

CAN NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS BE ALLIES IN HEALTH POLICY EFFORTS? POLITICAL ACTIVITY AMONG NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS

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We examined organizational characteristics and types of political actions of neighborhood associations, and factors influencing the amount of political activity among the associations. We hypothesized that four neighborhood characteristics (population size, income, educational level, and percentage of owner-occupied households) and six organizational characteristics (budget, number of staff, size of board, newsletter publication, coalition involvement, and resident involvement) would influence the amount of political activity of the associations. We obtained data from the 1990 U.S. Census and a survey of neighborhood associations ($n = 84$) in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. We found that neighborhood associations engaged in numerous and diverse political activities. Results from multiple regression analyses revealed that median household income was negatively associated with amount of political activity. Population size of the neighborhood and intensity of involvement in multi-organization coalitions were both positively associated with political activity (all significant at $p < .05$). We conclude that neighborhood associations, particularly those in larger and poorer neighborhoods, can be key allies in health and social policy efforts. © 2002 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

Community and neighborhood organizations often engage in political action to address local health and social issues such as homelessness, drug trafficking, and crime (Berry, Portney, & Thomson, 1993; Crenson, 1983; Davis, 1990). Local political actions play a critical role not only in local policy efforts but also in building foundations for regional and national policy efforts. Neighborhood-level actions, such as attending city council meetings and organizing letter and telephone campaigns, are considered by many to be cornerstones of the political process (Berry et al., 1993; Benest, 1990; Davis, 1991; Suttles, 1972).

Neighborhood political activity, particularly in urban settings, is often facilitated by neighborhood associations, which are citizen-participation organizations that provide residents with a voice in city decision-making. Neighborhood associations strengthen links between residents and policymakers and create opportunities for face-to-face dialogue among residents and between local officials and residents (Logan & Rabrenovic, 1990; Mesch & Schwirian, 1996). Opportunities for face-to-face interaction increase participation in the political process and increase confidence in government (Berry et al., 1993; Davis, 1991). This more intimate form of political action can be instrumental in engaging residents and leaders in actions to prevent and reduce a wide array of local and national public health problems, including violence, environmental hazards, and substandard or inadequate housing (Benest, 1990; Berry et al., 1993; Suttles, 1972).

The degree of political activity across neighborhood associations and other local voluntary organizations varies significantly. Some local organizations engage in frequent and diverse types of political activity, whereas others engage in very little political activity (Davis, 1991; Hunter & Staggenborg, 1986; Knoke, 1990; Mesch & Schwirian, 1996; Oropesa, 1989). Factors that influence the degree of political activity among neighborhood associations are not well understood. Building on previous theory and research (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Hunter & Staggenborg, 1986; Oropesa, 1989; Prestby, Wandersman, & Florin, 1990) we developed a model of factors expected to influence political activity by neighborhood associations (Fig. 1). Most studies of neighborhood associations have evaluated how characteristics and perceptions of residents and/or characteristics of neighborhoods influence the degree to which residents participate in activities of neighborhood organizations (see left side of Figure 1; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Crenson, 1983; Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Perkins, Florin, & Rich, 1996; Prestby, et al., 1990; Thomas, 1986; Wandersman, 1981). However, fewer studies have assessed how characteristics of the neighborhood and organization influence the overall political activity level of neighborhood associations (see right side of Figure 1).

Only two neighborhood characteristics have been evaluated for their effect on political activity—size and socioeconomic status (SES). Hunter and Staggenborg (1986) found that organizations in larger neighborhoods (measured in square miles) were less politically active, but only through an indirect relationship—larger neighborhoods tended to have neighborhood organizations with larger budgets, which in turn tended to be less politically active. Mesch and Schwirian (1996) determined that neighborhood associations in higher SES neighborhoods (as measured by a composite of median household income, education level, and median home value) were less politically active, but, according to the opinions of association presidents, were more effective and successful in their political actions. Oropesa (1989) also found that

