

Consultative Democracy in Voluntary Political Organizations

I. Introduction

This paper will address the role of democratic processes inside voluntary organizations that seek to engage citizens in active political participation. My particular focus will be on the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), America's oldest network of community organizing coalitions. Though IAF organizations are non-partisan, they function as political parties in Schumpeter's strict definition: "a group whose members propose to act in concert in the competitive struggle for political power." In Madisonian language, IAF organizations are factions, and they strive to be the broadest and most powerful factions they can be so as to advocate effectively on behalf of their members inside a raucous democratic free-for-all.¹ The purpose of these organizations is thus to build political power for the purpose of acting effectively on the interests and values of the organization's constituents. The IAF has enjoyed significant praise among political theorists for its strategy of engaging traditionally powerless constituencies in successful democratic action. It has also attracted criticism for non-transparent internal decision-making practices and non-elective selection of leadership.² This criticism illuminates an important tension inside of voluntary organizations: the delicate balance between democratic values, internal processes, and external organizational efficacy. In discerning the appropriate balance, I consider two important questions:

1. For what reason is democratic internal process important inside voluntary organizations?

¹ Some observers miss this point, imagining the IAF organizing strategy to be transcendent of adversarial democracy – Mark Warren uses the term "Consensual Democracy" to describe what he sees as a different sort of politics in the IAF. This analysis misinterprets both the intention and practice of IAF organizations.

² In his unpublished but widely circulated review of Mark Warren's *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*, Harvard lecturer Marshall Ganz antagonistically (though, I would say, accurately) described IAF decision-making processes and leadership selection in the following way: "Public meetings are rituals where constituents ratify previous understandings because those who might dissent have already 'voted with their feet.' Leadership development works through co-option. Emerging leaders compete to be recruited by those 'above' them rather than contesting with one another to be elected by those 'below' them."

2. What variety of internal processes can be called “democratic?”

Though I build my argument around the experience of IAF organizations, my analysis is applicable to any voluntary organization that seeks to involve its members in public action in democratic states: political parties, neighborhood associations, religious organizations, labor unions, etc. This tension between democratic values, internal practices, and external objectives, is near universal.

II. Why Be Democratic? Theory and Practice

Carol Pateman (1970) provides a theoretical argument for why voluntary organizations should practice democratic processes: by being involved in decision-making in all aspects of their lives (family, workplace, voluntary organization), citizens will develop a sense of efficacy which can enhance their willingness and skill in making public decisions. This is an extension of J.S. Mill’s belief in the educative power of popular participation in government. However, because few polities are restricted in size to Rousseau’s ideal of 5,000 citizens, participation in smaller-scale, non-governmental arenas is for Pateman the best way for people to experience these educative effects. Undergirding Rousseau, Mill, and Pateman’s belief in the value of participation is a notion of “positive liberty” – liberty as self-rule – that stretches back to Aristotle and Machiavelli. In order to be free, citizens must participate in the public decisions that affect their lives, and therefore it is the responsibility of institutions in a liberty-promoting democracy to prepare them to do so. For this theoretical perspective, democratic decision-making processes should be ends in and of themselves.

While appreciating this theoretical justification, IAF organizations tend to be pragmatic in their worldview, and therefore look to practical reasons for instituting internal democratic

decision-making processes rooted in the mission of the organization. Popular control over public decisions is necessary inside IAF organizations not as an end in itself, but rather as a best strategy towards the goal of building a powerful political organization. Public control over decision-making leads to this goal in two ways:

1. Power is built in IAF organizations through the sheer number of church, synagogue, union, and neighborhood leaders who are willing to volunteer their time and energy in relationship with others to further their common interests. Quite simply, people will tend not to maintain long-term intensive volunteer participation in an organization that does not respect and act in accordance with their talents, creativity, leadership, and interests. Though it may be possible to “trick” people into short-term participation through deceptive promises and manipulation, it is simply not possible to maintain long-term involvement in this way. People “vote with their feet” when it comes to participation.
2. As Mill and Pateman argue, participation in internal decision-making processes further develops the public capacities of church, synagogue, union, and neighborhood leaders – their political judgment, communications ability, and relational skills. The more highly-trained volunteers involved in IAF leadership, the more effective the organization can be in building its power and acting on the common interests of its membership. Thus, the goal of education from the organization’s perspective is not to increase an individual’s sense of efficacy as an individual, but rather the power of the collective. Contrary to Pateman’s analysis, it is not the experience of *participation* that enhances efficacy, but rather the experience of participating in a political victory on the issues of concern to the volunteer. This increased sense of efficacy from winning creates a virtuous cycle: leaders want to participate more and develop their skills more, which in turn increases the power of the organization to win more.

For these reasons, a minimum form of public participation in decision-making is necessary for the viability and growth of an IAF organization. However, as illustrated in the second point above, participation only results in increased efficacy and enhanced participation if it first leads to the realization of an individual's interests through the organization. A leader will not continue to volunteer her time attending training workshops, planning strategy sessions, making phone calls, and spending her relational capital in her church if that energy is not directly wisely inside a winning strategy that helps her realize those interests that caused her to become active in the organization in the first place. Thus, it is incumbent upon the organization to win.

