

Oligarchy in Farmland?

Application of Community Power Theory to a Rural Setting

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Abstract

Nelson Polsby's study of community power structures is one of the most widely known among political scientists. However, his research on the subject, as well as studies of community power that have been conducted since have focused on Eastern urban centers. As someone whose life has been spent away from cities, I posed the question: what will result from applying community power theory to a rural setting, namely Iroquois County, Illinois? Analyzing theories of elitism and pluralism through content analysis of The Times Republic, the county's only daily newspaper, in the years 1974 and 2004, I sought to compare the leadership structure of Iroquois County to those found in earlier works focusing on cities. Preliminary results show greater level of diversity among community leaders in 2004 than in 1974. However, what this means in context with national trends remains to be seen.

Literature Review

When it comes to community power, there are many competing theories; even the term itself is not completely clear. Each scholar on the subject seems to have just a slightly different meaning attached to it. Many more recent authors have noted this and tried to give some definition (Garrard 1977, Hammack 1978), but many of the older works gave little or no substantive definition of the term *community power*. Closely tied in with it is another term, local politics, which carries a more concrete but still often fluid definition. With our modern global mass media, the flow of data and news is much freer flowing now than ever before, the borders between local, state, and national issues are coming closer together and often times into conflict as well. With such loose use of terminology finding a mass of works that was consistent in their focus was difficult, but not impossible.

Despite a lack of clear definitions, there is a large and widely varied body of literature to be found pertaining to community power, local political structure, and the influence it has on a variety of issues. Although the range of topics discussed in the works was broad, most of them made one comment that was almost universally shared; both community power and local politics are constantly shifting, which is one of the main reasons that both terms are hard to get a solid

grip on. Of the two, community power is definitely the more difficult to grasp. According to most authors, including Garrard (1977), Hammack (1978), Meenaghan (1976), and Stone (1988), the definitive work on community power began with the works of Dahl, and Polsby (1980) in their study of New Haven's local power structure. Although Floyd Hunter (1953) addressed the topic earlier than Polsby and Dahl (1980), their New Haven study, written as a reaction to Hunter's, is the work that really put the study of community power on the map academically. Another concept that has remained from their work is that of elitism versus pluralism in power structures at the local level, but it has been expanded to a wider scope too. The works in this review are mostly built off the Dahl/Polsby (1980) research or use it as a reference. He defined *community power* as "the capacity of one actor to do something affecting another actor, which changes the probable pattern of specified future events." (Polsby 1980, 3) This is a definition that leaves a lot to the interpretation of the individual, so over time studies in power have often have had different meanings for the same term. More concrete are his concepts of elitism and pluralism, elitism being "a small number of people who had disproportionately large amounts of power in most aspects..." and pluralism as "at least two or more aggregates whose power varied with specific issues in the

local community..." (Meenaghan 1976 ,127)

Another concept closely related to community power is that of local politics, which have been changing and evolving in this country since it was founded. The problem is that "local" is another one of those terms that gets used frequently without a definition, or with one that varies greatly between works. For example, in his article on crime and local politics, Stuckey defines local politics as within a single city, or urban politics. Many, including as Hammack (1978), Polsby (1980), and Garrard (1977) use this same definition. Others apply "local" in a much broader sense, it may pertain to towns, counties, and sometimes even regions within a state when they mention local politics. One thing remains the same in all the works though; local politics were defined as being in a much smaller area than the state or federal level. In these areas most decisions are made by a small body of people which have an impact on people's daily lives. The issues in local politics are broad, but the actors in any one of them are the same. Councils, boards, associations, organizations, and individuals all play into this local level political system, which is where community power and local politics come together. This implies that elitist structures are in place within these communities.

The shift in community power in local politics is what has caused the most difficulty in discussing either topic. Evidence suggests that over time power has shifted from a small, homogenous group of white landowners in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the "bosses" and political machines of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that used political patronage to gain power.

(Percola 1994, Garrard 1977, Hunter 1953) The progressive shift throughout the twentieth century though has this power balance changing to a more pluralist representation. As Alan Ehrenhalt (1992) points out, the progressive movement has shifted the nomination process away from the "smoke filled room" to the primary elections.

