

Regional Civic Organizations: Strengthening Citizenship in Changing Times

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Regional civic organizations (RCOs) are essential champions of the regional public interest. They empower their region's interests in the face of a constant barrage of more localized concerns. RCOs—groups of citizens who come together in nonpartisan ways to solve public problems—are a hopeful alternative to the creeping cynicism threatening public life. They provide an opportunity for citizens to get involved in tackling their communities' toughest challenges. They nurture an infrastructure of regional problem solving that brings business, government, and citizens together productively. Most important, by improving the quality of public decisions, RCOs help rebuild the public's faith in government and reward that faith by helping government work better.

But dramatic economic, cultural, and political changes are making the work of regional civic organizations more challenging. Anyone starting a new RCO, or working to sustain one, cannot rely on the organizational structures, programs, and strategies of the RCOs' Progressive-era ancestors. New conditions and new problems demand new designs for civic reform.

Six Key Trends for Regional Civic Organizations

The oldest of today's regional civic organizations were founded more than 100 years

ago, as the Industrial Revolution fueled the growth of America's big cities. The founders of those first RCOs sought to infuse virtue into city life and politics by giving citizens a more vital place at the public-policy table. Later, Progressive-era RCOs worked to clean up corruption at city hall and modernize government administration by injecting the same scientific management practices then being adopted by industry.

Corruption and inefficiency haven't disappeared from politics, of course, but in the 1990s the toughest challenge for America's big-city regions is that government—the institution of government—often is unable to solve the most pressing problems these huge urban communities face. Today's problems—sprawl, failing schools, crime, environmental degradation, and many others—cry out for regional solutions with a major “buy in” from citizens. But we still have small town halls trying to solve problems that spill over city, county, state and, sometimes, even national jurisdictions.

Regional civic organizations can fill the void by providing a framework for regional problem solving, but they must also respond to today's political, economic, and cultural realities. They will have to reinvent themselves, paying attention to six key trends: the rise of regionalism, the decline in civic participation, the growth of interest-group politics, the changing corporate and philanthropic

The RCO Network

Regional civic organizations (RCOs) have increased in number over this decade. The informal exchange that always has occurred between these agencies now receives the benefits of a formally-organized network, created to facilitate the requests of this growing movement. The RCO Network, formally organized in 1995, works to build the capacity of its member organizations to address civic issues effectively in a regional context. The RCO Network supports its members by sharing techniques, approaches, and solutions to regional problems.

The 1996 RCO directory identified 50 active groups, ranging in age from five months to more than a century old. Staffing varies as well. Some RCOs work entirely through volunteer activity while others support staffs as large as 10.

Each independent RCO serves its community by objectively examining the needs

of the region and working constructively to address public issues. Each RCO is a separate case study in regional policy advancement. RCOs can learn much from each other about citizen participation processes, administrative uses, and policy solutions. The Network helps its RCO members to mobilize citizens to become involved in problem solving and community change by utilizing various problem-solving processes.

The RCO Network will meet this year in Arlington, Virginia on October 23-24 as part of the National Civic League's annual conference on governance. For more information about the work of RCOs or the RCO Network, contact Janis Purdy, executive director, The Citizens League of Greater Cleveland, 50 Public Square, Suite 843, Cleveland, OH 44113, Phone 216/241-5340, Fax 216/736-7626.

environment, the increasing diversity of American society, and the advent of new technology for civic participation and problem solving.

1. The Rise of Regionalism

If it was ever out of fashion, "the region," in one form or another, is definitely back on the policy agenda.

Most Americans in 1997 live in greater metropolitan regions, or "cristates," in the parlance of Peirce and Johnson (1993). The region as a geographic unit was once thought to be a matter of arbitrary boundaries imposed for planning or political purposes. Economists, demographers, business analysts, and

sociologists alike now see the urban region as a real, organic phenomenon (Jacobs 1984; Ohmae 1993; Peirce and Johnson 1993). The metropolitan region is considered the critically important unit for understanding and addressing economic issues, from infrastructure and workforce preparation to international competitiveness, and such critical social concerns as affordable housing and living-wage jobs (Peirce and Johnson 1993; Dodge 1996; Kanter 1995; Porter 1990).

There is mounting evidence that, when it comes to economic and social well-being, communities rise or fall as regions. A recent study by the German Marshall Fund of the United States concluded that regions where communities work together effectively do better in

global economic competition (German Marshall Fund of the United States 1992). As another observer stressed, “the core is completely at the command of the local community” (Gabor 1991, 126)—and the “local community” typically is a metropolitan region.

