CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT IN THREE OKLAHOMA COMMUNITIES

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Del City

A study of citizen participation and relations between citizens and their elected officials in three suburban Oklahoma City communities shows that all forms of citizen participation are very low and that elected officials are generally forced to make decisions with very little input. Modes of decision-making, dealing with conflict, and changing regimes all suggest that Dahl's model of pluralism, designed to explain the politics of 1950s New Haven, fits these 1990s suburbs nearly as well. While there are signs of growing communitarianism and civicism in these communities, these activities are supplementing, not supplanting, the plural democratic systems.

It is only 10:30 on a July morning at Freedom Trail Park, but it is already over 90 degrees. As a result, the children abandon the sandbox and playground and drag grateful mothers to the shade of oak trees and the shore of the lake. At one corner, a city crew mows and makes repairs. On another, contractors put down sod over a recently rebuilt sewer pipe. Beyond them another contractor puts the finishing touches on the blacktop that will connect the quiet town road to the interchange

on the Interstate. The sign reads "Yukon City Park 1966." It could be 1966, but a closer look suggests otherwise. The playground, built by volunteers with donated materials, is accessible to disabled children and adults. Under one of those shade trees is a group of disabled persons enjoying a post-play drink. While one side of the park is bordered by a typical 1960s-looking housing tract, the other edge of the park is watched over by the peaked roofs of new houses enclosed by an eight-foot brick wall. Getting to the park, one passes too many convenience stores to count, not to mention Wal-Mart and Wendy's and McDonald's, all packed along a street recently renamed for a country music star. This is Yukon, Oklahoma, "Yukonamerica" to locals. It is 1998.

In thirty years Yukon has grown from a farm town centered around the grain elevator and flour mill to a suburb, arguably with no center at all. Its population has tripled in that time. Yukon has changed. City government was essential in managing change by making decisions on issues as diverse as zoning land, building infrastructure, and regulating public and private activity. Because most citizens had other concerns that seemed more important, they elected other people to worry about these things for them. As long as elected officials made decisions that were "good for the community," Yukon could grow and change with the quiet support of its citizens. Understanding how citizens and elected officials work together is fundamental to understanding how and why communities like Yukon grow and change.

Political science has long recognized local elected officials' important in the process and results of municipal government and politics. Robert Dahl (1961) made elected officials the central element of a model that explains how municipal government could function democratically and effectively in spite of widespread apathy. Dahl suggested that elected officials shared a strong commitment to "the democratic creed," an assumption that democracy was the best way to operate any government. Local representatives used their time and other political resources to govern the municipality for what they saw as the common good. Citizens acceded to the leadership of their representatives until the current regime could not resolve serious political disagreements. At that point, one or more political leaders who were unhappy with the current situation attempted to mobilize citizens to change it. If so motivated, citizens would use their own political resources — time, money, and energy — to change the direction of the municipal government. This underlying system allowed

leaders to develop governing coalitions and to balance the needs of many competing interest groups. The model described New Haven, Connecticut in the 1950s — the location for Dahl's study — as a plural democracy in which incumbent and aspiring elected leaders were the focal point and the most important actors in urban politics. These leaders cultivated and regulated interest group activities in a way that dispersed power among interest groups but concentrated power in the leaders themselves. Local elected leaders were both the representatives of the citizens and the managers of urban conflict (Dahl 1961).

Dahl's ideas, particularly his insistence on the importance of local elected officials in urban politics, have been questioned in later studies of large urban areas. Lowi (1979) suggested that pluralism had deteriorated into "hyperpluralism" in which interest groups gained hegemony over policies that affected them to the point that elected leadership was virtually powerless. Stone (1989) found that in Atlanta successful candidates for local elected offices did indeed create coalitions of interest groups to gain office. Once they were elected, however, they risked loss of relevance unless they abandoned or downplayed their winning coalitions and worked in unison with more powerful and important business leaders. DeLeon (1992) found much the same dynamic operating in San Francisco. Peterson (1981) suggested that the need to compete in a growing international economy made both local elected officials and local business interests virtually powerless. Power was held by multinational corporations that left little room for local decision-making. Virtually all citizens agreed on the course of action that made the city competitive, so there was no conflict to manage and little skill needed in representing citizens.

