

RESEARCH NOTE

Representation in Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations: A Conceptual Framework

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It is held that nonprofit and voluntary organizations contribute to democratic governance by representing the interests of their constituents to the state. Yet little is known about the capacities of these organizations to represent effectively their constituents and the larger community. This study proposes a framework for understanding the varieties of representation in nonprofit and voluntary organizations. The authors argue that the nature of representation within an organization is indicated by five dimensions: substantive, symbolic, formal, descriptive, and participatory representation. Formal, descriptive, and participatory representation are different means of achieving substantive and symbolic representation; the latter being measures of the extent to which organizations "act for" and "stand for" particular constituencies. They further suggest that this conceptual framework serve as a useful first step toward examining the representational capacities of nonprofit organizations. Two illustrative cases of community-based organizations are presented to tease out the complexity of representational mixes found in nonprofits.

Keywords: *representational legitimacy; representational capacity; community; nonprofit and voluntary organizations*

This article develops a framework for evaluating the extent to which nonprofit and voluntary organizations represent the interests of their

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constituencies in mediating between citizens and “megastructures” (i.e., government and large corporations). Central to the pluralist understanding of American democracy is the notion that nonprofit and voluntary organizations contribute to democratic governance through their representational effects (Warren, 2001). We argue that a better understanding of the representational capacities of nonprofit and voluntary organizations is a necessary foundation for the pluralist argument that these organizations are a primary means through which interests of citizens are represented to the state. It will also aid in considering Weisbrod’s (1997) critique that organizations operating in the nonprofit sector are “increasingly being seen not as public-spirited philanthropies but as self-serving entities that pursue the interests of their top officials and board members” (p. 545).

In this article, we argue that the nature of representation within an organization is indicated by five dimensions: substantive, symbolic, formal, descriptive, and participatory representation. Substantive and symbolic representation could be considered outcome measures of an organization’s representational legitimacy, while formal, descriptive, and participatory representation arguably are input measures of *capacity*, the ability of organizations to achieve symbolic and substantive representation. We caution that the heterogeneous nature of the nonprofit sector makes it difficult to promote a uniform “gold standard” of representation in the sector. Rather, the distinctive functions, missions, types, and other contextual factors might all play a role in determining the “representational mix” of different organizations. We illustrate applications of this framework through discussion of two cases of community-based organizations that vary in their “representational mixes.” The current study concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and policy implications and future research directions.

REPRESENTATION IN NONPROFIT AND VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Since Alexis de Tocqueville (1956), two streams of research have emerged to address the contributions of nonprofit and voluntary organizations to the operation of American democracy. The first stream of research, as represented by various contemporary American pluralist theorists, focuses on the institutional level. Most relevant is Berger and Neuhaus’ (1977) mediating structures thesis, which states that voluntary associations mediate between individuals and “megastructures” (i.e., government and large corporations) by giving audible “voice” to individual concerns and, thereby, maintain the legitimacy of a democratic regime (see Bucholtz, 1998, p. 577). Such pluralist views of the representational function of nonprofit organizations have been challenged in the past several decades (Berry, 1994; Crotty, 1994; Frumkin, 2002). The challenges have focused on the capacities of nonprofit organizations to actually represent the interests of citizens to the state. It has been widely argued that

nonprofit organizations often yield to the famous “iron law of oligarchy” (Michels, 1962); they are led by local elites who are rarely elected and who function with little input from their constituencies and the community at large (Bolduc, 1980; Cnaan, 1991).

A second stream of research focuses on the organizational level and emphasizes the internal developmental effects of participation in nonprofit and voluntary organizations on citizens. Social capital theorists argued that participation in secondary associations creates social capital in the form of dense networks of civic engagement, norms of generalized reciprocity, and generalized trust, which in turn produce a healthy democracy (Putnam, 1993, 1995).¹ Other scholars, following a tradition developed by Almond and Verba (1963), stressed the importance of associational participation to the development of political behaviors and attitudes (e.g., Booth & Richard, 1998). Although the discussion of the development effects of participation have illuminated their role in nourishing “the capacities of *individuals* [emphasis added] to participate in collective judgment and decision making and to develop autonomous judgments that reflects their considered wants and beliefs” (Warren, 2001, p. 61), it says very little about the capacities of organizations to represent effectively the interests of their constituents.