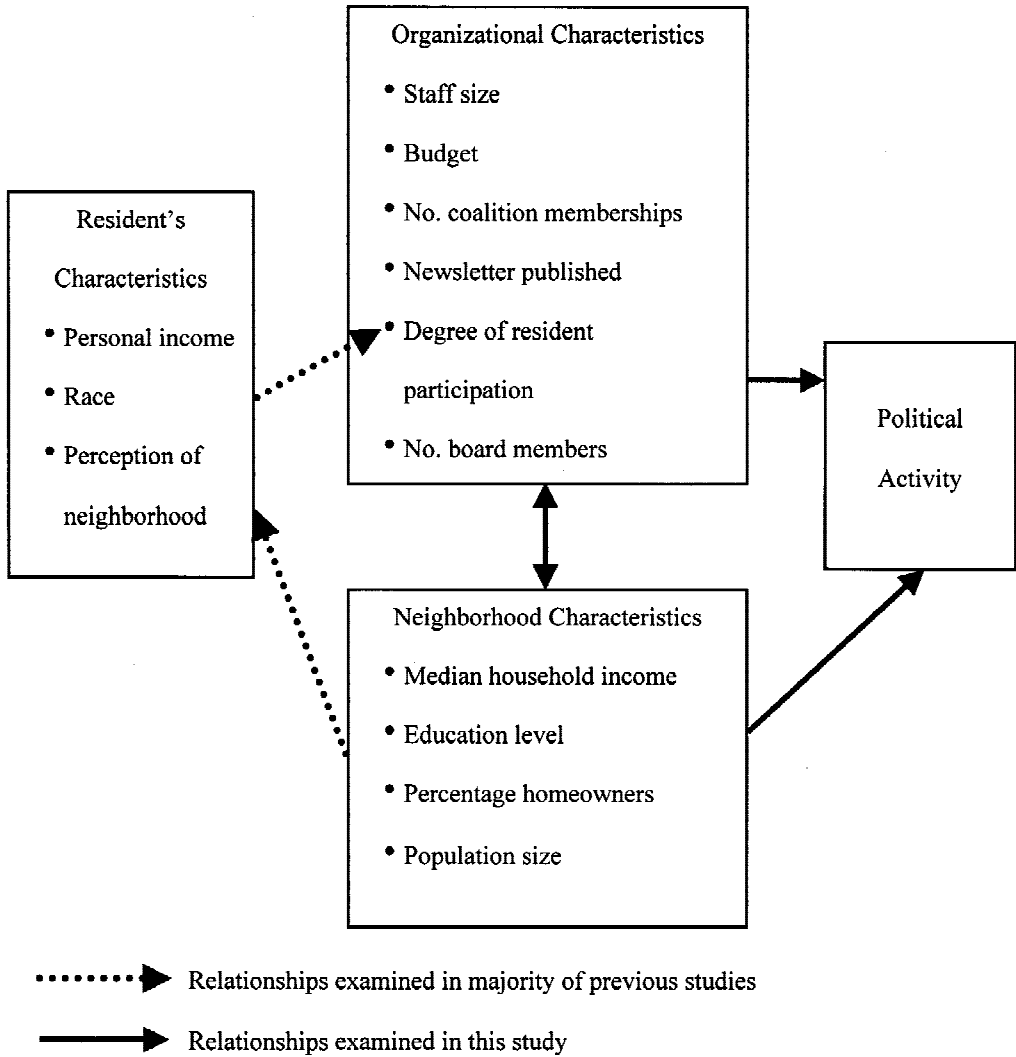


Figure 1. Model of factors influencing political activity of neighborhood associations.

associations in lower SES and unstable neighborhoods were less effective, again according to opinions of association leaders, than associations in other neighborhoods.

Organizational characteristics also may differentially affect the degree of political action and the effectiveness of this action; however, studies examining how organizational characteristics influence political activity among associations have produced conflicting and unclear results. One study found a positive relationship between staff size and degree of political activity (Knoke, 1990), whereas another found no association between staff size and effectiveness of political activity (Oropesa, 1989). Mesch and Schwirian (1996) found no relationship between organizational involvement in coalitions and degree or effectiveness of political activity, but Knoke (1990) found associations involved in more coalitions were less politically active.

