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The Politics of Aging and Rural Social Services: An Exploratory Analysis¹

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The advent of federal funding for rural social services during the late 1960s and 1970s brought about changes in the political organization of rural America. A host of new organizational actors, like Area Agencies on Aging and various local aging agencies were created in rural communities across the country, in the wake of Baker v. Carr with its “one man/one vote” principle and funding through programs like the Economic Opportunity Act and the Older Americans Act. This article details a leadership succession model suggesting that local leadership of aging interests went through at least four distinct phases during this time: from pre-organizational leadership, to leadership planning, organizational managers, and finally, leadership as special-interest advocacy.

Introduction

Let us agree from the very start to set aside the one topic which is most frequently heard of meetings on rural social work. I would hope that we might all simply agree that there are important qualitative and experiential differences between what are conventionally called urban and rural life in America and let it go at that. My concern here is not with how politics and social services in rural areas are different from those same concerns in urban areas – which is essentially a topic of comparative analysis. I am concerned instead with a straightforward descriptive account of events and trends on this topic in rural areas – small towns, villages, ranches, farms, primarily. Political and social service activities by, and on behalf of, older people in rural areas are, I believe, a topic worthy of discussion in their own right and do not need any comparisons with urban areas in order to justify them.

Assumptions

In pursuing such a descriptive, non-comparative approach to this subject we can also state certain assumptions in a strictly qualitative, non-numerical manner. Let us assume that: 1) There are a substantial number of small towns, farms, ranches, mining camps, fishing villages, pueblos, migrant labor camps, reservations, rural communes, and other small scale settlements in the contemporary United States. 2) Older people are found in most of those settlements and may be defined

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qualitatively as those who have adult children or are age peers with those who have adult children; and 3) national and state social legislation for the aged explicitly and implicitly extends parity coverage for most of those rural older people. That is, rural older people are, in principle, entitled to their fair share of services and benefits, however difficult that concept of fairness may be to operationally define or to achieve.

Social welfare politics in rural areas of the United States have since the days of the agrarian reformers encompassed two very different strains of activities. On the one hand there are those efforts such as support for Social Security legislation and the current national health initiative. These are activities everyone recognizes as politics – election of public officials, campaigning, political parties, interest groups and more. At the same time, there is a level of non-partisan or civic politics of social welfare involving appointed rather than elected officials, volunteers, community leaders and others who are not explicitly recognized as politicians. This form of civic politics has existed more or less continuously during the twentieth century in both rural and urban areas. It is this level of nonpartisan politics which is the central focus of this paper.

The American Welfare State in Rural Perspective

Given these assumptions, how do the emerging system of social services and the political forces which support it appear from a rural perspective? It is my purpose here to offer some hypotheses on this question. The answers to that question must look first at social welfare ideology as it has developed in the United States. From the end of World War II through the reapportionment of state legislatures beginning in 1964 in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's "one man one vote" ruling in *Baker v. Carr*, one of the most common arguments for federal social action was the necessity of such action established by the negative political setting of rural dominated state and local governments. Social services arose in the United States according to this view out of the urbanization and industrialization of American society. From this point of view, ruralness often became a particular form of villainy: "Rural domination" was virtually synonymous with inaction for the needs of older people, the poor, the mentally ill, the disabled and other similar populations. A companion argument often advanced during this period was the view that rural areas had less need for organized social services because rural areas were characterized by strong, more satisfactory mutual aid networks and kinship systems of the sort that tended to break down in urbanization.

Four observations can be made about this ideology which was often presented as received truth to many of us in our undergraduate and graduate training. First, it has proven to be an ideology of political complacency: Why, after all, would social workers and progressives need to be politically active when major historical trends were so clearly in their favor? Secondly, this view does not offer a very flattering portrait of older people and their families, since it appears to present them as either active and willing supporters of backward-looking rural politicians who have proven

to be the most retrograde forces in American political life, or as so completely unaware of their own best interests that they can easily be tricked or duped into supporting those same backward-looking politicians. Thirdly, this interpretative rationale for why social services do not exist and are not even needed in rural areas when they do exist and they are needed!

Most importantly, however, the modernization argument for social services as it has come to be called is unable to explain the changes which have taken place in the political leadership of and support for aging services to rural communities during the past decade. For example, why did so many antagonistic rural politicians suddenly “see the light” and begin declaring their support for services for older people after 1970?