Although this does not completely level the playing field because of the differences between states, it makes candidates work much harder to court their electorate, rather than merely appease the elites of an area. This takes far more time, money, and effort, and sheer willpower than what was required before, which has changed the type of people who seek elected offices. However, the real extent to which this has changed things has been the topic of a large mass of research. So far it remains a cloudy picture if there is or ever will be truly representative government at the local level. Some researchers have also questioned whether an elite group can

govern effectively and represent the community where there are elitist structures in place. (Meenaghan 1976)

Introduction

My research did not go as deep as most of these works; its main focus is merely to confirm or disprove the existence of an elitist structure in a rural community. Although this is not truly a new vein of research I think it holds merit because previous research has mostly been conducted in an urban environment instead of a rural one, plus it might show a change in findings since the studies that were used for models. I settled on using my home county of Iroquois County, Illinois for a case study since it nearly perfectly matched what I was looking for; geographically large (1160 square miles) and sparsely populated (approximately 31,334 people in the 2000 census). By examining the governing structures in place in the years 1974 and 2004 I set out to find if the elitist theory holds true in rural settings. In addition to just trying to confirm or deny an elitist structure I sought to examine change in the governing structure of the county in the last thirty years that would either point toward an elitist growth or a more pluralized leadership pool over time.

In the end the reason for this research is simple but still very important. Being able to understand who runs for

public offices and why can help political scientists, as well as the public at large, to understand this community power structure and changes in it over time. (Ehrenhalt 1992) The ability to analyze, understand, and predict changes in these structures is a valuable because if we can analyze the values and interests of those who govern we might be able to help shape public policy for the common good more effectively.

Methodology and Analysis

In order to try to get some grasp on the leadership structure of Iroquois County over time, the years 1974 and 2004 were chosen for study. These two years were used because they represented a fairly long span of time, and because issues facing the county in both years were similar. After the years were settled on the next thing to consider was what to use as a gauge for the power structure of the county in each year. After some consideration newspaper articles were chosen as a source to construct data sets for each year. The Times Republic (also known as the Eagle Times Republic or Iroquois Times depending on the time of publication) was chosen above all over local newspapers for two reasons. First and most importantly, it has been the county's only daily newspaper since the 1930s. The second was a matter of logistics, all of the Times Republic volumes are kept on

microfilm at local libraries, whereas most of the others were not, or if they were, not in their entirety.

For each year only articles relating to political or leadership issues were taken, resulting in a total of forty-one articles between January and May of 1974, and forty-nine articles between January and March of 2004. Then, after reading through each set, they were broken into broad categories representing the issues the county was facing in each year. The results were a total of six categories; zoning, public works, law enforcement, education, and economics/development being shared in both 1974 and 2004. The sixth issue, agriculture/conservation was only present in the 1974 articles.

(Tables one and two here)

The next step was to find the groups and individuals representing those groups that had some kind of impact in each area within the articles. There were a total of twenty active groups mentioned in the 1974 articles, with a possibility of a twenty first. A blurred microfilm image made it impossible to distinguish part of an article that had the group's name. Within these groups a total of one hundred and twenty individual actors identified. In the 2004 article set

nineteen different groups with a total of one hundred and twenty six actors were present. Just by seeing the number of actors and groups involved in such a sparsely populated area, Polsby's (1980) theory that a more diverse group of individuals controls the power structure of a locality was beginning to outweigh Dahl's elitist argument.

(Tables three and four here)

However, raw numbers alone are rarely proof enough to disprove a theory so more analysis was needed. One of the most obvious indicators that a group of elites control an area is to look through the list of actors and find how many belong to multiple groups. For both years, this accounted for a very small proportion of the total number. In 1974 only four of the one hundred and twenty (3.3 percent) belonged to more than one group, and only one of those four was in more than two (the actor was in three groups). The numbers for 2004 turned out very much the same, four of the actors (3.2 percent) were involved in more than one group, and none of them were in more than two groups. When I was sorting through this one trend did begin to emerge though that supported Ehrenhalt's theory of diversification of political office holders in the last half century, one related to sex.

