EMERGENT CITIZEN GROUPS IN DISASTERS
AND THEIR POLITICAL ACTIVITY:
A LOOK AT NATURAL HAZARD SITUATIONS*

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Introduction

This paper explores the dynamics of emergent citizen groups, or ECGs as we shall call them, in potential or actual disaster situations in which the political process is used. Field data are drawn from a nationwide study of emergent citizen groups (of ECGs) in disasters. We describe the process of citizen response to actual or potential natural hazard situations as well as how the role of ECGs may affect political decisions.

Organizational response to disaster and the impact of disaster upon the familial, religious, and economic spheres has been fairly well studied in most cases by social scientists. However, emergent citizen response to a disaster situation and the political aspects of disaster are neglected areas of research (Quarantelli and Dynes, 1977:31, 42; Brown and Goldwin, 1973:91). Taylor (1978:262) suggests:

...some study ought to be made of those protest groups which form at times after disasters. Some enter the political arena, but others do not. Which groups do, what they attempt to do, and what impact, if any, they have on political figures and events should be studied.

Not only do we attempt to respond to these topics suggested by Taylor, but we will also look at pre-disaster ECGs and their political activity. These activities include attending city council meetings, lobbying, and supporting candidates for election. The means by which ECGs attempt to accomplish these activities and their interaction with governmental agencies are also discussed.

An Overview of the Literature

Political participation generally is characterized as involving either conventional or unconventional means. Conventional means primarily include voting (Verba and Nie, 1972), but there are other perceived legitimate activities such as working in a candidate's campaign. Unconventional participation pertains to such activities as protests, social movements, and revolutions.
(Kourvetaris and Dobratz, 1982:303-304). Our analysis of ECGs in actual or potential disaster falls under the rubric of "unconventional participation." This categorization may seem odd since many, if not most, ECG members believe they are practicing their democratic rights in forming a group to rectify a conflict situation. Over the last decade, there has been a trend toward grassroots movements in the political process (e.g., Linowes and Allenworth, 1973; Jonassen, 1974; Boyte, 1980; Henig, 1982; Rich, 1982). Thus, we find that the nomenclature of "conventional" participation carries a conceptual if not ideologically biased. Granted, ECGs are not involved in revolution, but they are often part of a local, regional, or national social movement.

The role of ECGs in actual or potential disaster is a topic only recently touched upon by researchers. The focus of this research pertains to pre- and post-disaster group emergence in a natural hazard setting. Only a few studies exist of this nature (e.g., Forrest, 1974; Taylor, 1976; Nigg, 1979; Wolensky, 1983). Quarantelli (1966) and Dynes (1970) developed the underlying approach used in this study. They contend that a disaster situation creates conditions of unmet needs in the social system. In turn, various organizations attempt to fill the unmet needs, but often they cannot. Therefore, emergent groups form to fulfill the various needs. In this particular study of ECGs in disaster, we see two particular conditions leading to group emergence. They are: 1) no other agency, group, or ECG is responding to an actual or potential disaster situation, and 2) actual ECG members perceive that these groups or organizations should be responding to the situation. The focus of this paper is the political context in which ECGs in disaster operate, not the process of emergent group formation (see Neal, 1983, for a discussion on this topic).

ECGs attempt to create social change in a community by using formal and informal political channels. So not only do ECGs fulfill a function of dealing
with a potential or actual situation, they also bridge a political gap that exists in a community. Thus, these groups can also be considered social movement organizations (Zald and Ash, 1966; McCarthy and Zald, 1973, 1977). We recognize that one characteristic of a local social movement organization is that it is associated with a broader or national social movement (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). There are no national social movements, however, around the issues of tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, landslides, and hurricanes with which the ECG can become associated. This is not the case with ECGs that are involved in technological or environmental hazards such as toxic wastes, or severe air and water pollution. Despite the fact that there are no national movements organized around natural hazards, we feel that the social movement organization perspective has a great deal of analytic value. We therefore treat local ECGs as local social movement organizations.

The research tradition of political dimensions of disaster is limited. We are aware of no study focusing directly on the political role of ECGs in disaster. One earlier piece of research looked at the effects of a hurricane on a local election (Abney and Hill, 1966). Another set of studies looked at governmental responses to brushfires and politics involved between various agencies in Australia (see Wettenhall, 1981, for a summary). More recently, the policy and political implications of American disasters have been explored (Wright and Rossi, 1981:45-81; Rossi, Wright, and Weber-Burdin, 1982). However, few, if any, substantive ideas for our research can be drawn from these studies.

