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Lelieveldt, H.; Dekker, Karien; Völker, B.; Torenvlied, R.; Volker, B.

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Civic Organizations as Political Actors

Mapping and Predicting the Involvement of Civic Organizations in Neighborhood Problem-Solving and Coproduction

Herman Lelieveldt
Roosevelt Academy, Middelburg, the Netherlands
Karien Dekker
Beate Völker
René Torenvlied
Utrecht University, the Netherlands

Despite the scholarly consensus on the importance of civic organizations for the livability of neighborhoods, there are relatively few empirical studies examining to what extent these organizations engage in various forms of political participation to contribute to the quality of the neighborhood. The authors argue that to get a better overview of neighborhood-oriented forms of participation, it is necessary to look beyond those organizations with an explicit focus on the neighborhood and to include newer forms of participation such as coproduction, government-initiated plans that seek to address neighborhood issues through extensive cooperation with organizations. The authors argue that three groups of factors determine organizational participation: resources, engagement, and network position. An empirical analysis of survey data collected in 2007 from 400 organizations in eight neighborhoods in two Dutch cities shows that the impact of resources is virtually absent, whereas concern about the neighborhood and relations to pivotal organizations are positively related to participation.

Keywords: civil society; nonprofit sector; voluntary associations; political participation; coproduction; urban neighborhoods; empirical studies; surveys; the Netherlands

Author’s Note: Please direct all correspondence to the first author, Herman Lelieveldt: h.lelieveldt@roac.nl.
Urban scholars have devoted a large part of their research to unveiling the conditions that make neighborhoods livable. One of the most important strands of research has focused on analyzing the determinants of residential efforts to maintain the quality of the neighborhood. These activities include both formal forms of political participation (contacting civil servants or politicians, staging a demonstration, petitioning city governments) (Hirlinger 1992) and informal governance (Crenson 1983), consisting of the direct efforts of citizens themselves to produce public goods in the neighborhoods themselves, most importantly public order (Sampson 2004).

As a result of these studies, we have a fairly good picture of the determinants of individual political engagement and the factors that help to maintain the quality of urban neighborhoods. This growing body of knowledge on the determinants of individual neighborhood involvement stands in contrast to what we know about the activities of organizations residing in the neighborhood. Scholarly work on political engagement in neighborhoods is to such an extent focused on individual-level studies that we would almost seem to forget that these citizens in fact live among a large variety of organizations that make up their neighborhoods “civic fauna—the population of organizations in the stretch of life that lies between work and family” (Rae 2003, 141). One can think of women’s groups, neighborhood associations, community groups, schools, sports clubs, self-help groups, tenants associations, pensioner clubs, housing associations, political parties, and churches.

Although the civic fauna or civil society figures prominently in many individual-level studies—where scholars regularly use organizational membership or involvement in associations to predict political involvement—there are relatively few studies that examine the activities of these organizations themselves, in particular at the neighborhood level. Milofsky’s lament that information on the functioning of community organizations “is fragmented and not systematically presented” (Milofsky 1988b, 4), is as valid today as it was 20 years ago.

In this article, we argue that it is indispensable to look also at the activities of civic organizations in neighborhoods to gauge a neighborhood’s civic vitality, in particular its potential to address neighborhood problems. Compared to the vast amount of survey-based, individual-level analyses of local civic and political engagement, a corresponding body of systematic knowledge providing a snapshot of organizational activities that would complement the individual-level data is lacking. As such, this article addresses recent appeals to “reframe the civil society debate in terms of collective, rather than individual action” (Sampson et al. 2005, 675).
Using survey data collected from 409 civic organizations in eight Dutch neighborhoods, we explore the contribution of these organizations to the livability of the neighborhood in two different ways. We look at (1) the extent to which organizations contact civil servants and municipal actors to address specific problems they experience in the neighborhood and (2) their involvement in processes of coproduction, government-initiated plans that seek to address neighborhood issues through extensive cooperation with citizens and organizations.

Drawing upon previous work on organizational and individual-level participation, we test the effect of three groups of factors (resources, neighborhood engagement, and network position) on these two types of activities. Our results show that engagement (stake in the neighborhood) and network position (through being connected to pivotal neighborhood organizations) are the key determinants of organizational activity.

