

Perceptions of Local Leadership: Results from a Pilot Study

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Abstract

In the mid-twentieth century, political researchers took active interest in the question of who, in a community, is influential. In those studies, most ordinary Americans could identify a person who they thought had influence. Respondents generally identified local business leaders as having most influence. In subsequent decades, research on this question dried up. We resurrect the question. As expected, in 2020 the vast majority of respondents cannot think of a person in their community who has most influence. Respondents who have stronger community ties are more likely to identify an influential person than respondents with weaker ties, but even those deeply embedded in their communities tend not to identify anyone at all as influential. Those who do identify someone as influential rarely choose a businessperson. Our study contributes to multiple active research areas, including the study of local politics, social and political party networks, and business and politics. Our pilot study is meant to reintroduce the topic of community power and influence to more political scientists and spur further research.

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1. Introduction

Who is the most influential person in your community? This is a question that interested social scientists in the post-World War II era, but largely faded as a scholarly topic in the subsequent decades. In the 1950s, studies showed that about two-thirds of ordinary citizens could identify the name of an individual who they thought was most influential in their community. The name that they came up with tended to be a local business leader (Agger 1956; Fanelli 1956). In this paper, we resurrect this research question to examine contemporary responses.

For three reasons, we expect to find very different results today than in the 1950s. First, the dramatic decline in social capital from the generation of post-war “joiners,” well-documented in work such as Putnam (2000), would suggest that fewer ordinary people today are able to identify any local influencer at all. Second, when it comes to politics, ordinary citizens who are cognitively engaged in politics are increasingly only attentive to the national level (Hopkins 2018; Moskowitz 2021; Hersh, 2020). Third, several features about modern business suggest that survey respondents today, if they can name a local influencer at all, would not choose a local business leader. The nationalization and internationalization of corporations means there are fewer powerful business leaders in long-term positions in a community who are heading up civic and political endeavors (Heying 1995; Hanson et. al 2010).

Several trends in political science make the study of local leadership worthy of resurrection. In the last few years, there has been a surge of research focused on state and local politics (see Anzia 2020; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; Palus 2010; Sances 2021; Warshaw 2019; Schaffner, Rhodes, and La Raja 2020; Hajnal 2009; Anzia 2014). This research is important, given that the structure of American political institutions invests tremendous power to local governments but for decades was somewhat ignored by political science. Our collective

understanding of local politics is still underdeveloped: Who is in charge in local politics? What are the main ideological cleavages? How do laws get changed? These questions seem basic, but scholars are continuing to shed new light on seemingly simple questions about local politics in the United States.

In a separate research area, political science has long been interested in social networks and political party networks, as these networks shape political discussion, vote choice, candidate recruitment, and more (Broockman and Skovron 2018, Broockman et al. 2019; Cohen et al. 2008; Skovron 2018; Huckfeldt, 2001; Huckfeldt, Plutzer, and Sprague 1993; Tam Cho et. al 2006; Kenny 1998; Beck 2002).¹ The importance of local leadership is not really in question. But we are aware of no scholarship in decades that has asked ordinary citizens their view on who is influential in their own communities.

What are the stakes of citizens knowing who is influential in their community? In an era in which voter turnout at the local level is very low, sometimes as low as 10% of eligible citizens, we suspect that few Americans know who to take their cues from when it comes to local elections. If a citizen cannot name a person who they think is influential in their community, this might indicate a more general lack of information about the structure of local politics. Understanding perceptions of local leadership may help civic leaders consider how better to inform and influence the public. As a research question, the relative balance of industries and roles of local influentials sheds light on the flow of power in American politics. When individuals are asked to name the most influential person in their community, the balance of names coming from business, politics, religion,

¹ On opinions and attitudes, see also MacKuen and Brown (1987); Lazer et al. (2010); Weatherford (1982). On political participation, see also Leighley (1990); Mutz (2002); Kenny (1992); Brians (1997); Highton (2000); Abrams, Iversen, and Soskice (2011).

nonprofits, and other fields teaches us about where the public believes power rests in their own communities.

