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Informality and Urban Politics in Oakland

Michel S. Laguerre

The daily political routine of the city provides us with several niches where we can productively understand and explain the informal side of urban politics. The informal city, in fact, is also sustained by the informal political system and administrative process. Urban politics has a visible and formal arena regulated by the formal political system. It has also an informal side which survives in the interstices of, or serves as an extension to, the formal system. This is why we need to explain the mechanisms of its production and relations with the formal system.

Political informality refers analytically to two distinct realities. On the one hand, one can think of an informal group that assembles on the basis of common goals with a view to bettering their plans and possibly influencing the course of the formal political system or city government. On the other hand, it refers to a procedure, a way of doing things, which may not follow a formal blueprint or set of formal rules.

In mapping the geography of informal urban political practices, we identify three niches that are important for our analysis: the informal political process as anchored through the actions of informal leaders at the grassroots community level, the informal process as played out within

the confines of the formal system at City Hall, and the upward and the downward relations between the grassroots and the Mayor's office or between the Mayor's office and state and federal leaders.

What strikes any perceptive observer of the urban American social landscape is the vast density of politicking that goes on behind the scene. This is not done randomly, but rather consistently both in the formal political system and in the parapolitical system--even in the latter one finds even more behind-the-scene political maneuvers and activities. When it is well explained, this informal process can open the gate to a better understanding of the total system.

The informal political system is not a distinct entity totally separated from the formal system. This dual view of the political reality is not valid. The informal system is seen here "not just as instrumental in the cause of an extensive formal power but as constituted by and within such power"(Fitzpatrick 1988:180). The difference in this formulation of the issue is that we see the urban political system as including a diversity of political spaces "operating simultaneously on different scales and from different interpretive standpoints" (Santos 1987: 288).

Durkheim (1960) was among the first social scientists who saw the need to explain the role of voluntary associations in society, especially in their relations to the formal state. He sees them fulfilling three major roles:

restraining the overarching arm of the formal state, counter-balancing the power of the state, and constituting an essential condition for the liberation, freedom and emancipation of the individual. Voluntary associations are not mechanisms created by the state but by groups of individuals to protect their interests, channel their views and values, and to influence state policies. Durkheim goes so far as to imply the existence of these secondary groups as a sine qua non in the practice of democracy.

Following the lead of Durkheim, Greer and Orleans (1962) see formal voluntary organizations as "mediating organizations" (see also Merton 1961:112). They interpret their effectiveness in terms of their ability "to mobilize the population in such a way as to limit the administrative state" (Greer and Orleans 1962: 635). They refer to them as "parapolitical" because such institutions are not derived from state institutions, but rather are produced by the local neighborhoods. These mediating formal voluntary associations are seen precisely as being parapolitical in the sense that they allow "the translation of norms, commitments, and interests, into political behavior. For the individual citizen, political information, influence, and identification require such a sub-set of organizations in which he may participate" (Greer and Orleans 1962: 635). What they say about formal voluntary organizations can also be said about informal voluntary organizations. This leads me to refer to informal voluntary organizations as informal

parapolitical organizations.

However, my definition of the parapolitical structure is more inclusive than those proposed by Durkheim and Greer and Orleans; it must also include the informal network and means used by the city government, informal political discourse and ideology, and the informal administrative structure. The informal parapolitical structure is not simply a mediating mechanism, but it is also the backbone that is ever present in the every day operation of the formal political system. It is central in the production of the urban political process.

Here the informal parapolitical system is seen as a processual system, a system in which motion and change constitute an essential element for its survival. Two types of change are envisioned here. One is internal in the sense, for example, that the repositioning of one element changes the relations of that unit to others. The other is external and depends on relations with the formal political system. Boundaries of the informal parapolitical system may shift because of changes in the boundaries of the formal system. Through this processual analytical standpoint, I will show that both the formal and informal aspects constitute the totality of the urban political reality. The separation of the whole into the informal and formal components is a heuristic device to better analyze the making and shaping of the processual outcome.

Informal Parapolitical Organizations

The reality of parapolitical organizations has led researchers to seek the nature of their origins. Some have become more visible because the neighborhoods in which they emerged have been annexed, changing from an independent town into one of the urban neighborhoods of a megalopolis. In such a situation, "once the official institutions of local government have been moved downtown, what remains of neighborhood governance is chiefly the informal, dispersed, and intermittent activity of political nonprofessionals" (Crenson 1983: 11). What annexation does is to remove the formal political system to a different site, not the parapolitical players, even though the parapolitical structure must adapt to the new political reality.

The parapolitical organizations whose internal structure we are about to analyze have a different political origin. They are produced by the formal system or as a reaction to the formal system. They come into being because people want to preserve or improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods. In this sense, they can be seen as institutions that foster community values, that socialize people in the culture of democracy, that serve as mediating institutions vis-a-vis the formal system, and they provide both a forum through which formal leaders can challenge or be challenged by neighborhood residents and a platform for informal leaders who seek elective offices.

The neighborhood provides an excellent niche for the rise of informal leaders and the development of informal

organizations. It is there that one can follow with some precision the appearance and disappearance as well as the various forms and shapes of informal organizations.

Grassroot organizations begin as informal organizations. Even after they have formalized their rules and procedures, the people may continue to use informal means to achieve their stated goals.