In light of the limitations associated with the above two research streams, we argue that an organization can enhance its representational capacity by establishing representative structures through which the views and concerns of its constituents and the larger community are represented by those who speak on their behalf in the organization (Guo, in press; Rosenblum, 1998; Warren, 2001). In defining *community*, we follow the lead of Robert Bellah and his colleagues to define the *community* as “a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision-making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it” (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, p. 333; see also, Smith & Lipsky, 1993). This definition of the community does not exclude the territorial and geographical notion of community (e.g., neighborhood, town, city, etc.) but is more reflective of the multiple-constituency nature of nonprofit organizations (Herman & Renz, 1997). This view of the community would include all the major constituencies of a nonprofit organization: clients, funding agents or donors, staff members, volunteers, partner agencies, and neighborhood residents.

To date, there are only a few studies that assess the representational capacities of nonprofit organizations (Bolduc, 1980; Cnaan, 1991; Regab, Blum, & Murphy, 1981; Swindell, 2000). Most of these studies built on and extended the work by Hanna Pitkin (1967) in her classic work *The Concept of Representation*, which identified four different forms of representation: formal, symbolic, descriptive, and substantive. Ragab et al. (1981), for instance, examined four types of representation: formal, descriptive, substantive, and actual. The organization studied was highly representative in its formal structure, and on nine descriptive measures there was great similarity among residents, participants,

and leaders; on perceptions of severity of neighborhood problems there was moderate agreement (substantive representation); actual representation, the time devoted to the most severe problems, was low. By contrast, Cnaan (1991) provided an excellent review of existing studies associated with the formal, descriptive, and substantive dimensions of representation in neighborhood organizations and found the level of representation to be questionable.

Following this line of research, this research note provides a conceptual framework for identifying representative structures and practices, and assessing their prevalence in the nonprofit and voluntary sector. We intend to contribute to the existing discussions in two major ways. First, we add to Pitkin's definition a fifth dimension, *participatory representation*, which entails direct participatory relationships between organizational leaders and their constituents. This dimension highlights the importance of communication channels between an organization and its constituents. Consistent with Habermas (1989), participatory representation questions the boundaries that have traditionally surrounded the idea of participation and representation and perceives nonprofit leaders as delegates of constituents. Second, we argue that representation in nonprofit and voluntary organizations should be understood in terms of legitimacy and capacity. Substantive and symbolic representation most directly signifies the representational legitimacy of organizations. These two dimensions of representation differ in terms of whether representatives "act for" (substantive representation) or "stand for" (symbolic representation) the interests of their constituents. Substantive representation provides tangible benefits in terms of agendas, policies, and activities reflective of the interests of constituents, whereas symbolic representation provides intangible benefits in terms of trust and legitimacy of an organization as perceived by its constituents. The question then is the manner in which formal, descriptive, and participatory representation—all of which could be considered capacity measures—may contribute to substantive and symbolic representation.

Table 1 defines the core concepts in our framework and relates them to relevant studies.

In the remainder of this section, we first clarify the meaning of *substantive* and *symbolic legitimacy*, before turning to the three capacity measures.

REPRESENTATIONAL LEGITIMACY: SUBSTANTIVE AND SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION

Substantive representation. *Substantive representation* means acting "in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209). This rather broad definition leaves room for one of the central controversies in the history of representative democracy. Regarded as the mandate-independence controversy, the question can be summarized as "should (must) a representative do what his constituents want, and be bound by mandates or instructions from them; or should (must) he be free to act as seems best to him in pursuit of their welfare?" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 145). Consistent with this

Table 1. Dimensions of Representation in Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Definitions</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Legitimacy: Substantive representation	This dimension of representation occurs when an organization acts in the interest of its constituents, in a manner responsive to them. It is often measured by the congruence between leaders and constituents on issues of most importance.	Berry, Portney, & Thomson (1993); Bolduc (1980); Cnaan (1991); Kissane and Gingerich (2004); Regab, Blum, and Murphy (1981); Swindle (2000)
Legitimacy: Symbolic representation	This dimension of representation occurs when an organization is trusted by its constituents as their legitimate representative.	Abzug and Galaskiewicz (2001); Bolduc (1980)
Capacity: Formal representation	This dimension of representation occurs when formal organizational arrangements establish the ways in which its leaders are selected by its constituents. It focuses on elections and other relevant formal arrangements (e.g., rights of recall of leadership, etc.).	Bramble (2000); Cnaan (1991); Regab et al. (1981)
Capacity: Descriptive representation	This dimension of representation occurs when leaders of an organization mirror the (politically relevant) characteristics of its constituents.	Abzug (1996); Abzug, DiMaggio, Grey, Useem, and Kang (1993); Abzug and Galaskiewicz (2001); Cnaan (1991); Gittell and Covington (1998); Middleton (1987); Regab et al. (1981); Siciliano (1996); Widmer (1989)
Capacity: Participatory representation	This dimension of representation occurs when there is a direct, unmediated and participatory relationship between an organization and its constituents. It highlights the importance of maintaining a variety of channels of communication with constituents.	Bramble (2000); Brown (2002); Checkoway and Zimmerman (1992); Lansley (1996)