Frequently, a requirement for acting powerfully and effectively in the political arena is the ability to respond swiftly to the challenges of other powerful organizations and interests. This requirement comes into tension with certain forms of democratic decision-making and leadership-selection processes, which may be extremely consuming of the limited volunteer time an organization can claim from its members, and which may take longer to result in a definitive organizational decision than the demands of adversarial politics require. Simply put, extensive elective processes can be "inefficient." On the other hand, IAF organizations cannot exclude members from decision-making processes and still expect that they will continue to volunteer their time for the organization. Managing this tension inside a victorious campaign strategy is the central job of the professional organizer. When considering a polity, an argument rooted in the purported "inefficiency" of electoral practices would not be compelling enough to argue against elections, but the fundamentally distinct aims and nature of voluntary associations require a more thoughtful analysis. In the next section I consider different frameworks for conceiving of organizational democracy that allow for the optimum balance between democratic values, internal processes, and organizational effectiveness.

III. Models of Organizational Democracy

For the past sixty years, Joseph Schumpeter's procedural definition of democracy has dominated political thought: "The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (Schumpeter 1942, 281). Schumpeter defines democracy squarely in terms of elections; an institution that does not allow for competitive elections is simply not democratic.

IAF organizations, in general, do not have competitive elections for decision-making leadership positions. Organizations eschew elections primarily for practical reasons developed out of experiential knowledge, though theoretical principles can be abstracted out of that experience. Early in the history of the modern IAF, when the current institutional form of IAF organizations was developed through experimentation by staff organizers, clergy, and volunteer leaders alike, some organizations flirted with competitive elections. Communities Organized for Public Services (COPS) in San Antonio engaged in such an experiment under its second lead organizer, Arnie Graf.³ The practice was eventually abandoned for the following reasons:

1. The process of elections was time-consuming, requiring that the organization suspend its external public business for over one month each year.
2. Volunteers complained about having to spend their limited time on internal processes rather than the external objectives that compelled their interest in the organization.
3. The process of competitive elections itself damaged relationships inside of the organization, instituted a hierarchy of winners and loses, and resulted in a drop in participation by the losing parties.

³ This example was related to me by Arnie Graf, who is currently my supervisor in the Industrial Areas Foundation.

Each of these outcomes reduced the ability of the organization to achieve its objectives more than the inclusion of members in election-based democratic decision-making processes strengthened the ability of the organization to achieve its goals.⁴

Separate from the practical arguments against elections, there is an Aristotelian objection. The elective principle of “one person, one vote” is problematic inside a voluntary organization constituted as IAF organizations are. The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization has 70 dues-paying member congregations that have a combined membership base of 50,000 people. This is the theoretical constituency of the organization. However, of those 50,000 people, perhaps 3,000 people volunteer actively on a yearly basis, 500 on a monthly basis, 100 on a weekly basis, and 10 on a daily basis. Furthermore, all levels of participation there is a wide differential in political judgment, public skills, and following as a leader.⁵ In this context, with measurable differences in volunteer investment and generally agreed-upon criteria for discerning leadership ability, the notion of “one person, one vote” is not as compelling as a fair or wise way to make organizational decisions. In the case of a voluntary organization, Aristotle’s preference for allocating power based on contribution and ability (*Politics* III.9) may make more sense.

IAF organizations are clearly not democratic according to Schumpeter’s definition, and yet the fact that these organizations continue to exist, and indeed thrive, indicates that there is some form of public control over decision-making taking at a level sufficient to maintain active volunteer participation. This suggests a weakness in Schumpeter’s emphasis on elections as the appropriate measure for assessing democratic practice inside of a voluntary association.

⁴ Some IAF organizations maintain limited electoral practices. For example, the BUILD organization in Baltimore selects its president every year by a vote of the clergy caucus.

⁵ IAF tends to define “following” as the number of people a person could turn out to a public event on a week’s notice – frequently a minimum following of 25 people is required of all members of an organization’s top governing body. This is one way of assuring that the people most active in decision-making do not only speak for themselves. This criteria is frequently written into the constitution of an organization ratified by the member congregations at the founding.

At a minimum level, leaders in a voluntary organization “vote with their feet” every time they chose to attend (or stay home from) an IAF meeting. Because there is no coercion compelling participation, the volunteer affirms consent at every moment of activity. Much as Hobbes suggested that a citizen unsatisfied with the terms of the social contract may chose to leave the society rather than enjoy its benefits, the volunteer is free at any moment to stay home or to donate her time elsewhere. Because it is much easier to extract oneself from a voluntary association than from a nation, the “love it or leave it” argument holds more weight in this circumstance. One might object here on the grounds that true participation in decision-making must be more than accepting or rejecting a proposition that someone else has decided – it must be taking part in the decision of which propositions are to be considered. However, this objection misses the complex interplay between decision-making and popular consent in an organization that depends on participation for its success.