The existence of informal organizations within the city is a corollary to and vital to urban democracy. Throughout the history of the American city, there has always been a felt need--whether in a homogeneous white population or one with multiple ethnic groups--for residents to band together informally to influence the course of city policies and politics and to prevent the deterioration of their neighborhoods (de Tocqueville 1945:114-132, Tomeh 1964).

The residents of West Oakland have a long history of participating in informal and grassroot organizations. Starting in the late thirties, the city began to adopt a progressive policy of city improvement, the outcome of which was the changing face of the old West Oakland neighborhood. This was when residents banded together in what they called the West Oakland Planning Council to try to influence city policies (Hayes 1972:110).

This trend toward participation in neighborhood informal political organizations became much stronger after World War II as more African Americans came to settle in

Oakland. The white city council was little inclined or willing to listen to their concerns and needs. However, the informal political structure became more heterogeneous and well established as product of the changing policies of the city, which evolved from its "Redevelopment", "Model Cities," and "Economic Development" planning strategies. Informal leaders still living participated in all these various phases of the evolution and transformation of the informal parapolitical structure in this part of the city. They have worked very strongly in the informal structure to influence, lobby, and help redirect the decisions that affect West Oakland.

The pattern of migration and resettlement has influenced the composition and dynamic of the informal groups in West Oakland (Daniels 1980). The migrants from Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi continue to maintain their informal group ties within the informal neighborhood group because of friendship or family connections. This common background has been a force to bring people together and also to build consensus through the leaders of each sub-group. Within the informal parapolitical structure, there is a grouping by states. This characteristic is however slowly declining with the younger generation.

Place of origin is then a marker in the composition of the informal group, helping in networking. People who share the same experience band together. Such groups are easy to

galvanize because the people share an homogeneity of meanings and views.

The NAACP, although a formal organization, also has its members that served or joined the informal organization. They may have joint activities, or some members may participate either on their own or as representatives of the organization.

The informal networks sometimes give rise to long-term acquaintances. Even when people move to the formal, those informal ties can be reactivated at any time. Not all the members may continue to live in the same neighborhood. Those who move out still have influence there. The "informal machine" survives even after the emigration of members to other neighborhoods. With gentrification comes a recomposition of the informal demographic content of the informal sector.

In the metropolis, more than one informal political organization exists. In fact, there are several. Sometimes they are in competition and at other times work in collaboration with each other. Some individuals belong to more than one informal political organization. Informal parapolitical organizations are by definition interest groups.

There is a certain element of elasticity among the membership of informal groups. At a certain time of the year, when there is an event, membership may be large. At other times, around an issue, it may be small. Each leader

brings his or her own constituency when the informal group organizes a meeting around a common cause. If a leader leaves the informal organization, he may take the constituency out of the coalition as well.

The informal structure is not absolutely informal. It includes entities with formal structures as well. Such structures as the West Oakland Development Council, Model City Organizations, and West Oakland Mental Health Board have formal structures but came into being because of pressures from informal parapolitical groups. These formal structures are linked to each other through informal networks of relationships.

Informal organizations with a generalist purpose tend to give birth to informal organizations with specialist purposes, for which they serve as an informal coordinating mechanism. Among the latter, we find the Senior Citizens Council, Progressive Senior Citizens, the St Patrick's Council, the Acorn Revitalization Council, the McClymonds Alumni Association, the McClymonds Community Board, the Oak Center Neighborhood Association and the Citizen Emergency Relief Team, which was formed to deal with the fall out from the Loma Prieta Earthquake. All of these associations have as their goal the improvement of life in West Oakland. To achieve that goal, they hold regular meetings or maintain on-going interactions with formal structures such as the Oakland Redevelopment Agency, the Oakland City Council, the Oakland Planning Association, the Oakland School Board, and

the Peralta Community College Board.

These community organizations may have some formal structures, but they are run on an ad hoc informal basis. They are linked to each other and sometimes to the formal sector through informal means. Through their interactions with the formal sector, they have learned a number of lessons. The informants have reiterated three principles for a successful outcome in their interactions with the formal sector. One is that they must be as well versed with the subject matter as the formal structure, and in many cases better versed. Two, they must be consistently assertive and aggressive. However, it is no longer necessary to be disruptive to attract the formal sector's attention as was the case during the decade of the civil rights movement. Three the informal organizations must have an agenda and a clear idea of what they want to accomplish.

Informal organizations are by definition soft organizations in that they are run informally but are forced to formalize their structures temporarily and cyclically so as to discuss their agendas. The cyclical meetings allow them to formalize temporarily their structures so that they can express and reinforce the informality of their character. This is why the informal organizations have regular meetings with regular agendas and regular items to take into account.

The Ethnic Factor

It is important to note that there are cultural differences in the way in which ethnic groups and communities play out the informality game in their relations with the formal system. Cultural practices lived by the ethnic community members in their respective communities as they relate to members of their group tend to carry over in the relations of their grassroots and parapolitical organizations with the formal system of municipal government. The focus on this aspect of political informality will help us to understand the differential composition of the informal ethnic leadership.

