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Who's The Boss In Oss?

Power Structures In Local Governance Networks of a Small Dutch City

Paper EGPA conference 2009; SG IV Local governance and democracy

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1. Introduction

Who's the boss in town? Ask any citizen and he'll probably name the mayor, mainly because local governance is exemplified by the mayor, who is the most visible representative of the local administration. This doesn't of course mean that the mayor is the one who wields the greatest influence in a municipality. Running a city is a complicated process of give and take between local authorities, businesses and organizations (e.g. Stone 1989, Kooiman 2003, Kjaer 2004). They decide how a city should develop, what the key issues should be addressed, and how these can best be tackled. The people who wield the greatest power are those who have fully mastered the game, the ones who can bring together administrators, institute directors and entrepreneurs or can play them off against one another.

We don't know much about how influence is distributed within a municipality. Some aldermen have a higher profile than others, which is not to say that they wield greater power. A top civil servant who prepares key strategic decisions behind the scenes may in practice have more influence. People who run businesses or public institutions (educational institutes, housing associations, cultural facilities) often have greater influence than the general public realizes. It is therefore interesting to investigate just who are the most influential people in a municipality. This will shed light on the powers and forces that determine a city's future.

Who calls the shots in a city? Who are the 25 most influential people? How many administrators, politicians, civil servants, entrepreneurs and other active citizens feature on that list? And to what do they owe their influence? To answer these questions, the University of Tilburg joined forces with the regional newspaper, the Brabants Dagblad, to conduct a major study in the city of Oss. More studies on other towns and cities in Brabant are planned for later. A key part of the study involved a survey of more than 200 people who play an active social or administrative role in Oss. These are the people who are up with the play, who are involved in negotiations about public policies of all kinds. We asked them who they think wields the greatest influence and why. This paper is a report on that study.

2. Community Power Analysis

To carry out the study, we needed a way of identifying the people who exercise 'power' within a particular local entity or community. We developed two different methodologies that go back to American studies from the 1950s and 60s. The debate generated by

these studies is sometimes called the community power debate (Trounstine & Christensen 1982).

Before this debate began, people would often refer to Floyd Hunter's book *Community Power Structure* (Hunter 1953). Hunter's work was instrumental in helping us accept that power resides not only in formal institutions such as city councils, but also outside these institutions – in Hunter's case, in local entrepreneurs or other actors from the economic sector. Hunter's study was also remarkable in that, for the first time, it focused not on 'government' (with power as a derivative), but on power. This led to greater interest in power within non-governmental institutions (see for instance Trounstine & Christensen 1982: 21). As a sociologist, Hunter limited his scope to political institutions. In his study, he defined power as 'the acts of men going about the business of moving other men to act in relation to themselves or in relation to organic or inorganic things' (Hunter 1953). He wanted to find out who wielded power in Atlanta and he used his own methodological approach, later known as the 'reputational method', to do so. He analyzed documents and newspapers to compile a list of more than 175 people whom he regarded as community leaders and activists. With the help of a panel of 14 people who were well-acquainted with the city, he then reduced the list to 40 candidates. He interviewed all 40 on a range of matters including their social contacts and their involvement in projects; he also asked them to nominate other possible leaders who might have been overlooked in the earlier stage. The interviews all confirmed his belief that Atlanta was run by a coherent elite. Moreover, it was an elite that came primarily from the economic sector. Of the 40 people listed, 28 were from the banking, insurance and legal sectors, five from the 'community' and four from government, as well as two union leaders and one dentist (Hunter 1953). This group also constituted a coherent elite in that its members tended to know one another, to belong to the same social and other clubs and to meet regularly. Hunter's empirical findings confirm earlier 'elite theories' of politics and power, namely that within a particular community power is exercised by a small coherent elite (see Pareto 1935: 1429-30; Mosca 1939: 50; Hunter 1953: 2/3, 262-271; Polsby 1963: 45-48; Trounstine & Christensen 1982: 108/109).

