

VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS: A COMPARISON  
OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL COMMUNITY LEADERS

D. Stanley Eitzen and Charles K. Warriner  
University of Kansas

Studies of community power have shown that the particular form of power structure varies from community to community. It is generally agreed, however, that informal "behind-the-scenes" decision-makers hold the ultimate power in most communities. This emphasis on informal leaders overlooks the very real role played by two other elements of the power structure--the visible leadership (elected and appointed officials in various agencies and organizations) and the organizations and relationships through which leadership and power are organized and implemented.

Despite the role of informal leaders the formal leaders are a very real part of the community power structure. Laws are formally enacted and administered only through them. The degree to which formal leaders are manipulated by "behind-the-scenes" leaders is open to question. Wherever the ultimate power lies in the community, there is, nevertheless, the necessity for coordination between the informal and formal leaders. Voluntary associations provide one important source for such a linkage.

Voluntary associations comprise the least obvious yet very real element of the power structure. Some of these associations are explicitly parapolitical (e.g., act as pressure groups and form coalitions for added strength on particular issues). Such organizations also provide a base from which the leaders are selected and recruited. Moreover, organizations are a means of economic and political control by particular groups and individuals over others.

Since sociological research has focused on the study of informal leaders, it would appear to be valuable and instructive to compare these studies with one of formal leaders to determine if there are any significant differences between the two types. To this end, we will analyze the findings from a study of the formal leaders of a midwestern community<sup>1</sup> and compare them to findings from representative studies of the informal leaders of other communities.

The data came from a university community of approximately 30,000 inhabitants located forty-five miles from a large urban center. The universe to be studied is composed of all those persons elected to positions in the city government (City Commission and School Board) and those persons appointed by the City Commission to the various city boards and commissions from 1960 to 1964.

The data for this study were derived from mailed questionnaires which asked the respondent to give his name, address, occupation, employer, community, and the organizations to which he belonged, plus the length of membership and offices held within these organizations.

The total number of formal leaders from 1960 to 1964 was 108. Fifteen of these persons were not available for our research since they had died or had moved away. The questionnaire and two follow-up letters were sent to the remaining 95 persons, bringing a response from 77. The data for this study, then, represents 71 per cent of the total universe and 83 per cent of the officials still living in the community.

A composite picture of informal leaders from the literature. There is a close association between social class, involvement in voluntary associations, and political activity.<sup>2</sup> A review of the literature allows us with some certainty to arrive at a composite picture of informal leaders on these dimensions.

If we take occupation as a criterion of social class, informal leaders are clearly members of the middle and upper classes. A general conclusion in the literature is that informal leaders tend to be successful businessmen or in the professions.<sup>3</sup>

Erbe cites 20 studies that find a positive correlation between high socio-economic status and high rates of organizational involvement.<sup>4</sup> We would expect informal leaders, then, to belong to more voluntary associations than the average residents. The empirical studies of informal community leaders do not mention specific rates but generally find a high organizational involvement for these leaders.

Not only do informal leaders belong to a greater than average number of voluntary associations but they tend to be leaders in these organizations. Schulze and Blumberg found 89 per cent of the informal leaders in "Cibola" had served as president of at least one local voluntary association.<sup>5</sup>

Another consistent finding in the literature is that more informal leaders belong to the local Chamber of Commerce than any other organization.<sup>6</sup>

Several writers have reported the significance and the extent of the overlapping memberships of informal leaders.<sup>7</sup> They assume that "... persons participating together in community organizations may use these organizations as communication centers from community decision-making or at least as places to reinforce friendships." Thus, the assumption that frequency of contact among informal leaders in voluntary associations tends to lead to the formation of cliques.

The comparison of informal and formal community leaders. How do formal community leaders compare with informal leaders in the characteristics listed above? Floyd Hunter found in Regional City that over 50 per cent of the policy-makers were businessmen and 15 per cent were in the professions.<sup>9</sup> This finding is buttressed by D'Antonio and his associates who found that 67% of the community influentials (informal leaders)<sup>10</sup> in eleven cities were in business and 15 per cent in the professions. The present study of formal leaders finds 49 per cent in business and 39 per cent in the professions. If we take only the occupations of the members of the most powerful elected body (the City Commission) we find five of the seven (71 per cent) have a marked business orientation.

The studies of informal leaders imply a higher than average rate of organizational memberships for these persons. The average public official in our study (elected or appointed) belongs to 6.14 organizations. This compares with an average of 2.48 found for a sample of the total population of Lawrence (N = 382).<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned previously, Schulze and Blumberg found 89 per cent of the informal leaders in "Cibola" had served as president of at least one local voluntary association. This compares with 54 per cent of the total sample of public officials and 80 per cent of the elected officials alone in the present study.