controversy are two most common forms of substantive representation: trustee representation and delegate representation (e.g., Box, 1992; Kelly, 1998; Mitchell, 1997). According to the trustee model, the representative must act on his or her own independent judgment of the best interest of constituents irrespective of their expressed wishes. By contrast, the delegate model posits that the representative must act as an agent or delegate of constituents, and that he or she must, wherever possible, reflect the wants and needs of constituents.

Relatively few studies have examined substantive representation in nonprofit and voluntary organizations, possibly because of the high costs of collecting data on organizational and constituent issues (Swindell, 2000). Most existing studies along this dimension have found that nonprofit organizations do not well represent the interests of residents in the neighborhood (e.g., Bolduc, 1980; Cnaan, 1991). It should be noted that, although the existing nonprofit studies have not made the distinction between trustee and delegate versions of substantive representation, they more or less implied delegate representation by empirically examining the representativeness of a nonprofit organization in terms of the issues of most importance of organizational leaders vis-à-vis those of neighborhood residents. Such a measure of representation seems to reflect an understanding of substantive representation closer to the delegate view.

Symbolic representation. According to Pitkin (1967), symbolic representation rests on what exists in people's minds and belief systems rather than on rationally justifiable criteria. Symbolic representation occurs when constituents believe in the legitimacy of an organization because of what it is perceived to be, rather than what it actually acts in their interests. In other words, an organization delivers symbolic representation to the extent that it is trusted by constituents as a legitimate representative. The act of achieving symbolic representation, therefore, is to take actions to earn the trust and confidence of constituencies, and to intensify their commitment to the mission of the organization (Kouzes & Posner, 1993, p. xvii).

Symbolic representation has received little attention in existing nonprofit studies. Bolduc (1980) touched on this issue in a case study by arguing that the mere existence of a local neighborhood association may gain trust and legitimacy from local residents even if they themselves are totally alienated from the organization. The study found that this neighborhood association was strongly dominated by a small band of "duly elected" local elites who were far from representative of the entire neighborhood, and that local residents are highly ignorant of the organization's precise activities. Yet the organization nevertheless was perceived as sufficiently reflective of the general will of most residents. In a more recent study, Abzug and Galaskiewicz (2001) highlighted the importance of gaining trust and legitimacy for community-based nonprofits by stating that an organization's claim to represent the interests of its constituents "would be hollow if those that it claims to represent do not see it as their legitimate spokesperson" (p. 54).

We emphasize the importance of symbolic representation in the nonprofit sector, especially for those organizations where substantive representation is hard to deliver. Nonprofit organizations often serve multiple constituents whose interests may differ (Herman & Renz, 1997; Kanter & Summers, 1987), have amorphous goals and intangible services (Forbes, 1998, p. 198; Newman & Wallender, 1978), and base their work on "societal values about which there may be little or no consensus" (Kanter & Summers, 1987, p. 154). Under

such circumstances, it is difficult to determine if the policies of the organizations reflect the true needs of their constituents (substantive representation); it is thus critical for these organizations to gain trust and legitimacy (symbolic representation).

DIMENSIONS OF CAPACITY: FORMAL, DESCRIPTIVE, AND PARTICIPATORY REPRESENTATION

Formal representation. Formal representation rests on the arrangements that establish the ways in which organizational leadership is selected. This view of representation focuses on elections “as a grant of authority by the voters to the elected officials” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 43). Other relevant formal arrangements might include right of recall of officials, limited terms of office, regular representative conferences to determine organizational policy, the right of factional opposition without expulsion, and the right to circulate oppositional material among the membership (Bramble, 2000, p. 301).

There seems to be a presumption that to ensure substantive representation, certain formal mechanisms (i.e., elections) are necessary to hold leaders accountable by defining the procedures that initiate or terminate their tenure (e.g., Bramble, 2000; Held, 1988). The existence of such formal arrangements, however, does not necessarily guarantee substantive representation. It is entirely possible for organizations to have formally very democratic constitutions but to be led by leaders who are only marginally under the control of constituents or members (Bramble, 2000, p. 299). Moreover, the mere creation of formal mechanisms of electoral control will not safeguard substantive representation if these mechanisms do not function effectively. For example, many elections in membership organizations are characterized by low turnout rate and lack of democracy (Cnaan, 1991), and members may be marginalized in relation to board members and management (Lansley, 1996; Spear, 2004). Such weaknesses in formal representative mechanisms also seem likely to threaten the symbolic legitimacy of nonprofits, which by virtue of their quasi-public character would appear to be held implicitly to the standards of representative democracy.