Political scientists are not alone in questioning the importance of local elected officials. Civic and communitarian movements around the country note the growing disconnection between citizens' interests and concerns and their officials and governments (Frederickson 1997). The communitarian movement advocates that citizens bypass their officials and governments altogether and minimize the role of the state by building alternative institutions for community support (Etzioni 1993). A parallel movement, civicism, urges citizens to develop programs outside the reach of existing institutions with a goal of "governance," as opposed to government (Boyte 1989). In the view of these movements, the traditional democratic system, particularly the elected representatives

who guide it, has lost its legitimacy. This article suggests that Dahl's model is still the most useful in explaining municipal government and politics in the study communities.

THE STUDY COMMUNITIES

This article addresses the relationship between citizens and local elected officials in Yukon and two other suburban communities in central Oklahoma, Bethany and Del City. It seeks to understand the level of citizen involvement in municipal government, the methods by which people make their views known to their elected officials, the topics that citizens address with their elected officials, levels of community conflict and trust, and how the officials respond to citizen input. Results of this investigation allow some conclusions about whether differences among communities result in differences in citizen-official interaction, how apathy can still result in democratic government, whether municipal government is less relevant to community life than it has been in the past, and the basic nature of community politics. The reported research used a number of techniques, including observing city council meetings, reviewing minutes and video tapes of meetings, reading community newspapers, attending community events, and interviewing elected officials in the three communities. Of the nineteen elected officials in the three communities, ten were interviewed (three each in Bethany and Del City and four in Yukon).

The three study communities were selected because they share many common characteristics — suburban nature, population levels, and the council-manager form of government with non-partisan elections. They differ in many other characteristics, as shown in Table 1. While population figures are within 20 percent, Yukon is the only community with recent population growth and by far the least densely populated. Yukon residents are more likely to be younger, well educated, and white than those in the other cities. Del City most closely resembles the metropolitan area as a whole in its racial makeup, but has less educated and slightly older citizens than most of its neighbors.

TABLE 1

Demographic Characteristics

Indicator	Bethany	Del City	Yukon	Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area
1996 population	20,400	23,990	22,921	1,026,657
% change in population, 1980-1996	-7.4%	-15.9%	33.9%	19.2%
Population per square kilometer, 1990	3,849	3,175	812	88
% white, 1990	91.1%	80.0%	92.7%	81.1%
% black, 1990	1.9%	11.0%	0.7%	10.5%
% Hispanic, 1990	2.4%	2.9%	2.1%	3.6%
Median age, 1990	34.2	33.1	31.6	31.1
% with some college education, 1990	52.0%	44.2%	52.7%	51.7%

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 1991; University of Oklahoma Center for Economic and Management Research, *Statistical Abstract of Oklahoma*, 1997; Oklahoma Municipal League, *1998 Oklahoma Municipal Budgetary Conditions in* 1997-98.

Just four miles from downtown Oklahoma City, Del City is surrounded by Oklahoma City to the west and south and by Midwest City and Tinker Air Force Base to the north and east. The city was developed and incorporated shortly after World War II, largely to house

civilian workers at the base. "It's a nice little quiet bedroom community — self contained — a pleasant place to live," according to a long-time resident recently elected to the city council. Del City's present population, about 24,000, is less than its 1980 population.

Five elected officials govern Del City. The mayor is elected by all voters to a two-year term. The four council members are elected from individual wards and serve four-year terms. "The average citizen is who sits on the council," says one observer of City government, "and has been for years." Del City's reputation locally is for colorful and conflict-filled politics. The city lived up to that reputation in the past two years. Four of five incumbent-elected officials were defeated or chose not to run in 1997. The city manager and city attorney both departed under fire. One council member asked for a grand jury investigation of the other four and all five faced recall efforts by citizens. While none of the recalls was successful, one member resigned rather than trying to reconcile differences in the community and the council. Another city manager was fired in 1998.

Like Del City, Bethany is a post-World War II suburb surrounded by other cities. Bethany is also similar to Del City in size (20,000) and decline of population; the City has lost about 1,800 residents in the last 25 years. Also like Del City, Bethany has some well-developed strip commercial areas but is largely residential. A council member says, "Bethany is such a stable, good community. Overall, it's a pretty peaceful place." Bethany residents' income and education levels are somewhat higher than Del City's, but the crime rate is similar (See Table 2).