The Chamber of Commerce is the most popular organization for informal and formal leaders. Schulze and Blumberg found 14 out of the 18 leaders (77 per cent) belonged to this organization.<sup>12</sup> Our sample of public officials finds only 32 per cent belonging to this organization. For the elected officials alone we find that 50 per cent are members. In both instances, however, the Chamber of Commerce is the most popular organization.

Delbert Miller found a total of 94 overlapping memberships among the twelve key influentials in "Pacific City" (an average of 7.83).<sup>13</sup> Our study of formal leaders also discloses a high rate of memberships in common. Figure I demonstrates this phenomenon by giving the memberships in common among the City Commissioners as well as the overlapping memberships of the City Commissioners and the members of the most important appointive body--the Planning Commission.

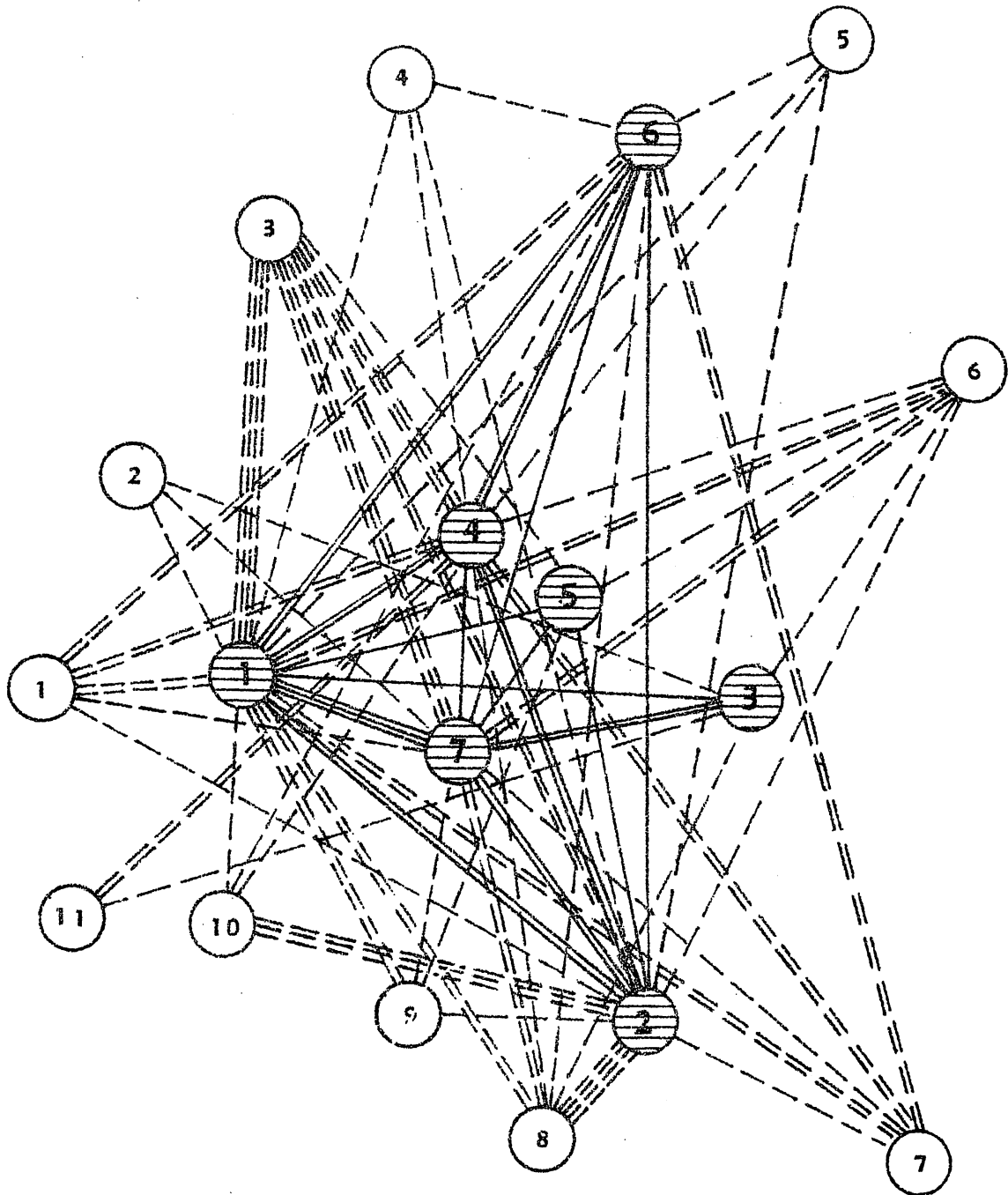
See Figure I

Figure I shows that the average City Commissioner has 6.86 common memberships with the other Commissioners and 10.29 common memberships with the members of the Planning Commission. A matrix of memberships in common of all the elected and appointive officials finds an average of 33 common memberships.<sup>14</sup> This is a rather striking high degree of common memberships among public community leaders. One might tentatively conclude that these overlapping memberships of public officials result in the building of common ties through interaction. It is also very possible that leadership reputations are built in voluntary associations.