Descriptive representation. This dimension of representation occurs when a representative mirrors the (politically relevant) characteristics of its constituents (Pitkin, 1967). Within the nonprofit sector, there has been a charge that many boards of directors are upper-income, better-educated, professional employers and managerial persons, whereas the community has little or no representation (e.g., Abzug & Galaskiewicz, 2001; Cnaan, 1991; DiMaggio & Anheier, 1990; Middleton, 1987). This picture, however, may be changing; some scholars suggest that nonprofit boards have become more diverse (Abzug, 1996; Abzug, DiMaggio, Grey, Useem, & Kang, 1993; Abzug & Galaskiewicz, 2001; DiMaggio & Anheier, 1990). This change might be partly attributed to the trend of democratization during the 1960s and 1970s,

when mandated participation of community representatives in organizational decision making became the hallmark of a great number of government-sponsored nonprofit agencies (Peterson, 1970; Piven & Cloward, 1971). As a result, boards of government-sponsored community-based nonprofit agencies were found to be more descriptively representative of the community than the traditional nonprofit boards (see Smith & Lipsky, 1993, p. 77).

Research on the substantive effects of descriptive representation in the nonprofit and voluntary sector has provided mixed results (Widmer & Houchin, 2000; Zimmermann, 1994). Findings from a few studies have shown that descriptive representation does make a difference in promoting substantive representation (e.g., Gittel & Covington, 1998; Siciliano, 1996; Tourigny & Miller, 1981). Tourigny and Miller (1981), for example, a study of community-based organizations found that organizations with higher community representation on their boards were more effective in developing policies that reflected needs and concerns of the community. By contrast, other scholars have found that organizational leaders, despite a high level of descriptive representation, differ from members and/or residents in their identification and assessment of needs in the community (Regab et al., 1981).

Attention to the linkage between descriptive and symbolic dimensions is sparse in the nonprofit context. Abzug and Galaskiewicz (2001) reasoned that community-based nonprofit organizations might symbolize their community representation by having constituencies dominate boards. Ben-Ner and Van Hoomissen (1994) similarly noted that a nonprofit board of directors consisting of representatives of its key constituent groups is a signal of trustworthiness to constituents. A representative of a traditionally disadvantaged constituent group on a nonprofit board, for example, may deliver a potent symbolic message to members of that group about the extent to which the organization values their needs and perspectives, thus increasing their trust toward this organization. Although the linkage between the descriptive and symbolic dimensions of representation has only received scant attention from nonprofit scholars, it seems to be clearly on the radar screen of nonprofit practitioners (Noteboom, 2003).

Participatory representation. Participatory representation was not included in Pitkin's (1967) conceptualization of representational dimensions. This dimension of representation involves active constituent participation in organizational activities. It highlights the importance of maintaining a variety of channels of communication and participation between an organization and its constituents to ensure that the organization is receptive to its constituents' demands (Loewenberg & Kim, 1978). Inspired by Arnstein's (1969) famous "ladder of participation" analogy, we argue that participatory mechanisms can be viewed as a continuum with respect to the degree to which constituents and the community have the real power. For instance, the lower rungs of the ladder represent nonparticipation by manipulation (e.g., constituents are placed on rubberstamp advisory committees or advisory boards). The next

rungs of the ladder represent tokenism and consultation (e.g., attitude surveys, neighborhood meetings), followed by higher levels of community power such as partnership and delegated power.

Research suggests that an organization's substantive representation might be affected by appropriate participatory arrangements. Brown (2002) noted that participatory mechanisms in the forms of inclusive organizational and board practices facilitate the organization's representation of and sensitivity to constituents. Checkoway and Zimmerman (1992) found a positive correlation between organizational leaders' self-reported issue representation (substantive representation) and constituent participation in neighborhood associations. An organization's symbolic representation may also be affected by its participatory representation. Harrison and Mort (1998) suggested that constituent consultation and involvement serve as "technologies of legitimation" by which the decisions and activities of social care agencies can be legitimated. The constituents "might acquiesce in a decision, irrespective of whether s/he agrees with its content, because the *process* by which the decision is made . . . is seen as legitimate" (p. 67). Thus inclusive organizational structures and communication processes may enhance an organization's legitimacy by demonstrating organizational awareness of its constituents and community (Freeman, 1984).