Bethany also is governed by a mayor elected at-large, but has eight council members, two from each of four wards. The mayor serves a three-year term and council members serve for two years, with the two members from each ward overlapping terms by a year. Thus, there is a municipal election every year in Bethany. While one council member says he thinks the council is comprised of typical citizens, another says the council is less educated and has been less involved in community affairs than the average resident. Politically, city government has been through cycles. There was a period of upheaval in the late 1960s and early 1970s, followed by two decades of serenity. Bethany had only three city managers in its first 31 years of incorporation. The tone changed, however, after a 1995 staff disagreement. The fire chief left after a dispute with the city manager regarding a promotion in the

TABLE 2

Economic, Social and Political Characteristics

Indicator	Bethany	Del City	Yukon	Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area
Median household income, 1989	$27,235	$25,550	$35,090	$26,883
% within 33% of median income, 1989	36.4%	36.7%	40.2%	33.6%
Minority median income as % of white, 1989	60.9%	55.7%	72.7%	62.2%
Index crimes per 1,000 residents, 1996	51.4	52.4	41.3	82.5
Democratic votes as % of two-party vote for President, 1996	23.7%	41.7%	32.9%	40.8%
Number of Elected Officials	9	5	5	NA
Term of Office	Mayor-3 yrs Council-2 yrs	Mayor-2 yrs Council-4 yrs	3 yrs.	NA

NA Note: "% within 33% of median income" is a measure of income equality, with a higher figure indicating a more equal distribution of income. The percentage reported is all households within income within a range from 33 percent below the city's median income to 33 percent above the city's median income, divided by total households in the city. "Minority median income as a % of white" is the median household income for households headed by minorities divided by the median household income for households headed by whites. Again, a higher figure indicates a more equal income distribution.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 1991; University of Oklahoma Center for Economic and Management Research, *1998 Statistical Abstract of Oklahoma*, 1997; 1996 election returns of Canadian, Cleveland, Logan, McClain, Oklahoma, and Pottawotomie counties; Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation, *State of Oklahoma Uniform Crime Report 1996.*

fire department. One council member who disagreed with the city manager mobilized citizen opinion and the fire employees union to create an electoral coalition to change managers. The new coalition managed, over the course of two elections, to elect six new council members, fire the city manager, and form a new voting bloc on the council. While the very recent past has been characterized by relative calm, one observer notes that, in this new environment, there is lingering dislike and every time things are calm for a while, "something will come up" and fighting begins again.

Yukon, ten miles to the west of Bethany, is a contrast with Bethany and Del City in virtually every way. It was incorporated more than fifty years earlier and, with greater distance from Oklahoma City, grew up as a town in its own right rather than a bedroom community. Automobiles and interstate highways converted it into a suburb. People no longer depended on farms and agricultural support for a living; they could commute to Oklahoma City or to industrial and service employers between Yukon and the central city. Yukon has more land area than the other two cities and much of it is vacant or used for agriculture. Yukon has boomed from a population of 17,112 in 1980 to over 22,000 today. Yukon, says one elected official, is the ideal magnet for "white flight" from Oklahoma City and its older suburbs. It has excellent schools, low crime, more room, and fewer urban problems.

Five elected officials govern Yukon. Four are elected by ward and one at-large. These officials choose a mayor from their own ranks. All five members serve three-year terms and are limited to two such terms. Political conflict is rare in Yukon. One official says "I happen to be lucky enough to be on a council that works together." His colleagues uniformly describe a decision-making process in which all ideas are considered and every effort is made to identify and work through disagreements before decisions are made in public. The council's current emphasis is on continuing a program of street and infrastructure improvements designed to catch up with the years of growth. Members of the council also work hard to maintain ties with the business community and support many community improvement programs of private businesses and non-profit organizations.

CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT — VOTING AND SEEKING OFFICE

All of the study communities are characterized by a lack of citizen involvement. Voting, for example, is the simplest and least focused form of citizen participation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). In recent studies, voting turnout was closely related to the "civic-ness" of a community, which in turn was an accurate predictor of the effectiveness of the community's government (Putnam 1993, Rice and Sumberg 1997). Turnout in these and other central Oklahoma communities, however, does not indicate a high level of interest, as shown in Table 3. Turnout in the 1996 general election was reasonably healthy, but turnout in municipal elections averaged one in four voters or less. All three cities exceed the average turnout rate for 21 municipalities in the metropolitan area.

