
**An Empirical Method for the Study of Community Power:
an Examination of Power in Oklahoma City**

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The study of the location and use of power in the community is becoming a central topic of interest to all of the social sciences. Some of the theoretical controversies which have developed in this area have, however, escaped experimental scrutiny because of persistent and difficult methodological problems. One of the most difficult problems centers around the question of whether there is or is not a power elite. Much of the information which has been gathered on this topic since the publication of Hunter's (1953) *Community Power Structure* has remained shrouded in a veil of secrecy. The secrecy has, of course, been necessitated by heavy reliance on studies of individual leaders as indicators of power.

While most community power studies have considered the traditional sources of power, i.e., economic and organizational, the power weight of each of these sources has been extrapolated from the power possessed by leading figures in the community. The designs have been parsimonious and have much to recommend them, but at the same time they have contained one of the most difficult variables in the total assessment of power, the aspect of charisma in power. Use of the ranking of individuals as the technique for the study of community power tends to cause the factor of personality to obscure the other power sources; this is especially true in the case of the power a leader derives from representing an organization. We have noticed innumerable cases where a presumably powerful figure, e.g. a mayor, in a few months after the loss of his position is a powerless nonentity. This also holds true for figures who have their source of power based in business organization.

A further methodological problem is found when interviews are focused on leading individuals. The respondent is necessarily placed in a subjective relationship with the power figure. This subjectivity may obscure responses to such an extent that understanding can be achieved only by the most highly skilled interviewer, and one who perhaps, like Dahl (1961), has made his home in the area for some time. If we are to make power studies in community decision-making a science rather than an art, the method must be clearer, more objective, and most of all, feasible for the trained outside observer to perform.

There is still another condition which limits the utility of the individual approach. We have in this country an ethic of privacy which requires that identities be veiled in a nonrecognizable form. This, of

course, makes it difficult for other researchers to repeat experiments. The data that can be provided on specific individuals tends to be deceptive regarding the total flow of power in public policy making.

It, therefore, becomes imperative that an approach to community power structures be found which can circumvent or obviate the restrictions elicited by the individual-centered study of power and those which put concentrations of power in an either-or category, e.g., elite vs. pluralist. We believe this can be done by altering the approach from the more exciting, but also more restrictive, study of individual ranking to an inventory of the influence of vital community organizations on community decisions. This approach does not appear immediately novel since there have been studies (Zeigler, 1964) on the role of organizations in public issues. We believe that such studies of organizational influences have distinct advantages over the attempted ranking of individuals. These advantages are:

1. More material can be legitimately published without embarrassment or violation of privacy of the individual. Thus, more useful scientific information can result because more can be made public. In the long run the continuing study of an area becomes dry without some utilitarian fruits.
2. The people interviewed are more willing and more objective in evaluating an organization than they are in evaluating another person.
3. The same theory of consequences that has been fruitfully derived from the individual studies can also be applied to the organizational studies. This applies to communities having power elites as well as to those that have a relative absence of leadership and organization.
4. Our approach can be used far more fruitfully in inter-city comparisons of organizational control. This is especially useful for a comparative political science since the total political organization of many communities could be meaningfully viewed and related to each other.

The following empirical study of power in community decision-making in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, represents a methodology which has the aforementioned advantages. In accordance with the theories of Hunter (1953) and Mills (1959), the following hypothesis was raised:

Organizational influence and control will follow a hierarchical pattern which will demonstrate itself in a relatively pervasive and consistent manner from one issue to another.

PROCEDURE

Consistency of organizational influence was tested by isolating four issues and assessing the relative influence of each of ten organized interest groups upon these issues. The issues were of considerable interest to Oklahoma City at the time the data were collected in 1964. The issues were as follows:

1. **Political Reform.** This constituted the creation of a nonpartisan citizens' reform group, the "Association for Responsible Government," to elect reform councilmen and mayor. The group was highly successful.
2. **Civic Improvements.** The promotion of a "City Beautiful" organization and its campaign for voluntary public action. There was moderate success for this program.

3. **Integration.** There was a Negro-white group attempt to bring about the integration of public facilities. It appeared highly successful on a voluntary basis and it finally culminated in a city ordinance.
4. **Bond Drives.** Several bond issues were submitted to the city electorate primarily for roads, but also including sewers, courthouse and other municipal improvements. These were all supported by large majorities.

Ten groups were chosen on the basis of their relative permanence of influence in city affairs. These were also the groupings we would expect to find in any American city with a population of over 20,000. The "panel of experts" approach was utilized for the assessment of the relative influence of the various organizations. Thus, 30 judges were selected on the basis of their supposed knowledge of Oklahoma City. Caution was taken to assure that no more than three judges held positions in any one of the 10 organizations. Each judge was asked to rank each of the 10 groups on each of the four issues. For example, the group which was considered to be most influential on a given issue was assigned a rank of one. The group considered least influential was assigned a rank of 10. Thus, each group was assigned a rank from 1 to 10. The mean rank of a given group consisted of a composite of the opinions of the 30 judges. Thus, we have a 4 x 10 design with each of the 40 cells containing a mean based on the composite opinion of our panel of 30 experts.

RESULTS

Table I presents the mean ranks of the 10 groups on each of the four issues. A better picture of the relative influence of each group can be provided by converting the means in Table I to simple ranks. Thus, on the reform issue, the mayor and his office receives a rank of one since this group has the lowest mean rank. The Republican Party receives a rank of 10 since this group had the highest mean rank. Thus, each mean rank may be converted to a simple rank. Table II contains all of the conversions from mean rank to simple rank.