ILLUSTRATIVE APPLICATION TO COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

This section illustrates the conceptual distinctions outlined above by applying the framework to several community-based organizations. The purpose of this application is to explore the variety of "representational mixes" that may be found at the community level.

These illustrative case studies are drawn from two research projects on two distinctive types of community-based organizations: community-based charitable service providers, whose primary goals are not to represent constituent interests to the state but to deliver needed services to constituents; and neighborhood councils (NCs), whose primary goals are to engage in external representational activities.² Alpha was the subject of case study research that combined participant observation, archive data analysis, and unstructured interviews with representatives of multiple constituents of the organization (e.g., executive director, board members, staff members, volunteers, participants, and community residents), conducted over the period of 1999 to 2001. The case material on NCs was drawn from ongoing research by the Neighborhood Participation Project and combines field observation, documentary analysis, and data from a survey of NC board members.³

ORGANIZATION ALPHA

Organization Alpha is a community-based organization designed to serve and improve the quality of life of economically disadvantaged residents in

South Central Los Angeles through the implementation of cultural, educational, economical, and social service programs. Since its founding in 1991, Alpha has served a broad range of constituent groups who suffer from a variety of social problems in the community.

The level of formal representation was low in Alpha. The Alpha board of directors has been a self-perpetuating system since its founding when the founder and board president selected and invited all the other members to serve on its board. The understanding of Alpha's descriptive representation requires some clarification of definition of *community*. The current board consists of 12 members, including businesspeople, nonprofit leaders, community activists, and other professionals. Many of these members are sponsors of the center, but not necessarily the current residents of this community. As some interviewees pointed out during the interviews, the Alpha board could be regarded as having a moderate level of community representation if the community be defined broadly as people who live in South Central Los Angeles. Yet if we take into consideration Alpha's multiple constituency nature, its level of community representation would be relatively low, as no rank-and-file staff member, volunteer, client, or resident in the neighborhood was included in its board.

Alpha demonstrated a rather high level of participatory representation during its early days through the provision of direct and indirect communication channels. Immediately after Alpha opened its door to the community, a series of community meetings were held at the organization; neighborhood residents were invited to voice their needs and concerns and to provide advice and comments on the future directions of the organization. Office spaces were provided for block clubs and other community organizations. The founding executive director and his volunteer staff used to walk down the street and pay door-to-door visits to residents in the neighborhood. Moreover, block clubs and other community groups were also encouraged to initiate and cosponsor neighborhood events with the organization; many of the neighborhood residents volunteered for this organization. In terms of indirect communication, two community needs assessment studies, both of which were conducted in 1993, are notable. One study was a survey administered to the community residents on the services most likely to be used at Alpha; the other study incorporated the 1990 U.S. Census and other sources for information on the existing community programs and facilities in the area.

As revealed by the interviews, the leadership of Alpha established these participatory mechanisms with the intention of not only understanding better community needs (substantive representation) but also gaining community trust (symbolic representation). The limitation of data and the complexity of community issues made it difficult or even impossible to determine the extent to which Alpha was substantively representative of the community. These participatory arrangements nonetheless helped Alpha gain the trust and recognition of its constituents and local and state governments as a legitimate representative of the community.

Within the next 10 years, Alpha had quickly grown to become a multimillion dollar government contractor with dozens of paid staff members and a power board, offering a wide range of human service programs to the community. Alpha's "representational mix" evolved as it grew and involved a notable change in its degree of participatory representation. Some of the communication channels that were established in its earliest years were no longer available as years went by. Community meetings were reduced to a single event, which usually happened before Alpha's annual celebration—a festival-type of event that involved residents in the neighborhood. Block clubs no longer had their offices at the organization. The succeeding executive directors—in fact, even the founding director during the last few years of his tenure—no longer made home visits to residents in the community. Another change was associated with its descriptive representation. Many members of the Alpha board of directors who used to live in South Central Los Angeles later moved out of the community; however, they still held their positions on the board.

Such weakening of Alpha's ties with the community seemed eventually to have diminished its level of symbolic representation, as dramatically demonstrated by a proposed community rally against Alpha and then by an article in a community newspaper. In early 2000, members of several block clubs and other community activists stood up and questioned the legitimacy of the organization as a representative of community interests, threatening to throw a community protest to stop the "ripping off of the community" by the Alpha board and staff. At the same year, a comment essay published on a minority newspaper challenged the legitimacy of Alpha and a few other minority organizations to represent their constituencies. In this case, then, we see that declining participatory and descriptive representation appeared to place at risk the organization's symbolic representation, the extent to which community members perceived Alpha to "stand for" their interests.