### Civic Organizations as Political Actors

Urban scholars have put great faith in the possible contribution of civic organizations to the quality of neighborhoods because of their potential to tackle neighborhood problems while at the same time connecting to the local citizenry in a variety of ways. It is especially this combination of a public purpose with the ability to link to residents that explains why so many scholars and policy makers see an increased role of civil society organizations—rather than for-profit organizations or governmental agencies—as an essential ingredient of livable neighborhoods (Fredericksen and London 2000; Fung 2004, 523-29; Hirst 2002, 418-20) and even as key to “restoring the American Community” (Putnam and Feldstein 2003). It is widely believed that these organizations are in an ideal position to generate solutions that are both effective and democratic and hence are able to ensure the legitimacy of their actions and of neighborhood governance in general.

Given these observations, it does not come as a surprise that any serious examination of the fate and fortune of a neighborhood will include extensive analyses of the interplay between residents and those civic organizations to which they are connected (Berry, Portney, and Thompson 1993; Crenson 1983; Small 2002). Naturally, these studies have focused on those types of organizations that are more or less explicitly focused on the neighborhood such as community development corporations or tenants, housing, or neighborhood associations. One generally finds considerable amounts of political activity among these types of associations because of their explicit
focus on improving the neighborhoods and/or the lives of their residents. The drawback of these studies, however, lies exactly in their confinement to these types of organizations.

In addition to those organizations with an explicit focus on neighborhood issues, there are many other organizations, such as libraries, churches, and schools, that will have an interest in keeping the neighborhood livable and thus from time to time engage in problem-solving activities (for some examples, see Putnam and Feldstein 2003). Given the fact that all kinds of “community-based organizations concentrate resources, voice and clout in collective civic engagement” (Sampson et al. 2005, 710), we should expand an analysis of organizational activities to the full civic fauna and not restrict ourselves to organizations with a specific neighborhood orientation.

This is even more relevant given the fact that recently many civic organizations have taken up roles and responsibilities that go beyond their traditional domains, a development that has led to the differentiation and hybridization (Hasenfeld and Gidron 2005) of the nonprofit sector. One example is the field of education, which has witnessed the transformation of schools from educational institutions into organizations with a much broader mission that includes monitoring the development of children in many more respects and also involves actively engaging parents. In the Dutch context, these community schools (Brede scholen) are pivotal players in a network in which they connect to many other social services that seek to address psychological and developmental issues not only of children but of their parents as well. It often also brings them in touch with neighborhood-related issues such as traffic safety or nuisances being created by pupils.

In addition to the necessity of including a much larger group of organizations to better capture the capacity of neighborhood-based organizations to address neighborhood problems, there is also a need to take a more comprehensive look at the type of activities that are relevant in this respect and go beyond traditional definitions of political participation. While political scientists have traditionally focused on mapping forms of political participation that have been initiated by participants to address a problem they experience, recent innovations in policy making demand that we should also look at the involvement of organizations in processes of coproduction, government-solicited forms of participation in which stakeholders may be involved in a variety of ways in producing public goods for the community. Coproduction involves a constellation where governments and social actors share “conjoint responsibility in producing public services” (Marschall 2004, 232).
Most analyses of political activities tend to follow the conventional definitions of political participation, in which participants take the initiative to engage in activities that seek to influence public decision making. Such a conception of political participation resembles a division of labor in which participants demand something from the government and use participation as a way to communicate their preferences, with the expectation that government will “deliver” (Marschall 2004, 232). In processes of coproduction, on the other hand, stakeholders—both citizens and organizations—are invited by governments to take part in policy making and are much more actively engaged in one or more phases of the policy process. Depending upon the issue at hand, they may be informed, consulted, asked to think about policy options, entitled to allocate budgets, and/or entrusted with implementing such policies.

A neighborhood’s ability to successfully take part in such processes and actively engage in these coproduction processes is as relevant for its livability as its capacity to engage in traditional forms of political participation. And given the fact that the participation of organizations in such processes has been shown to be crucial in predicting the success of these programs (Huygen and Rijkschroeff 2004; Thomas 1987), it is essential that we include these activities in our analysis in addition to traditional forms of political participation.

