

Who Represents the Neighbor?

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One way of understanding who represents a neighbor is their elected representative. Nonetheless, there are other neighborhood groups and associations that claim they also represent the neighbors.

In the fifties, sixties and seventies, the then Mayor Daley in Chicago was the leader of the municipal government and of the city's Democratic Party. The Party was organized with Precinct Captains at the most local level, then Ward Committeemen at the ward level. These Captains and Committeemen traditionally held jobs in the government and acted together as a part of what was popularly known as "the Machine." Mayor Daley believed that the neighbors were represented by the local party officials and their elected alderperson. He was unsympathetic with the idea of an independent neighborhood organization. When he or his organization were challenged by various kinds of neighborhood groups, he often responded by saying, "Who do you represent? We have a neighborhood organization with Precinct Captains, Ward Committeemen and the Alderperson. They really represent the neighborhood because they were chosen in an official election available to all the residents in the neighborhood. You don't really represent the neighborhood because you don't involve everybody."

The Mayor's challenge to the representativeness of local neighborhood associations focused on breadth of participation. In practice, these associations tend to take three forms:

1. An organization historically created by a few neighbors that assigned themselves the name "Neighborhood Association." These associations typically meet monthly at a public location and anyone in the neighborhood can attend. Quite frequently, these meetings involve twenty people in a neighborhood of 35,000 residents. Rarely would even 100th of the residents appear.
2. An association with a constituency base of block clubs. Early in the 50's, 60's and 70's, there was an aspiration to have a block club organized in every block in the neighborhood. However, the experience was that to organize and support these block clubs was far too demanding in terms of funding and organizing personnel. This form could be significantly representative, but it's resource demand is so great that there are very few places today where a block club neighborhood association involves all or even most of the blocks.

3. Saul Alinsky introduced a form of neighborhood association that is primarily based on creating an association of associations. The goal was to engage the leadership of local associations from sports leagues to veteran's organizations to women's groups to churches. It was his view that if you could get large numbers of local associations organized into one neighborhood association, you would have the greatest non-governmental possibility of being widely representative. He trained neighborhood organizers to identify local associations and to bring them together into a group that could claim to be the voice of the neighborhood. In fact, once again the resource problem limited Alinsky's aspirations. To identify and engage fifty to one hundred local associations in one umbrella group requires talented organizers consistently engaged in creating and maintaining the alliance. Therefore, the association of associations began to atrophy because of the resource issues. The result is that today's Alinsky organizations are usually composed, in the main, of local churches. In fact, "churched based organizing" is now the dominant form of Alinsky based neighborhood groups.

It's obvious that none of these forms of neighborhood association could claim to officially "represent" the neighborhood as does Mayor Daley's electoral system. However, the actual participation in the electoral system at the municipal level is never very high and may, in actual numbers, engage no more people than the best neighborhood organizations can engage.

Another way of comparing associational with electoral representation is to think about the functions that each may distinctively be able to perform. Associations whose members are individual residents provide unmediated opportunities to define personal concern and interests. They provide the important opportunity to be heard –to "tell it like it is." Many people value a public forum where they give voice to their unique perspective. Collective action in response to their concern may be less important than the platform to express their concern. Because of the uniqueness of each individual voice, it is often difficult for these kinds of associations to reach a common position.

Another function of the individualized neighborhood associations is often to provide a vehicle for an unrepresentative few to have an inordinately powerful voice outside the neighborhood. This most often happens when the participants are home owners magnifying their voice, often at the expense of renters. These kinds of neighborhood groups usually defend their public positions by noting that their meetings are open to all.

Neighborhood organizations whose members are block clubs implicitly are space based, as are our elected units. They assume a geographic identity as the source of their authority. The very fact that a physical block is the unit of representation creates a local collective decision making process at the block and neighborhood level. These two levels of collective decision-making incentivize positions that represent the greatest common good. Because the best of these groups are structurally universal and informed by local discourse, they may be more “representative” of the neighborhood interest than the positions of a partisan elected official.

The third form of neighborhood organization is the “association of associations.” Here the collective decisions are made by a coalition of special interest groups, i.e. sports leagues, gardening clubs, veteran’s organizations, churches, cause groups, men’s and women’s organizations, etc. This form implicitly creates an organization of many collective interests rather than geographic or individual interests. These “associations of associations” have no locus of commonality based on space/residence. Therefore, it is much more difficult for them to cohere as a group. Nonetheless, their diversity of interest can be their strength because they bring to the table concerns that, in the aggregate, create a wholistic agenda with prospects of a much broader set of policies and actions. For example, the various associations bring to the table, diverse assets:

- Sports leagues – health, youth
- Artistic groups – culture, creativity, economy
- Merchant organizations – local markets and jobs
- Environmental groups – recycling, energy conservation
- Youth groups – safety, vocation, citizen preparation
- Veteran’s groups – children learning citizenship
- Men’s and Women’s groups – family support, youth opportunities
- Gardening groups – health, local economy

Many of these special associational interests are recognized by most as for the common good—diverse issues around which they can cohere.

A functional analysis of the public benefits of these various forms of association suggests that each has a valuable and distinctive role. In sum, all three provide unique collective means of achieving the common good.

The basic dilemma of our era is the continuing decline of the prevalence and influence of all three forms. The dilemma is magnified by the decline of belief in and support for the electoral means of achieving the common good.

For those interested in how to enhance citizen participation, the first question may be, whether that can be done if our vehicles for achieving the common good are weak. What can revive or replace these vehicles? We need to search for and support associational actors and inventors. For, as Tocqueville 'said,' "In democratic countries the science of associations is the mother of science; the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress it has made."