Through an original survey fielded in 2020, we ask a random sample of U.S. adults who they perceive to be most influential in their communities. Only 22% of respondents can identify a name of someone as the most influential person in their community. This is a stark contrast to the more than two-thirds of Americans who could do so in the mid-twentieth century. Overall, there is a positive relationship between respondents' ties to their community and their ability to identify someone as the most influential person in their community. However, only 30% of those with the strongest ties to their community identified a local leader. Leaders who are identified as community influentials today differ significantly from those identified in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s, respondents identified business owners as the most influential people in a community. In contrast, the majority of those selected as community influentials today are government officials. Fewer than 1 in 10 named are business leaders.

2. Community Leadership in the 1950s

In the mid-twentieth century, the study of community power developed into a popular field of research (see Dakin 1962). This research started in the 1930s, when Helen and Robert Lynd published *Middletown in Transition* on the power structure of Muncie, Indiana, but Hunter's (1953) *Community Power Structure* brought the field front and center, leading to research on various aspects of local power (Bonjean and Olson 1964; Clelland and Form 1964; Polsby 1959; Salisbury 1964; Rossi 1960; Clark 1967; Wolfinger 1960; Herson 1961; Kadushin 1968; Miller 1963). During this period, social scientists sought to identify who the most influential people in a

community were. To do so, they mostly relied on the opinions of elites (see Schulze and Blumberg 1957).

However, several scholars asked community residents about their perceptions of community influence. Robert Agger (1956) surveyed a small, unnamed town with an adult population of 2,000. After taking a random sample of 260 adult residents and collecting basic sociopolitical and economic data, Agger asked them who they thought were “generally most influential in the community (323).” He found that 67% of respondents were able to identify someone as the most influential person in their community. Similarly, Alexander Fanelli (1956) conducted extensive interviews with a random sample of 304 white adults in an unnamed Mississippi town with 5,000 residents. He asked respondents, “who would you say are the five people in Bakerville whose opinions on community affairs you respect most?”² Here, too, most respondents could identify names of people they thought were the most influential people, as only 12% of respondents failed to identify anyone.

That such a large percentage of citizens in the 1950s could identify someone as the most influential person in their community is (at least in part) a function of the high level of civic and community engagement during this period. Mid-century, American life was characterized by high levels of civic engagement and social capital (Putnam 2000; Skocpol, Cobb, and Klotz 2005). Citizens attended local political meetings, were members of volunteer associations, and were generally involved in their communities. Because citizens were deeply engaged in their communities, it is perhaps unsurprising they were able to identify someone in their community who has influence. Indeed, Agger (1956), using Foskett’s (1955) general community participation scale, found that social ties and community involvement are positively associated with a

² Bakerville is a fictional name used to ensure the community and its resident remained anonymous.

respondent's ability to identify a community influential. Since then, however, social capital and community involvement have declined precipitously.

A long line of social science research has found that those with strong social ties are more likely to engage in various acts of civic and political participation (see Campbell 2013 for an extensive review), whereas those who are more socially isolated participate less (Reilly 2017). One's length of residence in their community, for example, is positively associated with general civic participation and membership in voluntary associations (Kang and Kwak 2003; Lim 2008). We hypothesize that today far fewer Americans will identify a person who is influential in their community, but, like in the 1950s, respondents' social ties will be positively associated with the likelihood that they identify someone as the most influential person in their community.

3. Business Leaders in Community Structure

Nearly 75 years ago, business leaders were viewed as the most influential people in a community. In Bakerville, Mississippi, 52% of those chosen as the most influential people were local businessmen (Fanelli 1956).³ Likewise, the residents of 'Valley City' identified a wealthy automobile dealer and property owner (who was also a state lawmaker) as the senior community leader (Agger and Goldrich 1958).⁴ Related research found people turned to business professionals for community leadership (Agger and Ostrom 1956).