Reaction to Hunter's research was not slow in coming and came mainly from political scientists. Criticism focused first and foremost on his research methodology. It was argued that studies should not investigate subjective reputations but rather specific actions that can be identified more objectively (Trounstine, Christensen 1982: 27-28). As well as this plea for a different methodological approach, ontological criticism was also levelled at Hunter. He was accused of focusing too much on a homogeneous power elite and ignoring rivalry and conflict between elites. Therefore, political scientist Robert Dahl

proposed an alternative methodology for measuring power. Known as the decision method, it has its origins in Dahl's study *Who Governs* (Dahl 1961). Dahl found that to measure influence (he used the word 'influence' rather than 'power'), it is necessary to focus on specific themes. He looked at three controversial decision-making processes in the city of New Haven: restructuring, public schools and political and other appointments (Dahl 1961). His assumption was that if an elite did indeed exist in New Haven, it would be apparent in all of these areas. However, using qualitative methods (e.g. participatory observation, including at the town hall) and quantitative methods (e.g. surveys of voters and of whom Dahl calls 'sub leaders'), he found that influence in New Haven was 'specialized'. By this he meant that different coalitions were important in different decision-making processes and that there was no single elite pulling the strings. Stronger still, the only actors who played a key role in every decision-making process operated in the political rather than the economic arena (Dahl 1961/1970: 96, 164, 330-340; Polsby 1963; Trounstine & Christensen 1982: 30-32).

This method also came under criticism, much of which can be traced back to the reputational method. Political scientists argued that the decision method ignores the more subtle ways in which power is exercised. Power is often entirely invisible and need not always be wielded in an active sense. Decision makers can anticipate the will of the real leaders, without the latter having to carry out specific actions (see for instance Bachrach & Baratz 1970; Crenson 1971).

A further criticism was that Dahl's approach pays little heed to the aims of power wielding. Such a focus within power studies would reveal the reasons behind the rise and fall of powerful coalitions of politicians, administrators, organizations, institutions and companies with the same interests and views (Laumann & Pappi, 1976). These notions regarding power coalitions were later elaborated in regime theory. The concept of urban regimes is based on the work of several authors, with Clarence Stone (1989) as its chief architect. Stone defines a regime as 'an informal yet relatively stable group with access to institutional resources that enable it to have a sustained role in making governing decisions' (Stone 1989: 4). The concept of urban regimes differs from pluralism and elitism. It challenges the notion that community power is concentrated in the hands of a single coherent group, and shows instead that it rests with different autonomous actors who form a governing coalition. And in contrast to pluralists, urban regime theorists do not see coalition formation as an open process. A regime is for the most part a group that does not allow access to outsiders.

3. Research study

This study seeks to do justice to the original reputational method, and tries to interpret the findings in terms of urban regimes. With some minor modifications and additions, we are applying Hunter's reputational method to several Dutch cities, starting with the North Brabant city of Oss. We hope the results of this study will tell us something about the power coalitions built up around certain policy themes and about whether Oss has its own urban regime.

Oss is a small city of about 70,000 inhabitants, situated in the northeast of North Brabant province. Traditionally a strong industrial centre, Oss has seen a sharp decline in the number of jobs within industry over the past five years, which has not been offset by the growth within other economic sectors. As a consequence, Oss's unemployment rate of 10% is high compared with the region and with the Netherlands as a whole.

The Oss regional editorial office of the Brabants Dagblad identified a number of people whom they felt were highly knowledgeable about Oss society, who understood the comings and goings within the community and who could identify the key players. Together with researchers from the University of Tilburg, the central editorial staff then interviewed these people in September and October 2008 to draw up a list of 30 influential individuals. In early November, the Brabants Dagblad sent a letter to a sub-elite of 230 people who are socially, politically or administratively active in Oss, asking them to take part in an online survey about the key issues and people in Oss. The letter gave a link to the questionnaire and a user name and password for logging in. Those who hadn't responded by mid-November were sent a reminder asking them once again whether they would like to participate. To identify the most influential person in Oss, respondents were asked to indicate which five people on the list of 30 candidates wielded the greatest influence. They could also nominate people who were not on the list, but this option was hardly used. Respondents were then asked to rank the top five according to their perceived level of influence. Eventually, 90 people completed the questionnaire, giving us a response rate of 40%.

4. Measuring influence

The questionnaire results were used to calculate influence scores for all the candidates that the respondents selected. The procedure was as follows:

1. Firstly, each respondent's ranking of the five most influential people was converted into individual scores in accordance with the following formula: 11 minus the position on the list. For example, a candidate who was ranked number one was awarded 10 points (11-1), someone ranked number two was awarded 9 points (11-2), and so on. Candidates who did not appear in the respondent's top five, received 0 points.
2. We then calculated total scores by adding up the points awarded by all respondents to each candidate. This meant that a candidate who appeared at the top of the list 50 times received $50 \times (11-1)=500$ points, while a candidate whom 100 respondents ranked in second place received $100 \times (11-2)=900$ points. It is therefore theoretically possible for someone ranked second by many people to obtain a higher influence score than someone ranked in first place by fewer people.