REPRESENTATION IN LOS ANGELES NCS

We now contrast Alpha to the case of voluntary associations that are part of the new NC system in the City of Los Angeles. In June 1999, Los Angeles City voters approved a charter reform measure that included provisions creating a citywide system of NCs. This system is intended to link neighborhood stakeholders to city officials and engage them in the governance process. The charter apparently stressed the importance of descriptive representation, stating that NCs "shall include representatives of the many diverse interests in communities" (LA City Charter Section 900 [Purpose]) and requiring that NC membership "be open to everyone who lives, works, or owns property in a neighborhood" (LA City Charter, Section 906 [a][2]).

Given the demographic diversity of City of Los Angeles, it is not surprising that there has been controversy regarding the likely descriptive representation of NCs during the entire period of formation. What is interesting is that the debate mixed two different descriptive concepts: representation with respect

to racial and/or cultural characteristics, and with respect to functional stakeholder status (whether people lived, worked, or owned property in the neighborhood). During the planning period, public testimony from groups such as the National Association of Latino Elected Officials regularly stressed the danger that the system would exclude the City's large Latino population. Business organizations such as the Valley Industry and Commerce Association stressed concern that NCs would be dominated by homeowner groups who would impede local development initiatives.

Two provisions of the implementing ordinance were put into place in response to these concerns. First, the administering agency, the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE), was charged with assisting "all groups and stakeholders" so that they will have "equal opportunity to form neighborhood councils" (LA City Ordinance 174006, Section IA: Department Responsibilities). The DONE was asked in particular to assist "areas of the City with particularly low rates of participation in government," and to mitigate "barriers to participation, such as the need for translation and childcare services." In addition, the certification requirements stated that NC bylaws must establish provisions for the governing board such that it would "to the extent possible, represent the diversity of the neighborhood council's community stakeholders. No single stakeholder group may comprise a majority of the neighborhood council's governing body" (LA City Ordinance II: Certification of Neighborhood Councils).

Within these general guidelines, NCs were provided relative autonomy in constituting their own formal representative rules, such as establishment of governing board structures and procedures for board member selection. This has led to a wide array of formal requirements across the city. Although the vast majority of NCs hold elections for governing board representatives, a few permit some representatives to be appointed by local organizations such as homeowners' associations, or by self-constituted stakeholder committees. In a content analysis of 40 NC bylaws, it was found that about two thirds of NCs designated at least some seats for particular types of stakeholders (youth, renters, homeowners, businesses, social service agencies). Many created governing boards where seats were filled through a combination of "at large" (community wide) and "district" (neighborhood-level) elections.

It also appears that NCs vary considerably with respect to their internal arrangements for participatory representation. Some NCs appear to have relatively permeable structures, allowing members of the public to participate in committees and to speak—if not vote—in general meetings. In contrast, many appear to have replicated city-hall-type structures in microcosm, limiting committee membership to elected board members and in meetings, utilizing speaker cards and time limits to control public discourse. Hence there is a question as to whether fairly weak formal structures (elections with relatively poor turnout) in combination with bureaucratically rigid internal organizational arrangements will be adequate to ensure substantive and symbolic representation.

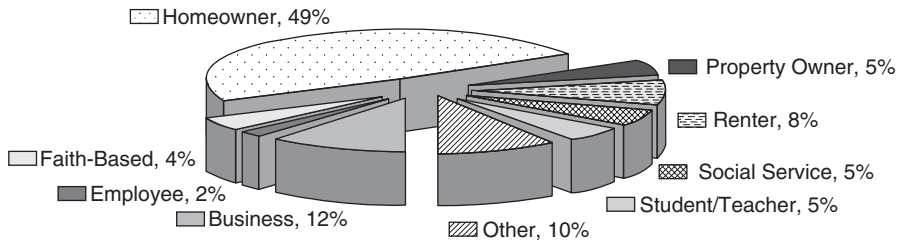


Figure 1. Main Stakeholder Membership of Neighborhood Council (NC) Boards (Single Response)

As discussed in a policy brief published by the Neighborhood Participation Project, a survey of board members suggests that, in terms of descriptive representation, NC governing boards disproportionately are constituted of long-term residents, and that they tend to be older, well off, well educated, and more likely White than the city's population. Figure 1 shows the self-identification of board members with respect to the community group(s) they represent. When asked which stakeholder groups they most strongly represent, about 49% affiliate with homeowners, 12% with businesses, and smaller percentages with other types of community interests. Figure 2 suggests a strong descriptive disparity between Whites, who tend to be overrepresented, and Latinos, who are strongly underrepresented citywide.