(Tables five and six here)

When compared, the 2004 data shows a much higher level of women involved in the local leadership structures and decision making than what was present in 1974. In 1974 women only appeared ten times throughout the articles, which accounted for only 6.4 percent of the total. In 2004 this number had increased to thirty six, which was 18.6 percent. The focus of their participation by issues also broadened greatly over the course of thirty years. In 1974 no women were mentioned in any of the articles related to agriculture or law enforcement, and only one each in the zoning and economic/development articles. The 2004 data shows a higher level of participation in all areas, with the highest concentrations in education, public works, and economics/development.

(Tables seven and eight here)

As one may expect, this increase in the number of women and the range of issues they had influence in was accompanied by a diversification of positions and groups they were active in. Through comparison sex*group cross tabs the picture was very clear. In 1974 the only elected offices that any women

held were local school board positions, the rest were all private citizens. This is a sharp contrast to 2004, where nine of the nineteen groups had at least one woman in them. Again, this increase in participation by women is more evidence of the political process lending itself to higher levels of diversification over time as Ehrenhalt (1992) states in his work. It may also confirm that education lends itself to diversification, since the level of education within the county rose sharply between 1974 and 2004. In 1970 only 50.6 percent of the adult residents of the county had a high school diploma, whereas in 2000 that number had risen to 80.3 percent. There was also a rise in the level of college education within the county, from 5.2 percent of the adults holding a Bachelor's degree in 1970 to 11.3 percent in 2000 (US Census Bureau data).

(Tables nine and ten here)

Results and Conclusion

After running through the data gathered from the newspapers it appears that Nelson Polsby's defense of a pluralist governing structure in local areas holds true to rural settings such as Iroquois County as well as urban areas that community power studies have been conducted in previously. By examining the increase of women in the

county's power structure it also appears that as others have stated, as our society strives for a higher level of equality there will be more diversity among its leaders. However, there are obvious limitations to using newspaper articles as a source of data. There is no information about these people in the articles, so in fact there could be merit to Floyd Hunter's (1953) assertion that established businessmen (and women in our modern setting) control the power structures of communities. Future research on the subject that includes more detailed information about those who are in power in a rural community would do much to determine just how pluralistic the governing structure truly is.

Appended Tables and Charts

Table 1 : 1974 Article Type Frequencies

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Zoning	12	7.6	7.6	7.6
Public Works or property	21	13.4	13.4	21.0
Agriculture or conservation	46	29.3	29.3	50.3
Law Enforcement	12	7.6	7.6	58.0
Education	15	9.6	9.6	67.5
Economics and development	51	32.5	32.5	100.0
Total	157	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 : 2004 Article Type Frequencies

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Zoning	17	8.8	8.8	8.8
Public works or property	70	36.1	36.1	44.8
Law enforcement	27	13.9	13.9	58.8
Education	43	22.2	22.2	80.9
Economics and development	37	19.1	19.1	100.0
Total	194	100.0	100.0	

Table 3 : Active Groups in 1974

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
County Administrator, supervisor, or staff	1	.6	.6	.6
Element Planning Commission	3	1.9	1.9	2.5
Iroquois County Board	4	2.5	2.5	5.1
Regional Planning Commission	2	1.3	1.3	6.4
Mayor or town president	10	6.4	6.4	12.7
Private citizen	21	13.4	13.4	26.1
Iroquois County National Farmers' Association	14	8.9	8.9	35.0
Iroquois County Soil and Water Conservation Commission	4	2.5	2.5	37.6
Chamber of Commerce	20	12.7	12.7	50.3
Superintendent	6	3.8	3.8	54.1
School board	7	4.5	4.5	58.6
Town/village council	7	4.5	4.5	63.1
Iroquois County ASCS	2	1.3	1.3	64.3
Iroquois Valley Association	21	13.4	13.4	77.7
Ford-Iroquois Cooperative Council	2	1.3	1.3	79.0
Illegible	15	9.6	9.6	88.5
Alderman	2	1.3	1.3	89.8
Law Enforcement Agent	11	7.0	7.0	96.8
Iroquois County Bar Association	3	1.9	1.9	98.7
Department of Family Services	1	.6	.6	99.4
Iroquois Industrial Development Association	1	.6	.6	100.0
Total	157	100.0	100.0	

