

Small Town Power Structure

A small number of influentials closely linked by informal and overlapping organizational membership could constitute a power structure in small communities

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THE DECISIONS of a small number of influentials (people of influence) will be of considerable importance in determining how a community responds to change, according to evidence reported in this paper. Such evidence tends to support the general findings of Vidich and Bensman—that a small number of able men with special training and overlapping membership in various social systems play dominant roles in the ongoing life of the community.¹ On the basis of data from the study to be discussed, one could hypothesize that a small number of influentials, closely linked by informal and overlapping organizational membership, would constitute a power structure in small communities in low-income rural counties. Preliminary analysis of data from two other small communities supports this hypothesis.

This paper is concerned with a study of the influentials of a small community in the unglaciated section of Ohio. The trade center of this community is the county seat town of 3400 people in a low-income county. The area is characterized by continued outmigration, decline of industry, and widespread unemployment. The volume and value of agricultural products has remained almost the same

¹ Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), pp. 258-65.

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over the years although the number of farms continues to decline in this hilly county.

The purpose of the study was to identify the influentials of the community, the organizations, and/or social systems of which they were members and what systems were regarded as important. Using the reputational method of studying community leadership, a panel of judges was selected to nominate persons they considered to be influential. Information was supplied by six residents of the community: a young bank president and life-long resident of the community; an owner-operator of a business along Main Street; the manager of a farm supply business; the county Extension agent; an officer of a local labor union; and the wife of a retired postmaster. This woman was very active in civic affairs and was a former school teacher.

These judges were asked to respond to this question: "Who are the persons who can get things done or keep things from happening in this community, persons who are influential in community affairs?" From the 196 persons mentioned, it was decided that 21 of 22 persons mentioned three or more times would be interviewed. One of the 22 was dropped because he was the county Extension agent—a close associate of one of the authors. Twenty were actually interviewed; it was not possible to interview 1 of the 21.

All information was obtained through interviews conducted by one professional using a pre-tested schedule. The schedule relates to personal data, organizational membership, visiting patterns, and questions pertaining to leadership by organizations and individuals.

The identification of influentials and how they are organized has been dealt with extensively in studies focused on urban centers of 25,000 or more.² Not as much attention has been given to the study of influentials in the small community setting (i.e., those with population centers of less than 10,000 people). Studies by Presthus, Vidich and Bensman, Bohlen and others explore the small community and find a small number of influentials, usually closely linked,

² See Ivan Belknap and John B. Steinle, *The Community and Its Hierarchy* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1963); William H. Form and Delbert C. Miller, *Industry, Labor and Community* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960); Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959); Ralph B. Kimbrough, *Political Power and Educational Decision-Making* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1964); Delbert C. Miller, "Decision-Making Cliques in Community Power Structures: A Comparative Study of an American and an English City," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXIII (November, 1958), pp. 299-310; Roland J. Pellegrin and Charles H. Coombs, "Absentee Owned Corporations and Community Power Structure," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXI (1956), pp. 413-16; and M. Kent Jennings, *Community Influentials, the Elites of Atlanta* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, Collins MacMillan, Ltd., 1964).

solved in many aspects of community life. Would similar situations exist in a rural, low-income Ohio county?³

FINDINGS

The 20 persons interviewed in this study were all white males between 35 and 65 years of age. Two were widowers and all the others were married. Two lived on farms, one was a rural nonfarm resident, and three lived in nearby villages. The others lived in Twintown. Most of the respondents were long-time residents of the community (only two reported residence of less than 10 years).

Of the 18 reporting church membership, all but one were Protestants. Politically, this was a homogeneous group; 17 were Republicans, two were Democrats, and one man had never voted in a primary but was considered a Democrat. Occupationally the group included, among others, a restaurant owner, bankers, insurance agents, merchants, and a judge.⁴

The investigators were interested in discovering whether the persons considered influentials by the panel of judges perceived any differences in influence among persons considered leaders in community affairs. The 20 persons interviewed were asked, "Which persons have the most influence when decisions are made which affect the entire community?" They could name anyone in the community. Respondents identified 30 persons and six of these were mentioned four or more times. All six were included in the original list of 22 influentials—that is, those mentioned three or more times by the panel of judges. Two of the six were attorneys; two were bank presidents; one, a medical doctor, and one, the owner of a large business.

A table of organizational membership (Table 1) shows considerable overlapping of these persons regarded as most influential in community affairs. In the political area they were all Republicans, and five of the six belonged to the Chamber of Commerce. Although affiliated with different banks, all were bank officers or on the board of directors of the three larger banks serving the community. These men represented a small well-knit group.

Membership in formal organizations was not the only opportunity for these persons to work in unison. Their formal association was

³ See Joe M. Bohlen *et al.*, *Community Power Structure and Civil Defense*, Rural Sociology Report No. 35 (Ames: Agricultural and Home Economics Experiment Station, Iowa State University, 1964); Robert Presthus, *Men at the Top* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); and Vidich and Bensman, *op. cit.*

⁴ In most incidences, where comparable, these findings coincide with those from Prairie City, an Iowa town of 4500 people. See Bohlen *et al.*, *op. cit.*

reinforced by family visiting patterns. There were two groups: on the board of directors in the Rural Bank were F. Bird, L. Folse, and T. Cane who visited back and forth; while Dr. Boyd, B. Foote, and E. Hobby, officials of the other two banks, visited each other.