Additionally, the number of people on the board of directors and frequency of newsletter publication were found to have no influence on the degree of political action (Knoke, 1990; Mesch & Schwirian, 1996), but associations that published a newsletter were found to be more effective in their political activities (Mesch & Schwirian, 1996). Hunter and Staggenborg (1986) and Knoke (1990) found that poorer organizations were more likely to be politically active than better-funded organizations. Oropesa (1989), however, found that organizational budget was not associated with effectiveness of political activity. Two studies found no relationship between resident involvement in neighborhood organizations and degree of political activity (Hunter & Staggenborg, 1986; Mesch & Schwirian, 1996), but Mesch and Schwirian (1996) and Oropesa (1989) found that resident involvement had a positive relationship with effectiveness of political actions.

In summary, although many studies have examined factors influencing the participation of residents in neighborhood associations, few studies have examined how neighborhood and/or organizational characteristics influence political action of neighborhood associations. And among this latter type of studies, each measured the effects of only a few characteristics, and each evaluated a different combination of characteristics. Definitions of these neighborhood and organizational variables also varied across studies, making it difficult to draw clear conclusions. Furthermore, some studies examined only neighborhood associations whereas others examined several types of community associations.

In this study, we examined the effects of four neighborhood characteristics (income, educational level, population size, percent owner-occupied households) and six organizational characteristics (budget, staff size, newsletter publication, membership size, board size, and degree of resident involvement) on degree of political activity among neighborhood organizations (Fig. 1). Given the current lack of understanding of these relationships, our goal was to determine which characteristics most influence amount of political activity among neighborhood associations. Gaining knowledge about how neighborhood and organizational characteristics influence political action of neighborhood associations can guide the work of health professionals, community organizers, and neighborhood activists.

METHODS

Data Collection

We administered a telephone survey of neighborhood associations in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota from November, 1998 through January, 1999. The purpose was to assess organizational characteristics of the associations, issues the associations have addressed and/or plan to address, and type and frequency of political actions. Minneapolis has 68 neighborhood associations; St. Paul has 19 associations, which are designated as district planning or community councils. Of 87 associations, 84 participated, for a participation rate of 97%. We interviewed one representative—defined as the executive director or a person who is in charge of and/or knowledgeable about personnel, budgets, and program areas—from each participating organization, including 26 executive directors, 28 board chairs, 14 community organizers, 10 coordinators, and 6 staff members. We contacted the three organizations that did not participate numerous times over a two-month period but a representative from these associations was not available and/or did not return calls.

The survey consisted of 84 questions and took an average of 12–18 minutes to complete. We asked participants to respond to the questions as representatives of their organizations, rather than to provide their personal opinions.

We used the 1990 U.S. Census to identify characteristics of the neighborhoods represented by the associations. In 1990, the number of persons per neighborhood ranged from 663 to 24,475, the median household income ranged from \$5,000 to \$80,190, and the percentage of residents over age 25 years with at least a bachelor's degree ranged from 5.6% to 67.1%. The percentage of owner-occupied households within a neighborhood ranged from 0.2% to 91.2%.

Measurement

The dependent variable for this study was the amount of political action taken by each association in the past year, measured by an index constructed from survey questions pertaining to nine types of political action (e.g., “In the past 12 months, has a representative of your organization attended a city council meeting? [If yes] How many times?”). Types of political action included: (a) attending city council meetings, (b) speaking at city council meetings, (c) attending state legislative meetings, (d) organizing telephone or letter campaigns, (e) organizing protests or demonstrations, (f) writing letters to the editor, (g) meeting with neighborhood leaders, (h) organizing media campaigns, and (i) contacting public officials. In order to measure both the quantity and diversity of an association's political actions, we created a new variable for each type of action based on the median number of times the action was taken across all the associations (0 = no times; 1 = number of times greater than zero but less than or equal to median; 2 = number of times equal to or greater than median). We then summed the new variables for each association to create the political activity index (possible scores ranged from 0 to 18). The standardized Cronbach's alpha for this index was 0.79.