Certainly, the fact that such support in most cases cost these same politicians nothing politically, together with the widely prevalent belief among American politicians that older people represent a potentially powerful voting block may have something to do with that sudden enlightenment. Whatever the reasons, however, certainly one of the most noteworthy political events in rural America today has been the emergence of new political leaders’ interest in and willing to represent the interests of older people across a wide spectrum of issues and in a variety of forums. One of the most interesting facets of this development has been the succession of leadership styles among rural community leaders speaking for the aged.

Presentation of the actual words and deeds of these leaders – which would be a task of enormous complexity and subtlety and a suitable project for future historians – would be the best form of evidence for these claims. In the meantime, we can make some broad and general observations about this matter. It would appear, for example, that we can single out four distinct phases among the leadership styles found in many communities in rural America. We can call these the pre-organizational leadership style, the grantsman or leadership planner style, the organizational or managerial style and most recently the advocacy style. Further, we can relate each of these styles to the goals, organizational structures and power relationships of the aging agencies in local communities.

The Succession Model

Studies of leadership in the social sciences tend to follow two general approaches. One is termed the traits approach and tends to deal with the subject in terms of the characteristics which differentiate leaders from their followers. The other approach, termed the situational approach, tends to focus on the social factors which bear upon leaders. The approach taken here is essentially situational. Leaders, for example, are defined as those who speak for, or in the name of an organization or set of organized interests. Leadership style, as the term is used here, has to do with the characteristic manner of action displayed by leaders.

Prior to adoption of the Older Americans Act of 1965, there is no evidence of any large-scale development of organized social services for the aged in rural

communities. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that recognition of the social problems of older people was completely lacking in the rural American of the time. In the documents of the 1950 and 1960 White House Conferences on Aging, as well as in numerous minutes of public bodies, one can find abundant evidence to the contrary. At least since the end of World War II, and probably much earlier, local citizens in rural communities throughout the nation were troubled by what they saw of conditions among sold older people and sought to bring those conditions to the attention of local politicians and civic leaders. After the fashion of Dorothea Dix's "memorials" to state legislatures, such reports most frequently took the form of letters to local newspapers, uninvited testimonials before town councils, county commissions and other public forums.

In general, these early opinion leaders were self-appointed, relatively isolated from local political forces and by and large relatively ineffectual. Their activities can be characterized as pre-organizational in the sense that there is no evidence to date to suggest any political or social movement-type activity in rural American coinciding with or resulting from such leadership. They were, in general, leaders without followers.

In a number of instances, however, such *pre-organizational leaders* were ready and willing to participate when state and federal funding programs began in the mid 1960s. However, where these early advocates of aging interests were enlisted in the formative stages of what is now known as the Aging Network the dictates of the situation in which they found themselves radically transformed the nature of their efforts. In this new leadership planning era, the same leaders were likely to find themselves less and less involved in their former publicist roles and more and more involved in grant writing, forming committees, writing program proposals, serving on committees to hire staff, set goals and objectives, and identify outcome measures.

Creation of organized agencies to deliver services to older people also brought about a major transformation in the division of labor among leaders: What appeared initially to be a common group with common interests became sub-divided over time into paid employees, board members and volunteers, each with its own slightly different perspectives, commitments and obligations. In time, employees recognized that they were executives or staff, each with differing leadership responsibilities and roles. One of these newly differing roles, as it has grown clearer and more distinct in recent years, has led also to a third emergent style: That of *organizational manager*, concerned principally with the continuity of funding, agency policy, personnel actions, and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of program performance. In many cases, this transition could be clearly documented by reviewing the funding proposals submitted by these same agencies over the years. In many agencies, one should expect to find general, somewhat vague, unprofessional-looking proposals possessing a lot of enthusiasm and very little polish gradually replaced by increasingly slick, error-free 'professional' proposals. Such documents would reveal clearly the transition from leadership planning to managerial leadership styles in these same aging programs and agencies.

