that focuses solely on representative democracy. Her model distinguishes among four aspects of representative democracy: formal, descriptive, substantive, and actual representation. Although these categories are important and add to the basic dichotomy mentioned above, Pitkin's model does not fully address the broad aspects of democracy in neighborhood-based organizations because it does not take into account participatory democracy.

Another attempt to measure democracy in neighborhood-based organizations, and one that can be also applied to NROs, was proposed by Milofsky and Rothschild. They focused almost exclusively on issues of participatory democracy. The key components of their model include participation as democracy, voluntarism as democracy, donated resources as democracy, public meeting as democracy, and member activism as democracy.

These two approaches, in combination, provide the following 10 criteria for democracy in NROs.

1. *Free, open elections.*—This criterion, which Pitkin labels “formal representation,” is the hallmark of all democratic societies and organizations. Without the open and honest election of officials, the power in NROs will be held by those who appoint themselves and who care only for their own interest. This criterion, which tests the level of representative democracy in an NRO, overlaps with some aspects of participatory democracy because it calls for active member participation. It is important, therefore, to determine to what extent elections are held and how many members participate.

2. *Members' participation.*—Another criterion of democracy in NROs is the extent to which the general members are involved in planning and policy-making.¹⁹ Organizations with an active membership are characterized by open meetings, consensus decision making, and members' participation in regular activities and decision-making bodies. This criterion tests the level of participatory democracy.

3. *Informed membership.*—A third criterion to assess the level of democracy is the availability of information. It is imperative that officials

of any democratic organization keep their members well informed, especially on a local level where most people may know one another and rumors are frequent.²⁰ This is important for both representative and participatory democracy. Residents cannot be involved in or demand action from elected members of an NRO if they are not aware of what the organization is doing.

4. *Accountability to constituents.*—A fourth criterion of democracy is a high level of visibility and accountability of the organization. Democratic organizations and their officials must not only open their records to the public, but they must also permit internal and external examinations of accountability, planning, and accomplishments, including independent investigations and audits.

5. *Due process.*—A criterion of participatory democracy is due process, which protects members against nepotism, injustices, and harassment. Due process assures fair treatment and limits the power of authorities in dealing with individuals. Accordingly, a democratic NRO must establish and publish clear procedures for action that citizens may follow.²¹ Examples include bylaws and protective procedures, such as grievance procedures. In contrast, an NRO that has no written guidelines and takes action arbitrarily based on the officials' interests can still function, but it cannot be considered a participatory or representative democratic organization. Rothschild and J. Allen Whitt note that alternative organizations, such as community health clinics or parent-run schools, are characterized by minimally stipulated rules and primacy of ad hoc individual decisions.²² However, in alternative organizations, due process is manifested by lengthy discussions in which all members are actively participating and in which all members are protected.

6. *Level of similarity.*—A sixth criterion of representative democracy is the level of similarity between elected officials and the constituency, which Pitkin labels as "descriptive representation." Those who hold office in NROs should resemble those whom they represent because common characteristics often translate into equal interests.²³ This assumption of equal interests may have originated, in part, from the Marxist theory of class consciousness. If leaders and constituencies belong to the same group, then it is likely that they share the same problems and seek the same communal services and goods. If leaders belong to a different group, then they will likely pursue services and goods in their own self-interest and not those preferred by the majority of residents.

7. *Similarity in perceived needs.*—This criterion of representative democracy was categorized by Pitkin as "substantive representation." She argues that good representation entails not only similarity in background but, most important, also a common perception by both leaders and constituents of problems and their urgency. According to this criterion, elected leaders are not to pursue their own private agenda but to

represent the interests of all residents. This is especially important in NROs where there is no real competition for office and incumbents can easily become entrenched.

8. *Cui bono?*—This eighth criterion of democracy, based on Peter Blau and Richard Scott's typology of organizations, asks who actually benefits from the activity of the NRO.²⁴ This criterion focuses on those who derive a practical benefit (leaders alone or the whole community). *Cui bono* is a more direct indicator of democratic representation than the leaders' perceptions of problems or similarity in characteristics, although it is more difficult to measure. According to Richard Rich, it is hard to attract leaders without incentives, yet such incentives increase the potential for conflict between members' interests in collective goods and leaders' interests in maximizing the rewards of their roles.²⁵ Robert Rosenbloom believes that because neighborhood organizations are local and usually do not focus on social reform, leaders and active members are largely motivated by the desire to preserve their own property value and to improve their quality of life.²⁶ Thus, a careful analysis is required as to whose interests are being served and to what extent leaders are self-serving.