Independent variables included neighborhood characteristics that we obtained from the 1990 U.S. Census and organizational characteristics obtained from survey responses. Neighborhood characteristics included median household income, education level (the percentage of residents over age 25 years with at least a bachelor's degree), population (number of persons), and percentage of owner-occupied households (number of owner-occupied households divided by the total number of occupied housing units). Seven of the responding neighborhood associations represented more than one neighborhood; we determined census figures for each of these associations by either summing or averaging the census figures, as appropriate, for all neighborhoods represented by that association. Conversely, one neighborhood in Minneapolis had four neighborhood associations; we assigned the census figures for income, percentage of owner-occupied households, and education level of the neighborhood to each association and divided the figure for the neighborhood population by four to estimate the population corresponding to each neighborhood association.

Organizational characteristics included annual budget, whether they published a newsletter, number of paid staff members, number of board members, degree of coalition involvement, and degree of resident involvement. We measured the budget of the association by a dichotomous (0,1) variable based on the survey question, “What is your approximate annual budget?” We collapsed the four response choices into two categories (<\$50,000 and \$50,000–\$100,000 were assigned a 0; \$101,000–\$200,000 and >\$200,000 were assigned a 1) to more accurately reflect the relationship between

political activity and budget. We also measured newsletter publication as a dichotomous variable based on the survey question, "Does your organization publish a newsletter?" (response choices: 1 = yes, 0 = no).

We measured the number of staff members, board members, and coalition memberships by creating new variables based on the corresponding open-ended survey questions. Using the median value of the responses across all the associations, we created the staff member and coalition membership variables (0 = no members or memberships; 1 = number greater than zero but less than or equal to median; 2 = number equal to or greater than median). Possible scores ranged from 0 to 4 for staff members (sum of two variables; part-time and full-time staff), and from 0 to 2 for collaborative efforts. We measured the board members variable by dividing the distribution of all open-ended responses into quartiles and assigning the four groups a value of 1 to 4.

We measured resident involvement by summing the responses from four closed-ended survey questions. Three questions referred to how many residents were involved on a yearly, monthly, and weekly basis (e.g., "How many residents are involved in your organizations on a weekly basis?"; with response choices assigned 1 through 4); one question pertained to how many hours per month were spent on soliciting neighborhood involvement (response choices assigned 1 through 3). The total possible score ranged from 4 to 15, and the standardized Cronbach's alpha for this index was 0.79.

Analyses

We conducted univariate analyses to describe organizational characteristics and types of political actions of the associations. We conducted bivariate analyses, using Pearson's correlation coefficients, to determine the interrelationships between independent variables and the relationships between the dependent variable and each independent variable.

We performed multivariate analyses to determine which organizational and neighborhood characteristics were most associated with the amount of political activity among associations, after controlling for the effects of the others. Analyses consisted of a series of multiple regressions using a forward selection method. Since the independent variables represented two distinct domains (organizational characteristics and neighborhood characteristics), we initially constructed two separate models. For each model, we added independent variables based on the strength of the correlation between the independent variable and the dependent variable (using Pearson's correlation coefficients) and retained the independent variable if it was significant at the $p = .05$ level. We based strength of a model on the total variance explained (R^2). We then combined the two strongest models—one for each group of independent variables—to determine the overall best model.

We used a significance level of $p < .05$ for all analyses and performed all calculations using the SAS statistical package.

RESULTS

Approximately 70% of the associations had at most one paid staff member and had a yearly budget of less than \$100,000 (Table 1). Fifty-five percent of the associations had a board with 8 to 15 members, 82% published a newsletter, and 67% were members of coalitions or collaborative efforts. Over 50% of the associations had at least 100

Table 1. Characteristics of Neighborhood Associations (Expressed in Percent of Organizations; n = 84)

	0	1	2	> 2
Number of full-time paid staff	45%	25%	10%	20%
Number of part-time paid staff	45%	37%	11%	7%
	0-7	8-15	>15	
Number of board members	12%	55%	33%	
	<\$50K	\$50-100K	\$101-200K	>\$200K
Annual budget	49%	19%	17%	16%
Published a newsletter	82%			
	<20	20-50	51-100	>100
No. of residents involved ≤1/year	7%	16%	20%	55%
	<10	10-20	21-50	>50
No. of residents involved 1/month	8%	25%	52%	14%
	<5	5-10	11-20	>20
No. of residents involved 1/week	31%	28%	30%	10%
	<5 hours	5-10 hours	>10 hours	
Hours/month soliciting involvement	13%	21%	64%	

Note. Totals may not add up to 100% because of rounding and/or non-respondents.

residents involved on a once-a-year basis, 21-50 residents involved once per month, and at least 5 residents involved once a week. Sixty-four percent spent over 10 hours per month soliciting neighborhood involvement.