We have argued that there is a need to extend the analysis of the participation of civic organizations in two respects. First, we need to look at the activities undertaken by all neighborhood-based civic organizations, not only those that explicitly focus upon the neighborhood. Second, it is necessary to look at both conventional forms of political participation and their involvement in processes of coproduction because both tell us something about the contribution of organizations to the quality of neighborhoods.

Explaining Participation

On the basis of both organizational (Maloney, Smith, and Stoker 2000; Newton 1976; Smith, Maloney, and Stoker 2004; Staggenborg 1988) and individual-level studies of political participation (Marschall 2004; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), we expect three groups of factors to account for variations in the level of political participation: organizational resources, an organization’s stake in the neighborhood, and their network position as measured by their connections to other organizations both inside and outside the neighborhood.
Personal and financial resources provide the operative backbone for any organization seeking to fulfill its goals (Blau and Rabrenovic 1991, 333; Guest and Oropesa 1986, 554; Kriesi 2007; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988; Hunter and Staggenborg 1988, 248). Within the context of the non-profit sector, personal resources are composed of the number of both volunteers and paid staff working for the organization. The number of both paid and unpaid functionaries determines the extent to which the organization can draw upon expertise, time, and efforts to foster organizational goals. While both volunteers and professionals are regularly included as predictors of organizational activities, the latter one in particular turns out to boost political participation (Cowen, Rohe, and Baku 2000; Maloney, Smith, and Stoker 2000; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988; Newton 1976; Staggenborg 1988). Paid staff provide an organization with the continuity that is pivotal in building up expertise, which is an essential resource for becoming politically active. Another important resource that is important for realizing organizational goals is the budget of the organization. Organizations that operate larger budgets can be expected to be able to invest more time and efforts into furthering their goals (Guest and Oropesa 1986, 554; Kriesi 2007). Finally, organizational size in terms of the number of members, clients, or participants may be seen as a resource. A larger organization can back up its claims more easily and can refer to the sizable group on whose behalf it expresses its opinions or concerns.

The second group of factors that is relevant for predicting organizational participation is the stake of an organization in the neighborhood. This group of factors should capture the engagement or interest of organizations with the neighborhood in which they reside. While such measures have been routinely included in individual-level studies of political participation (by looking at problem perceptions, political interest, or engagement), surveys of organizational activities have somewhat ignored this factor. One reason may be that such studies have often focused on a single type of organization and as such assumed such interests to be more or less constant between organizations (see, for examples, Berry, Portney, and Thompson 1993; Eisinger 1973; Milofsky 1988b). But given the inclusive approach that is taken here, we should make sure to incorporate the variability of an organization’s concern with the neighborhood in the explanatory model. Some organizations, like community associations, have the neighborhood as their explicit and sole focus and can be expected to be particularly active, whereas others may undertake activities that are focused on residents of the neighborhood (schools) and only occasionally feel the need to become active. As a third group, there will probably be a lot
of organizations that simply happen to be located in the neighborhood but never feel the urge to engage in political activities.

To capture this variety, we incorporate three measures that look at an organization’s stake in the neighborhood: the extent to which it observes neighborhood problems, the share of clients or members coming from the neighborhood, and the extent to which the organization organizes activities for neighborhood residents.

The final group of predictors for political participation is made up of the connectedness of the organization to other organizations. The relevance of interorganizational networks for predicting an organization’s political activities has been highlighted in particular by political sociologists who developed the organizational state perspective to assess the influence of corporate actors on decision making (Knoke et al. 1996) as well by other scholars examining power and influence at the local level (Galaskiewicz 1979; Laumann and Pappi 1976). These studies have shown that the influence of organizations is related to their centrality in the interorganizational network of their social system. Organizations with a more central position tend to be better informed, are better able to mobilize other organizations for collective action, and stand a bigger chance of being mobilized by others. A more central position in interorganizational networks is accompanied by higher levels of contacts with politicians and/or governments and governmental agencies (Amara, Landry, and Lamari 1999, 488; Guest and Oropesa 1986, 554).