Regional civic reformers in this new millennium must invent a public problem-solving infrastructure that is appropriate to the demands of today’s urban citistates. The most urgent challenge is to improve the quality of metropolitan policies—and that can only occur if the policy-making process can overcome the Balkanization of local governments within a metropolitan area. RCOs must also nurture a regional consciousness among citizens and policy makers in order to counter not-in-my-backyard parochialism. It is important, too, to invigorate a regional civic society, by bringing together business, government, and private communities to work on common goals and by training leaders—at many levels, in many sectors—to tackle regional concerns.

2. The Decline in Civic Participation

Robert Putnam of Harvard University has written persuasively about the decline of citizenship and what he calls “social capital.” All across the country, participation in church activities and civic associations has declined. Membership in everything from parent-teacher associations to unions to bowling leagues has plummeted. Leisure activities are becoming more private (Putnam 1996). Some dispute the details of this decline and argue that new kinds of social activities are simply crowding out the traditional forms of citizen engagement (Stengel 1996). There can be no doubt, though, that the four hours of television the average American views per day has some effect on other social and community activities (Putnam 1996).

At the same time, fewer of those people who do participate are focusing on the public

good and cultivating their ability to understand and participate across many issues. Generalists might be a dying breed. Even among citizens yearning to have an impact on public concerns, there is a growing tendency to align with single issues or to join consumer-type organizations, such as the American Association of Retired Persons, the Sierra Club, and Planned Parenthood (Putnam 1995, 70-71). Increasingly, citizens and funders are buying results and concentrating their efforts on organizations that represent a point of view they already hold.

Confidence in government also has fallen precipitously. Twenty-five years ago, three-quarters of the public said they had confidence in government; today only a quarter do. Citizens are skeptical—sometimes downright hostile—toward politicians. And they have checked out of citizenship in huge numbers.

Paradoxically, there are also signs of a resurgence of interest in civic involvement. The present urban generation, hungry though it may be for the experience of community, is starting behind the curve, however. It is missing the attitudes and habits of citizenship that were taken for granted by previous generations, who, while they might have found themselves living in big cities, still had fresh memories of small-town community life. Today people don’t know much, nor are they taught much, about state and local policy making—and they know even less about regional policy making. Very few people think of themselves as members of metropolitan communities.

Regional civic organizations have a tall order. They must counter the cynicism, attract a new generation of citizens and persuade people they can make a difference. That challenge is made more difficult by the fact that RCOs typically are “big-picture organizations” at a time when people habitually think about narrow interests and expect immediate gratification.

3. The Growth of Interest-Group Politics

Special-interest politics and ideological litmus tests seem to be gaining strength at the expense of “good government.” Indeed, some claim that in today’s political climate, “good government” is an oxymoron. The legislative process and political decision making have changed a good deal over the past 40 years. There are much bigger legislative staffs, more policy competitors (usually with specific axes to grind and larger budgets), much more money being poured into political campaigns, and more campaign supporters included in the process of drafting public policy.

One of the greatest sources of regional civic organizations’ influence has been their reputation for impartiality, thoroughness, and nonpartisanship. RCOs’ objectivity and dispassionate analyses have gained them media coverage, attention and, most important, the trust of policy makers. These assets must be guarded even more carefully as the public’s skepticism grows. At the same time, however, RCOs have to deal with the reality of interest-group politics or be accused of ivory-tower thinking and naivete. This balancing act sometimes presents a challenge, particularly when politics—rather than understanding what needs to be done—is the main barrier to adopting a needed policy.

4. The Changing Corporate and Philanthropic Environment

There has been a substantial change in the corporate contributions climate in the last decade. Many corporations are expanding the scope of their giving activities to all of the communities where the company does business; philanthropic dollars that once were devoted to the company “home town” might now be given instead to six or seven communities across the United States, Europe, and Asia. Corporate leaders are less likely to be home

grown or to stay in one community for long. More company giving decisions are made by committee rather than a few top executives, and donations are increasingly tied to employee volunteerism and company marketing strategies.

In addition, many corporate foundations are focusing on struggling members of the community and are funding organizations that provide direct services to those groups. This trend is likely to intensify as the nonprofit service sector is called upon to provide more services, in the wake of anticipated government cutbacks and welfare reform.

Traditional corporate support for RCOs has been eroding. A 1990 survey of regional civic organizations by the National Civic League found that between 1986 and 1990 corporate member contributions declined from 39 to 34 percent of overall income, while grants declined from 41 to 34 percent of income (Dodge 1990). That trend has probably worsened in the 1990s as overall corporate giving has declined.