Another, more active way to become involved in municipal government is to run for office. In communities like those studied, the cost of running is relatively low and it is possible to hold a full-time job and still serve on the council. One would expect a high level of participation, but Table 3 shows that is not the case. Del City, the most politically tumultuous of the cities, has the highest number of candidates for mayor and council, an average of over three candidates for each open office. Bethany has typically attracted just over two candidates per office, while Yukon has just over one, suggesting most offices go uncontested. Bethany and Del City have more electoral competition than the average metropolitan area city, while Yukon has less.

CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT — CONTACTING VOLUME

There is an extensive literature centering on citizen-initiated contacts with local elected representatives, including studies of who contacts, why they contact, and what the pattern of contacting means for the operation of republican local government. Verba and Nie (1972) initiated the citizen contact discussion. Their national survey found that there were two distinct types of contacting. First, contacting about general policy issues was, like most other forms of political participation, related to the socioeconomic status (SES) of the citizen. Second, "particularized"

TABLE 3

Measures of Citizen Participation
Study Cities and Average Metropolitan Area Community

Community	Percent Voter Turnout 1996 General	Percent Voter Turnout Municipal	Average Candidates per Municipal Elected Position
Bethany	62.5	24.3	2.33
Del City	53.8	16.6	3.20
Yukon	66.6	25.0	1.33
Metro Average	58.5	15.4	1.89

Note: Voter turnout is actual voters as a percentage of registered voters. Municipal voter turnout is the average turnout for a full cycle of municipal elections ending in 1997, in which one election took place for every elected position. A cycle is two years in Bethany, three in Yukon, and four in Del City. Average candidates per municipal elected position is the total number of candidates for office in the same election cycle divided by the number of elected positions.

Metro average is the unweighted average of 21 communities with 4,000 or more population in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area.

SOURCE: Individual election summaries, Canadian, Cleveland, Logan, McClain, Oklahoma, and Pottawotomie county election boards.

contacting, in regard to a specific, personal concern, did not depend on the status of the constituent and it was the only form of participation that could be focused to the citizen's specific concern. Later research has in many cases found SES to be unimportant in explaining why people contact elected officials. Another explanation is that a combination of need for service and awareness of government's ability to provide it explains contacting. Low-status citizens (with greatest need) and high-status individuals (with greatest awareness) should contact more than those in the middle (Coulter 1988). Still others see civic group involvement

and political ties as the biggest factors to explain contacting (Brown 1982, Hirlinger 1992). There is at this time no agreement on why people contact their elected officials. Differences in location, data, methodology, and city administrative efforts make this question impossible to sort out (see Hero 1986, Sharp 1986, Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995).

There is also widespread disagreement on how much contacting takes place and its nature. Studies have found that anywhere from 20 to 55 percent of the population has contacted an elected official in the last year. Of the total contacts, from 31 to 92 percent have been of the particularized variety (see Coulter 1988 for a summary of previous studies).

National and international studies have recently shed more light on the importance of contacting and its meaning for democracy. Putnam (1993) studied regional governments in Italy and found that greater citizen participation was closely related to the extent to which the region had a "civic culture," one that embraced social and public values. Civic cultures, in turn, produced governments that worked better than those in less civic regions. Citizens in more civic regions were less likely to contact an elected official than in the less civic regions. In less civic regions, citizens tended to contact council members for more personal reasons; in more civic regions the contacts were more likely to be with a broader view toward the government and its programs. Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) found also found a significant difference in "issue-oriented" and "particularized" contacts. People who contacted their elected leaders for a particularized (more personal) reason were more likely to be doing so for economic gain. Of all forms of political participation the particularized contact ". . .is the least likely to be described in terms of civic gratifications and the most likely to be described in terms of material benefits (p. 123)."

The results in this study add other dimensions to the problem of understanding contacting. Elected officials were asked how many citizens had contacted them in the last week and whether that number was typical.[2] Two of the ten had not heard from a single citizen and reported that that was often the case. One Yukon official received two contacts and said, "If I get two contacts a week, that's usually a bunch." Most of the officials were contacted from 8 to 15 times. For several, that was an unusually high number — one called it an extraordinary week — for others it was about average. Two Del City officials received from 50 to

100 calls. One of them said that volume of contacts was unusually high. The other reported, "It's always like that."

When looking at the volume of citizen contact, some interesting patterns emerged by city. Bethany and Yukon were the quietest. The four Yukon officials who were interviewed were contacted by a total of about 30 citizens; 20-25 people contacted three Bethany representatives. Within this group there was a good deal of variation. It appears that citizens seek out officials who the citizens perceive to be influential, such as mayors and the leader of the majority faction. This suggests that contacters are also somewhat politically involved and probably are drawn from the voting population. A non-voter would be less likely to know who was influential among elected leaders. The relationship between contacting and voter turnout confirmed Putnam's (1993) findings; Del City, with the lowest voter turnout, had by far the highest level of contacting like Putnam's less civic regions.