9. *Successful advocacy.*—A ninth criterion of democratic NROs is effectiveness in representing the needs and preferences of residents vis-à-vis formal institutions. This criterion is, to some extent, parallel to what is labeled by Pitkin as "actual representation." I distinguish between the personal benefits of leaders (*cui bono*) and effective representation, although both are grouped by Pitkin as actual representation. The reason for this distinction is that, although some leaders might not work for their own interests, there is also the possibility that they might not work for the collective good but would give preference to the interests of government and other external public authorities.²⁷ These governmental organizations could assimilate these leaders and use them as a means of social control to prevent change.

10. *Competition among NROs.*—A final criterion of the level of democracy in NROs is competition. Competition by various NROs may in itself be a positive process; however, it can weaken other democratic processes. For example, if several NROs within one neighborhood organize to carry out a particular mission, then they may impede one another's progress, compete for the same resources, and unintentionally weaken the neighborhood. Another example would be when representatives of different organizations compete for the same resources for different causes and attempt to influence the same formal organization in their own favor. In the latter case, representatives of upper-middle-class NROs are likely to be more effective because of their stronger political ties, greater experience in lobbying, and greater resources, thus reversing the representative democratic effect of NROs in low-income neighborhoods.²⁸ One can argue that such a network

of NROs is the ideal form of democracy. However, competitive NROs are likely to have a harmful effect and serve as a means for preventing change and for perpetuating the current social order in the neighborhood.

In the remainder of this article, I will review data from various studies that are relevant to these 10 criteria of democratic functioning. Findings related to single-purpose organizations are excluded. A few methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, numerous studies are used for this examination, some of which were conducted outside the United States. The meaning and cultural contexts of NROs in different countries may differ. Second, a neighborhood may have more than one NRO; thus, some may represent the whole neighborhood while others serve a certain subpopulation. Both types are included in this study. Third, the NROs studied varied in size, scope of activities, and history. Finally, the decision as to whether a certain local group is an NRO is seldom clear. However, my findings are consistent across this methodological variation and thus indicate strong validity.

Free, Open Elections

Free, open elections are the most common symbol of democracy and thus are an important criterion in testing the level of democracy in NROs. In Dayton, Ohio, even though the city mandated and supported formal elections for NROs and mailed out ballots with stamped return envelopes, only a small percentage of residents bothered to vote.²⁹ In a study of 11 NROs in Indianapolis, Rich determined that only a small percentage of members had actually voted in the elections and that officeholders in the NROs ran virtually uncontested in the elections.³⁰ From a study of 20 NROs in Israel, Joseph Katan and I conclude that most officials are either self-appointed or appointed by interested city officials.³¹ Ruth Liron and Shimon Spiro, in a study of project renewal in Israel, found that approximately 40 percent of the officials had been appointed and that another third had volunteered.³² Although it is often difficult for NROs to find residents who are willing to run for office, those who do agree are almost invariably elected, and there seldom is a real threat of being voted out of office.

Ibrahim Regab, Arthur Blum, and Michael Murphy report that in Cleveland, Ohio, all the organizations they studied had been started by a small group of residents who, upset by a critical incident in the neighborhood, had decided to do something about it, which reflects self-appointment.³³ A similar phenomenon of self-appointment is reported by Terry Cooper in a case study in Los Angeles.³⁴ Cooper notes that, when the NRO became involved in a major planning effort, only members who had the required skills remained active. Michael Masterson reports that, in a government-proposed plan to establish neighborhood

councils in Scotland, only 28 percent of the councils held a contested election and that, overall, only about 15 percent of council residents bothered to vote.³⁵ As a result, councilors, to a large extent, selected one another.