All of these developments have profound implications for regional civic organizations, especially those that have relied on a cozy relationship with a few large, local companies. Increasingly, it seems, regional civic organizations seeking financial support and business participation will have to appeal to corporations’ self-interest and show that profit maximization and community building are compatible (Sweat and Anthony 1995, 245).

5. The Increasing Diversity of American Society

The United States is rapidly becoming a more culturally diverse society. Already, persons of color account for the majority of population in several metropolitan areas; soon, non-Hispanic whites will be in the minority in California and Texas (Population Reference Bureau 1989, 8).

The climate for decision making in metropolitan areas has changed a great deal and will continue to do so. Historically, the civic and political leadership of big cities was comprised of a tight-knit group of fairly well-to-do families and businessmen. In the present era of multinational businesses, mergers, and corporate downsizing, there are fewer business leaders with roots as deep and investment as personal as earlier generations of leaders.

Too, there has been a marked diffusion of social power across the urban United States, with new groups gaining influence and representation among the key decision makers. Increasing racial and cultural diversity means we can no longer assume consensus about important questions. Citizens and the political process itself will no longer allow important decisions to be made by a small group of leaders, however well informed and public spirited they might be. The public expects and often demands a more open, inclusive decision process.

Neither the old way of dealing with regional challenges—the proverbial smoke-filled room—nor the present processes, which too often seem fractious and prone to interest-group parochialism, are equipped to lead urban regions forward. We will have to think hard about how to improve the quality of community decisions, while including more people at the table. If we hope to have important public decisions stick, the decisions will have to reflect real consensus.

Regional civic organizations can help lead the way. But we also should acknowledge that our members and leaders might never be completely representative of the “average” citizen. People who are interested in public affairs and willing to devote time and energy to become informed participants are unusual—whatever their gender or color. These folks are heroes and we should be proud of them. But we also should recognize and celebrate the fact that

civic heroes will come from different places than in the past.

6. New Technology for Civic Participation and Problem Solving

The worlds of information technology and telecommunications are in a rapidly accelerating mode. Every day there is a new development. Citizens have exciting new ways to learn about and understand issues, solve problems, and participate in government.

By now most people and organizations understand technology’s power to improve management efficiency and expand analytic capabilities. Policy analysts, lobbyists, and others in the public arena have developed extremely sophisticated technology applications. No public debate escapes reams of spreadsheets and computer-generated statistics; targeted faxes, customized form letters, and television spots are ubiquitous. Regional civic organizations, which typically have small staffs and shoestring budgets, must be prepared to use these tools to run their shops and conduct and publish their research.

Much less has been done to use technology to help improve the quality of public decision making. The possibilities are tantalizing. For instance, one of the reasons citizens have become disaffected with public policy is that they are presented with a series of yes-or-no choices, neither of which is the right solution, in their view (Strauss 1989). Voting or opinion polling on these yes/no questions might reveal the majority’s choice, but a more fine-tuned decision method would show that the solution the public really preferred was one that wasn’t on the ballot (Strauss 1989). Communities sorely need creative thinking to take technology beyond vapid opinion polling to helping the public and decision makers envision better policy options.

Practical Steps for Building and Growing a Regional Civic Organization Today

These six trends will profoundly affect how regional civic organizations organize themselves. But there are ways to adapt this century-old concept to meet today's challenges.

Mission and Scope. Regional civic organizations today must be even more explicit about focusing their missions on the metropolitan region as the key unit for understanding and solving public problems. RCOs should choose topics for their studies and projects that have regionwide significance and that are amenable to policy solutions at the regional level. They must be conscious about ensuring representation of city and suburbs on their boards, in other volunteer leadership positions within the organization, and among their membership.

Membership and Funding. Regional civic organizations should model to the community how to improve the quality of decisions by involving a variety of people in a variety of tasks in a variety of different ways. We should show our communities that consensus is possible among diverse groups and that people can engage in public dialogue without resorting to "sound bites" and mudslinging.

RCOs can take a number of specific steps to reach beyond "people that look like me" and travel in the same circles:

- Develop relationships with other organizations that can help with ongoing recruitment of a wide variety of people as members and as participants in study and action projects. Devise deliberate strategies to cultivate culturally diverse leaders from among the organizations' members.
- Develop processes for gathering information and input from important, but frequently overlooked, stakeholders when studying regional issues. For example, the Citizens League in Minneapolis-St. Paul conducts "SpeakUps"—one-time round-

table discussions in neighborhood locations—in conjunction with its research studies.

