

## Could the Methodologies Used to Discover Politically Significant Social Networks in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Alexandria and Newport Be Replicated in a US City Today?

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The discovery of politically meaningful social networks in Alexandria, Virginia and Newport, Kentucky in the mid nineteenth century harks back to the small cities projects in the early and mid-twentieth century that produced the classic studies of Middletown (Muncie), Indiana; Erie County, Ohio; and Elmira, New York.<sup>1</sup> Those research programs approached small cities and rural communities with sociological and anthropological tools and produced findings that emphasized social patterning and what we would call social networks. The understanding of political engagement that emerged from those works diverged from other findings being explored at the time portraying a rational voter evaluating competing policy positions and others in which electoral outcomes were understood as heavily influenced by the retrospective influence of historical patterning. The small city findings were different too from the psychologically-informed approach that accompanied the University of Michigan's later development, in the 1950s, of national election samples, a development that would ultimately displace the small city and county case study as the appropriate crucibles from which to understand American electoral behavior.

As is widely acknowledged, the current revival of interest in the political significance of social networks – the social logic of politics – owes much to those earlier works and their methodologies.

In terms of findings, the two historical projects converge with both the findings from Elmira, Erie, and Muncie and those emerging from the new focus on the social logic of politics.

But attempting to replicate in today's cities the data and methods used to study Alexandria in 1859 and Newport in 1873 would encounter difficulty. One key divergence is that the studies of Muncie, Erie, and Elmira arose from panel surveys backed by aggregate data while the Alexandria and Newport studies are based on whole populations considered individual data from archival records. The historical databases include all residents and all voters, not a sample of residents or a sample of voters. Each individual in the database is linked to information on that individual that survives in an array of social, economic and cultural inventories preserved in archival records. This information defines the social networks linking families, neighbors, occupations, and religious memberships. Building a similar universal database for US cities today would be difficult, both for the independent variables but especially for the dependent variable.

The following list explores replication of the historical studies' identification of networks created by families, neighbors, occupation, and religious memberships; it begins, however, with the most difficult fact to determine in the contemporary city: how individuals voted.

**Individual voting information for an entire city:** Poll books are the key to the historical project; they are the source of the individual political information. They differ fundamentally from political

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<sup>1</sup> Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown; a Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1929); Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in A Presidential Campaign* (New York: Duell Sloan, 1944); Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, William McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago, the University of Chicago Press, 1954).

records available today and from contemporary studies that rest on surveys of electoral behavior. Poll books were official records: they were public at the time and are public now. They provide a perfect record of how all individuals performed politically at a given election: who voted and who each voter supported for each office being filled in that election.

Attempting to construct this information today is far more difficult. Ballot image data exists for recent elections in several US cities that use transferrable voting systems but any effort to connect those ballot images to the social profiles of voters who cast those ballots is not possible and if attempted would violate the strictures of secret voting while generating profound privacy issues. Just so the publicly available information that details each voter's record of electoral participation does not reveal how that individual voted.

On the other hand, obtainable voter registration data, while not revealing the candidates (or issues) voters supported at the general election; reveals an individual's party registration in states with closed primaries. Probability estimates could be generated from this data which would allow profiles of likely voters, assuming that the vote in a party's primary leads to a vote for that party's candidates in the general election.

Still the link to individual social profiles remains deliberately elusive even in this circumstance. The sequentially inferential data that emerges might well compromise the development of a robust and compelling database of partisans. Even if this could be generated to a researcher's satisfaction, the pattern of office selection within a secret ballot would remain unknown. Likewise, while it is the case that an increasing number of individuals post their voting preferences in various forms of social media or on bumper stickers or yard signs, these public declarations are far different from a list of how voters, including these self-declared partisans, actually did vote.

How else could this information be secured? A complete survey of all voters leaving the polling stations is unlikely to be approved by election officials nor entered into by the public. A complete survey of a city's potential voters would be possible after the election but it is unlikely that voters would remember, or wish to divulge, the complete slate of candidates (and now referenda issues) they supported at the last municipal election.