That citizens identified business leaders as the most influential people in their community is hardly surprising considering the importance business leaders played in community affairs during the mid-twentieth century. During this period, CEOs and CEO-led organizations

³ Specifically, 52% of the top 25 people chosen were businessmen. Fanelli elected to focus on the top 25 since they received the clear majority of nominations.

⁴ Valley City is a fictional name used to ensure the community and its resident remained anonymous.

“occup[ied] legendary status as powerbrokers and agenda setters in their communities (Hanson et al. 2010, 2).” Business leaders were stable fixtures of their communities. Compared to today, they had more autonomy from stakeholders, such as shareholders, and could act in a “statesmanlike manner” (Mizruchi and Marshall 2016, 146).

In the last quarter of the 20th century, the United States economy experienced a major restructuring. Two components of this restructuring – the globalization of firms and globalization of ownership – completely reshaped communities across the country (Paarlberg and Yoshioka 2015). This restructuring drastically reduced the involvement of local business leaders in their community. As part of these restructurings, local companies were bought and were transformed into branches of multinational corporations, and their leadership ranks were composed of managers tied to the company, not the community (Hanson et al. 2010). The replacement of the hometown business leaders is most visible in Charles Heying’s analysis (1995; see also Heying 1997). Consider that in 1961, 71% of the top 70 elites in Atlanta were born in Georgia, including 38% who were from Atlanta. Just 30 years later, only 49% of the elites were born in Georgia, and less than one-third were born in Atlanta.

As a result of these economic changes, business leaders are today less engaged in their community. Non-native CEOs lack long-standing ties to their community and are incentivized to rise through the ranks of firms, moving cities throughout their careers. Business leaders travel more and report having less time to focus on community affairs. As a result, there are fewer civically engaged business leaders than there were previously (Hanson et al. 2006). Thus, we hypothesize that those respondents who are able to identify key local leaders today are more likely to identify individuals in politics and government rather than in business. This hypothesis is consistent with 1950s era work by Belknap and Smuckler (1956), who found that those less

involved in their community are more likely to identify formal leaders (i.e., government officials) as community influentials.

4. Data and Methods

The data in this study came from a 1,000-respondent module of the Congressional Election Study (CES), fielded by YouGov. The first dependent variable is whether or not a respondent can identify the most influential person in their community. Prior research has asked questions with specific towns or places named. For instance, Fanelli (1956) asked, “*Who would you say are the five people in Bakerville whose opinions on community affairs you respect most?*”

Here, we asked, “*Thinking about the COMMUNITY where you live, who would you say is the most influential person in your community?*” Respondents were provided with a textbox where they could enter the first and last name of the most influential person in their community. They were also given the option of selecting a checkbox that said, “I can’t think of anyone.” Respondents might have interpreted community to mean a city, a county, a religious community, a neighborhood, etc. We intentionally did not define community for them. We did so in part because survey respondents live in very different places from one another, some in rural counties, some in densely populated city neighborhoods. We also did so because we were agnostic to how respondents conceived of their community.

We created a binary variable for whether or not a respondent identified someone. Those who entered the name of the most influential person are coded as 1, and those who selected “I can’t think of anyone” were coded as 0. We then went through the names of those identified as

community influentials to remove any “fake” answers. Five respondents entered “fake” names, and we coded them as 0.⁵

The second dependent variable is the primary role of the most influential person. After entering the name of the most influential person, respondents were asked “*What is this person’s primary role in your community?*” Respondents were provided with a multiple-choice list and were instructed to select the person’s role. The options were religious leader, elected office, political leader, business owner, civic volunteer, personal friend, media influencer, athlete, and other.

When designing the answer choices, we anticipated that respondents would select “elected office” when identifying a local elected official and “political figure” for someone like the chair of a local political party. However, based on a review of all the individuals whom respondents identified as leaders, we reclassified the “political” and “elected” categories. Many of the political/elected leaders cited were actually state-level or national level figures. We classified federal office holders as well as governors as political figures. We classified state legislators, mayors, county executives, and other lower government or political office-holders as “local officials.” Ultimately, there are ten roles: local official, political figure, business owner, personal friend, civic volunteer, religious leader, media figure, athlete, university president, and other.