It has been pointed out that in the African-American community the church is the central institution that sustains the lifeblood of informal political organizations (Hamilton 1972). This is so for historical reasons: the church is an institution that is controlled by African-Americans, that helps them, that provides a setting for the discussion of ideas, that provides a ground to organize protest, that develops training for leadership, that is a point of contact of the community with the outside world, and that can trade the votes of the congregation for services to the community. Thus the church is part of and central to the African-American parapolitical system.

The Asian-American parapolitical organizations have a different dynamic in part because of the history of immigration of the different groups to the Bay Area and in part because Asian-Americans belong to national groups with

distinct cultural practices, including distinct languages. They maintain an interest in both local politics and the political situation in their home countries. Among the politically active Bay Area Asian-American groups are the Chinese, Philipinos, Laotians, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Koreans. The Chinese are by far the most numerous and are the most vocal and articulate among the Asian-American groups in Oakland. They have their own Chinatown, even though it has become more and more an "Asiatown", including many other groups.

The Cambodians, for example, started to arrive in Long Beach, California, in the early 1970s, before the Khmer Rouge began their killing spree. These immigrants were mostly former officials. However after 1979, when Vietnam invaded Cambodia, those who came included many with a peasant background. The Oakland segment is poorer and less sophisticated than the Long Beach Cambodian population.

In Oakland, the Cambodians established in 1983 the Cambodian New Generation Inc. As a refugee group, they are less active in local Oakland politics and more active in Cambodian politics. This reflects the reality that the majority of them are not American citizens. One informant said that, because of their peasant background, they worry that if they become citizens, they might lose public assistance. The younger Cambodians who are connected with the Cambodian New Generation are more active politically.

The informal Cambodian political system is part of a

network of informal Asian-American political leaders. The Director of Cambodian New Generation is at the center of the process for three reasons: the visibility of the office he holds and the people who depend on him for leadership, the fact that he is the representative of the Cambodians at the East Bay Asian Local Development Cooperative, which is a voluntary and non-profit organization pushing the interests of all Asians, and his contacts with the satellite informal leaders, individuals who provide leadership to certain segments of the population, church leaders for example.

Since the Cambodian group is small, the strategy has been to form alliances with other Asian groups for funding and for influencing the course of local and municipal politics.

The front leader, in this case the Director just mentioned, recognizes that there are other, back leaders who operate in the community but do not necessarily interact with the rest of the city. The front leader joins ranks with the back leaders as a way of getting access to or votes from their constituencies.

There are issues that engage more the sentiments or interests of one segment of the Asian-American population more than others. This is why the various Asian groups have developed three strategies to deal with issues confronting their respective communities. Sometimes they go it along. For example, the director of the Cambodian New Generation takes his case directly to the East Bay Forum on Refugee

Affairs where he can air the concerns of the Cambodian refugee community. Sometimes a partial alliance is formed with other ethnic groups. That was the case when the Laotians, the Vietnamese in the East Bay Vietnamese Association, and the Cambodians formed an alliance to support the election of a supervisor in San Leandro in 1988. He lost the race. At other times, they form a much larger coalition. This was the case when the leaders from all the Asian groups formed a coalition to support the election of Elihu Harris as Mayor of Oakland. He won the race.

The Latino community presents still another type of informal political organization. The Mission District in San Francisco provides an arena where this form of parapolitical system can be studied and explained. Like the Asians, the Latino community is made up of several cultural segments, original Californios, as well as old and new immigrants.

Unlike the Asian group who may experience difficulty communicating among themselves if they do not speak English, Latinos do not have this problem. The lack of knowledge of English is not an handicap for them in cooperating.

The Asian model, where the representative of each group tends to represent the membership, is not found in the Latino community. There is more fusion. The leadership structure of the informal parapolitical organization in the Latino community in San Francisco is made up of heads of formal and voluntary organizations. The leaders of the Mission Economic and Cultural Association (MECA) who

organize the annual carnival and the Cinco de Mayo festivities, the Mission Neighborhood Center, Women Initiatives for Self-Employment, members of the Chamber of Commerce, prominent businessmen, church leaders -- all are part of a network that can be activated to put forward the interests of the community.

While the modes of organization of the informal leadership--especially in terms of its composition and the position of the leaders in the community-- differ among the African Americans, Latinos, and Asians, the way they connect with the municipal authorities shows less variations as does the way the formal structure relates to them. The formal power structure sees them as competing interest groups.

There are various sites of power (front/back region leaders) where the informal raw politics is cooked, practiced, and channelled into the arena where the formal political system can interface with it and sometimes recoup it.

The Impact of Informal Parapolitical Organizations on the Formal System

In the last Oakland School Board race, one of the incumbent candidates was defeated and replaced by a newcomer. The reason for that defeat was the inability, failure, or unwillingness of the incumbent to deal with the Progressive Senior Citizens on the issue of a site for a Senior Citizen Center, one of the old school dormitories. The incumbent is reported to have said that he tried and

failed to obtain the site. The Progressive Senior Citizens found that response to be inadequate and organized a negative campaign which led to his defeat. This is a clear example where an informal organization targets a specific candidate for elective office and influences directly the election outcome.

This example also shows how the formal system is shaped by the informal system. Electoral campaigns organized by the formal system, whose outcome is intended for the management of the formal system, are heavily influenced by informal organizations. The informal system stands inbetween two formal processes. It helps produce the formal outcome.