In the case of citizen contact, as in so many others, Del City stands out. One official received 10 calls in what he termed an unusually busy week. Some were calls from regular supporters who wished him luck the week that a recall petition was filed to remove him from office. The same was true for the official who received over 100 calls and talked in person with over 200 citizens, both unusually high figures for him. While the third Del City council member who was interviewed indicated that this week's 50-100 calls was not uncommon, he also said that every week he hears from a number of the same people — his supporters — many times. It appears that in Del City, much citizen contact does not fit neatly into the categories of policy issues, neighborhood problems, or even seeking particular favors; instead, it is people engaging in the politics of personality and factions. No published study of contacting has separated calls that might be best described as "politically motivated" from the more common issue-oriented and particularistic type. Del City may provide some evidence in favor of the needs-awareness model of contacting. It has by far the highest level of contacting, but the lowest income and the most unequal distribution of income. That combination is consistent with a high volume of calls from citizens with many needs from government but a good sized high-status population that seeks assistance because it is aware of city services and leaders.

CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT — CONTACTING CONTENT

Leaders were asked to describe the nature of contacts from citizens. Neighborhood problems and specific complaints about city services are the most common. Officials said that anywhere from seventy-five to ninety percent of the calls fit this description.

Bethany officials were contacted by citizens with a range of neighborhood problems and some input on issues facing the city council. One Bethany leader said neighborhood problems, some beyond the control of city government, accounted for the majority of contacts. Other Bethany officials agreed. Drainage, traffic speed, unkempt properties, sinkholes, and dogs all generated calls to council members.

Except for calls related to the political goings-on in Del City, contacts were similar to those in Bethany. Some citizens were unhappy with city services, mentioning sewer problems most frequently, along with problems with puddles forming and staying in the streets. Many calls were about neighbor problems, like vicious dogs, front yard parking, dilapidated vehicles, and cluttered yards.

In Yukon, what one council member calls "neighborhood wars" accounted for a number of recent calls. "When problems get close to people," he says, "they pay attention. It's as if the Munsters moved in next door." Tall grass and loose dogs topped the list of complaints. As to city services, trash pickup, street condition, and a decision to grant exclusive vending rights to the Fourth of July celebration in a city park all drew citizen comments.

Contacting in all of the study cities appears to be mainly particularized, with the proportion of problem-oriented calls near the top of the range reported in other studies (Coulter 1988, Putnam 1993, Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Contacts of the very narrow, gain-oriented nature described by Putnam and Verba, Schlozman and Brady are rare, however. At the high end, a number of officials put this type of call — people seeking help getting a building permit approved, getting a license, eliminating a traffic ticket, for example — at about ten percent of total contacts. At the low end, some recall only one or two in the last year. For most officials, issue-oriented contacts are also rare. "People just aren't involved in municipal government that way," says a Bethany official who has served for many years. Elected officials say that calls about

larger community issues comprise from a very small percentage up to perhaps 15 percent of the total. This pattern holds for all three communities in the study.

CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT — ATTENDING COUNCIL MEETINGS

After voting and contacting an elected official, the most common form of participating in municipal government is to attend a council meeting. All three-city councils meet twice a month, make the agenda relatively easy to access, and set aside time for citizens to speak. Citizens take advantage of this opportunity to varying degrees. As with contacting their leaders, Del City's residents are the most active meeting participants. In three months from April through June 1997, a total of 78 different citizens spoke at council meetings. Approximately 20 of these citizens attended more than one meeting. A core of three or four attended and spoke at over half of the meetings during the three-month period. At any given meeting, the number of citizens addressing the council ranged from 0 to 21. Citizens addressed virtually every possible issue, large and small, facing the city. Nearly half of the citizen comments were concerned with controversies regarding council membership and hiring and dismissal of staff. Others addressed larger policy issues, such as settlements of lawsuits, the policy allowing citizens to ride along with police officers, and changes in the insurance program for retirees. Many spoke of problems in their neighborhoods. One remarkable aspect in every type of citizen comment in Del City was the extent to which citizens referred to and appeared to be informed of legal constraints on city operations. There were constant references to requirements of the open meetings act and to other state laws and the city charter and code. A group of neighbors complaining about a long-standing sewer backup problem quoted from the building code requirements for capping sewer cleanouts. Another citizen noted the city risked the cost of returning tires to property owners when tires were removed by the city in abating nuisances. The nuisance ordinance, he indicated, did not specifically define tires on the property as a nuisance.