A test of the experimental hypothesis is provided by a measure of the consistency of ranks across each of the four issues. Kendall's (1955) *Coefficient of Concordance W* provides such a measure. For the data in Table II, there is a statistically significant degree ($W=0.67$, $P<0.01$) of concordance of ranks. Thus, according to the measurement techniques employed, it would appear that power groupings in Oklahoma City have a fairly stabilized influence which operates at a significantly consistent level from issue to issue.

The power hierarchy is flexible enough to permit some variation from issue to issue, but there is no great concentration of power in any one group. In fact the two top interest groups are equal in power. There is a hierarchy of leadership led by the news media and governmental organization, but they are on a par in strength, and the third category is not far behind. Thus, it appears that community change in Oklahoma City could not be brought about easily unless it were in the interest of the news media, governmental organization, and probably another major grouping. Consequently, it should not be assumed that the existence of a hierarchy of power permits the indiscriminate use of that power. In fact the hierarchy itself dictates only such action as is compatible with the survival of the hierarchy. Thus the "power elite" in this case depends on a stratification of procedure rather than exercise of power by a mystical self-aggrandizing leaders. Once this distinction is understood a great deal of the controversy between elitism and pluralism will be resolved.

TABLE I. MEAN* RANK FOR EACH OF TEN GROUPS ON EACH OF FOUR ISSUES

	Government Reform	Civic Improvement	Integration	Bond Drives
Mayor & Council	2.05	1.96	3.00	4.00
Labor Groups	5.70	5.08	5.27	5.63
Chamber of Commerce	2.75	2.50	6.13	1.46
Churches	5.50	5.82	2.30	3.31
Democratic Party	6.33	7.17	6.67	8.50
League of Women Voters	4.32	4.23	6.47	5.00
Newspapers, TV, Radio	2.31	2.41	3.48	1.82
NAACP	7.14	7.33	2.74	9.25
Republican Party	8.60	9.00	8.88	9.75
Service Clubs	6.64	4.86	6.92	3.33

*Means are not all based on the same N since some judges disqualified themselves for judging the influence of some groups.

TABLE II. RANK ORDER OF INFLUENCE OF TEN GROUPS ON EACH OF FOUR ISSUES

	Government Reform	Civic Improvement	Integration	Bond Drives
Mayor & Council				
City Manager	1	1	3	5
Labor Groups	6	6	5	7
Chamber of Commerce	3	3	6	1
Churches	5	7	1	3
Democratic Party	7	8	8	8
League of Women Voters	4	4	7	6
Newspapers, TV, & Radio	2	2	4	2
NAACP	9	9	2	9
Republican Party	10	10	10	10
Service Clubs	8	5	9	4

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study seem relevant to two major questions which dominate current attempts to assess community power. The first question centers around the theoretical dispute as to whether there is a power elite with pervasive influence or whether power is specialized to specific issue areas. The second question deals with the problem of finding a methodology which will provide a definitive answer to the first question. We will direct our discussion first to the question of methodology, then to the question of theory.

As was pointed out in the introduction, our organization-ranking approach offers several distinct methodological advantages over the individual-ranking approach. The judges who participated in this study were far less hesitant to rank organizations than to rank individuals. In a number of cases judges completely refused to rank individuals for reasons that seemed obviously affective in nature. This emotional or affective dimension did not appear to interfere with the ranking of organizations. There is, of course, still a question as to the comparative accuracy of individual ranking and organizational ranking, but organizational ranking apparently does not produce great ego involvement on the part of the judge, and the results of the ranking do not have to be disguised or published in some vague or obscure form. One of the more interesting possibilities of the organizational ranking method is its simplicity and its

adaptability to a large number of cities for intercity comparisons. With this method it seems feasible that a comparison could be made of the relative power positions of groups which various cities may have in common. We question, for example, whether other cities would have news media with as high a rank as Oklahoma City does. Relative comparisons of other groupings would also be of interest since our initial selection of these groupings was also with regard to their general existence in other cities. It may, therefore, be possible to study power hierarchy from city to city and make comparative quantitative statements about the relative hierarchical structure of one city as opposed to another. Such comparative analysis would have important implications for providing a more conclusive answer to the theoretical question of whether there is or is not a power elite.

The results of the present study lend support to the appositeness of elite theory for accounting for the power structure of Oklahoma City. It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that these results lend general support to elite theory. The only permissible generalization is that there is a perceived power elite in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. General support for elite theory would be contingent upon replication of the present results in a large number of different communities. Support for our research will also depend upon validation techniques which must demonstrate the judges' perception of a hierarchy to be in keeping with the actual situation.

The conclusion that our results lend support to elite theory might be challenged on the basis that the significant correlation resulted only because of the interdependence of the chosen issues. Such an argument is probably untenable in the present case, but it does suggest a crucial refinement of the present methodology, namely, the development of a technique to insure that issues chosen are a random sample from a population of issues facing a given community. The issues in the present study were not chosen at random and even though the issues have a certain a priori independence, the present data must be interpreted with caution.

SUMMARY

Organizational power in Oklahoma City was studied by utilizing a "panel of experts" to assess the relative influence of each of 10 organizations upon each of four community issues. Perceived consistency of organizational influence was indicated by a significant coefficient of concordance.

The experimental design is discussed from the standpoint of the advantages it offers for replication, intercity comparisons, and publishability of results.

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