It is important to differentiate between different types of linkages, however. Hunter and Staggenborg point out that at the neighborhood level, two types of linkages may be relevant. One concerns links to organizations inside the neighborhood: Having these links provides the opportunity to mobilize resources to “support locally organized collective action” (Hunter and Staggenborg 1988, 248). The other linkage concerns connections to organizations outside the neighborhood, which may provide “critical external resources” that are necessary to engage in political action (Hunter and Staggenborg 1988, 248).

**Fieldwork and Data**

The empirical analysis for this article draws upon a survey conducted in 2007 within the framework of a research project that explores the involvement of civic organizations in eight neighborhoods in the cities of Dordrecht (120,000 inhabitants) and Utrecht (400,000), the Netherlands.
Our neighborhood definition follows the designation that both residents and policy makers have given to the different sublocalities that can be identified in these two cities. Given the fact that these neighborhoods constitute clearly delineated geographical areas and residents as such identify with them, the municipality has incorporated them as an important organizational framework for its policies. Hence both cities organize their urban policies partly in a territorial fashion, employing neighborhood managers to connect the city administration to the neighborhood and vice versa. Also, both cities have established consultative forums at the neighborhood level in the form of information sessions twice yearly (Dordrecht) and the establishment of a neighborhood council (Utrecht).

For each city, a two-by-two selection design was applied that combined age (young to old) of the neighborhoods with the relative amount of policy attention the neighborhood received from the municipal government (little attention to much attention). We excluded those (very worse off) neighborhoods that have been the intensive focus of both local and national policy attention and interventions for decades: Intensity and accumulation of neighborhood problems as well as policy interventions make them a very specific category that is not representative for the average urban neighborhood. The size of the neighborhoods ranges from only 3,500 residents in Voordorp (Utrecht) to almost 12,000 for the neighborhood of Lunetten, also part of Utrecht.

For each of the neighborhoods, we engaged in a comprehensive mapping of the organizational landscape by searching for all organizations that reside in the neighborhood and belong to what is known as the third sector, nonprofit sector, or civil society. Although each of these terms captures a somewhat different feature of this organizational landscape, organizations that are part of this sphere share in fact three negatives: They are not part of the state, nor of the market, nor of the family. Formulated in a more positive vein, they have come into being voluntarily—thanks to people using their freedom to associate. They operate on a not-for-profit base and are thus noncommercial. Finally, they go beyond primordial, familial bonds and bring together “strangers,” thus constituting secondary associations (Salamon, Sokolowski, and List 2003, 9). All in all, this means that we employ a quite expanded conception of the types of organizations that we consider to be of interest. Although far from ideal, the term civic organizations seems to best capture the heterogeneous nature of our sample by making clear that these organizations in some way or another bring citizens together and are not part of the state.
We first obtained names and addresses of all the associations and foundations that reside in the neighborhood and have registered with the Chamber of Commerce—something that is required for all foundations as well as for all associations with a legal status. In addition, we consulted address lists of the city’s neighborhood managers for each of the neighborhoods, checked phone and online directories, and browsed local and neighborhood newspapers for items that might reveal the existence of groups that might have gone unnoticed. Our list includes clubs, self-help groups, neighborhood groups, community-based organizations, schools, community centers, tenants associations, housing corporations, churches and other religious institutions, child care facilities, homes for the elderly, youth centers, and kindergartens.

Table 1 gives details on the size of distribution of organizations across different domains, which as much as possible follows the International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations (Salamon, Sokolowski, and List 2003, 56). It also provides information on the response rates to the organizational survey, which amounts to almost 44%.

The largest part of organizations belongs to the culture/leisure domain, followed by the domains of housing and neighborhood, sports, and education. The small group of entrepreneurs refers to interest and umbrella groups of businesses that have organized themselves into associations—it does not refer to individual businesses themselves. Finally, the neighborhoods house 46 religious organizations, such as churches, mosques, and other religious congregations. All in all, our population overview suggests at least a large potential for organizational involvement in neighborhood problems given the number and the variety of terrains that are being covered.

Organizational Characteristics

We measured organizational size by asking for both the number of members and the number of people or clients taking part in activities. This is necessary because our survey includes not only member-based voluntary associations but also foundations and institutions that do not have members but deliver services to residents. In addition, we asked questions about the number of volunteers and professionals (measured in full-time equivalents). The organizational budget was measured on the basis of a categorical variable with five categories (from 0 to 500 euros as the lowest to more than 100,000 euros as the highest category).