The overall trend from these studies is that the election of many neighborhood officials is not entirely democratic. It may be the voluntary nature of these offices and the attendant costs that make them unattractive to many residents. The lack of competition may contribute to Pamela Oliver's findings that active participation is also based on the belief that there is no one else to do the job.³⁶ While such a motive ensures some citizen involvement, it is insufficient to generate the competition required for a true democratic election process.

Member Participation

In his Indianapolis study, Rich found that officers and a few activists did almost all the work in NROs. Similarly, Katan and I report that, in Israel, residents are rarely involved in NROs.³⁷ Paul King and Orly Hacoen discovered that, in Israel, even some officials took no active part in the organization.³⁸ To a great extent, the few officials who did serve preferred not to be bothered by the dictates of the other residents.

Cooper reports that, the more successful an NRO becomes, the more it tends to de-emphasize resident participation.³⁹ He also notes that, as issues become more technical and professional, the likelihood of organizational stagnation and oligarchic decision making increases. Curtis Ventriss and Robert Pecorella document the case of one organization that was able to avoid professionalization and maintain close contacts with many residents.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it seems that in the life cycle of NROs, professionalization and detachment from residents is more the norm than the exception. Stephen McNamee and Kimberly Swisher report that "the incomplete records and our own observations at meetings indicate generally poor attendance at most priority board meetings."⁴¹ Vincent Bolduc notes that, in most board meetings that were open to all, only the board members participated and that, on average, one new person attended every other meeting.⁴² Similarly, Howard Hallman describes a case study in Columbus, Ohio, in which attendance by residents gradually diminished and the executive council became the dominant body.⁴³ Michael Lipsky and Margaret Levi studied several NROs in poor communities and found that, because the leaders had difficulty in defining what the rewards of membership might be, local residents were not receptive to the organization, even though it might serve them.⁴⁴

The findings from these studies indicate a trend of minimal resident participation. It may be that many officials in NROs recognize the importance of residents' involvement but also view it as costly and as

an unwelcome and added burden. This is especially true of older NROs, in which the zeal of the start-up stage has passed.⁴⁵

Keeping Members Informed

In a nationwide study, Curt Lamb discovered that nearly two-thirds of the residents in black neighborhoods could not name even one important local group.⁴⁶ In his study, Rich found only very limited contact between officers and members of the organizations.⁴⁷ Even when they could expect positive rewards from such contacts, leaders failed to develop adequate networks with residents. Bolduc reports that most of the residents surveyed in Hartford, Connecticut, could not accurately describe any neighborhood association activities, even though the association published a monthly neighborhood newspaper.⁴⁸ According to Katan and me, and King and Hacohen, NROs in Israel are not required to communicate with or report to local residents.⁴⁹ They report that some organizations used one-to-one communication as a method of reporting and very few mailed out reports or made formal reports in a local newspaper, and then only on an irregular basis. In all cases, the information was filtered by the leaders. Liron and Spiro reveal that only 30 percent of the neighborhood residents studied viewed the organization as representative and only 12 percent knew an organization official by name.⁵⁰ Finally, Matthew Crenson studied the level of awareness of NROs by residents in six Baltimore neighborhoods.⁵¹ He determined that only 40 percent knew of such an organization in their neighborhood and were able to name it. This study clearly indicates a level of detachment between NROs and residents, but further study is necessary to validate the findings.

This review of the literature suggests that the means used by NROs to communicate with residents are varied, inadequate, and not entirely democratic in nature. First, there are no clear guidelines as to what information should be made public. Second, most of the methods used by NROs to communicate with residents are informal and on an ad hoc basis. Finally, for the most part, all information they provide is censored and approved by the officials beforehand.

Accountability

Very few of the studies reviewed in this article mention any formal internal or external form of evaluation or auditing. None of the studies report employing a certified public accountant or other qualified professionals as an independent auditor, and none use an external means of evaluation. Furthermore, the studies did not report any attempt at systematic evaluation from within. Interestingly, most studies reviewed were initiated by the researchers, and officials of the NROs

granted permission to the researcher to participate and record. Thus, the officials, once elected or appointed, apparently had little or no accountability to their constituencies.