Table 4 : Active Groups in 2004

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
County administrator, supervisor, or staff	4	2.1	2.1	2.1
Iroquois County Board	12	6.2	6.2	8.2
Regional Planning Commission	7	3.6	3.6	11.9
Mayor or town president	9	4.6	4.6	16.5
Private citizen	38	19.6	19.6	36.1
Chamber of Commerce	3	1.5	1.5	37.6
Superintendent	11	5.7	5.7	43.3
School Board	16	8.2	8.2	51.5
City/town/village council	13	6.7	6.7	58.2
Alderman	37	19.1	19.1	77.3
Law Enforcement Agent	16	8.2	8.2	85.6
Public Works Committee	4	2.1	2.1	87.6
Tax Assessor	1	.5	.5	88.1
Building Inspector	2	1.0	1.0	89.2
City/County Attourney	5	2.6	2.6	91.8
Kiwanis	13	6.7	6.7	98.5
Farm Services Agency	1	.5	.5	99.0
Department of Public Health	1	.5	.5	99.5
USDA	1	.5	.5	100.0
Total	194	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 : 1974 Sex Breakdown

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	147	93.6	93.6	93.6
Female	10	6.4	6.4	100.0
Total	157	100.0	100.0	

Table 6 : 2004 Sex Breakdown

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	158	81.4	81.4	81.4
Female	36	18.6	18.6	100.0
Total	194	100.0	100.0	

Table 7 : 1974 Sex ratios by Issue

	Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
ArtType Zoning	11	1	12
Public Works or property	18	3	21
Agriculture or conservation	46	0	46
Law Enforcement	12	0	12
Education	10	5	15
Economics and development	50	1	51
Total	147	10	157

Table 8 2004 : Sex Ratios by Issue

	Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
ArtType Zoning	14	3	17
Public works or property	60	10	70
Law enforcement	26	1	27
Education	30	13	43
Economics and development	28	9	37
Total	158	36	194

Table 9 : 1974 Sex Ratios by Group

Group	Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
County Administrator, supervisor, or staff	1	0	1
Element Planning Commission	3	0	3
Iroquois County Board	4	0	4
Regional Planning Commission	2	0	2
Mayor or town president	10	0	10
Private citizen	13	8	21
Iroquois County National Farmers' Association	14	0	14
Iroquois County Soil and Water Conservation Commission	4	0	4
Chamber of Commerce	20	0	20
Superintendent	6	0	6
School board	5	2	7
Town/village council	7	0	7
Iroquois County ASCS	2	0	2
Iroquois Valley Association	21	0	21
Ford-Iroquois Cooperative Council	2	0	2
Illegible	15	0	15
Alderman	2	0	2
Law Enforcement Agent	11	0	11
Iroquois County Bar Association	3	0	3
Department of Family Services	1	0	1
Iroquois Industrial Development Association	1	0	1
Total	147	10	157

Table 10 : 2004 Sex Ratios by Group

		Sex		Total
		Male	Female	
Group	County administrator, supervisor, or staff	3	1	4
	Iroquois County Board	11	1	12
	Regional Planning Commission	7	0	7
	Mayor or town president	9	0	9
	Private citizen	23	15	38
	Chamber of Commerce	1	2	3
	Superintendent	8	3	11
	School Board	11	5	16
	City/town/village council	9	4	13
	Alderman	34	3	37
	Law Enforcement Agent	16	0	16
	Public Works Committee	2	2	4
	Tax Assessor	1	0	1
	Building Inspector	2	0	2
	City/County Attourney	5	0	5
	Kiwanis	13	0	13
	Farm Services Agency	1	0	1
	Department of Public Health	1	0	1
	USDA	1	0	1
Total		158	36	194

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