These contemporary difficulties are in some contrast to the high quality, complete, and official voting data preserved in the nineteenth century poll books. This universal and linked individual level information in the historical studies allows the creation of profiles of voters according to the extent of party loyalty as delimited by cross party voting and abstention from voting for some offices or issues. Linking poll books between pairs of elections allows precise determination of consistency or change in each of the nine components of the inter-election matrix: drop-out and drop-in by party (4), non-voting (1), and partisan change or continuity (4). Deploying the social, cultural and economic information associated with all categories of voters (and non-voters) allows the creation of profiles of each of the now ten groups. Neither contemporary aggregate data nor ballot image data permit these electoral and sociological discoveries.

**Determining Household Composition (Family as a Social Network):** The 1860 and 1870 manuscript census returns list each member of the household and provide basic demographic information about them (including name, sex, age, place of birth, occupation) from which it is possible to infer family

relationships (explicitly stated in the 1880 census). Individual US census entries are closed for 72 years; the most recent census for which census individual entries are available is that taken in 1940.

Voter registration lists provide the names of eligible voters but not the names of others within a household, whether eligible to vote or not. It is not clear how a contemporary researcher could deduce household residents, and therefore family networks, other than by conducting a mini-census and visiting every household seeking that information. The cost of such an undertaking would be considerable while the extent and veracity of the information forthcoming is uncertain.

**Creating a Geographic Information System (Neighbors as a Social Network):** The maps of the two historical cities with individual place of residence were created from information in city tax records, using the books of tax collectors as they went house by house around each block in the city, augmented by city-prepared plat maps and the visitation order of the federal census collectors. Nineteenth century cities taxed personal as well as real property so there was an incentive to visit each and every household. Indeed, in an age before federal grants to cities, the city tax collector was far more likely to visit each household than was the federal census taker. Alexandria's tax regime was geared more toward personal estate, reflecting the limited extent of home ownership, while Newport, where home ownership was far more extensive, placed more of the tax burden on real estate.

The historical studies use two sources of individual wealth data from census and tax records: 1) the self-estimated valuations of total personal estate and real estate in the 1860 and 1870 census and 2) the very detailed annual tax assessments by city tax officials.

Wealth information would not be available to contemporary researchers; they would have available city records with tax assessments of each piece of property but whether a city government would release that database to researchers is problematic. Even then, these records will not reveal the occupants of the taxed properties. More generalized assessments of contemporary real estate valuation could be found, but again not readily connected to individual ownership.

Utility records probably would be viewed by most cities as private. City phone books, which began appearing in 1878, are a rapidly disappearing research tool; even in cities where phone books still exist, coverage is decreasing by ten percent a year as cell phones replace landlines. In any event, utility records and phone books also fail to provide a sure link to who else lives in the household of the payer of the city tax or the phone or utility bills. City directories, which do create a link between a piece of property and a resident in that property are, like phone books, fast disappearing social inventories.

All of these developments and limitations greatly increase the burden of mapping a town's population. Google maps are useful for individuals, rather than whole populations but also fail to provide a link to household residents.

**Determining Occupation (Occupation as a Social Network):** The historical studies derive occupations from the 1860 and 1870 manuscript federal census returns augmented by city directories. These records detail hundreds of specific occupations.

The situation for the contemporary researcher seeking individual occupational information for the population of an entire city is far less sanguine. As noted, however, census information is not

available post 1940 and city directories are another dwindling social inventory. Yellow Pages, also declining, provide at best a partial list, principally of professional employment and skilled craftsmen and women.

The surest source of comprehensive occupational information is again a mini-census with the issues associated with conducting such an intrusive enterprise.

**Determining Private Networks (Religious Membership as a Social Network)** Individual level religious membership information in the historical studies arises from the archival records of the religious institutions, including member lists, baptisms, marriages, and deaths which have been deposited in public archives or which the institutions were willing to make available as historical documents.

Religious institutions might well take quite a different stance in terms of making such information available on their current members. Individuals in a survey might well be willing to detail their religious affiliation and whether they were committed to that affiliation through a religious membership, but this returns us to the expense of probabilistic veracity and completeness of the contemporary researcher conducting and funding a min-census of a city.

**Conclusion:** Replicating the historical studies' detailed and verified individual level political information for all actual and potential voters could not be replicated in a contemporary setting. The surest way of replicating the historical studies' information on family, occupation, location, and religious membership would be to conduct a door-to-door city-wide mini-census. Aside from conducting such a house to house survey, ascertaining the occupants of all households, or even households with potential voters would be difficult for the contemporary as would be the discovery of the occupations of those residents. Information on religious memberships might well be viewed as private and not to be released.