One study explicitly deals with accountability. Patrick Sills, Hugh Butcher, Patricia Collis, and Andrew Glen, in a study of five NROs in their formative stage in England, note that those who initiated the new NROs maintained leadership roles and were not accountable to members and residents.⁵²

In contrast, most studies of single-purpose organizations find high levels of evaluation and auditing. For example, in a detailed analysis of a civic organization in South Africa, Patricia Wheeldon reports the use of auditing, and Milofsky and Sandra Elion cite the use of evaluation in a local alternative school.⁵³ It may be that organizations with specific, service-oriented missions encourage careful review, while organizations that are broadly representative tend not to emphasize accountability.

Due Process

McKnight, a strong proponent of NROs, asserts that such organizations can respond quickly to residents' complaints because NROs are not overly complex.⁵⁴ There are no formal procedures in selecting an issue and no institutional barriers to planning and taking action. Regardless of the benefits, the literature indicates that due process is seldom found in NROs.

According to Rich, the "leadership cadre" of the NRO makes most of the decisions regarding what projects to implement, how funds should be raised, and what position to take on issues affecting the community.⁵⁵ This finding is supported also by Sills, Butcher, Collis, and Glen's study of five NROs in England.⁵⁶ Steven Haeberle studied 93 NROs in Birmingham, Alabama, over a 1-year period and found that the number of meetings per association ranged from 0 to 16, with a median of 7, although each association was required to meet once each month.⁵⁷ The leaders appeared to make most of the decisions and plans in private with minimal regard for written procedures. Bolduc notes that NRO leaders recognize their uncontested power but do very little to change the situation.⁵⁸ Katan and I indicate that none of the NROs in Israel have bylaws that clearly state the rules on public scrutiny or on the appeals process.⁵⁹ King and Hacothen also disclose that none of the NROs in their sample have grievance procedures.⁶⁰

These findings indicate that NROs operate with little concern for due process. Most NROs act according to the current leader or activist's preferences and rarely commit to written bylaws. At times they reflect the interests of a small cadre of leaders and active members at the expense of other residents who have no established means to claim their case.

Similarity between Leaders and Members

Of all types of political participation, community leadership is strongly and positively related to socioeconomic status.⁶¹ This may be because community leadership requires a high degree of professional skill and communication capabilities.⁶² Downs finds that residents with the greatest financial or emotional investment in the status quo are the most active in NROs.⁶³ Because those in power in many NROs prefer only minimal change and strongly support conservative measures to maintain the status quo, many of those who are extremely dissatisfied with the current situation opt to move away from the neighborhood.

Sue Ann Allen found that, while 63 percent of the homes in East Lansing, Michigan, were renter occupied, only 7 percent of the members and 14 percent of the leaders in the NRO were renters, which reflects a clear bias toward homeowners.⁶⁴ This does not imply that affluent neighborhoods necessarily have more active NROs; rather, the leaders in each neighborhood, regardless of its relative socioeconomic status, tend to be those whose income and status is higher than that of other residents. Abraham Wandersman, Paul Florin, Robert Friedmann, and Ron Meier observe that, in both Israel and Nashville, Tennessee, “rootedness” in the community is related to active participation in NROs.⁶⁵ “Rootedness” means living for a long period of time in the area, intending to stay longer, having children, and owning a home. Regab, Blum, and Murphy report that leaders have higher incomes than members and other residents and are more likely to work in professional or managerial occupations.⁶⁶ This trend is borne out by Bolduc’s study in Hartford, Connecticut, Masterson’s study in Scotland, Sills and colleagues’ study in England, and Yasumasa Kuroda’s study in Japan.⁶⁷ This trend, with minimal variations, has held constant since the early studies on personal characteristics of NRO leaders.⁶⁸ Thus, leaders in NROs can be clearly characterized as the neighborhood elite.

The overall findings from the literature indicate that the leaders of NROs are not democratically elected by the residents, operate in seclusion from other residents, are not accountable to residents, operate according to their own interests and style rather than by due process, and are not typical community members but the local elite. This profile raises questions as to the match between the community needs of leaders and residents. It also raises questions as to whom the leaders are serving—themselves, their subgroup within the neighborhood, or the neighborhood as a whole.