The informal system has been a way either to integrate or to segregate the community. While one group may use it to propel forward their own ethnic or racial demands or preserve their own traditions, in West Oakland it has rather served for the improvement of whole neighborhoods. This is why they have been able to accomplish so much.

Many of the people in the informal structure are spread across the political spectrum from very conservative to very liberal. The thing that brings them together is the concern for West Oakland. Recently, they have become extremely liberal in terms of demands for services, but not always agreeing on the services that are needed.

The major figure in the informal system has been Ralph Williams, a septuagenarian, who has been an active member and leader of grassroots organizations ever since he

migrated to Oakland in the nineteen-forties. He has been on the Advisory Board of Community Development, the mayor's representative on the Senior Citizens Council, Chairman of the Budget Committee for the Oakland School Board. He has been perceived by the community and outsiders as the unofficial or informal mayor of West Oakland. When I interviewed him, he was also the chairman of CERT (Citizen Emergency Relief Team), the newest and probably most dynamic of the informal organizations in West Oakland.

The 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake was a catastrophe of major importance throughout the entire Bay Area. In West Oakland, the collapse of the Nimitz freeway provided the image with the greatest visual impact and the point where most people died. Damage was extensive throughout the neighborhood. Out of that evolved a group whose membership numbers from 200 to 700, with a hard core of probably 150, a group that has been extremely successful within the official political system and has developed its own subgovernment structure. This success was helped by Mayor Lionel Wilson who early on was supportive of their concerns. The city manager showed up in at one of CERT's meetings and the district supervisor came on a regular basis. This organization developed its own Transportation Committee which, after several confrontations with CalTrans (the California Department of Transportation), has now been involved in the routing of the new Nimitz freeway. It helped draw the outlines of the two alternative routes proposed. It

has been influential, forcing the formal system to bend its views and demanding the production of a negotiated order. The chairman of that committee has been invited to internal CalTrans meetings and in meetings with CalTrans and the Southern Pacific Railway.

A second committee has taken over the redevelopment effort and made itself a citizen component of the redevelopment of West Oakland. A third committee is involved in education and the political dimension of the organization, and their accomplishments are rather impressive. Every community from Vallejo to San Jose has, in fact, passed a resolution supporting the community's demand that the freeway not be reconstructed on Cypress Street, a route that effectively bisected the community. The city of Oakland has put on record three major resolutions that support this effort. The congressman and the assembly person representing the area both indicated strong support for the concerns of the residents. The organization, despite its volunteer staff, has made itself a strong voice for the neighborhood.

The African American church has had an enormous impact in several ways on the day to day operation of this informal parapolitical organization. The office of CERT is in the Bethlehem Lutheran Church, an integrated but predominantly African-American church. The board of directors of CERT has on its membership a number of prominent black preachers, such Rev. Ray Williams, Rev. Harry Smith, and Bishop Will

Herzfeld. Prominent members of CERT, such as Paul Cobb and Ralph Williams, are also strong church members. According to a knowledgeable informant, if Ralph Williams is the informal mayor, Paul Cobb must be singled out as the informal political theoretician and strategist for the African American-church in West Oakland.

The church has provided the informal system two important sources of support. One is their membership: members of the informal system are recruited from among the membership of the church, but not exclusively, though. Another is the support of their ministers, both of whom have served to give the organization even greater legitimacy in the eyes of the formal system. From their pulpit, they have also supported the effort of CERT. Bishop Herzfeld and Fr John Maxwell have also provided invaluable leadership. Bishop Herzfeld is, in fact, a member of the Mayor's Earthquake Relief Committee and has been able to help CERT in getting grants from the Mayor's Earthquake Relief Fund.

Partial formalization of the informal structure has come about as a result of formal funding. Informal organizations sometimes formalize their administrative structure for more efficiency and to be accountable to the formal system. A supervisor's wife who happened to be the president of the group Neighborhood Housing was influential in getting CERT a grant from the San Francisco Foundation. Other churches have provided small amount of money and have let CERT use their names for whatever good will this might

bring them in terms of finances. Within the informal power structure, however, the single greatest liability is the lack of paid staff.

There has been a partial formalization of CERT in that the grants have allowed them to hire an Executive Director and secretarial staff staff. The physical office was given by the church, and the leaders are all volunteers. The grant was obviously given to CERT because West Oakland was so heavily affected by the earthquake and the magnitude of that effect is still visible. The degree of citizen involvement shows the official structure that this work of reconstruction has to be done.

Relations Between the Informal Parapolitical Organizations and Formal Voluntary Associations

Three types of relations can be envisioned from an institutional standpoint. These relations can be dominant, dependent, or interdependent.

The relation is dominant when the informal coopts the formal to join its activities while maintaining its vision, procedures, and goals. The formal voluntary association joins forces with the informal group in an action that it has not developed but is willing to support.

The Urban League has sometimes been connected to an informal group put together to solve a specific issue, for example, installation of a stop light at a particular corner. A group of people might come together for such a purpose, aided by informal leaders. As they discuss the

matter among themselves, they may seek and enlist the help of the Urban League in identifying the people to talk to at City Hall or, if the power structure is not responsive to their request, they may use the Urban League motto or banner to do their picketing. This is the example of the informal getting support from a formal organization to fight against another formal organization to solve a problem identified by an informal group.