To better capture the diversity of the organizational landscape, Table 2 gives separate figures for member-based organizations and non-member-based
Table 1
Numbers and Types of Organizations and Response Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Type</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Response Rate (%)</th>
<th>Share of Sample (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Health)care</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing/neighborhood</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other social rights</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture/leisure</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurs</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>942</strong></td>
<td><strong>409</strong></td>
<td><strong>43.4</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

organizations. Roughly two-thirds of the organizations have a member base, while one-third has no members. The figures reveal notable differences between these types of organizations within the same category, especially with respect to the number of staff employed as well as the budgets. The housing/neighborhood category, for example, shows small member-based groups with small budgets and no professional staff (tenants associations and community groups) versus large, highly professionalized, well-funded organizations (housing agencies). Despite this variety, the resources variables are distributed in a pretty skewed fashion. Therefore both paid staff and volunteers have been measured as dummy variables, while organizational size is measured by computing a variable called participants, which is the square root of the sum of members and clients.

Table 3 gives information on the organization’s stake in the neighborhood and network position. The first measures the perception of neighborhood problems by the organization and is based on calculating a mean score for a list of 15 standardized items asking the representative of the organization about levels of crime, traffic noise, pollution, and so forth. On a scale from 1 (not a problem at all) to 5 (a very big problem) the mean score is 1.7, indicating that perceived problem levels in these neighborhoods are low. The second measure of stake in the neighborhood looks at the percentage of participants who come from the neighborhood in which the organization resides. The higher this percentage, the more organizations can be said to have a stake in the neighborhood. The mean percentage of neighborhood participants is 51, but there are a considerable number of missing values for this variable, so the real figure is probably lower. The final measure...
**Table 2**

Organizational Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Member-based Organizations</th>
<th>Non-member-based Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Health)care</td>
<td>295.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>234.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing/neighborhood</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>335.7</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other social rights</td>
<td>380.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture/leisure</td>
<td>148.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>269.9</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurs</td>
<td>148.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>565.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>230.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: FTE = full-time equivalents. Mean scores are presented in Participants, FTE, and Volunteers columns, and percentage of organizations in Budget column. Participants = members + clients FTE: number of FTE employed. Volunteers = number of volunteers. Budget > 100,000 = percentage of organizations with budgets exceeding 100,000 euros (highest budget category).
of neighborhood engagement counts the number of activities an organization organizes for residents of the neighborhoods. Answers that were provided in this open question range from street festivities and neighborhood barbeques to courses for residents and information on social services and support for specific groups like migrants. Almost 30% of the organizations organize these activities (with an average of three activities for those that do).

Finally, three measures were employed to measure the connectedness of organizations. The first measures the number of ties to the most pivotal organizations in the neighborhood, a measure that was developed on the basis of a list of key organizations, which was provided by the neighborhood manager, a civil servant who is specifically assigned to each neighborhood and monitors and coordinates developments and policy efforts. Because the precise number differs from neighborhood to neighborhood (it runs from 7 to 10), the variable measures the proportion of organizations with which the organization has stayed in touch in the past year. The second measure consists of the count of other organizations that were mentioned as contacts on the basis of an open question enabling respondents to list a maximum of 10 organizations. Of the organizations, 55% mention such contacts, with an average of 1.4 contacts. A second measure of outside linkages refers to receiving governmental funding.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of Organizations with Neighborhood Residents (%)</th>
<th>Mean Activities for Neighborhood (%)</th>
<th>Mean Neighborhood Problem Score</th>
<th>Mean Connections to Pivotal Problem Organizations (%)</th>
<th>Mean Number of Interorganizational Contacts</th>
<th>% Subsidized by Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Health)care</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing/neighborhood</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>59.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other social rights</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture/leisure</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurs</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is included to capture structural connectedness to public authorities and is measured as a dummy.