Similarity in Perceived Needs

Regab, Blum, and Murphy studied neighborhood needs as perceived by leaders, members, and residents and found that leaders rated prob-

lems as more severe than did members and residents.⁶⁹ They found a correlation between leaders and residents in the perception of problem urgency of .42. They indicate that this correlation is high but fail to account for chance agreement. If these considerations were taken into account, the correlation would be quite low and would indicate differences in perception between activists and residents. Regab, Blum, and Murphy also note that residents and leaders significantly disagree on 40 percent of the issues, mostly in the area of housing and city services. In a later paper on the same sample, Blum and Regab report that, after a few years in office, leaders became more interested in citywide issues than those of the neighborhood and residents lost interest in the NROs.⁷⁰

Crenson found a similar gap between residents and organizational activists in six Baltimore neighborhoods.⁷¹ In Japan, Kuroda found significant differences between leaders and residents with regard to international attitudes, economic liberalism, taxes, and authoritarianism.⁷² Cooper shows how an NRO, involved in carrying out a complex mission of developing, obtaining formal approval, and carrying out a large-scale housing project in the neighborhood, slowly divorces itself from the perceived needs of many residents.⁷³ According to Cooper, dealing with complex formal organizations shifts the focus of NRO officials from the needs of the residents to those of a technically oriented group of professionals with whom they frequently interact. Thus, officials gradually find it difficult to attend to the needs of the “uneducated” residents. Sills, Butcher, Collis, and Glen and Ventriss and Pecorella show that the act of being attentive to residents’ needs and interests is slow, frustrating, and often discordant and can lead to burnout for its unpaid, unrewarded workers.⁷⁴

The overall trend that emerges from the studies reviewed is that, over time, NROs become more professional and bureaucratic while neglecting residents’ concerns. Furthermore, long-term leaders become impatient with residents and tend to prefer to work on what they perceive as good for the residents rather than work with the residents, which further widens the gap between the two groups’ perceived needs.

Cui Bono

Theoretical literature like that of Rich and Olson assumes that personal gains motivate some or all people who volunteer to be NRO leaders.⁷⁵ With some exceptions, the literature does not seem to support a hypothesis that NRO leaders serve solely to benefit themselves; they often function to serve the subgroup to which they belong. Robert Whelman and Robert Dupont show how appointment of the local elite to a task force to revive the New Orleans Zoo helped protect the interests of affluent subgroups in the area.⁷⁶ Allen found that in East Lansing, Michigan, the positions taken by the association were largely

those of homeowners (the majority in the association) and not those of renters (the majority in the neighborhood).⁷⁷ Bolduc's findings in Hartford, Connecticut, reveal that most residents were unaware of the two programs the NRO offered, which indicates a division between leaders-beneficiaries and general residents.⁷⁸

Rich and Katan and I argue that material rewards gained by leaders in NROs are minimal.⁷⁹ Similarly Wandersman, Florin, Friedmann, and Meier find that the cost of participation—that is, donations, time from work or family, and neighbors' requests—far exceeds any available material rewards.⁸⁰ These studies indicate that the major rewards for leaders are the satisfaction generated by their activities and accomplishment within the NRO and that most leaders do not use their position to improve their material status or to abuse their office. It may be that these findings are biased by the limited accountability of and challenge to leaders, and abuse of office may be more prevalent than reported. The overall reported trend in the literature, however, is that NRO leaders have more potential for benefiting neighborhood subgroups than for personal gain.

Successful Advocacy

Regab, Blum, and Murphy report limited congruence between the problems perceived as most urgent by the residents and those on which NROs actually concentrate.⁸¹ They explain this gap by noting that residents stressed problems that had direct impact on the quality of their daily life, while leaders sought a balance between immediate and long-range problems. However, this gap may also indicate that leaders adopt perspectives that are comparable to those of city officials.

Many studies of NROs indicate that after a stage of reform and activism, both leaders and members co-opt into the formal organizations. Instead of representing the interest of local residents, they begin to assist external authorities in delivering services or in obtaining relevant data.⁸² These studies reveal that even the most contentious NROs, those that manage to survive for more than a decade, eventually become community service providers and neglect their earlier advocacy function.⁸³ Katan and I found that very few NROs in Israel were involved in advocacy or reform and that the majority either served formal organizations or were inactive.⁸⁴ Similarly, McNamee and Swisher note that NROs in Dayton, Ohio, spend only 4 percent of their time on planning or policy-making at the city or county level.⁸⁵ Their main interest is serving the city and county's need for local information and preserving the NRO.