In addition to standard demographic correlates (party, race, age, gender, urbanicity), we measure respondents’ ties to their community using variables associated with social connectedness (see Timpone 1998). Specifically, we construct binary variables for marital status (1= married or in civic/domestic relationship, 0 for all others), church attendance (1=at least once a week, 0=less than weekly), homeownership (1=homeowner, 0=not homeowner), union membership (1=current or former member of a union, 0=never a member of a union), education (1=four-year college

⁵ Their answers were “No One,” “Donald Duck,” “Government Local,” “No One,” and “Mqrtl Sfg.”

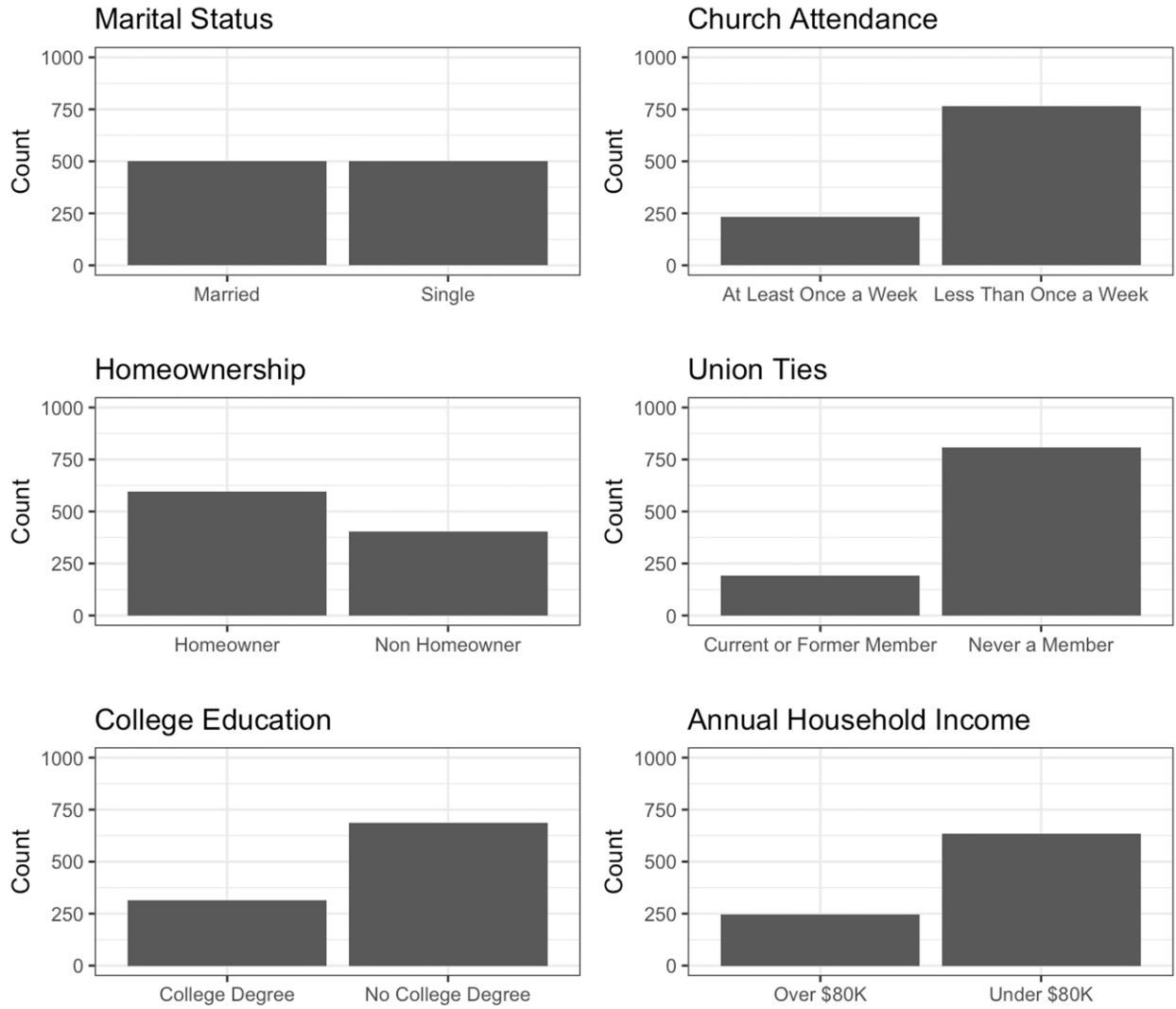
degree, 0=no college degree), and income (1= more than \$80,000, 0=less than \$80,000).⁶ The distributions of these six variables are shown in Figure 1.⁷