The relationship of the informal to the formal voluntary organization becomes dependent when the latter seeks and enlists the help of the former. A voluntary association may not have the resources to show that they actually mass support on behalf of a specific demand or grievance. Informal leaders are often contacted to bring the grassroots out for a public show of support. In this case the cause is not devised by the informal, but they endorse it because they see much good in it.

The relationship between the informals and the formal voluntary associations become interdependent when both identify the same problem and work jointly or separately with different strategies, and inform each other about their progress, with the goal of achieving the same end.

Informal Leaders

Being an informal leader is a way of appropriating power and of being influential in one's community. It gives the individual access to authority. The intermediary role of the informal leader is played out in three different ways:

as a politician, a broker or middleman, or an administrator. The politician provides informal leadership to the community. The broker helps City Hall understand the needs of the community. The administrator seeks funds and develops programs that he or she may then administer.

Informal leaders must be seen as liaison between the community and City Hall, as providers of insights when they are called on by City Hall, and as shapers of policy when their opinions are sought before policies are developed and implemented. The mayor recognizes the power of these leaders and seeks their help to propagandize projects or get out votes in a campaign. The mayor sees them as each fulfilling different functions in the community, and in calling on them recognizes the power of each one of them. The relations between the mayor and the informal leaders is a two-way movement: they call on each other to achieve stated goals.

The connections of the mayor's office with informal leaders at the neighborhood level are multiplex. These relationships of informal leaders to the mayor's office lead us to ponder a number of questions. To whom are they connected both in the mayor's office and the community? Are they acting to promote their self interests, placing themselves ahead of their competitors and in a strategic position to grab a job in the formal sector? Do they solve problems that the city could not solve? Do they constitute a layer linking the neighborhood people to the mayor's office--that is, instead of going to see the mayor would a citizen

elect to see them, believing that they have better access to the mayor's office?

It is obvious that the natural leader may not have the same influence over people outside his or her neighborhood. His contacts are limited to the people of his neighborhood and to other local leaders with whom he may collaborate or be in competition. His contact at City Hall may be directly with the mayor or with an influential person in that office. The network of contacts both horizontally and vertically is limited.

The position of informal leader may lead to a job in the formal or public sector. Being an informal leader makes the person more visible, leads to contacts with city officials, and reveals how much that individual may be needed by the urban political establishment. Informal leadership is established over time and is based on a relationship of trust and the knowledge that the neighborhood and City Hall gather about the leader. The informal leader is knowledgeable about the community and commands the support and respect of his followers.

Some informal leaders may decide not to take a formal government job because they realize how much influence and power they have as informal leaders. They hold their influence by virtue of knowing a lot of people, young and old. The fact that they are not paid helps project their image as people caring for the good of the community.

What kinds of influence can informal leaders exert on

City Hall, since they perform a self-appointed leadership role? Can cooptation lead to the incoherence of the informal organization? Informal leaders who have been coopted cannot drop their informal role overnight. This is not a decision they can make by themselves. The people are also a factor in carrying out that decision. They will continue to call on them in informal group matters and problems. The other factor is that the positions they are given may be tied to their informal role in the community as a constituent basis of support. In that case, informal accessibility remains important in the performance of the new, formal job.

In the informal political arena, power is both dispersed and hierarchized. In the neighborhood, one must distinguish the center-stage informal leaders and the satellite informal leaders. While the center-stage provide leadership to the whole area, the satellites may do it only to their individual blocks. We see here the hierarchization of the leadership among informal leaders. The satellites refer individuals or inform the center stage about neighborhood problems to be addressed, or seek the advice of the center-stage, or lobby the center stage to bring the problem to the attention of the other sub-groups or the general assembly. This can also be done by contacting directly the other informal leaders representing various micro-neighborhoods.

The informal leader can also be found in the person of a formal official who has left a formal job. There are cases

of members of city councils who lose elections and return to the neighborhood. What does it take for such a person to become an informal leader? If he or she was an informal leader prior to landing the formal job and continues to maintain contacts thereafter, the reentry will not cause any problem. People who were not formerly informal leaders can become leaders because of the expertise they are able to offer. To the extent that such formal leaders accept the role of informal leaders, they will be recognized as such by the group.

The informal organization is sometimes rife with division because of the ideological orientations or different perceptions of the informal leaders. The issues that tie the group together do not necessarily include the willingness to support any one individual informal leader for public office. One informant stated that many people like him as chairman of the transportation committee, but should he become a candidate for an elective office in the formal system they would probably oppose him because of feelings and personality clashes. He believes that people are afraid of him for the same reasons they like him have him available to fight the "outsiders".

The same qualities that make people into leaders in the informal sector may make it very difficult to get them accepted as part of the formal sector in anything other than advisory capacity. The neighborhood did run Paul Cobb once for city council, but he lost to another candidate in a

hotly contested election because the mayor threw his weight to the other candidate. The informal sector did not have access to the major financial resources of the larger formal structure and could not muster its people power in a unified way against the incumbent.

In the mayoral campaign of 1990, the informal leaders of CERT were not able or were unwilling to consolidate their voices behind one candidate. In fact, the members of the board of directors supported the incumbent mayor Lionel Wilson. The chairman supported Elihu Harris, and two others supported Wilson Riles. Harris won. Some see this lack of unanimity as a lack of unity of purpose, but others see it as a strategy to avoid having all their eggs in one basket.