Again, the overall trend indicated in the literature is that, over time, NRO leaders often disassociate themselves from local residents and ally themselves with the formal institutions with which they commu-

nicate. Once NROs become institutionalized, they either become co-producers of services for the local government or become inactive. Thus, they abandon the reformist zeal and participatory spirit that led to and characterize their establishment and the representative role for which they continue to exist.⁸⁶

Competition among Organizations

The existence of several NROs, contrary to single-function organizations, tends to weaken their individual power of representation.⁸⁷ A few researchers report hostility and a loss of power among some competing groups whose members are often from different ethnic, racial, or social groups.⁸⁸ The existence of NROs in every neighborhood perpetuates class differences and serves to better the interests of the upper middle class. Michael Williams notes several instances in which NROs, claiming to represent residents, managed to keep blacks out of all-white areas and to oppose orders to integrate schools.⁸⁹ McNamee and Swisher reveal that the formation of NROs in upper-middle-class neighborhoods results in loss of power and resources in the nearly all black, inner-city neighborhoods.⁹⁰ Poor neighborhoods cannot generate resources and will often rely on funds from authorities or be co-opted in other ways.⁹¹ Due to problems in raising funds and hiring professional staff, it seems evident that the poorer the neighborhood, the less powerful the organization will be.

The above findings indicate that NROs, like any other social structure, often serve to undermine their own positive intentions. When a number of neighborhoods have NROs, the relative advantage for low socio-economic neighborhoods disappears. Furthermore, competition among local groups reduces their effectiveness as they fight over narrow interests. Competition also enables public officials to recruit these organizations for their own purposes.

Discussion

Leaders of NROs are usually well-intentioned residents who, concerned by conditions in their neighborhood, decide to organize to improve things. These leaders select methods in line with their experience and values. In many instances, residents become leaders in a nondemocratic manner, such as appointment by external organizations or self-appointment. Even those who are elected are elected by a few residents and often face no real competition.

Because rewards for leadership are meager, few people wish to become leaders, a fact that renders officers less vulnerable to the sanctions of impeachment by residents.⁹² Furthermore, as is the case with most leaders, these officials are usually at a higher socioeconomic level than

are their constituencies. Uri Bronfenbrenner sees this as an indication of representative democracy, in which the best and most able represent the interests of all residents.⁹³ However, it is also a sign of a low-level participatory democracy in which full citizenship is limited to the elite.

Rich uses the exchange theory from a materialist perspective to argue that leaders of NROs very seldom receive material rewards for their efforts on behalf of the neighborhood.⁹⁴ Because their rewards are intrinsic, they do not need the other residents to be active in the NRO. The leadership group establishes its own system of social exchanges, such as their periodic meetings over refreshments, that generates benefits that offset the cost of running the organization. This increases the leaders' detachment from their constituencies.

Officials in NROs tend to create a small cadre of activists and to exchange information within this select circle. As a result, most residents are unaware of what is going on, except during the development and conflict phases of the organization. In this respect, NROs, like many other organizations, subscribe to Michels's "iron law of oligarchy"—that is, all organizations develop small but highly centralized and bureaucratic bodies of leaders—the elite—who will necessarily compromise democratic principles and keep most residents from participating and electing new leaders.⁹⁵

Some cities and national organizations have developed bylaws and democratic procedures that NROs are expected to observe in their day-to-day operation.⁹⁶ Yet NROs are characterized by a high level of flexibility and informality, which allows leaders to do as they wish. There are very few, if any, mechanisms for control or accountability to hinder officials of NROs.