The most common political activities were meeting with leaders of neighborhood groups and businesses, contacting public officials and attending city council meetings. Less common activities were attending state legislative meetings and organizing protests and demonstrations (Table 2).

Considering the relationships between neighborhood characteristics and political action, median household income and percentage of owner-occupied households were negatively associated with political activity; however, population of the neighborhood was positively associated with political activity (Table 3). Educational level was not significantly associated with political activity. Regarding the relationship between organizational characteristics and political activity, resident involvement, number of coalition memberships, budget, number of staff members, and number of board members were all positively associated with political action. Newsletter publication was not significantly associated with political action.

We examined relationships between independent variables to determine possible multicollinearity. We found evidence of multicollinearity between median household income and all other independent variables. Similarly, all the organizational characteristics, except newsletter publication, were positively and significantly associated with each other.

Table 2. Types of Political Activity of Neighborhood Associations

<i>Political activity</i>	<i>% yes n = 84</i>	<i>If yes, average times in past year</i>
Met with leaders of neighborhood groups/businesses	96.4	21.3
Contacted public official	88.1	26.6
Attended a city council meeting	86.9	7.8
Participated in public education or media campaign	60.7	6.1
Wrote letter to the editor	59.5	5.7
Spoke at a city council meeting	59.5	4.9
Organized letter/phone campaign	42.9	4.4
Attended a state legislative meeting	39.3	3.6
Organized a protest or demonstration	10.7	4.4

In the model examining relationships between neighborhood characteristics and political activity, population and median household income were the two variables significantly associated with political activity ($R^2 = .372$). The best model examining relationships between organizational characteristics and political activity only included number of board members and coalition memberships ($R^2 = .276$). (Note: Five of the organizational characteristics had nearly equal correlations with the dependent variable; various combinations of these characteristics were tested in multivariate analyses to determine the model with the highest R^2).

When we combined the two models, the board member variable fell just below significant levels ($p = .07$) and was subsequently dropped. The final model for predicting the amount of political activity among neighborhood associations included population size, median household income, and number of coalition memberships ($R^2 = .419$; see Table 4). As determined in bivariate analyses, population and number of coalition memberships were positively related to political action, whereas median household income was negatively associated with political action.

DISCUSSION

Several organizational and neighborhood characteristics were significantly associated with level of political activity among neighborhood associations. Neighborhoods with higher incomes were less politically active. This is in agreement with the results obtained by Mesch and Schwirian (1996) who used a composite measure of SES that included median household income. There are several plausible explanations for this relationship. Neighborhoods with wealthier residents may face fewer and less complex problems, and hence may have less need for extensive political action. Additionally, neighborhood residents with higher incomes may have connections to influential leaders in the community who can address issues quickly without extensive political action from the associations. In other words, these neighborhoods may need to do less than poor neighborhoods to achieve the same results.

The other measures of neighborhood SES (percentage of owner-occupied households and education level) were not significantly associated with political action in the final model. The relatively strong intercorrelation between income and percentage of

Table 3. Correlation Matrix of Neighborhood and Organizational Characteristics and Political Activity