Measuring Political Participation

To sort out those activities that focus on the neighborhood from more general forms of participation that do not have anything to do with the neighborhood, we measured political contacts in a problem-oriented fashion (Brady 1999). We asked organizations whether they had experienced a problem in their neighborhood and subsequently to self-describe a maximum of two of these problems. Following each of the problems mentioned, we subsequently asked them to tick all groups of actors they had contacted to tackle it (civil servants, neighborhood management, aldermen, political parties, neighborhood council, the media, other organizations, and citizens). We consider all contacts with the first five of these actors to be indicative of neighborhood-oriented forms of political participation; that is, they amount to activities that “have the intent or effect of influencing government action” (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 38).³

The second measure of organizational involvement focuses on participation in processes of coproduction. For each neighborhood, we made an inventory of such projects and procedures that were initiated by the city and neighborhood management and listed them in the questionnaire. All in all, the majority of these projects focus on redevelopment of parts of the neighborhoods or on initiatives to increase the livability of neighborhoods. Projects included things such as Proefstraat, a redesign of the layout of the street in the neighborhood of Staart, which involved residents and organizations thinking about ways to accommodate several conflicting demands (parking space, playing facilities, space for trees, etc.). Another example is an advisory panel in Voordorp, one of the neighborhoods in Utrecht, which gave feedback to the city on how to redevelop the site of a former cattle market. Organizations were asked to indicate how they related to each of these projects by ticking the following options: not aware, been informed, have given advice, taken part in decision making, or carrying out the project. We consider any involvement going beyond being informed as being indicative of being actively involved in such projects. Because the number of coproduction processes differs per neighborhood (from 2 to 11), involvement was measured as the proportion of projects in which organizations had been active.
Empirical Results

Table 4 gives an overview of the rates of political participation. Contacts with the five types of governmental actors display a cumulative structure in which the neighborhood manager and neighborhood council are more frequently contacted than municipal actors such as aldermen, council members, and political parties. These latter actors as a rule are contacted only if organizations have also engaged in contacts with the neighborhood manager and council. The existence of this pattern is corroborated by a Mokken scale analysis—a probabilistic version of the Guttman scale—which shows that the items form a strong unidimensional scale with a scalability H of 0.54 (see Niemöller and Van Schuur 1983 for an explanation of this procedure). Accordingly, a single contact score was calculated, ranging from 0 to 10.

For contacting, the percentage of active organizations—defined as engaging in at least one contact to address a problem—ranges between 8% (culture and leisure associations) and 42% (housing and neighborhood associations). Whereas culture and leisure associations are significantly less active than the average, housing and neighborhood associations are significantly more active than the average, something that we should of course expect given the neighborhood focus of the latter group. An analysis of the problems that organizations have addressed (tables not shown) reveals that a third of the problems concern nuisance being caused by most notably youngsters hanging around in the neighborhood, followed by social problems and problems with housing (each around 15%) and crime and traffic (each around 13%).

Turning to involvement in coproduction, we once again see that housing and neighborhood associations are most active. A total of 40% of them have been engaged in at least one coproduction process. Culture and leisure organizations are among the least active (together with religious organizations that have not been engaged in any of these projects).

All in all, the figures prompt two observations. The first is that just as is the case with citizens, only a minority of organizations are active. This is exactly what we should expect given the encompassing design of this study, which included all organizations in the neighborhood, irrespective of their goals, size, level of institutionalization, or neighborhood orientation. Still, as a second observation, we must note the considerable amount of contacts deriving from those organizations without an explicit neighborhood focus. Of the total of 324 contacts mentioned, 189 have been initiated by organizations outside of the housing/neighborhood category—if we take this as a rough proxy for neighborhood orientation. And of the 219 instances in
Table 4
Political Activities of Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Contacting Politics to Tackle Neighborhood Problems</th>
<th>Involvement in Coproduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Organizations with at Least One Contact</td>
<td>Mean Number of Political Contacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Health)care</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing/neighborhood</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>0.82a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other social rights</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture/leisure</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>0.27a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>0.17a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurs</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>0.20a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Group mean differs significantly from overall mean at 95% confidence interval.

which organizations have been engaged in coproduction processes, 150 have involved organizations outside the housing/neighborhood category.