6. The top 25

The influence scores give us the following top 25. At number one is Jules Iding, a alderman who has represented the Socialist Party¹ (SP) in Oss since 1978. He succeeded Jan Marijnissen as chairman of the SP council group when party leader Marijnissen was elected to parliament and in 1996 he became the country's first SP alderman. Herman Klitsie, the mayor of Oss for more than ten years, comes in at second place. Third place goes to Jan van Loon, a alderman for more than six years. Previously, he had spent eight years as leader of the independent local political party 'For the Community' (VDG).

<i>Position</i>	<i>Name</i>		<i>influence score</i>
1	Jules Iding	(SP alderman)	652
2	Herman Klitsie	(mayor)	414
3	Jan van Loon	(VDG alderman)	279
4	Rob Prins	(entrepreneur)	264
5	Frans Heesen	(entrepreneur)	179
6	Harry Grimmus	(secondary school principal)	178
7	Harrie Windmüller	(director housing corporation)	176
8	Chris Ermers	(SP alderman)	152
9	Theo Vinken	(manager Rabobank)	127
10	Hendrik Hoeksema	(PvdA alderman)	126

¹ The SP is a rather traditional socialist party with Maoist roots. The main distinction with the social democrat party PvdA (Partij van de Arbeid, Labour Party) is that the SP has a stronger communitarian profile. Oss has been the cradle of the SP. The SP gained 28.9% of the votes in the last municipal elections in Oss (2006).

11	Henk Berghege	(building contractor)	101
12	Mari Nelissen	(cultural institutions director)	89
13	Marc Veldhoven	(board member of regional training centre)	77
14	Lambèr Hendriks	(entrepreneur)	73
15	Ria Engels	(city manager)	70
16	Jan Marijnissen	(SP MP)	65
17	Pierre Vink	(hospitality industry entrepreneur)	64
18	Peter van der Steen	(workforce reintegration agency)	42
19	Paul Peters	(SP council group leader)	37
20	Michel de Best	(chairman entrepreneurs association)	35
21	Vic Acket	(entrepreneur)	33
22	Jacques Luijpen	(civil servant)	30
23	Adri van Osch	(elderly care institution)	21
24	Eric Blokland	(manager shopping centers)	19
25	Joop van Orsouw	(independent councillor)	17

As a further check on the validity of the research data, informants were asked to compile their own list of the top ten most influential people. The top three for all informants corresponded to the above list. For positions 4 and 5, there was also a high degree of overlap between informant assessments and the study data.

Entrepreneurs and directors of social institutions (care, education, culture and housing) frequently occupy a high position on the list. If we compare the average scores of administrators (the municipal executive), politicians (councillors, MPs, etc.), civil servants, entrepreneurs and directors of institutions, we see that respondents attributed the greatest influence to administrators, institution directors and entrepreneurs.

Average influence score

- Administrators 324
- Directors of institutions 108
- Entrepreneurs 79
- Politicians 31
- Civil servants 30

This conclusion therefore differs in an interesting respect from the main findings of Hunters reputation study. In contrast to Hunter's study, the most influential people in Oss are primarily administrators. This is all the more interesting because the response to Hunter was prompted in part by the dominant role of economics in his research. Although

the reputational and decision methods more or less merged later into one, a 'pure' application of the reputational method in Oss shows that an elite can also consist predominantly of administrators. The Oss situation seems to relate to some degree to Dahl's findings in New Haven, which also pointed to administrators and politicians as the main 'linking pins'. The extent to which the influential people in Oss also form a coherent elite, like Hunter's elite in Atlanta, still remains to be seen, although the fact that they are largely active in the same sector would suggest that this is the case.

To what do the Oss elites owe their influence?

In our study of influential people in Oss, however, we have gone further than the original advocates of the reputational method. We were also curious about what these influential people owe their position to. For instance, administrators might owe their influence to factors other than their job. Various possibilities are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Power sources of all local leaders

name	% formal position	% public support	% relationships and networks	% professional expertise	% financial investment capacity
politicians	97	93	79	50	50
administrators	98	84	89	73	60
civil servants	100	93	100	87	53
institution directors	98	82	91	82	67
entrepreneurs	94	87	92	70	69
TOTAL	91	82	85	69	59

*Example: 97% of people who see politicians as influential people say that this influence is partly based on their formal position.

The influence of the Oss elite is primarily based on the formal positions they hold. Yet, it takes more to get into the top 25; influentials also need contacts and networks, public support, expertise and money. The influence of aldermen and the mayor rests above all on their public support and their relationships and networks. The influence of entrepreneurs is primarily attributed to their opportunities for financial investment, but also to their public support. In that respect, the elite appear to operate in a fairly democratic fashion. Although the most influential people in Oss are not elected, they can not get anywhere without the support of large sections of the population.