Marlyn Gittle suggests that democratic citizen participation organizations may initially promote social change and adhere to participatory democratic processes but that they tend to be absorbed by the very institutional structures they had set out to change.⁹⁷ Along the same lines, Cooper argues that leadership demands technical and bureaucratic skills that alienate the constituencies—a principal characteristic of the "iron law of oligarchy."⁹⁸ Thus, many NROs, which at the outset involved residents in a democratic process, accommodate public authorities once they mature. When the social reform drive wanes, these organizations become less active, more self-preserving, more controlled by outside authorities, and less concerned with their democratic base. John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, in an analysis of social movement organizations, note that, to obtain needed external resources, organizations must meet the idiosyncratic preferences of those providing the resources, the democratic nature of the organization is compromised, and the survival of the organization becomes primary.⁹⁹

Ventriss and Pecorella found one exception: a neighborhood organization that managed to remain accountable and close to its residents.¹⁰⁰ They note that this effort was at the expense of attaining

goals and required patient, dedicated leaders who wanted to educate rather than achieve. The fact that this is the only exception reported in the literature indicates that both participatory and representative democracy are often compromised in NROs.

Conclusion

The major function of NROs is to moderate the power of complex organizations that influence the local scene and to represent the needs and preferences of local residents. However, a review of the literature indicates a low level of both participatory and representative democracy in NROs. From the representative point of view, NROs appear to be a mechanism of social control used by local government and other authorities. From the participatory point of view, NROs appear to be potentially regressive and elitist groups. Thus, I raise the question as to the overall desirability of NROs.

My analysis in this study focused on the actual functioning of NROs from an atomistic framework. One may also view NROs from a holistic perspective. In this respect, Williams notes that NROs can be, and often are, reactionary, racist, and antiprogressive while, paradoxically, serving other important functions in the neighborhoods.¹⁰¹ For example, NROs may assist in the individual and collective process of empowering residents or changing attitudes. Such contributions are essential elements in the democratic structure of any given society, and, though difficult to measure, they should not be ignored. Furthermore, the NROs may have an impact on how city planners and politicians regard the autonomy and self-determination of the residents. Without NROs, apathy and hopelessness might prevail on the neighborhood level, and city and other authorities would be free to do as they pleased, without regard to residents' needs and priorities. Neighborhood-representing organizations may have potentially decreased officials' paternalism. Finally, the mere existence of a local NRO may add to the pride of residents and their feeling of belonging even if they themselves are totally alienated from the organization.¹⁰² The level of democracy should not be the only criterion by which NROs are measured. Indirect evidence as to the importance of NROs is provided by Harry Boyte.¹⁰³ Based on a survey by the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1977, he reports that most interviewees believed voluntary organizations were more active in helping cities and neighborhoods than was government or big business. These findings are in line with Constance Smith and Anne Freeman's pluralistic thesis that voluntary organizations of all types contribute to democracy in society as a whole, even if they themselves are not necessarily democratic.¹⁰⁴

It is quite possible that NROs are worthwhile and democratic only when there is a real threat or common problem strong enough to unite and excite the residents. In such cases, NROs serve the majority,

are open to residents' input and participation, and are less subject to the influence of the authorities. However, as time passes and the common cause that united residents fades, NROs tend to become more closed, less democratic, and weaker. As such, it is questionable whether the existence of NROs is justified in the postreform stage. A better alternative may be for residents and community organizers alike to develop lively "ad hoc" NROs and to dismantle them once the goal has been achieved. In this respect, enthusiasm and a higher level of democracy will compensate for lack of experience and established structures. However, like all organizations, survival may become the primary goal in times of peace, and NROs do serve several positive functions that would not be performed were they to be dismantled. These include providing authorities with relevant information in the interest of better services and assisting individual residents with problems.

My thesis in this article is that there is a discrepancy between the potential and actual level of democracy in NROs. Before more conclusive assertions can be made, research is required to assess the level of democracy in NROs. These studies should also focus on practices that increase levels of democracy in NROs. Finally, policymakers, neighborhood activists, and local officials should be more aware of these issues and work in ways that will enable NROs to represent the neighborhood rather than the authorities or the leaders. The problem of rewards for leaders is a crucial one.¹⁰⁵ Because the rewards of leadership are minimal, very few wish to compete for office, and without the fear of being unseated, leaders have no incentive for democratic performance and need not be accountable. A more attractive reward system would increase competition and increase the level of democracy in NROs.

Notes

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