Predicting Organizational Participation

To predict levels of organizational participation, a stepwise regression was performed in which subsequently the categories of resources, stake in the neighborhood, and network position were introduced. Both logistic and linear regression techniques were used to test the robustness of estimates. Moreover the independent variables were also operationalized in different ways to find out to what extent the estimates were sensitive to different transformations. Because the different estimates are quite robust when performing these different calculations, Table 5 reports estimates using ordinary least squares regression.

A bird’s-eye view of the regression results reveals that resources do not contribute much to the explained variance but that engagement and network position do indeed help explain both types of activity. We discuss the role of these three groups of factors in turn.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Contacting Local Politics</th>
<th></th>
<th>Involvement in Coproduction</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants (square root)</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-1.12</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteers (1 = yes)</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time equivalents (1 = yes)</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-3.31**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yearly budget (5 categories)</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>-2.10*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of neighborhood residents (0–100)</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-0.51</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood problem score (1–5)</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>2.40*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities in neighborhood (1–5)</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>2.31*</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financed by government (1 = yes)</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections to pivotal neighborhood organizations (0–1)</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>3.52**</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>6.95**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections to other civic organizations (1–10)</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$ resources</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$ resources + engagement</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td></td>
<td>.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$ resources + engagement + network</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td></td>
<td>.48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $N = 117$

*p < .05, **p < .001.

We first turn to resources. In the final model, the coefficients for the different resources variables either are nonsignificant or are not in accordance with our expectations. There is a negative effect of budget on contacting and a negative effect of paid staff on participation in coproduction processes. In a model with only resources as predictors, paid staff is positively related to
contacting in response to a problem whereas it does not have a significant
effect on participation in coproduction anymore.

Turning our attention to the engagement variables, we witness a consist-
tent positive effect of organizing activities for neighborhood residents on
both forms of political participation. The percentage of neighborhood resi-
dents as members or clients of the organization has no relation to the prop-
sensity to engage in either form of participation. Even if we estimate the
model with the percentage of neighborhood residents as the only indicator
of engagement, it does not have a significant effect. Furthermore, the stand-
ardized neighborhood problem score is positively related to contacting
local politics to tackle a specific neighborhood problem but not for being
engaged in coproduction.

Turning finally to the network part of the analysis, it is clear that con-
nections to the pivotal organizations in the neighborhood are the key factor
in predicting both types of political participation. The other two network
variables are not relevant, even if we reestimate the equation without the
variable measuring connections to pivotal neighborhood organizations.

Assessing the Results

This article started out with the claim that to arrive at a better under-
standing of a neighborhood’s potential to address problems and maintain its
livability, (1) we should study the activities of civic organizations in addi-
tion to what individual residents do, (2) such a study should try to encom-
pass the full civic landscape, and (3) both traditional forms of political
participation and newer forms of participation in the form of coproduction
should be looked at. As such, this study expands upon earlier work of the
neighborhood-level involvement of organizations, which either has been
confined to systematically examining the activities of very specific types of
organizations, most notably community groups, tenants associations, and
the like using survey methods (Berry, Portney, and Thompson 1993;
Eisinger 1973; Milofsky 1988b), or consisted of case studies on the fates
and fortunes of specific movements (Marwell 2004; Putnam and Feldstein

After having mapped the extensive organizational landscape of eight
Dutch neighborhoods, we showed that many organizations that are not
explicitly focused on the neighborhood nevertheless turn out to be politi-
cally active by contacting civil servants and politicians with respect to
problems and by engaging in processes of coproduction.
The structure of contacts to tackle problems reveals that neighborhood-level institutions are an important port of entry for most organizations. The neighborhood manager is the most frequented political actor, together with the neighborhood council. As a rule, organizations get in touch with municipal actors only if they have also contacted these neighborhood-level actors. These results indicate that the structure of the municipal administration clearly shapes the participatory pattern organizations display. Given the fact that most contacts remain restricted to these neighborhood-level actors, they suggest that some form of administrative and political decentralization makes for an accessible form of problem signaling on the part of the government.