Here too it is interesting to relate the findings back to the community power debate. Dahl and other critics of Hunter's work point out that his findings exposed the undemocratic nature of urban elites. This is because it was not the elected politicians and administrators who pulled the strings in Atlanta, but non-elected entrepreneurs. Dahl's study has added some nuance to this picture. In New Haven it emerged that elected

politicians occupied a more significant position within the decision-making process. They could then be held accountable by means of democratic elections (please note that the mayor was particularly important in New Haven because, like most mayors in the United States and unlike Dutch mayors, he was directly elected by voters).

In urban regime analysis the role of citizens seems to be neglected. Most urban regime cases in the literature deal mainly with agendas focused on economic development in which the input from citizens is limited. In the terminology of Stoker and Mossberger these are typical instrumental urban regimes, which I consider to be urban regimes focused on economic development in which citizens are assumed to act largely in accordance with the functioning of the elites that dominate these urban regimes (Stoker and Mossberger 1994). Urban regimes like these are possible when citizens feel they are adequately represented by their elites. It is also possible that citizens lack the resources to be an effective partner or even counter-power to these elites. They are either not needed for the accomplishment of the urban (economic) agenda or they are not powerful enough to destroy it and replace it by a more social agenda. When citizens are more directly involved in an urban regime, this is mainly in organised form, like homeowners associations, but not as individual citizens. This neglect of citizens in urban regime literature is no longer maintainable. When new urban priorities emerge (e.g. economic change) that can no longer be implemented through elite control exclusively, the relationship between the urban regime and citizens changes as well (Van Ostaaijen 2007).

We included power sources as separate criteria in this study in order to find out whether the distinction between formal power and other power recourses is in fact drawn along sectoral lines. The Oss results are very revealing. We found that both administrators and entrepreneurs are partially reliant upon public support. No single member of the influential group in Oss can do without it. Although entrepreneurs and institution directors are more likely than others to owe their influence to their ability to invest money, the popular notion that this elite 'buys' power without being in some way accountable is therefore refuted.

The significance of the top 25

For this study we used the reputational method, a core method for measuring power and influence. We were prompted in part by the fact that it has had little systematic application outside Europe for studies similar to the one Hunter carried out in Atlanta. We have shown that the method is still useful, albeit in a slightly modified form. However, the Oss elite is quite different in character from the elite that Hunter encountered in Atlanta.

Firstly, it is made up primarily of administrators rather than people from the economic sector. This goes some way towards meeting the criticisms levelled by political scientists. And by adding an extra dimension, we have been able to discover that a key resource for all influential people is possessing a support base. Regardless of the sector they represent, this gives them a democratic dimension, which was certainly lacking for the non-directly elected people of influence in the original variant of the reputational method and of elite theory.

The list of top 25 'Oss bosses' presents a clear picture of who calls the shots in this city. It sheds light on the distribution of influence. This is of course based on the observations of the people surveyed. It is difficult, if not impossible, to establish a person's influence objectively. However, the respondents are up with the play in Oss by virtue of their positions as administrators, politicians, entrepreneurs, members of neighbourhood councils or social associations and the like. Their frequent involvement in negotiations means that their observations ultimately present a reliable picture of the power structure in Oss.

Quite apart from the names that feature in the top 25, the list is interesting in another respect. The composition of the urban elite sheds light on the policy priorities around which the Oss' elite is organized. The prominence of entrepreneurs and institute directors suggests that Oss has an urban regime in which the city council, educational institutions and companies work together in the fields of economic development and strengthening the labour market. Of the top-25, 17 elite members are active in policy networks that are aimed at strengthening the linkage between education and labour market.

For Stone, the agenda is the central aspect in urban regime analysis, which according to him is 'the set of challenges which policy makers accord priority' (Stone 2005: 1). An agenda does not emerge out of nothing. Every possible urban regime actor has its own agenda. Agendas compete for dominance and not always a 'new' overarching agenda emerges. Sometimes however a certain agenda becomes dominant and a coalition forms around it. This is a very dynamic process. The agenda and the coalition are in constant interaction.

This linkage to policy agendas means that the influential elite is not a closed shop. Urban elites are in fact relatively open to newcomers. If the city council's priorities change, new heads of institutions and organizations will make their way into the top 25. Nor is the elite a complacent caste of self-appointed dignitaries. On the contrary, they play a key role in interactions between politics and society. This is underlined once again by the fact that

they derive their influence primarily from their support base within the community. They are instrumental in recruiting support for urban developments. In short, they are the cement that holds the urban community together.

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