- Act as a convener and provide a forum for bringing various constituencies together on community problems (Bryson and Crosby 1992).
- Think about ways to collaborate with other organizations on certain issues. Some issues have important implications for diverse communities, while the communities themselves might view other agendas as more urgent. But regional civic organizations, working together with organizations that focus on the concerns of culturally diverse communities, can have a powerful impact on policy-level decisions of common interest.

On the funding side, there is stiff competition for money and volunteers. It's getting harder to find corporate leaders who understand and care deeply about regional issues. Luckily, there is a real self interest to hook business executives into participation. According to Michael Porter of the Harvard Business School, a company's home base—the community where it conducts research on products and develops its competitive strategy—determines how competitive the firm and industry will be (Porter 1990). Regions must undertake efforts to boost competitiveness, Porter says.

RCOs should keep this in mind and use a bait-and-add strategy for recruiting business participation:

- Give special consideration to focusing on at least some issues that are competitiveness concerns for all businesses in the region—workforce development, telecommunications, or transportation policy, for example.
- Develop or strengthen participation mechanisms for corporate sponsors' employees, connecting with work sites as a routine part of volunteer involvement efforts. Communicate individually with se-

nior company officials, making sure they know about the important contribution their employees are making to the regional organization and the community's future.

- Once business people are involved, be conscious about broadening their sights to include other community issues and concerns.
- Seek project-related grants from foundations and corporations rather than general operating support. Project support is more likely to appeal to companies and foundations that are eager to focus their giving programs and wary of long-term financial obligations. (Be careful of financial support from anyone with a direct self-interest in the outcome of a study.)
- Look for leaders from new corners of the business world. Some of the most visionary and energetic business folks today aren't in Fortune 500 companies, but are young adults starting up and running sometimes quirky, but often highly profitable, small businesses. Regional civic organizations can offer these young leaders entree into important leadership roles.

Historically, the corporate community has supplied more than half of the budget for most RCOs. New conditions mean that we have to be smarter just to maintain that percentage. And for long-term financial stability, RCOs must consider individual members to be the core of their financial support.

Advocacy and Impact. One of the most attractive features of regional civic organizations today is that they are a safe forum to discuss issues without the taint of interest-group politics. To protect their reputations as nonpartisan or bipartisan forums, RCOs must select board members and volunteer leaders with a careful eye for balance. It also is important to develop clear policies for member participation that, for example, screen out all or most members of interest groups from studies of "their" issues. RCOs would do well to develop fund-raising policies that preserve

their impartiality and credibility.

But interest groups are a fact of life and regional groups can hope to implement few policies without gaining some support from such groups. So RCOs shouldn't be apologetic about selectively forming collaborations with interest groups on a few carefully chosen issues.

Programs. RCOs have been sustained and nurtured by the World War II generation that is gradually receding from the scene. Subsequent generations—baby boomers, often two-career and single-parent families pressed for time, and generation Xers—need to be "sold" on becoming involved in their regions and neighborhoods.

Leaders of regional civic organizations must get to know the younger generation of citizens. What issues concern them? How do they get their information—cable TV, radio, the Internet, newspapers? How do they want to participate? Will concrete community improvement activities such as Habitat for Humanity be important "hooks" to enhance the discussion of more abstract policy dilemmas? The future of RCOs' membership, board leadership, and citizen participation depend on the answers to these tough questions.

RCOs must develop a continuum of ways to participate that acknowledges different family and financial circumstances, levels of education, and interest in public affairs. That means sorting through nuts-and-bolts matters, such as how memberships should be priced, where study committee meetings should be held and whether services such as on-site child care would allow more single parents to participate in study committees.

Some individuals are eager to roll up their sleeves and plunge into a year-long study committee that requires lots of reading and often contentious debate. But not all of the organization's programs should require such extensive time commitments. How might an RCO use cable television, a web page, a news-

letter, and one-time roundtables to create synergy?

New technologies offer exciting opportunities to reach and educate members and the community and policy makers about the important issues. But we must be conscious and deliberate about applying technology to improve the quality of public decision making, looking at new tools to accomplish the organization's goals. Electronic voting at meetings, for example, might help a group identify areas of agreement and disagreement and advance consensus more quickly.

Conclusion

Just as we have been trying to reinvent government, we need to reinvent citizenship for the metropolitan regions of today. Regional civic organizations can draw from their 100-year history to help urban communities do just that. In the process, RCOs must keep focused on their task: helping regions make better quality decisions about their problems. And they should accomplish that task in ways that nurture relationships and a sense of community among their members. That keeps members coming back for more—and builds the regional community's social capital. ■

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