Modes of Relations with the Formal or the view from the informal

From the standpoint of the informal, relations may sometimes be established with the formal system by means of cooptation. Cooptation can be seen as total or partial. It is total when an informal is given a job in the formal sector on a full-time basis. His primary allegiance is seen as shifting to the formal. It is partial when the informal is brought to the formal on an emergency or advisory capacity.

The participation of people in the formal sector tends to be a barometer to understanding their impact on the informal. The degree one is competent in the formal reflects one's performance in the informal. One who lacks competence

in the formal may lack lack credibility in the informal. The informal relies greatly on verbal interaction and the degree to which one is able to articulate and to express oneself with a certain vigor.

The formal selects advisors from the informal. The formal calls on them to help with matters concerning the informal and at the same time the informal advisors enhance their status in the informal setting. In this capacity, they help the informal community get grants and community services and ease the tension that the formal may experience in dealing with the informals.

The advisor serves as a paradiplomat representing the interests of the informals. The person from the formal calls on such expertise to help solve problems. The ties made here through the middleman-advisor strengthen the position of the informals.

The idea that the informals are a pole or the other side of the formal can be seen in two ways. Since members of the informal group may not be the same as those of the formal, they are linked to each other through the informal leaders. Or the members of the formal group may be the same individuals who participate in the informal. They may be full time participants in the formal or part-time participants in the formal.

The neighborhood informal organization has its own way of penetrating the formal political system. It does it through informal-to-formal contact by submitting and

presenting issues; through informal-to-informal political processes at City Hall (kitchen cabinet); through informal-to-informal administrative processes; and through multiple attacks at once in all three branches.

The Informal Parapolitical Organizations as Seen from the Mayor's Office

The formal system is aware of the existence of the informal process: the actors are engaged in it for their political survival and maintain collaborative contacts with informal political leaders as part of city governance. Astute politicians sometimes come from the informal system and have been elected to office because of their grassroots connections. Once in office they continue to maintain these links. In fact, election does not mean that they give up their membership in those groups. They continue to play major roles, at times convincing the membership to support their policies. For example, they may need the grassroots to show up for a special meeting at City Hall to support a piece of legislation or to put pressure on the mayor and city council to favor a specific policy. Sometimes they simply feed the grassroots with inside information not available to other residents. Other politicians who might have been active in one grassroots area developed cordial relation with other grassroots once they are elected. What Knoke (1990: 93) said about leadership role in industry can be applied here as well: "the most powerful actors are the incumbents simultaneously holding key positions within both

webs of formal and informal relations to other organization participants".

From the City Hall side, the elected officials see informal organizations as separate groups waging turf wars, challenging or supporting their candidates, but lacking in manageability, planability, and awareness of larger issues. They are seen as forming many factions throughout the city.

The strategy used by City Hall to reduce their influence or to control them is to create special citizen groups as a way of infiltrating and creating a balance to these opposition groups. Individuals may be coopted to serve as interlocutors along with others from other competing groups. This way they do not represent a threat to unity and can bring forth issues that deserve the attention of the city as a whole.

City Hall recognizes that the informal system is very hard to manage. The city neutralizes trouble makers among the informal leaders in three major ways: by harassment-- that is, undermining their leadership-- by ignoring them, or by creating alternative informal leaders. The strategy has also been to create alternative informal groups that one can control, or to infiltrate and encadre informal groups with one's own people. As other informal leaders are created, they are made to play against each other. Troublemakers are ignored: their phone calls don't get returned, or only one or two days later, and they do not get invited to public social affairs.

From the city angle, the rulers look at the informal at the neighborhood level with an eye to cooptation, collaboration, enhancing the positions of allies, downgrading the positions of hostile informal organizations, and a combined strategy based on the importance of informal organizations linked to unions, their size, age, fragility, and their overall importance in the neighborhood.

From the city side, two kinds of informal groups can be distinguished: the neighborhood groups and the corporate world. The corporate world is made up of the old guard businessmen, lawyers, professional people, and old families who are entrenched in the city politics. Behind the scene, they make decisions, influence the policy making process and policy implementation. They call council members, sometimes meet with them, and because of their ability to provide services to elected officials (such as raising money for an election or giving financial contributions to a campaign) their voices are heard.

The formal establishes its own informal apparatus for efficiency in handling issues, to serve as links, or to listen to informal groups and bring the demands of some to the attention of the mayor. Telephone conversations prior to a meeting provide an informal way to get votes and solve the problem of split votes. This informal procedure is necessary for efficiency because one cannot meet long enough to work out or iron out all details in a matter. The issue may be well discussed informally ahead of time because this cannot

not be done in a two-hour meeting.

The informal players at City Hall are the formal employees. These are the loyalists who comprise the kitchen cabinet of the mayor, protect him or her, and prepare policies. The center of the administrative process is identified as the gang (administrative decisions are made by the gang); political policies and planning rest with the political clique, but political decisions are made by the gang.

The informal in the mayor office consists of his staff. If one cannot see the mayor, one may be able to see members of his staff. The mayor may listen more to a staff member than to another. There is a hierarchy both in the way the mayor perceives the neighborhood-based informal groups and the informals in his office. In the neighborhood, one's position depends on one's importance and loyalty to the mayor's office. In the office, it is based on friendship, whether one knows the players, and whether one can provide reliable advice and loyalty.