It is likely that these differences in descriptive representation have implications for substantive representation among NC governing boards. Figure 3 compares issue identification among NC board members to that identified by Los Angeles City residents in a survey by the Public Policy Institute of California. Although NC board members and LA City residents are strongly interested in public safety, NC board members more frequently express concerns about land use issues and transportation, while the general public is more concerned about education. These differences may in part stem from the fact that NCs advise the City, which does not have authority over schools, but also probably relate in part to the descriptive status of NC board members as older homeowners.

The jury is still out in terms of the extent to which NCs will attain symbolic representation, a recognition that they "stand for" the interests of highly diverse neighborhood constituents. It should be noted that the local press has made much of several cases of elections controversy to call into question the legitimacy of NCs (in the most notable example, a constituent in the Grass Roots Venice Neighborhood Council attempted to delegitimize the election by registering her dog "Raku" as an absentee voter).

The explorative cases discussed above show the complex relationship between different varieties of representation in community-based organizations. In the case of Alpha, formal representation procedures were lacking, which is typical for most charitable service providers. The organization managed to

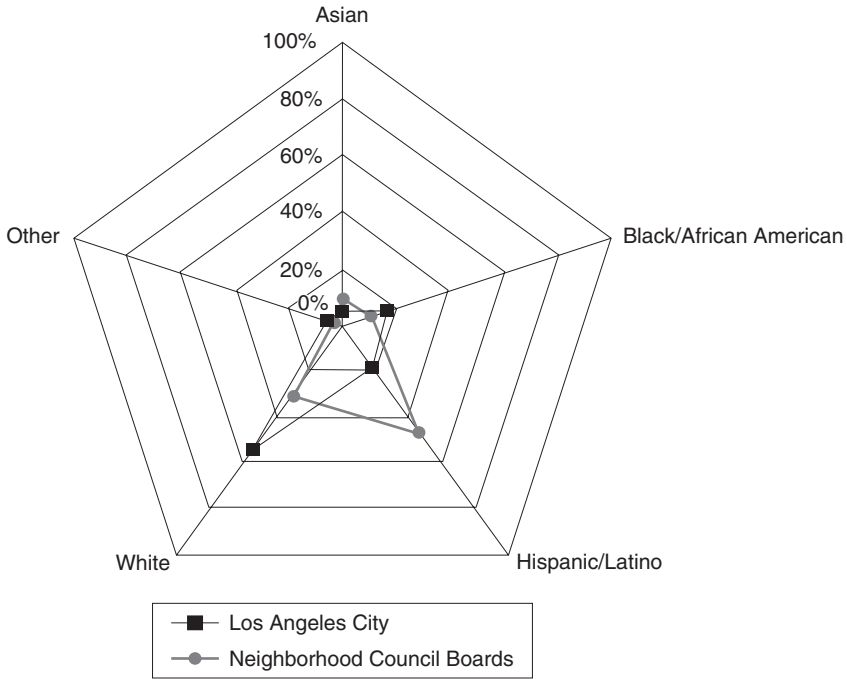


Figure 2. Race and/or Ethnicity: City of Los Angeles Versus Neighborhood Council (NC) Boards

achieve some degree of symbolic legitimacy through the establishment of various participatory mechanisms and, to a lesser extent, its descriptive representation. The breakdown of such mechanisms, along with the lack of formal procedures to hold the organization accountable, appeared to have led to the decline of Alpha’s symbolic legitimacy and have called into question its substantive success.

In the case of NCs, there has been tremendous attention to formal procedures, with the apparent aim of achieving descriptive representation. These formal procedures have not produced a high degree of descriptive representation, calling into question the extent to which NCs will “act for” the diverse interests in a neighborhood. One means to improve substantive representation might be to create participatory process to allow the broader array of stakeholders to advise NCs. Instead, many NCs appear to be replicating the “thinly” representative institutions of the Los Angeles City Council. Although the success of NCs in achieving symbolic legitimacy is still open to question, it should be noted that the focus of local media on electoral controversies suggests the important link between adequate formal structures of representation and symbolic legitimacy.