Finally, national and state attention devoted to age advocacy within the increasingly formalized and material aging networks of local agencies is presently setting off a further transition among local aging leaders. In many cases what appears called for is a return to the earlier prophet-in-the-wilderness style advocate within the existing organizational structure of local service delivery. While the general prospects for success in publicity-supported advocacy activities of this kind are not favorable, the generally positive high regard of American politicians for old people appears to be a factor very much in favor of the advocates.

Goals

Closely following this transition in leadership styles has been the gradual emergence of a set of narrowly defined, specific organizational goals reflecting the emerging service delivery system in aging. Initially, in the pre-organizational period prior to 1965, goals were less frequently encountered than problems. At village council, county court and other meetings where the rural advocates appeared, one was most likely to hear general expressions of concern, rather than future-oriented statements of intent: "It's just sad to see those lonely old people over at the rest home" and "Why can't you commissioners do something about all the poor widows in this county" and so forth.

Initially, the task of the leadership planners was often one of adapting such pre-existing sentiments to grant guidelines and the interests of funding sources. More recently, local agencies have undergone the transition to more managerial styles of leadership. As evidence of this transition, one can cite the emergence of management training as well as interest in managerial techniques such as MBO, as evidence of this general movement. It is probably also that evidence of the emergence of the advocacy style in local agencies will probably be found in the re-emergence of general goal and problem statements and expressions of the needs of the elderly in local newspapers and in various public forums.

Organizational Structure

A second related concern has been the persistent search among local aging agencies for an organizational structure which is an appropriate expression of the goals and purposes being pursued. In the pre-organizational phase, advocates for the aged seldom spoke for anyone other than themselves either formally or informally. Leadership planners, by contrast, faced the delicate organizing problem of speaking for and representing organizations that often existed only on paper, and the simultaneous problem of creating stable, viable formal organizations complete with staff and constituencies of supporters. Where it has emerged, the managerial style has been most frequently concerned with the classic managerial questions of efficiency and effectiveness.

The question of an organizational structure consistent with the professed interest of age advocates is a highly interesting one. Presumably, many local aging agencies will follow the lead of such national interest groups as the Nation Council

on the Aged (NCoA) or the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and seek to be hybrid organizations with different departments devoted to member or constituent services, advocacy and political activities, and direct service delivery.

Constituencies and Local Power

The three related variables considered to this point – leadership style, goals and organizational structures – imply or relate directly to another consideration. This is the question of the relationship to organized political power in local communities. From the days of the pre-organizational advocates for the aged, local aging agencies in many communities have truly moved on to Main Street and increasingly into the mainstream of local political life in rural America.

It has taken a number of years for senior centers, senior aides projects, Foster Grandparents, nutrition centers and other local aging projects to become fully accepted as community social welfare institutions. In part, this is due to the relative slowness of change in rural communities. It may also be related to the continued growth of age-related problems over the past fifteen years as older populations continue to rise rapidly in many rural areas.

It should also be noted, however, that there has been a substantial shift in the nature of local political leadership in recent years. Many of the older, crustier, politicians who ten years ago were howling about “creeping socialism” in the form of senior citizens centers or nutrition programs are gone now, replaced by seemingly more moderate, socially aware politicians. This is not entirely a matter of enlightenment, however. In a good many cases, the threat of senior power posed by local advocates, combined with the infusion of federal funding into the local economies appears to have helped many a foe of social programs for the aged to reconsider his views.

Conclusion

The differing demands on aging agencies during the distinct phases of their development have resulted in differing expressions of leadership style. Such a succession of styles should be viewed as important in its own right, but also as evidence of the growing political viability of aging interests in many rural communities today. We must concur with the published literature on the subject, which generally concludes that aging has not yet emerged as a significant or powerful political interest in the United States. However, those who would speak for the aged have gone from being “voices crying in the wilderness” to proponents of the status quo, including a significant number of community aging programs in little more than a decade. Further, the advocacy style of leadership could conceivably bring aging interests more directly into the mainstream of local political affairs than ever before. This would make a major transition from the days when local political leaders constituted major obstacles to aging programs. It should not escape our attention, that the nature of local rural political leadership has changed

much over the past decade in many areas of the country. And, that fact alone may be related to the shift in aging political leadership.

Finally, the trend toward advocacy and the resultant shift in leadership style bears continued watching over the next few years because it promises to be a major chapter in the local political relations on social welfare issues, as well as an interesting example of the changing rules of older people in American community life.