The informal group, which is informal by definition, is asked to present formal demands to be discussed formally. Both entry and influence can be informal, using an informal approach to deal with the formal politician, their informal organization and the formal bureaucracy with its informal apparatus. This is why, for analytical reasons, it is productive to separate the formal political system from the formal bureaucratic system, although in practice they are

intertwined and interdependent.

The formal administrative process creates its own informal administrative structure. The bureaucratic process with its own rigidity is an obstacle to efficiency. It operates both formally with outsiders and informally with insiders. To cut through the bureaucratic process, informal leaders who have contacts in the office can penetrate the informal bureaucratic system to achieve a formal outcome. Sometimes the informal group at the neighborhood level is able to adjust to the informal political process at City Hall and not to its attendant informal administrative process.

The Informality of Urban Politics

The informal dimension is ever more present in the organization of urban politics at both the neighborhood and city government level (Guest and Oropesa 1986). That informality is part and parcel of the formal political system in the running of the everyday affairs of the city, in the electoral process, in the policy environment and implementation, and in the overall relation of elected officials with their constituencies.

Urban politics is played out on two registers. The formal that is legal, visible and official, and the informal that is hidden and sometimes illegal. Because of the top-down nature of administration, a vast realm of human activities is not accounted for although they play key roles in the conduct of the political life of the city. The

informal register gives sustained life to the formal system.

Urban politics has an informal dimension because of the web of informal relations the elected officials carry with them. The network of informal relations that they have prior to coming to the city office and the informal ways they have been socializing to do things cannot be dismissed overnight. In fact, they must rely on some of them to survive in office. The notion of "kitchen cabinet" certainly implies that even within a formal cabinet there may be a clique closer to the boss who influence the direction of urban politics.

The informal arena is the place where political maneuvers that cannot be carried out in the open are accomplished. Informality provides a back-up to speed up cumbersome procedures, reduce the time that cannot be saved, and do things that cannot necessarily be done in the open because doing them openly either defeats the purpose or they are illegal.

Informality and formality are two sides of the same political process and reflect the sociological reality of everyday life. In the conduct of urban affairs, informality comes to the rescue of the formal system, while the formal is used to give legitimacy to the informal. In other words, the formal system and process of urban politics cannot be understood fully without paying attention to the informality that it contains and that shapes its content.

The Politics of Informality

The informal political process exists in every American city for the simple reason that democracy allows it, the imperfection of the formal governmental system invites it, neighborhood residents welcome the opportunity to make their voices heard in an effort to improve local conditions, and city officials routinely use it to achieve a successful outcome of their activities.

The politics of informality can be characterized as providing the formal system with an arena of activities that it uses and is forced to react to. I have investigated six domains worth examining: face saving, problem solving, safety valve, back stage rehearsal, information system, and plateau of resistance.

The informal is used by the formal in matters of face saving. An individual in a given situation can shift from formal to informal as a way of diffusing tension and getting smoothly out of a situation that could be embarrassing. It is basically a survival device.

The informal is also an arena where problems initiated in the formal domain may find their resolution. The informal domain is able to resolve problems efficiently because illegal, unethical and otherwise secret deals can be done there. Often the US congress is divided on an issue, which means that the formal system cannot solve the issue or could do so only with more time. After adjourning the session, the legislators are able to make informal deals with one another in the corridors, in the cafeteria, or on the tennis court.

Once this is accomplished in the informal domain, they can come back to the Chamber and take the votes. This is a clear case of the informal rescuing the formal.

The informal can also be seen as a safety valve. When everything else has been tried, the informal may be sought as an ultimate arena. It allows a decontraction of the formal system by way of its expansion.

The informal system provides a backstage rehearsal. It is there that compromises are made, the problems of the formal are contemplated, and strategies for change are developed. That rehearsal predicts the possibility for success in the formal visible on-stage performance.

The informal provides a system of communication to the formal. Such informal communication gives access to information not available otherwise. It is an informal system because of the informal acquisition, analysis, and content of the information. Few local and city politicians could survive without being fed routinely with this kind of informal information.

Informality also allows a route to opposing a leader or the operation of the formal system. It is in this arena that much consciousness raising and strategies of protest are developed. It provides a forum where true feelings can be revealed, secrecy can be kept, and an alternative political morality can prevail.

The politics of informality has its own intentionality and goal: to enhance one's own status, to prevent an

opponent's ascension or defeat an enemy, to speed up an administrative action, to exploit all possible sources of information, to keep alive important connections, or to advance a common cause.

The Mediation of Formal City Political Leaders with State and Federal Leaders Through Informal Means

To strengthen our argument for the role of informal practices in formal political life, we cannot rely exclusively on the relations between the grassroots and the mayor's office in their expression through the informal political and administrative process. Another crucial test is to show that even the relations between city officials and state or federal officials are mediated by informal practices. One would expect that the relations between these entities ought to be formal. This is not always the case. The formal apparatus comes in merely to rubber stamp what was already gained or solved in the informal domain.

The mayor's web of informal relations connects not only with the local urban electorate but also with officials at the state and federal levels. The latter are the ones who help the city secure state and federal monies for the mayor's constituencies. Becquart-Leclercq (1978: 261) notes that "to activate such power resources mayors must develop a personal relationship network that opens routes for groping their way through the tangled web of state agencies and for facilitating requests that may be blocked in administrative labyrinths".