Citizen participation in council meetings was lower in the other two communities than in Del City. In Bethany, over 20 residents spoke at council meetings in the same three-month period. (An exact count was not possible since minutes twice referred to "several citizens" speaking on a topic.) Two zoning changes drew the most citizen participation, followed by a group of neighbors complaining about drainage problems. Other citizens voiced concerns about traffic and parking and park rules. A few appeared only to express appreciation for a council action, congratulate the mayor on his reelection, or express pride over living in Bethany. One resident demanded changes in the city seal, which depicts some churches in the community. None of the citizens who were identified by name in the minutes spoke at more than one meeting or on more than one topic in Bethany in the three months of the study.

Yukon had the fewest public comments at council meetings of the three communities. A total of fourteen people spoke, three of whom appeared at the annual budget hearing to request funds for agencies they represented. Three other citizens spoke about an agenda item declaring a nuisance on a problem property in their neighborhood, three on zoning issues, and five on other topics. There were also citizens present for various ceremonial purposes. In addition, a number of senior citizens appeared at the budget hearing. They did not speak, but handed out cookies in appreciation for the continuing funding of the Salvation Army's senior center operation.

Council member comments and observing meetings suggest that appearing at council meetings is qualitatively different for citizens from contacting a leader one-on one. The difference is in the level of urgency and often of frustration, which is best understood through the language used by the citizens. "I haven't got an answer from anybody. . . . I have talked to some lawyers about this. I just want it to be known in public." "Tell us what to do; you're all we've got apparently." "I'm pleading with you, please do something about this problem." Some citizens view their elected officials as a sort of last resort to get their problems addressed.

TRUST AND CIVIC INVOLVEMENT

Putnam (1993) found that in more civic regions, people trust each other and expect their neighbors to follow rules and be honest. Elected officials in all three central Oklahoma cities in this study described their constituents as trusting. "People in Bethany really care about each other, their families, and their neighbors." "In Del City, people give money for good causes, they talk to their neighbors, and they don't lock their car doors." A Yukon officials says you can leave your house unlocked and many people, even those making the 15-plus mile commute to Oklahoma City, do. There is a general trend to be more self-interested in this country, he says, but "Yukon is less like that." Trust levels in these communities appear to be quite high. Del City is a conundrum, though. High interpersonal trust does not translate into high trust in government as Putnam suggested it would.

Putnam (1993) also found active civic associations to be "a necessary precondition for effective self-government" (p. 90) and one of four consistent indicators of a more civic society. Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) found that membership and involvement in non-political groups and churches were important indicators of political participation. Brown (1982) and Hirlinger (1992) found that citizens with more social ties were more likely to contact their leaders. Council members offered a range of opinions about the importance of social and civic groups. Some mentioned the role of church-related and service organizations in operating senior citizens' programs, youth and adult sports programs, beautification, efforts, and tourism. Yukon leaders were particularly proud of volunteer-based efforts to improve Freedom Trail Park; the results are impressive enough to warm the heart of any civicist. The city also has a group that actively supports the school system in many ways, including holding a welcome lunch for the new teachers coming to town late every summer. All three cities have chambers of commerce, but none are highly active in local politics. In spite of the glimmers of activity, some officials in Bethany and Yukon suggested participation in civic activities is low, because so many citizens work elsewhere and may be too busy to participate in groups. Del City is again different in this regard. Its civic clubs are active in community improvement efforts. The neighborhood watches are an excellent example of citizens working

together along with government to improve the community by fighting crime and the deterioration that invites crime. These groups appear to be the best example locally of "governance"solving community problems through community solutions, without direct management by a government agency. By this measure as well as by the measure of citizen involvement, Del City seems to have more active citizens than its more serene peer communities, but less involvement through the ballot box. Del City contradicts relationships found by Putnam (1993). In a civic community he would expect high voter turnout, high interpersonal trust, high levels of civic association, low contacting of public officials, and high trust in government. Del City exhibits two of five of the characteristics of a civic community. It does not fit neatly into Putnam's model as either civic or non-civic.