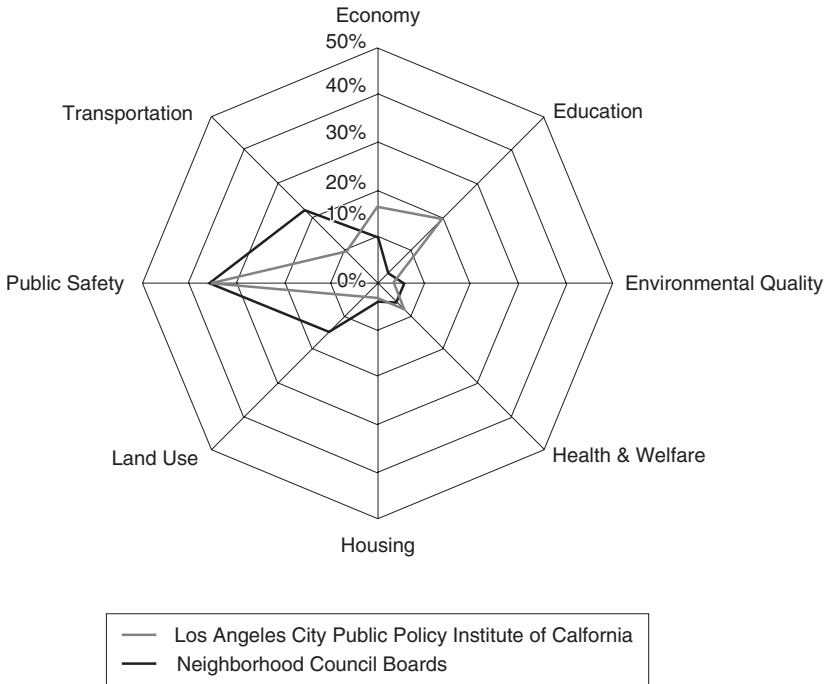


Figure 3. Policy Concerns Identified by Neighborhood Council (NC) Board Members and City Residents

Note: LA = Los Angeles, PPIC = Public Policy Institute of California.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The current study takes the representational function of nonprofit organizations as its point of departure and asserts that nonprofit organizations must create the necessary representational capacities for engaging in external representational activities. More specifically, it provides a conceptual framework for understanding the representational capacities of nonprofit and voluntary organizations and identifying the organizational structures and practices that enhance their representational capacities. Findings from two exploratory case studies suggest that different types of community-based organizations may be more representative in certain dimensions but less representative in other aspects. Thus the diverse character of the nonprofit and voluntary sector would appear to prevent development of a uniform “gold standard” to judge the representational capacities of the organizations operating in the sector.

This note highlights the need for more systematic empirical analyses to elucidate the extent to which nonprofit and voluntary organizations represent the interests of their constituents and the larger community. A next step

is to more systematically examine each of the five representational dimensions across types of organizations, and to clarify the extent to which different types of representational arrangements (e.g., formal, descriptive, participatory arrangements) seem to promote substantive and symbolic representation. Additional work is also needed to study the effects of environmental and organizational factors on the representational capacities of nonprofit organizations.

We conclude with the suggestion that public policy and management needs to be attuned to a broader understanding of the varieties of representation in nonprofit and voluntary organizations. From a standpoint of public policy, it should be noted that most advocates of reform focus rather narrowly on the relationship between formal mechanisms and descriptive representation. Our argument is that formal mechanisms may be neither necessary nor sufficient to promote substantive legitimacy. A more complex view of representation might assist in promoting nonprofit accountability. From a standpoint of management, this framework may help nonprofit leadership to “inventory” the representational capacity of their organizations, and suggest ways to bolster an organization that may be weak along one of the several dimensions.

NOTES

1. In Putnam’s studies, political organizations are excluded. Moreover, the so-called tertiary associations—those “mailing list organizations” (e.g., the Sierra Club, etc.) and most prominent nonprofits (e.g., Harvard University, etc.)—are also excluded because these organizations fail to provide the social connectedness and face-to-face contact that is believed to be crucial to building social capital.

2. The choice of the two organizational types is based on the following considerations. First, they represent a broader community consisting of multiple constituencies in a geographical area (as opposed to those organizations that claim to represent a single constituent group, e.g., a gay and lesbian organization). Such a similarity helps to form a basis for comparison of their representational dimensions. Second, in spite of a similar sense of community, the two types of organizations nonetheless perform different functions. As illustrated in the case studies, expectations of the type and level of representativeness seem to flow from their distinctions in organizational functions.

3. At the beginning of the survey in July 2003, 74 self-organized NCs had been certified by the City and 51 boards had held elections. Forty five of the 51 boards agreed to participate. Meeting rosters and Department of Neighborhood Empowerment lists were used to compile lists of the board members of the NCs. Overall 533 (65%) of the 821 board members completed the survey.

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