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The elected mayor may have no alternative other than to use these covert processes. They are so much entrenched in the way that formal politics function that it would be disadvantageous to a city if the elected officials were not to get involved in them. Becquart-Leclercq (1978: 254) puts it rightly when she notes that "municipal leaders are therefore confronted with this dilemma: play a game of covert relationships or handicap your community". She further notes that unlike the French situation where informal contacts with the higher echelons are the primary locus of informal activities, in the American case the informal relations tend to be more intense between the mayor's office and the local community (Becquart-Leclercq 1988: 131).

The informal relations have their own rituals operating under the stamp of secrecy. Becquart-Leclercq (1978:262) who studied the French system of networks linking mayors to prefects has identified some of its characteristics. It tends to be "face to face, and personal...activated by telephone calls, personal visits, luncheon invitation- never by letters". These are all modes of contact that nurture and reinforce the informality of the relationships. These patterns of behavior transform the formal into the informal. They have then a transformative characteristic. Once the ritual is accomplished, the relations can become informal. They serve as medium for the expression of informal relationships.

These informal relations must be seen as an exchange mechanism, one that maintains a balance favorable to both parties. It gives the mayor access to power resources, speeds up the bureaucratic process and the delivery of goods (money), and strengthens his or her position in the city, providing an advantageous broker position vis a vis other cities. At the same time, it provides a constituency for the state or federal elected official or support for state or federal policies. To the extent that each one receives something in return, the relations may be stable over time (see also Becquart-Leclercq 1978: 262).

In a formal system that is supposed to be run by formal rules and procedures, the informal network "perverts relationships between rulers and ruled, thwarts collective expression of demands, handicaps participation and leads to favoritism" (Becquart-Leclercq 1978:280). Through its perversion, this practice leads necessarily to nepotism because it positions some individuals in a better position than others, it discourages some from using the formal process, and discriminates against those who do. These practices help build a hidden stratification system and can blur the policy of fairness, leading to an apportionment of state services on a basis other than equality and contributing to the reproduction of inequality in the process of state allocation of resources. The mayor is then to the state official what the grassroots leader is to the mayor-- that is, part of a circle of proteges working for

their own benefits and those of their constituencies. Those mayors who are able to establish and maintain sustained informal relationships with state and federal leaders are likely to gain more for their communities than those who do not.

These informal relations show the subtle ways informality interfaces and interferes with formal practices, and so influences them. The success of the mayor in getting the money from the state cannot be explained exclusively in formal terms. One sees here the intermingling of both informal and formal in the production of the formal outcome. Informality provides a political space at the same time to de-route and to re-route the formal process. De-routing means going over a threshold to analyze and disarticulate an aspect of the formal process. Rerouting means going back over the threshold and returning to the formal with a formalization of the informal content. The formal political process is thus fraught with informality. Behind the formal facade, there is a benign discourse and practice of inequality and discrimination nurtured by the web of informal political relationships.

The Processuality of Informal Political Practices

Through the decoding of informal political practices, we can see political informality as being processual and also multivocal. Processuality refers to its content, backward and forward linkage with the formal sector, and its transformation.

The informal system is processual because it is constantly in the making and remaking. This process can be activated for various reasons, among them changes in goal-orientation, in the actors themselves, in the content of the network of relationships, in internal forces (internal transformation) or in external forces (generated by a varying amount of external constraints).

The informal system is also processual in a more lineal fashion in terms of its historicity. It has its beginning in establishing a hidden agenda or in a period of formation. This corresponds to the slippage from formal to informal. It has a peak which corresponds to the periods of analysis, maneuvers, deals, and informal decisions. The third phase is that of the re-entering or the formalization of the informal outcome. Each one of these phases corresponds to moments of inverted informal to formal relationships.

The informal is also processual because it shapes the formal system. Processuality here means two things. The informal is adjusted to the ways of the formal or may be on its way to becoming formalized. Its interdependence with the formal system is the cornerstone of its processuality.

Endnotes

1. There are various sites of power where the informal raw politics is cooked, practiced, and transformed and where the political system can recoup it. We have found the Chinese, Philipinos, Laotians, Cambodians, and Vietnamese have their own separate organizations where local issues that affect

their ethnic groups are discussed. They form an Asian alliance for the purpose of funding and politicking, especially in their interface with state and city agencies. However, the ethnic politicians identify themselves not as representing their specific ethnic groups, but rather the larger Asian community. The East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation provides them with a front region for the expression of their public discourse.

2. The informal leadership is subdivided into front region and back region leaders. The front region leader recognizes that there are back region or satellite leaders who operate within the community but who do not interface with the city government. The back region leaders join ranks with the front leaders for the purpose of making their voices heard and achieving their goals.

3. For an historical analysis of the participation of ethnic minorities in the formal political system in San Francisco, see Wirt 1974: 240-71. On African Americans' and Hispanics' attempts to shape the formal political system in Oakland, see Hayes 1972 and Browning et al. 1984.

4. The relations between grassroots leaders and the mayor's office are better understood in terms of exchange theory (Lomnitz 1988; Blau 1964) and patron-client relationships (Knoke 1990).

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