The ease of access is witnessed by the fact that organizational resources, which have been found to be relevant in studies of organizational participation at the municipal and national levels, do not have the expected impacts in the estimates we report here. For contacting, it turns out that, in fact, organizations with a smaller budget are more active, whereas for coproduction, organizations with staff are less active once we also account for their position in the interorganizational network. All in all then, the results do not indicate the participatory bias that has been observed in other studies of urban policy making that found a dominance of professionalized policy-making organizations in organizational networks aimed at tackling urban problems (Denters, Van Heffen, and De Jong 1999). What matters much more is an organization’s stake in the neighborhood, either in the form of observing problems or in terms of organizing activities for residents. These positive effects mirror results of individual-level studies, which have repeatedly shown the positive effect of engagement on different forms of political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

The results finally confirm the relevance of connections to other organizations in the neighborhood as a crucial determinant for political action. They not only corroborate a long line of research in political sociology but also attest to the emergence of governance structures at the municipal and neighborhood levels (Gittell, Newman, and Pierre-Louis 2001; Rhodes 1996). Governments seek cooperation with civic organizations through processes of coproduction, and organizations seek alliances with other organizations to tackle problems and work out policies. As is always the case with cross-sectional studies, we should be cautious in interpreting these findings as causal effects, however. Political action and being connected with pivotal neighborhood organizations are simply strongly correlated, even if we control for connections outside the neighborhood and financed by the government.
By including a wide range of organizations and identifying the structural determinants of their political involvement, we have been able to show that many neighborhood-based organizations are concerned about the quality of the neighborhood and that such a concern translates into action. The results help one to arrive at a more unified model to predict the political participation of civic organizations. As such, the analysis provides a small piece of the answer to Warren’s somewhat desperate observation that “from the point of democracy, then, it seems that there are associations and then there are associations” (M. E. Warren 2001, 11). Clearly, when studying the organizational capacity of neighborhoods, there is ample reason to look beyond the usual suspects to get a complete view of the political activity of civic organizations in urban neighborhoods.

Notes

1. This research was funded through a grant by the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research within the framework of the STIP-program, the Urban Innovation Program which is a cooperative venture of the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Netherlands Institute for City Innovation Studies (NICIS) (grant no. 473-05-608).

2. Those organizations that filled out the survey were asked to indicate the terrains and most important terrain for their activities. For those organizations that did not reply, we assigned the terrain on the basis of the name of the organization and double-checked these with the help of Internet searches. To check the validity of assigning terrains on the basis of only names, we did this as well for those organizations that responded to the survey. This yielded a match of about 80% between self-assignment and coder assignment.

3. Because in the preparatory stage of the survey key informants told us that protests rarely occurred in the neighborhoods, we did not include protest events or other forms of nonconventional participation as an option in the questionnaire. Still, in the event organizations were involved in this, we think our measures do almost certainly tap these as well as such protests are usually accompanied by contacts with politicians or civil servants.

References


Herman Lelieveldt is an associate professor of political science at Roosevelt Academy, Middelburg, the Netherlands, one of Utrecht University’s liberal arts colleges. His research focuses upon civil society, political participation, and urban policies. He recently published a chapter titled “Neighborhood Politics” in The Handbook of Social Capital, edited by Guglielmo Wolleb, Jan van Deth, and Dario Castiglione (2008, Oxford University Press).

Karien Dekker is an assistant professor in policy sociology at the Department of Sociology of Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Her research focuses on community participation in policy and decision making in urban neighborhoods. One of her recent publications is “Places and Participation: Comparing Resident Participation in Post-WWII Neighborhoods in Northwest, Central and Southern Europe” in Journal of Urban Affairs (vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 63-86).
Beate Völker is a professor of sociology at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Her research is directed to the impact of institutional conditions and contexts on networks and types of relationships. She is interested in a number of neighborhood issues, such as community and the production of collective action in neighborhoods as well as social and physical disorder and the conditions that explain variation in these outcomes. A recent publication on this topic is “Sixteen Million Neighbors: A Multilevel Study of the Role of Neighbors in the Personal Networks of the Dutch” in Urban Affairs Review (vol. 43, no. 2, pp. 256-84; together with Henk Flap).

René Torenvlied is an associate professor of sociology at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. His research interests include political decision making and policy implementation. Recent articles have appeared in the British Journal of Political Science, Journal of Peace Research, European Union Politics, and Rationality and Society.

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