We aggregate the six dichotomous variables associated with social connectedness and create a 'social ties score' by simply adding the values assigned by the binary variables for marital status, church attendance, homeownership, group membership, education, and income. The social ties score therefore has a maximum of 6 and a minimum of 0. A trivial number of respondents have a social ties score of 6, so we combine those who score 5 or 6. Of the 878 respondents assigned a social ties score, 15% have a score of 0, 20% have a score of 1, 25% have a score of 2, 21% have a score of 3, 15% have a score of 4 and, and 5% have a score of 5.

⁶ Timpone (1998) identified overall group membership as positively associated with social connectedness. Though the CES does not include questions on civic associational memberships, it does ask about whether a respondent is a current or former member of a labor union. Union membership has positive effects on membership in other civic and voluntary associations (Kerrissey and Schofer 2013), and so we use union membership as a proxy for overall group membership.

⁷ Approximately 100 respondents did not answer when asked about their annual household income. They are excluded from this portion of the analysis.

Figure 1: Distribution of Variables Included in Social Ties Score



5. Results

5.1 Few People Identify the Most Influential Person in Their Community

As reported in Table 1, only 22% of respondents could identify someone as the most influential person in their community. This is a stark contrast to the mid-twentieth century, when more than 65% of respondents could identify a community influential. Notably, few social and political characteristics are associated with a significant increase in a respondent's likelihood of identifying a community influential.

Democrats and Republicans are significantly more likely to identify a leader than independents ($p < .05$). Men are four percentage points more likely to identify a community influential than women, but the difference is not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p = .11$). Surprisingly, though older residents tend to be more involved in local government and are more likely to volunteer (Einstein, Palmer, and Glick 2018; Rotolo, Wilson, and Hughes 2010), they are less likely to report knowing a local leader here. Respondents who live in cities and towns are significantly more likely than respondents in suburbs and rural areas to identify a name. All these differences, we emphasize, are small. In no subpopulation do even 35% of respondents identify a name of someone who is most influential in their community.

Table 1: Few People Can Identify the Most Influential Person in Their Community

Social/Political Characteristic	Identified Most Influential Person		Social/Political Characteristic	Identified Most Influential Person	
	%	<i>N</i>		%	<i>N</i>
Overall	22%	1,000	Area of Residency		
Party			City	28%	257
Republican	22%	443	Suburb	20%	385
Democrat	25%	383	Town	25%	142
Other	13%	174	Rural Area	14%	207
Gender			Annual Household Income		
Male	24%	486	\$40,000 or less	18%	348
Female	20%	514	\$40,000 to \$79,999	20%	285
Education			\$80,000 or more	33%	247
4-year college	28%	314	Marital Status		
No college	19%	686	Married/Partnership	25%	499
Race			Single	19%	501
White	23%	682	Church Attendance		
Black	18%	121	At least once a week	26%	234
Hispanic	22%	128	Less than once a week	20%	766
Other	16%	69	Union Ties		
Age			Current/former member	27%	191
Under 40	23%	363	Never a member	21%	809
40-59	24%	313	Homeownership		
60+	18%	324	Homeowner	23%	597
			Rent/Other	19%	403