Data such as found in Figure I could be the starting point for research on cliques of community decision-makers--both formal and informal. Richard Schermerhorn proposes such a meaningful study when he suggests that there is an overlap in memberships between formal and informal leaders.

At the informal or non-governmental level, cliques and associations exercise power through networks of social groupings that form temporary alliances or, in other cases, more permanent coalitions. Some of these may include members of the city council or the mayor so that networks of communication are constantly open.<sup>15</sup>

FIGURE 1



= CITY COMMISSIONER. The solid lines designate the common memberships among the City Commissioners.



= PLANNING COMMISSION MEMBER. The broken lines designate the memberships in common among the City Commissioners and the Planning Commission members.

Conclusion. Formal and informal leaders are not so different as has been implied in the literature. On the surface, at least, it appears that formal and informal leaders are "drawn from the same well" from within the community. Both types of leaders share a high socio-economic status, a business orientation, high organizational involvement, a marked preference for membership in the Chamber of Commerce, and a significant network of organizational ties with other leaders. The similarity is even more profound if one compares the City Commissioners with the informal leaders. This association is not conclusive because our sample is too small but it does suggest that further study might lead to such a generalization.

Our study of formal leaders has numerous limitations which are inevitable in any piece of single-community research. It is hoped, however, that the similarities found between the formal leaders in this one community and the informal leaders of other communities will be theoretically and methodologically suggestive for further research. For example, we need to know: (1) whether there is a qualitative difference in the type of businessman who is a formal leader and the one who is an informal leader; (2) the role of key voluntary associations (e. g., the Chamber of Commerce) in the community decision-making process; and (3) the role of voluntary associations in the formation of linkages between formal and informal leaders.

We have suggested that an adequate study of community power structure must include not only informal leaders but also formal leaders and the role of voluntary associations. In particular, one must look for the linkage within each group of leaders and the linkage between the two groups. Common voluntary association memberships provide the foundation for such an analysis.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. D. Stanley Eitzen, "A Study of the Voluntary Association Memberships of Formal Community Leaders," Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Kansas, 1966.
2. Cf. William Erbe, "Social Involvement and Political Activity," American Sociological Review, XXIX (April, 1964), pp. 198-199; John C. Scott, "Memberships and Participation in Voluntary Associations," American Sociological Review, XXII (June, 1957), pp. 315-326; Robert O. Schulze and Leonard U. Blumberg, "The Determination of Local Power Elites," American Journal of Sociology, LXIII (November, 1957), pp. 290-296; and Nicholas Babchuk, Ruth Marsey and C. Wayne Gordon, "Men and Women in Community Agencies: A Note on Power and Prestige," American Sociological Review, XXV (June, 1960), pp. 399-403.

3. Cf. Floyd Hunter, Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers ("Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1963), pp. 75-76; and William V. D'Antonio, et. al., "Institutional and Occupational Representatives in Eleven Community Influence Systems," American Sociological Review, XXVI (June, 1961), p. 444.
4. Erbe, op. cit., p. 199.
5. Schulze and Blumberg, op. cit., p. 295.
6. Cf. Donald W. Olmstead, "Organizational Leadership and Social Structure in a Small City," American Sociological Review, XIX (June, 1954), p. 278; Hunter, op. cit., p. 83; Schulze and Blumberg, loc. cit.
7. Cf. Delbert C. Miller, "Decision-Making Cliques in Community Structures: A Comparative Study of An American and An English City," American Journal of Sociology LXIV (November, 1958), pp. 299-310; Hunter, op. cit., p. 17; and Richard A. Schermerhorn, Society and Power (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 88.
8. Miller, op. cit., p. 303.
9. Hunter, op. cit., pp. 75-76.
10. D'Antonio, et. al., op. cit., p. 444.
11. Kenneth M. Rothrock, "A Study of Voluntary Association Membership," Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Kansas, 1967, p. 28.
12. Schulze and Blumberg, loc. cit.
13. Miller, loc. cit.
14. This mean of 33 common memberships cannot be inferred from Figure I. See Eitzen, op. cit., pp. 35-37 for this matrix.
15. Schermerhorn, loc. cit.