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Michels' Law of Oligarchy and Minnesota Republican Nucleons and Cadres

THOMAS L. PAHL*

ABSTRACT—In an attempt to evaluate Michels' assertions about an "iron law of oligarchy," the top two levels of leadership in a state political party have been compared. An attempt to find significant differences which would support Michels' elitist theories has been made by comparing demographic factors, work approval and disapproval, political factors, and career aspirations of nucleons and cadres. No great support for the theories has been found, and some contrary evidence has been unearthed. In a further attempt to test Michels' theory, the leadership is divided along career aspirations into careerists and terminals; the support for an iron law of oligarchy is even weaker in this comparison.

Implicit in Robert Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" is the assumption that a handful of individuals will assume control and power in a political party, that these individuals will not be typical of the rank and file of the organization, and that others at intermediate levels will desire elite positions but the elite will perpetuate themselves in power. (Michels 1962). If these assumptions are correct, we should find a significant difference in demographic, economic, political, and social characteristics between the top and the intermediate levels of party leadership, significant differences between the likes and dislikes of party organizational tasks, and significant differences between their activism incentives. Finally we should find a substantial number of the intermediate leadership eager to hold higher party position.

Dwaine Marvick recently suggested the following distinction between top leadership called "nucleus" and an intermediate leadership called "cadre":

Functionally, elites are eternally differentiated. One can distinguish between the larger group, or "cadre," who are typically specialized to implement the specific ends of their organization, and the smaller group of the leaders, or "nucleus" . . .

A cadre is an elite stratum, typically larger than the elite nucleus, specifically confined to those who are expected to perform instrumental roles in furthering the organization's goals. The term "cadre" is further limited to those who provide the skeleton staff of an organization, capable of recruiting, training, and organizing additional members. (Marvick 1968: 349-350)

A like distinction is made here, with the members of the Minnesota Republican Executive and Central Committees constituting the "nucleons" and the intermediate level of leadership—county, legislative district, ward—constituting the "cadre."

In an attempt to relate incentives to organization theory, Marvick and others (Eldersveld), (Marvick and Nixon), (Bowman, Ippolito and Donaldson) adopted the three broad categories of incentives that, according to Clark and Wilson, influenced members of organizations. "Solidary" incentives are intangible rewards of a social nature, "purposive" incentives are intangibles related to the stated ends of the organization, and "material" incentives are tangible rewards such as money or business contacts. These categories are used here to study the differences between nucleons and cadres within the hierarchy of a political party.

The data in this study were collected in the spring of 1969 through a mail survey of 258 Republican leaders in Minnesota. The questionnaire was comprehensive but brief: two legal size pages with twenty-seven questions. The questionnaire was supplemented through personal interviews with party staff members, volunteer personnel, attendance at organizational meetings, and through use of data from other sources. Party volunteers, especially college summer interns, made possible the coding, key punching, and data processing. There was a return rate of 70 per cent on the questionnaires, and the completion ratio of items was above 90 per cent.

Nucleons, cadres and demography

Implicit in Michels' iron law are differences in demographic, economic, and social characteristics between the top and intermediate levels of party leadership resulting from the denial of leadership access to those not congruent with the nucleus. Based on this supposition, we would expect to find statistically significant differences in residence, place of birth, income, occupation, age, sex, nativeness, and education. Application of Chi-Square tests indicates that only in the cases of residence, place of birth, and income are the differences between the nucleons and the cadres statistically significant (the level of significance in this study is .05). The conclusion is rather meager: high income leaders who live in the metropolitan area in which they were born are more likely to be top party leaders than are lower income, rural born, rural residents. These are hardly the hard data from which flow support of Michels' iron law of oligarchy.

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Work approval and disapproval

When asked what they like most about their positions, a bare majority of Minnesota Republican leaders said their posts provide personal satisfaction and rewards. Minnesotans are less inclined to cite reasons of personal satisfaction than are Massachusetts and North Carolina Republicans surveyed by the Bowman, Ipolita and Donaldson (BID) study. On the other hand, Minnesotans are much more likely to like general party activities. Perhaps this is a result of the promotion of voter surveys, door-to-door small gift solicitation, and get-out-the-vote drives as "priority activities" by the Minnesota professional field staff (Minnesota Republican Party).