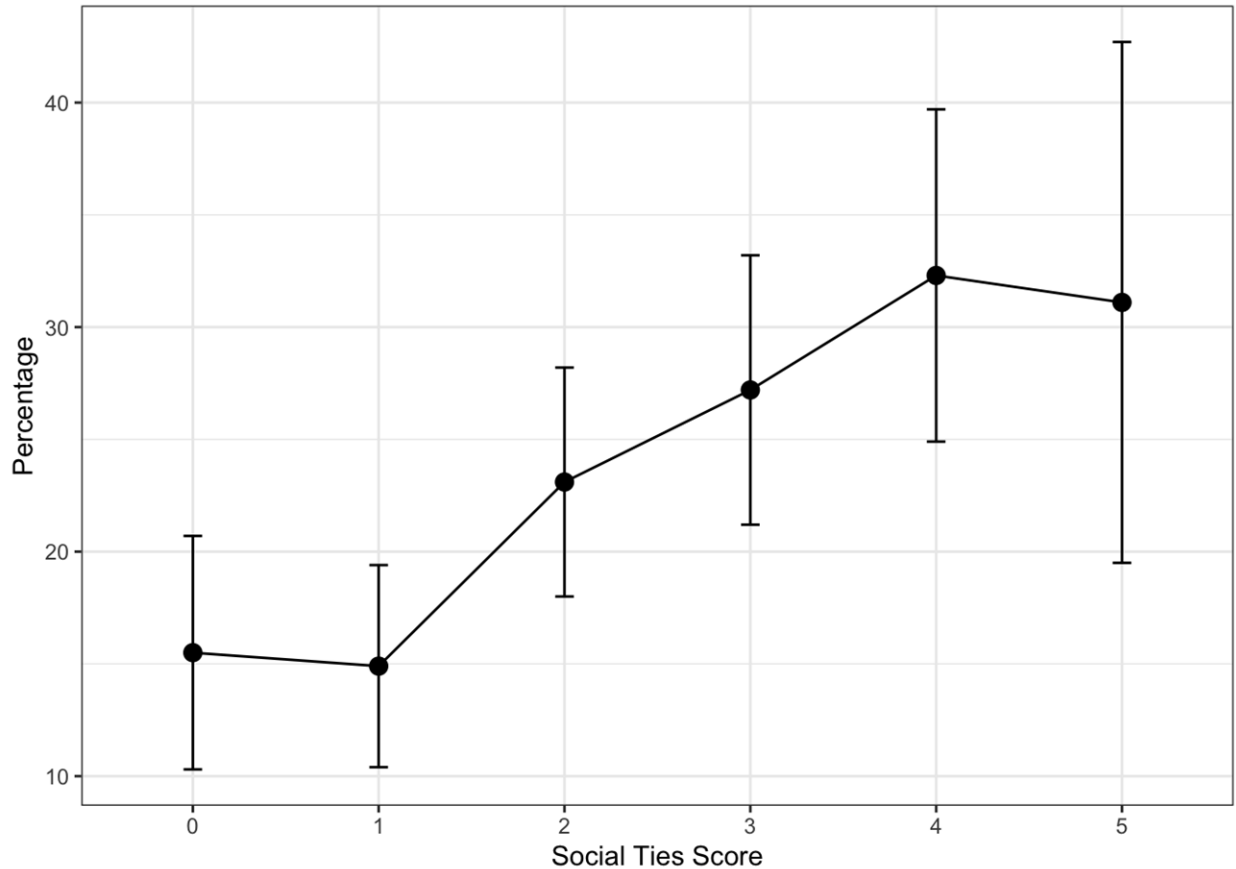
Note: Nested figures may not add to subtotals because of rounding. The “Type of Community” variable excludes eight respondents who selected “Other” when asked where they live. The “Annual Household Income” variable excludes approximately 100 respondents who did not report their annual household income.