Critics often over-estimate the power of an organizer or top leader to manipulate the consent of others. Imagine the following situation: an organizer (let’s call him Ari) decides that the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization should devote all of its energy toward banning Fluffernutter sandwiches in Massachusetts public schools.⁶ The clergy and lay leaders of GBIO are ambivalent; most agree with the idea, but it’s pretty low on their list of priorities. Some disagree, avowing their love for Fluffernutters. As a respected organizer, Ari presents an argument to the leadership team about how this campaign will build the power of the organization to accomplish other things in the future. Ari’s political judgment has been pretty on-target in the past, and they trust him. But then, they have to; their organization is in serious trouble if Ari has in fact gone crazy, and no one wants to admit that. So the leadership team

⁶ A Fluffernutter sandwich consists of two pieces of white bread, peanut butter, and spreadable marshmallow fluff. It is currently served in the free lunch program in many Massachusetts schools.

agrees to move forward with the campaign. They split up responsibilities for consulting leaders at each of the congregations, with the purpose of convincing them of the wisdom of this campaign. There is an organizational assembly at which a vote is taken on the initiative; like all votes at such assemblies, it is unanimous in support; the decision had already been made. After the vote, Ari explains the strategy: put 2000 phone calls into the Governor's office and bring 1000 people to a state house rally. He announces the date of the first planning team meeting, and sets a target of 50 people for the team.

The night of the first meeting arrives. Ari stands in the damp church basement with a flip chart and magic marker in hand. No one shows up. He is by himself. The membership has "voted with their feet," killing the campaign by their lack of interest in fighting against Fluffernutters. The truth is that no organizer or top leader ever has the power to make a sustained decision without the consent and participation of the membership.

What is the mechanism by which these daily affirmations of consent transform into decision-making agency and constraints on the top leadership of the organization? The concept in global democratic thought that best captures this process is the Qu'ranic tradition of *shura* – literally "mutual consultation." The Qur'anic injunction that leaders consult with the community (Q 3:159, 42:39) serves as the basis of modern Islamic democratic theory (Asad 1999, El Fadl 2003). Though *shura* has been interpreted to include elections as means of consulting the community in decision-making, the modern sense of the concept is much more expansive in its idea of ongoing participation.

IAF organizations transform the volunteer's affirmations of consent into decision-making power through a continuous process of consultation, which shapes and limits the strategic directions the organization can take. *Shura* occurs in at least three forms:

1. Individual meetings, in which two people (either organizers or volunteers) identify and discuss their mutual interests, with the aim of establishing a public relationship that will allow them to work together effectively on these interests.
2. Small group “house meetings,” at which a group of 8-10 people from a church/synagogue/mosque/union/association share with each other their interests and listen to the interests of others.
3. Any number of informal conversations between amongst volunteers and organizers who have established public relationships, and who constantly bounce ideas off of each other before the organization takes any action.

When decisions need to be made rapidly, who does the consulting and who gets to be consulted? Leadership, respect, and unequal decision-making power inside the organization are allocated on the basis of *shura*; those who engage in the most consultation – and who thus have the largest sense of the organization’s common interests and who in doing so have built the largest following – rise to the top of the leadership structure. The job of the professional organizer is to practice *shura* and train volunteers to do so as well; most organizers are expected to conduct a minimum of 20-25 individual meetings per week, and to facilitate the meetings of volunteers with similar interests. The organizer promotes the leadership of those she sees being most effective in this practice; however, she is no more able to promote the leadership of someone who has not succeeded in consultation than Ari is able to force through the Fluffernutter campaign. The Fluffernutter situation would never happen in an IAF organization because the idea would have been killed early in the process of consultation. *Shura* is a source both of creative energy and a check on undemocratic practices. It is the means by which the consent of the volunteer is transformed into control over decision-making.

Conclusions

Voluntary associations do not need to conduct elections in order to maintain democratic decision-making processes, and it is a misconstrual of democracy to argue that they should do so:

1. For IAF organizations, and many other voluntary associations, instituting electoral practices will undermine the effectiveness of the organization in realizing the interests of its members. A pluralist democracy requires successful interest groups to balance out competing claims; thus, it is more important for the larger success of democracy that IAF organizations be effective than for them to institute elections.
2. The basic premise of IAF organizations is that democracy does not happen only during elections. Although the threat of punishment at the ballot box always lurks beneath the mass mobilizations of people organized by these groups, most IAF actions take place when no one is voting. In this regard, IAF organizations are Schumpeter's nightmare: ongoing popular participating aimed at influencing the actions of people who have already competed for the power to make decisions, with the goal of sharing that decision-making power more broadly. In other words, the purpose of IAF organizations is to compel those who have won elections to practice *shura*. Thus, the internal practices of IAF organizations provide volunteers with an educative benefit more important to the public practice of democracy than simple election campaigning.
3. For IAF organizations and other voluntary associations, an ongoing, thorough process of consultation achieves the best balance between democratic ideals, public control over decision-making, and organizational effectiveness.

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