A comparison of Minnesota cadres and nucleons gives the impression that while differences are not statistically significant, certain patterns of work approval emerge. As one moves upward in level of leadership, one looks less to personal satisfaction and rewards and more to intra-party influence, with usual party activities and community influence remaining constant in importance. Perhaps the desire for more influence in party affairs is a motivating force that drives one to leave the comparatively pedestrian pace of the cadre for the more demanding role of a nucleon.

Interstate variations occur when the leaders are asked what they dislike most about their positions. The reaction against using the political leader in the solicitation of funds from the public, prevalent among Bay State Republicans, is not repeated in Minnesota. In contrast, almost 80 per cent of Minnesota Republican leaders work in door-to-door small gift fund drives. The BID study suggestion that the dislike of party tasks mirrors differing perceptions of influence in party or community does not explain the difference here. Although both party groups have the same degree of perceived influence, Minnesotans like party tasks and Massachusetts Republicans do not. Perhaps these gritty party tasks have been rationalized for Minnesotans in terms of personal satisfactions and rewards but have not been in the Bay State.

The greatest concern of a majority of Minnesota Republican leaders is the apathy of the people in the community, whereas only a minority of the Massachusetts and North Carolina leaders express this as their greatest concern. Party groups in the three states also vary in their dislikes of non-organizational conflicts; it is a minor problem except in Massachusetts.

Concern over demand on time is uniformly the second highest dislike for all groups. In Minnesota, when one moves from the intermediate level to the top level of political leadership, one is less concerned with the apathy of party workers and more concerned with conflicts within the party. Perhaps this is explained by the lack of opportunities to observe the top level conflict until one becomes a member of the nucleus.

Types of incentives

Republican leaders in Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Minnesota rank incentives similarly with a high Spearman coefficient of rank correlation of .94 between the BID results and the Minnesota results (Table I).

There appears to be no interstate difference in ranking of incentives, nor are there great interstate differences in the ranking of incentive categories (Table II).

Political scientists assume that as a politician moves from the intermediate level to the top level of leadership, the more altruistic incentives drop in importance and the other incentives increase in importance. In the Minnesota study, the only instance in which this increase is statistically significant is in personal friendship of candidate. Surprisingly, the percentage of nucleon members who say that politics is important as a way of life or that making business contacts is an important incentive is less than the percent of cadre members who say these are important. The difference, however, is not statistically significant. Thus, there seems to be little in the differences between incentives to support theories based on differentiated party elites.

The BID study suggested that activists were more highly motivated by concerns about public issues, community obligation, and party loyalty and social contacts than by material gains. They went on to imply that because material rewards would be more available at higher levels, material incentives would be more important there (Bowman, Ippolito and Donaldson). Our data do not support this hypothesis, in that little difference is found between nucleons and cadres in material incentive category grand mean scores. We suggest that this is due to the lack of material rewards in the Minnesota political system. Important for this study is the observation that our data give no indication that desire for material gain distinguishes the top party leaders from the intermediate leaders. Therefore our data are of no help to those who would see differentiated party elites as part of an iron law of oligarchy.

Nucleons, cadres and politics

In the examination of sundry political factors which distinguish the two levels of Minnesota Republican leadership some surprising results occur. First, contrary to McClosky *et. al.*, leaders do not move ideologically away from followers as they move up in levels of leadership. Based on results of a liberal-conservative semantic differential, nucleons are less likely to identify themselves as conservatives than are cadres. Perhaps this can be explained by the tendency for metropolitan areas to be over-represented among the nucleons in Minnesota Republican politics. This explanation rests, of course, on the assumption that metropolitan leaders are less conservative than rural leaders.