COUNCILMEMBER DECISIONMAKING

Local elected officials employ a range of attitudes and strategies regarding outreach efforts to ascertain city opinion. At one end of the spectrum, some simply accept the level of apathy and do what they think is best. "I like to remind people I'm a citizen, too," says one Bethany official. As a resident of his ward and a local businessperson, he believes his perspective on issues differs little from that of his constituents. A Yukon leader says he does what he thinks is best and does not go out of his way to gather input. "I get citizen input every three years [at election time.]" Another Yukon official suggests that "To be honest, most things we vote on, I don't need to ask citizens. They are business items." The majority of the elected leaders, however, have some strategies to seek out citizen opinion. Some have regular contacts with whom they speak. If these regular contacts agree on a particular issue, the majority of constituents probably do, too. The Del City leader who gets little input capitalizes on the very lack of input. If he gets two calls a week on an item from people other than his "normal callers," he knows an issue is big and gauges citizen opinion from those two callers. This leader also talks with all citizens present at a council meeting before the meeting to get an idea of what is on people's minds. Other strategies include occasionally walking through a neighborhood and knocking on doors to

ask people about their concerns and problems, talking to people at work or church, and using citizen committees. One of the more formal strategies is in Yukon, where there are organized weekly meetings with one important constituency, the business community, and monthly meetings where citizens can meet with city, county, and state elected officials and talk about any issue that is important to them.

When the leader is able to discern citizen preferences on a given issue, how important are those preferences in determining a vote? Edmund Burke distinguished between the elected official as *delegate*, sent to make the same decisions the voter would if that voter could be present, and *trustee*, sent to make decisions in the common interest, if not always according to their will. Burke suggested that the latter, trustee, role was the preferable one (Burke 1963). The extent to which elected officials carry out the wishes of their constituents depends on the type of issue (Miller and Stokes 1963), the party identification of the elected official (Brady and Schwartz 1995), the branch of government (Stimson, et al. 1995) and the racial makeup of the constituency (Key 1949, Combs, et al. 1984). Most of these studies found that national officials blended their own views and those of their constituents in varying degrees to determine how they would vote.

This study also suggests a wide range of official attitudes toward the proper role of a representative, with some variation by community. Some council members, particularly those in Yukon, see themselves as trustees. These officials profess to pay little heed to citizen preferences on specific issues: "I'm not afraid to piss 'em off," says a Yukon council member. Another member suggests the council is better informed than the citizens at large. "We do consider what they say. Sometimes we know more than they do, we have information that they don't. When people say something, we take into consideration what they say. They may not like what we decide. . . ." "Eventually," says another Yukon leader, "you have to vote yes or no. As long as I'm doing the right thing, I have no problem making an unpopular vote."

Leaders in Bethany and Del City say they pay more attention to citizen opinion and fall toward the delegate end of Burke's scale. Citizen opinion is "extremely important. You have to represent the citizens," says a Bethany council member. An official from Del City says that if his neighbors think he is out of line, he is careful not to be out of line.

Unless it is one of two or three issues of principle, he will back off when he hears from citizens who disagree with his viewpoint.

Recent council meetings reflect examples in all three cities of decisions in which leaders voted with the majority of citizens who expressed interest and other examples in which they voted against the majority. In Yukon, residents of the Spanish Cove home used an effective letter-writing campaign to turn back the appointment of a trustee who was not acceptable. On the other hand, the council approved the zoning and site plan for a "tyrannosaurus rex of a building" proposed by a grocery store chain in spite of an organized campaign of opposition by neighboring residents. In Bethany, the same type of campaign convinced council members to deny a rezoning request to allow a triplex that staff members, planning commissioners and some council members agreed would have been good for the community. The same council voted several times in the same period to approve new building projects in spite of citizens who expressed concern over the impacts on drainage problems. In Del City, the story is much the same. Six citizens who commented in 1997 favored the removal of a council member from office due to allegations he was not a registered voter. The council voted to retain the member (albeit on a tie vote). The council regularly denied use of tourism promotion funds to various citizen groups seeking support for festivals and meetings. Just as often, though, the council voted with the majority of opinions that they heard. In central Oklahoma the answer to whether local elected officials are delegates or representatives is "it depends" on the issue, the individual, and the city.