Another view on the political dimension of disaster has been espoused by Brown and Goldin (1973:Chapters 3-6). One of their basic assumptions is that disaster is defined in a political context. Furthermore, they assume that disaster itself is a political event. It has been observed, however, that disaster researchers have not utilized Brown and Goldin's approach (Quarantelli and

Clearly, there are only limited findings related to the political discussion of disasters. A dearth of information also exists on the role of ECGs, in pre- or post-natural disaster situations. This paper will bridge some gaps in both of these areas.

The ECG's Project

The data used in this study are from a broader study of ECGs in disaster. Pre- and post-disaster groups were selected from sites throughout the United States. Actual or potential disaster threats the ECGs are involved in include earthquake, floods, hurricanes, mudslides, and landslides. In this analysis, the data from 16 ECGs are used. Specific names of places, groups, and individuals are not given in order to protect the confidentiality of respondents.

Over 200 open-ended interviews were conducted to gather data pertaining to this paper. Some of those interviewed had knowledge of more than one ECG situation. In addition to the interviews, a plethora of documents was analyzed including newspaper articles, correspondence between ECG members and various organizations, internal organizational memos, private notes and memos, newsletters, community data, and videotapes. Direct observations made at field sites were also utilized.

ECGs are conceptualized as groups recently formed by private citizens concerned about a particular disaster issue. Activities by members associated with formal organizations or well-established social movements are excluded from our study. Only local ECGs are studied. Groups whose existence is based upon other regional, state, or national level organizations are not included. Only those ECGs that are formed before or after a natural disaster are included in this study; emergent time period groups are not included.
Discussion

Initial contacts

All of the natural hazard ECCs in our study entered the political arena. Hence, the important questions to ask are: 1) How soon do the groups become involved in the political scene? and 2) What tactics do the groups use once they are involved? One condition that influences how soon ECCs enter the political arena is whether they are in a pre- or post-disaster situation. Generally, we find post-disaster ECCs become involved more rapidly than pre-disaster ECCs.

A number of factors account for this pattern. A disaster impact creates an immediate problem of recovery. So post-disaster ECCs mobilize rapidly and soon afterwards begin contacting appropriate offices to aid the recovery process. On the other hand, the potential of a disaster occurring does not have as high a degree of urgency. Potential victims have a difficult time visualizing a disaster impact. Thus, the mobilization process is slower. Contacts with appropriate agencies and offices are done in a less urgent manner. Consequently, these organizations are also more likely to respond in a leisurely manner since they too perceive little urgency.

We issue a caveat, however, in regards to differentiating between pre- and post-disaster ECCs. There are cases (especially with floods and mudslides) where distinctions of "pre" and "post" disaster become blurred. For example, ECC may be involved in recovering from a flood, and simultaneously be contacting officials to buy group members' property before the next flood.

In addition, members of a pre-disaster ECG enter the political arena more slowly because they do not anticipate their involvement in a political situation. The initial goals of ECCs include mitigation of the hazard, establishment of a warning system, development of a post-disaster recovery plan, and are not perceived as being political in nature. Additionally, having appropriate
authorities recognize a potential hazard is not considered a political activity. Conversely, the disaster impact forces post-disaster ECGs to immediately interact in the political scene. In fact, many ECG members are surprised at how political disaster recovery becomes.

Except for the pattern discussed above, pre- and post-disaster ECGs follow a similar career of contacts and consequences. A potential initial contact for all natural hazard ECGs is the local Civil Defense office. ECGs derive two benefits from contacting the local Civil Defense office or similar organizations. First, ECG members begin to learn how to represent their group and interact with another organization. Secondly, the ECG receives a form of legitimacy through the interaction with the local office. This legitimacy aids the ECG in two ways. When the ECG approaches other organizations for further assistance, the group members can mention that they are working with or were sent by the Civil Defense office. Also, directly or indirectly the Civil Defense agency gives the ECG entree into the mayor's or other important officials' offices. These contacts can potentially aid the group's networking with other key political individuals, sectors, or organizations in the area. Thus, through these types of contacts the ECG members become socialized in the political workings of the community. They also learn that if any of their goals are to be accomplished, they must know how to operate within the local political setting. Yet, in over half of our cases, the local Civil Defense office was not contacted by an ECG. This is a strategic error.