Secondly, nucleons are more likely to view the governorship as the most important electoral contest, whereas cadres are more likely to view the United States senator post as the most important. This seems contrary to the common sense notion that, as one progresses upward in party leadership, one's interest moves from local to state to national contests. Perhaps here the nucleons are more cognizant of both the success of Minnesota Republicans at the state level and the importance of the governor's role in the 1971 legislative session, charged with reapportionment and redistricting. Perhaps the interest of the

TABLE I. IMPORTANCE OF INDIVIDUAL INCENTIVES TO REPUBLICAN LEADERS IN SELECTED STATES (IN PERCENTAGE OF THOSE WHO GAVE THE INCENTIVE THE HIGHEST POSSIBLE RATING).

Incentives	BID Study			Minnesota Study		
	Mass	N.C.	Avg.	Avg.	Nucleons	Cadres
<i>Purposive:</i>						
1. Concern with public issues	88	91	89	93	92	93
2. Sense of community obligation	85	85	85	80	75	84
<i>Solidary:</i>						
3. Strong party loyalty	58	56	57	57	58	57
4. Politics part of way of life	42	44	43	44	42	45
5. Fun and excitement of campaign	25	35	30	24	24	24
6. Personal friend of candidate	15	24	19	13	19	9
7. Making social contacts and friends.	30	56	43	6	7	5
<i>Material:</i>						
8. Furthering political ambition . . .	5	3	4	5	7	3
9. Being close to influential people .	15	20	18	3	5	3
10. Making business contacts	5	3	4	2	1	2
N =	(40)	(34)	(74)	(258)	(106)	(152)

intermediate level reflects the more glamorous national office and the heady thought of having a Republican senator from Minnesota for the first time since 1958.

Thirdly, cadres are more likely to contribute financially to the Minnesota Republican party than are nucleons. The explanation for this phenomenon escapes us unless the cadres are more involved than nucleons in finance drives at the county level.

Finally, when asked the most important reason for advancement, nucleons are more likely than cadres to choose ideology. This squares with the previous observation that conflict within the party is more salient to nucleons than cadres. Apparently, as one moves up in party leadership ideological conflict gains a more important but less desirable status. Although this and other political factors differentiate top level leadership from intermediate level leadership, no pattern of relationship has developed which could substantiate Michels' iron law of oligarchy.

Aspirations: Terminals and careerists

Michels' iron law of oligarchy implies that a permanent top leadership exists which tends to stay in power over a long period of time, and that this elite fights attempts by other members to penetrate their group. Michels also implies that ambitious party members who desire positions of leadership exist, but their attempts to crack the elite only meet frustration. Thus we would expect to find nucleons clinging to their positions and cadres anxious to move up to higher positions. Our findings are mixed.

Eighty-three per cent of the Minnesota Republican nucleons would prefer a longer tenure than the present two-year term, and three-fourths of the cadre express a desire for a higher position. We also find that 81 per cent of the cadres also approve of the longer term, and a third of the nucleons say they wish to terminate their present party position.

In an attempt to examine career aspirations, all those who indicate that they do not want another term and also do not seek a higher position are grouped as "terminals," whereas those who intend either to remain in their position or to seek advancement are grouped as "careerists." An almost even split occurs, with 133 careerists and 131 terminals identified. This division squares with recent results in the Minnesota Republican Party. Reporting a "healthy" turnover in county chairmen, the party said:

"Fifty per cent turnover is considered to be an excellent ratio since it both provides the continuation of experienced leadership and adds the stimulus of new blood and new ideas." (Minnesota Republican State Central Committee).

This goal of fifty per cent turnover hardly supports Michels' theory. But is it merely rhetoric? Do significant differences remain between nucleons and cadres which would suggest an exclusive leadership at the top level? A comparison of careerists and terminals may provide an answer.

Only three demographic characteristics show a statistically significant difference between Minnesota Republican careerists and terminals: residence, occupation, and sex. Rural leaders are more likely to be terminals than metropolitan leaders, housewives are more likely to be terminals than managers, professionals, white or blue collar workers, and women are more likely to be terminals than men. The conclusion that rural housewives are more likely to consider their party positions temporary than do metropolitan men hardly challenges the imagination. Nor does it give much support to any oligarchic theory.