	Political Activity	Pop. ¹	Median income (household)	Bachelor degree (%)	Owner occup (%)	Size of budget	Newsletter	No. paid staff	Resident involvement	Coalition involvement	No. board members
Political activity	1.0										
Population ¹	0.48**	1.0	-0.18	-0.04	0.08	0.44**	-0.15	0.58**	0.49**	0.36**	0.46**
Median income (household)	-0.41**		1.0	0.55**	0.56**	-0.29**	0.23*	-.28**	-0.23*	0.26*	-0.09
Bachelors degree (%)	-0.16			1.0	-0.05	-0.25*	0.15	-0.19	0.00	-0.20	0.21
Owner occupied (%)	-0.27*				1.0	-0.12	0.40**	-0.04	-0.01	-0.05	-0.15
Size of budget	0.45**					1.0	-0.01	0.67**	0.43**	0.54**	0.38**
Newsletter	-0.22						1.0	0.12	-0.17	0.13	-0.01
No. paid staff	0.45**							1.0	0.52**	0.63**	0.58**
Resident involvement	0.40**								1.0	0.51**	0.35**
Coalition involvement	0.44**									1.0	0.41**
No. board members	0.41**										1.0

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

¹Natural log used to reduce skewness.

Table 4. Effects of Neighborhood and Organizational Characteristics on Political Activity

<i>Model</i>	<i>Variable</i>	β	<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>p</i> -value	<i>df</i>	R^2
Neighborhood characteristics	Median household income	-0.00013	-4.04	0.0001	1	0.372
	Population	2.33	4.97	0.0001	1	
Organizational characteristics	No. of board members	1.16	2.99	0.004	1	0.276
	No. of coalition memberships	1.55	3.06	0.003	1	
Combined model	Median household income	-0.00011	-3.44	0.001	1	0.419
	Population	1.96	4.06	0.0001	1	
	No. of coalition memberships	1.16	2.52	0.014	1	

owner-occupied households may, in part, explain why percentage of owner-occupied households was significant in the bivariate analyses but not in the multivariate models. This explanation does not pertain to education level, however, which was not significant even at the bivariate level. The only relationship that education level had with political activity was an indirect negative relationship; education level was negatively associated with budget which, in turn, was positively related to political activity.

Number of coalition memberships was the only organizational characteristic that retained significance in the final model. One explanation for the significant and positive relationship between coalition memberships and political activity may be that these two variables actually measured very similar concepts. It is difficult to compare these findings to other studies, however, because of the conflicting results across studies (Hunter & Staggenborg, 1986; Knoke 1990; Mesch & Schwirian, 1996; Oropesa, 1989). The inconsistent results of such studies can, in part, be explained by the variation in measurement and in types of organizations sampled.

Results pertaining to organizational characteristics are also difficult to interpret due to the relatively high intercorrelations between five of the six variables and the nearly equal correlations these five variables had with political action in the bivariate analyses. For example, when we were constructing the model of organizational characteristics and political activity, several different combinations of the five intercorrelated variables resulted in models that explained nearly the same degree of variance as the final model. Further analyses are needed to more clearly determine the relationships between organizational characteristics and organizational characteristics that are associated with political activity.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size of 84 is small and is limited to one major metropolitan area. Also, results may not generalize to communities with different types of neighborhood governance structures. Further research in other locales with larger sample sizes would be useful. Additionally, more accurate information would likely be obtained by surveying several representatives from each neighborhood association, rather than limiting interviews to one person per organization. Other local leaders, city officials, and neighborhood residents may also be surveyed. One representative may not be aware of all activities with which the organization is involved; multiple respondents would increase the likelihood that all organizationally relevant information is captured. Another limitation is that this study assessed only

factors related to degree of political activity. Although it is difficult to measure accurately, effectiveness of political actions across neighborhood associations is a concept requiring future research. Finally, demographic data from the 1990 Census, the most recent data available, may not accurately depict neighborhood demographics in 1999. However, officials from the city planning offices in the two cities studied here estimated that SES and population size of most neighborhoods did not change dramatically between 1990 and 1999.

Despite these limitations, this study provides useful information for health professionals, community organizers, and other activists. Often an untapped resource for community health and social issue campaigns, neighborhood associations reported involvement in frequent and diverse types of political activities. Neighborhood associations in poorer and larger neighborhoods tended to be particularly active and, consequently, may serve as important allies for community activists. Similarly, neighborhood associations involved in coalitions are more likely to have experience in political actions that can be used in community health and social issue campaigns. Finally, the results of this study reveal that neighborhood associations have connections to numerous neighborhood residents, who are important political constituents in all efforts to improve community health and well-being.

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