5.2 Social Ties and Ability to Identify a Community Influential

Next, we examine the relationship between the individual measures of social ties and the likelihood a respondent identified a community influential. Of the six variables included in the social ties score, only three have a statistically significant relationship with a respondent's answer choice. Nearly 30% of respondents with a four-year college degree identified someone as the most influential person in their community, compared to less than 20% of respondents without a four-year college degree ($p < .01$). Relatedly, 33% of those with an annual household income of more than \$80,000 identified a community influential, compared to 20% of those with an annual household income between \$40,000 and \$79,999 ($p < .01$) and 18% of those with an annual household income of less than \$40,000. Additionally, respondents who are married or in a civic/domestic partnership are six percentage points more likely to identify a community influential than single respondents ($p < .05$). Homeownership ($p = .14$), union ties ($p = .06$), and church attendance ($p = .09$) are only slightly correlated with the dependent variable here.

In Figure 3, we display the percentage of respondents who identified the most influential person in their community, by their social ties score. Few people with a low social ties score identified a community influential. Only 15.5% of respondents with a social ties score of 0 and 14.9% of respondents with a social ties score of 1 identified one. Even among those with the highest social ties score, less than one-third of respondents identified someone; 32.3% and 31% of those with a social ties score of 4 and 5, respectively, identified someone.

Figure 2: Positive Relationship Between Social Ties Score and Percentage of Respondents Who Identified a Community Influential



Note: Means with 95% confidence intervals are shown.

5.3 Most Local Leaders Are Government Officials

What kind of person did respondents believe was most influential in their community? The results are in Table 2. Nearly two-thirds are government officials: 40% of the community influentials are local officials like a mayor, and 22% are political figures, such as a federal office holder. This is a stark contrast to the mid-twentieth century, when elected officials constituted only 28% of the community influentials (Fanelli 1956). Moreover, only 9% of community influentials today are business leaders, most of whom are local people. Though some respondents nominated “national” business leaders, they nominated such leaders when the businesses are located in their

areas. A Nebraska resident, for example, selected Warren Buffet, the CEO of Omaha-based Berkshire Hathaway. Similarly, a Georgia resident selected Bernie Marcus, the founder of Home Depot (based in Atlanta), and a respondent in Washington chose Jeff Bezos, the Seattle-based CEO of Amazon.

Additionally, only 3% of the community influentials are religious leaders. This is consistent with the decline in church membership and prior research that found few people turn to religious leaders for advice, even on major life decisions.⁸ Nearly 10% of the community influentials did not fit neatly into one of the nine categories. Those coded as “Other” include, but are not limited to, police officers, a college football coach, and the executive director of a retirement community. Also coded as “Other” are those respondents identified as holding public office who we were unable to identify through a web search.

⁸ Pew Research Center, “Religion in Everyday Life,” 2016.

Table 2: Roles of the Community Influentials

Role	Percentage	N
Local Official	40%	87
Political Figure	22%	47
Business Owner	9%	20
Personal Friend	6%	12
Civic Volunteer	5%	11
Religious Leader	3%	7
Media Figure	2%	4
Athlete	2%	4
University President	1%	3
Other	10%	22

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 and nested figures may not add to subtotals because of rounding.

In Table 3, we take a more detailed look at the office holders who were named. The plurality (48%) of local officials are mayors, and an additional 11% are members of the city council (including presidents or chairs of the council). Ten percent are state legislators – four state representatives and five state senators – and an additional 10% are police chiefs or sheriffs. Nine percent of local officials are county executives, which includes those whose formal title includes county commissioner, county executive, or county superior. The “Other” category includes all offices that were only selected once. This includes, but is not limited to, a member of a school board, a county judge, a district attorney, a town clerk, and the president of an American Indian territory.

Also reported in Table 3 are the formal positions of the higher-office political figures respondents chose as the most influential person in their community. More than 40% of the political figures are current Governors, and 38% are members of Congress (11 Representatives and 6 Senators). The “Other” category includes a gubernatorial candidate, a Congressional candidate, and a Lieutenant Governor. Notably, no respondent chose Joe Biden, who was the president-elect when the survey was fielded. Conversely, five respondents selected Donald Trump.