When the BID study contrasted the work approval ratings of those who said they were going to continue in party work with those who planned to quit, little variation occurred (Bowman, Ippolito and Donaldson). Our comparison of Minnesota Republican careerists' work approval with terminals' work approval shows that terminals mention personal satisfactions more often than careerists; careerists mention community influence more often than terminals do. However, the differences are not statistically significant. The BID study found few substantial differences in terms of work disapproval. Demand on time constituted a greater burden among careerists than among terminals. We do not find that to be the case in Minnesota. The Minnesota Republican careerists and terminals do not differ in work disapproval items. This is quite a contrast to the many differences in work disapproval observed between nucleons and cadres.

We share the BID observation that there is no evidence of a consistent pattern of differentiation between careerists and terminals in the political factors examined.

TABLE II. IMPORTANCE OF SOLIDARY, PURPOSIVE, MATERIAL INCENTIVES TO REPUBLICAN LEADERS IN SELECTED STATES (IN GRAND MEAN SCORES*)

Category of Incentive:	BID Study			Minnesota Study				
	N.C.	Mass.	Mean	Mean	Nucleons	Cadres	Careerists	Terminals
Purposive	1.17	1.21	1.18	1.14	1.16	1.12	1.15	1.12
Solidary	2.14	2.15	2.01	2.05	1.99	2.09	2.22	1.88
Material	3.15	3.39	3.12	3.55	3.56	3.54	3.47	3.63

* The higher the grand mean, the lower the incentive category in importance.

Incentives analyzed

In its comparison of careerists and terminals, the BID study found two cases in the battery of incentive items in which important variation was shown. These were the importance of personal friendship for a candidate and the importance of strong party loyalty. In both cases they were of greater importance to the careerists than to the terminals (Bowman, Ippolito and Donaldson). The only statistical significance we find is in the item covering fun and excitement of the campaign. The Minnesota Republican terminals are more likely to mention this item than are the careerists. Perhaps the terminals enter politics during a campaign and lose interest between elections when work turns to more mundane party tasks. If that is the case, we are curious why this is not reflected in responses to the work disapproval question. We would expect terminals to express a greater disapproval rating for party tasks than careerists if terminals are more likely than careerists to rate fun and excitement of a campaign as an important incentive. However, they inexplicably do not.

We then compare the incentive category grand mean scores of Minnesota careerists and terminals. As in the BID study, the relative ranking is as follows: purposive incentives most important, solidary incentives next most important, material incentives least important (Table II). We note a slight tendency for terminals to cite purposive and solidary incentives and a tendency for careerists to cite material incentives; but the difference hardly warrants a conclusion that material "pay-offs" keep Minnesota Republican leaders active.

Michels' theory implies that one moves up in the party hierarchy because one has won favor with those in the exclusive elite. If the decision not to remain active as a leader is due to lack of one's acceptance by the elite, we would expect the terminals more than the careerists to select "it's who you know that counts" as the most important reason for advancement. However, our study fails to show any tendency for terminals and careerists to differ in their assessment of reasons for advancement. Furthermore, the differences that we have observed between nucleons and cadres concerning ideology as an advancement reason disappear when we compare Minnesota terminals and careerists.

Differences not systematic

We reach the conclusion that, although variations exist between nucleons and cadres and between careerists and terminals, they do not constitute a systematic pattern that would give support to Robert Michel's theory of an

iron law of oligarchy. The fact that we do not find support for the theory does not mean that an iron law does not exist; the possibility that Michels' selection process is already at work when leaders rise to the middle levels of leadership makes any conclusion of that sort tenuous.

The differences observed among the Republican leaders in North Carolina, Massachusetts, and Minnesota suggest that the unique state political pattern within which a political party operates may have greater effect on intra-elite relationships than heretofore thought. If so, Dwaine Marvick is correct in his observation that research on intra-elite relationships is long overdue. Perhaps similar comparative studies of state party leadership will provide better generalizations than Michel's iron law of oligarchy.

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