The extent to which citizen input affects decision-making depends on whether there are other, powerful interests competing for council members' votes. Dahl (1961) held a sanguine view of dispersed and controlled power centers that allowed elected officials to be true leaders. As noted, many later scholars challenged Dahl's views. Dahl is closer to the mark than his critics in at least two of the study communities. Council members were able to name some powerful interests in local politics. Bethany leaders mentioned the firefighters union, chamber of commerce, and a father-son combination of city employees. Del City leaders named the local newspaper, a state legislator, and a former mayor. Yukon was the only community where all officials agreed there was a single person or organization with superior political power. Officials agreed that this man — a local banker — could and did influence their decisions.

All regard his influence as positive for the community, though, and none could point to an example of his influence in recent major decisions.

There is evidence of communitarian and civic movements in the cities in this study. These movements, however, are working within the existing plural system, not replacing it. Del City leaders described how neighborhood watches sprang up to address crime and neighborhood appearance problems. Yukon officials noted the role of local clubs in providing organized sports for local youth and of five women who organized the drive for accessible playgrounds. Leaders in all three communities credited various civic clubs with providing social services that the cities could not provide on their own. All of the groups mentioned, though, had strong ties to municipal government. Many received city subsidies while others worked to improve city facilities and services. Neighborhood watches worked closely with Del City police and code enforcement officers. Community efforts to create "governance" were indeed arising, but the efforts were to augment and focus government programs, not bypass them.

DISCUSSION — MAKING SENSE OF MUNICIPAL POLITICS

While this study is set in the 1990s in midwestern suburbs and Dahl's (1961) work covered New England central city in the 1950s, it is striking how well Dahl's model of "pluralistic" democracy fits into the current study. As in New Haven, central Oklahoma's elected officials work in an environment characterized by apathy. Most officials also work independently of any major wielders of political power. Elected leaders have to build their own systems for gauging and sometimes shaping public opinion, and do what they think is best for the community. Just as in New Haven, when the council-led mode of operation fails or one faction of a council is angered by actions of another faction, change may come. Like in New Haven, that change is often initiated by elected officials themselves. It has only been four years since one current member of the Yukon council, frustrated by the lack of investment in community facilities, led an effort to raise sales taxes to improve streets and other assets. He mobilized citizen opinion through public presentations and

through private lobbying. Voters eventually approved the tax measure. Soon citizens removed from office the "no people" who opposed the tax increase and investment program. The new council is strongly and unanimously in favor of more infrastructure investment. Their predecessors and supporters have largely stopped participating. This is as clear an example of Dahl's model of change as any in New Haven.

In Bethany, the efforts of one council member who was outvoted in his effort to fire a city manager could have been invented by Dahl to legitimize his model. Finding himself in the minority, this member recruited like-minded individuals to run for council seats, motivated voters to want change, mobilized dissatisfied firefighters to support his campaign, and is now the political leader of a council. Del City appears to be in a constant state of upheaval, in part because elected leaders use the press, the public, and the legal process to resolve, temporarily at least, conflict they cannot resolve in council meetings. Recall petitions, tips to reporters, grand jury investigations, and cultivating bases of supporters in the citizenry are the tools leaders use in Del City to try to set the directions they believe are best for the community. While the other two communities use more conventional channels to manage conflict, all three cities qualify as pluralistic democracies defined by Dahl. The political dynamic in these communities is more like that of the New Haven of the 1950s than either citizen or researcher might expect.

CONCLUSION

How does municipal government continue to function effectively in the face of citizens who are most likely to abstain from government and next most likely to complain about it? It survives because of the citizens who do bother to vote and the people they choose to represent them. One remarkable aspect of this research was the civic motivation of the elected officials who were interviewed in this study. Almost all were long-time residents of their communities. To a person, they expressed love of the community and its citizens. Many leaders got involved in civic affairs from a longstanding interest in government and the way it works, often acquired in childhood. All were involved because they wanted to improve the community, whether by reversing the decay

of infrastructure, ending the infighting, or helping build facilities to catch up with growth.

"We are serving the public. It's hard to explain the actual benefit of doing that," said one Yukon leader. Strong civic motivation among leaders is an important element of Dahl's model and is the key to successful government in the study communities. Elected leaders interviewed in this paper were committed to acting for the good of the community within the framework of democratic government. In order to meet this goal they built coalitions, shaped opinion, and rallied that opinion when they saw the need for political change. Some citizens seemed to be seeking other solutions to community problems. However, they were joining into pluralist politics, not replacing it. This study suggests that the pluralist model may be more enduring than often believed, and that plural democracy may be a way of political life in many communities for years to come.

NOTES

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