Table 3: Formal Positions of Local Officials and Political Figures

Role	Percentage	N
Local Official	100%	87
Mayor	47%	41
City Councilperson	13%	11
State Legislator	10%	9
Police Chief/Sherriff	10%	9
County Executive	9%	8
Other	10%	9
Political Figure	100%	47
Governor	43%	20
Member of Congress	38%	18
Donald Trump	11%	5
Other	6%	3

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 and nested figures may not add to subtotals because of rounding.

6. Conclusion

At a national level, there has been a proliferation of scholarship on which leaders have influence behind the scenes. Prominent research has studied the power of unelected insiders in the presidential nominating process (Cohen et al. 2008) and the role of a “Trumanite network” in US national security policy (Glennon 2014). Similarly, subnational scholarship has included examinations of state and local party machines (Masket 2009) and the power of interest groups in city politics (Cooper, Nownes, and Roberts 2005). However, this strand of scholarship has yet to examine who citizens of a community view as influential locally. This is notable, given the influence community influential likely have on citizens’ behavior.

Seventy years ago, when citizens were involved in their communities, the majority of people could identify the most influential people in their community. Yet in the fall of 2020, few could think of someone. The majority of respondents – no matter their race, gender, income, or partisan affiliation – failed to identify someone. Though one’s social ties score is positively associated with the likelihood a respondent identified a community influential, only 30% of those with the strongest social ties could think of the most influential person in their community.

Equally as revealing are those chosen as community influentials. More than 20% of those selected as community influentials are a member of Congress, a Governor, or Donald Trump. These responses are consistent with scholarship on the nationalization of politics (Hopkins 2018). Either these respondents have a very expansive sense of the term ‘community’ or they feel that state-level or national-level politicians exert more influence locally than any leader tied specifically to their area.

One of the biggest changes from when this question of community leader was asked in the past is that few people think of business leaders as influential in their community. This result

could stem from the decline in actual power of business leaders as the economy has shifted over the years or from a lack of awareness of the power that local business leaders still have today. Certainly, the decline in local media make it harder for respondents to know about local powerbrokers (Peterson 2021; Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido 2012). It is quite plausible that because of the decline in local media coverage, citizens are unaware of the power and influence of business leaders. In Germany, for example, Bischoff and Krabel (2017) find that locally dominant firms – even if they are not large or well-known – leverage their economic power to lower local business tax rates. Local business leaders in the United States may similarly influence local government behind the scenes, in part because there is scant local political coverage that could expose them.

One opportunity for future research is to survey business leaders on their perceptions of who wields power in their community. In the mid-twentieth century, elite surveys found that business leaders often identified other business leaders as influential (e.g., Smith 1960; Miller 1958; Form and Sauer 1963; Schulze and Blumberg 1957).⁹ If business leaders are truly no longer influential, then we expect few business leaders will nominate their peers. Alternatively, if they are still influential, but only behind the scenes, then surveying business leaders is one of the few ways to capture this influence.

This pilot study incorporated one of several possible approaches to the research question of perceived community leadership. As described above, we did not define a unit of geography or a sociological group for the respondents. Instead, we asked them about their community, leaving it to them to define what that meant. We suspect that if we had provided a geography, like a city, town, or county, respondents would have been even more likely to identify an elected

⁹ One limitation of these surveys is that they focused exclusively on white business leaders. However, Barth and Abu-Laban (1959) survey Black business leaders and come to a similar conclusion.

official (like a mayor) rather than a business or religious leader, since we would have primed a political boundary.

It is possible that leaving it to the respondent to define the terms of their community, combined with the web-based survey approach used by the CES, might have encouraged more people to answer “I can’t think of anyone” than if we asked the question more specifically or if we utilized a different survey mode. In addition to future research on the substantive topic of local leadership, we hope this pilot study encourages future studies to explore variations in methodology and build on this work.

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