Community programs of any consequence would need the approval of these six men. They and some of their close associates were the legitimizers for the Twintown community. Their approval would be all-important in any proposals for community development. Recognition of this on the part of local leaders and maintenance of their position is demonstrated by the composition of the board of the local non-profit development organization. The governor of Ohio had made several statements urging communities to organize an improvement corporation. The primary purpose of the organization would be to promote industrial development.

The Miller County Community Improvement Corporation was one response to the governor's urging. The two attorneys and the businessman of the six key influentials are trustees of this corpora-

Table 1. Social system membership and overlapping membership of six key influentials in the Twintown Community, 1964.

Social systems	Key influentials in community						Sum of within system overlaps
	Boyd	Bird	Foote	Folse	Hobby	Cane	
<i>Civic</i>							
Chamber of Commerce		x	x	x	x	x	5
<i>Religion</i>							
Lutheran	x						1
Episcopal		x			x	x	3
Methodist			x				1
Catholic				x			1
<i>Politics</i>							
Republican	x	x	x	x	x	x	6
Democrat							
<i>Fraternal</i>							
Masonic	x				x	x	3
Eagles		x		x			2
<i>Veterans</i>							
American Legion			x	x		x	3
<i>Sports</i>							
Shooting Club		x		x	x		3
<i>Business</i>							
County Bank	x				x		2
Rural Bank		x		x		x	3
Centerville Bank			x				1
Total*	4	6	5	7	6	6	30

* Total of 34 memberships in social systems but 30 within system overlap—there were no overlaps in three of the church systems and one bank.

men. One is also the vice-president while another is the secretary. The three banks are represented by these men. Informally, or through the social systems of the community, they can implement their policies. One of these key influentials stated: "I pick up the phone and get three or four guys (other influentials). They put their shoulders to the wheel and do it!"

Where the usual civic organizations are not viable (many are non-existent) there is a greater likelihood of decisions being made and implemented through one or more informal groups. This is especially true in Twintown where the influentials interact frequently. One remarked that we not only know everyone's first name but names of all the wives as well.

"The decision to have a caravan go to Columbus was made in my kitchen one night!" remarked T. Cane. The caravan was a method used to express local interest in improving the old highway that reportedly follows an Indian trail. Community leaders visited several state government offices to make their wishes known and exert pressure for favorable action on their request.

CONCLUSIONS

Our data and knowledge of this community indicate that these men are involved in decision making for health facilities, highways, and all public facilities and services. They are the primary "manipulators" or "regulators" of industrial promotion efforts plus business developments along "Main Street." Their influence touches every citizen of the community through these indirect activities. Direct influence is exercised through the financial system of the community. In addition, many proposals or problems that would be considered minor in larger communities are major or important enough to attract the attention of influentials in small communities.

Social decisions would appear to be influenced by this group. Three of this group and other influentials belong to the Shooting Club which serves the purpose of a country club for prominent Twintown families. The club's constitution states that no business or politics will be discussed during the weekly meetings. The expressed purpose of families getting together there is to socialize and recreate.

The power of these men is not challenged or reduced by able executives of any sizeable industrial enterprise. In fact, the continued outflow of human and economic resources reduces the likelihood of a recent arrival moving into this elite group. A prominent charac-

teristic of influentials in this community is that they are long-time residents—80 per cent of them were born in the county.

The present economic situation and services and facilities in the community are not likely to attract persons who could penetrate the existing leadership structure except through marriage. As one influential stated without reservation, "I like it here; Twintown is my home; I was born here! But, why would anyone want to move in here? The highways aren't too good and we don't have as much to offer as Plato and several other places. They (influentials and others) talk about attracting industry for we need jobs but why would an industry locate here!"

Without the entry of new systems with sizeable resources into this community (and others like it) the power of local influentials is not likely to be challenged or undergo drastic modifications. In fact, one can anticipate that many influentials would make negative decisions concerning community action proposals. Not all influentials in small communities are guardians of the *status quo*, but many are. They are presiding over communities beset by many problems.

A GOOD REPORT can be complete and yet be brief. Many facts can be given in very little space by using the recipe—Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How. Consider the following: The Lord's Prayer, 68 words; Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, 270 words; the Ten Commandments, 297 words; the Declaration of Independence, 1325 words; government order setting the price of cabbage, 26,911 words.
—CURTIS TRENT.

HISTORY has recorded the fact that liberty and freedom are associated with abundant production. Progress in our civilization depends on the son producing more than his father in agriculture as well as in industry. Efficient and abundant agricultural production will help keep our country great.
—JOE POU.

THE CIVILIZED MAN has a moral obligation to be skeptical, to demand the credentials of all statements that claim to be facts. An honorable man will not be bullied by a hypothesis. For in the last analysis all tyranny rests on fraud, . . . and any man who for one moment abandons or suspends the questioning spirit has for that moment betrayed humanity.
—BERGEN EVANS.

LET EVERY MAN be occupied, and occupied in the highest employment of which his nature is capable, and die with the consciousness that he has done his best.
—SYDNEY SMITH.