Because the goals ECGs seek and the means the Civil Defense agencies are able or willing to offer, initial relationships between the two are sometimes strained. The ECGs perceive that Civil Defense has enormous resources including time, equipment, money, and people. In contrast, local Civil Defense directors note that their philosophy is different than the ECGs' perceptions. Civil Defens
directors indicate their approach in aiding people is, to paraphrase, "We teach people to help themselves." In addition, local Civil Defense offices do not have the time, equipment, money, and people that EGG members perceive these agencies have. Hence, tension, if not conflict, is generated between these groups during initial meetings. The overall problems, however, are usually worked out over time.

In some cases (e.g., flooding, tornado) the local Civil Defense office was not involved with the EGG, or even the disaster itself. Furthermore, we found varying degrees of effectiveness of Civil Defense operations. These two characteristics are not related to each other. Rather, a local Civil Defense office with a high degree of autonomy is more likely to be involved with ECGs. In addition, a local Civil Defense office with a high degree of autonomy is more likely to be run more efficiently. For example, often Civil Defense positions (e.g., directors) are filled for reasons of political patronage rather than knowledge or expertise in disaster-related matters. Also, the local Civil Defense office may become entangled between two different political factions. As a result, a conflict of interests results in the local agency.

In a more general context, if an EGG is to experience success, it is beneficial for them to have contact, preferably support, from as many legitimate or "status quo" groups or organizations as possible. This support could be obtained from the local Red Cross, the Chamber of Commerce, or the mayor of the community. In addition, an increase of an EGG's contacts through networking creates an "organization set" (Evan, 1976) which can increase an EGG's chance for survival and maintenance.

Contacts with other groups, such as environmental groups, may have some additional advantages. These include helping the EGG and socializing it to the political process. Quite often, the necessary contacts for various environmental
groups and ECGs are quite similar. Environmental groups do not have much power in directly helping natural hazard ECGs achieve their goals. Further, radical groups are avoided by natural hazard ECGs. If ECGs obtain a radical image or associate with radical groups, the disaster group loses legitimacy. ECG members were not participants during the era of social unrest during the late 1960's and early 1970's. Most ECG members do not have prior experience in mobilizing social movement organizations. The exception is in some higher social class neighborhoods where some ECG members may be active in more traditional organizations as the PTA or teachers' unions. ECG members generally fall within the middle of the political spectrum. Unlike their counterparts (i.e., members of ECGs that form around technological hazards), natural hazard ECG members do not resort to political demonstrations, marches, and possible violence. Instead, these groups attempt to use the local political system and follow its rules. When their efforts are dismissed or achievement of goals are slow or minimal, ECGs' leaders and members express disillusionment with the American political process.

The political and economic context of the community defines the type of support the ECGs obtain. It especially effects their initial activity. For example, highly industrial or pre-economic development communities do not provide a conducive environment for an ECG to achieve success. In these circumstances, the goals of the ECGs run contrary to the dominant political and economic ideology of the community. Cases regarding flooding or mudslides are often examples of such situations. To illustrate, in one case, city officials denied that a dangerous flooding situation existed in a number of neighborhoods. Even after three floods in 13 months, city officials refused to take any action. The reason why action was denied is that key elected city officials were land developers. Mitigation of the flooding hazard would put an end to extensive development in one city section.
Such a politically charged setting, however, may lead to other ECGs developing in other neighborhoods in the community. Quite often these newly formed groups are at first unaware of other local ECGs. However, these ECGs come into contact with each other. Usually this occurs through the "shotgun" approach of trying to make contacts with relevant officials, or the attendance of public hearings or city council meetings. The more established ECG in such a situation aids in giving advice; defining the political situation and territory; and telling other ECGs what agencies, governmental bodies, and individuals are friends or enemies of the groups' cause. Although contact between local ECGs occur if a multiple ECG situation exists, no attempts are made to merge. Each group has its own specific turf, tasks, and identity. However, in such situations there are occasions where ECGs create an "umbrella group" to represent a larger constituency and coordinate efforts (see Neal, 1983b, for an elaboration on this process). Several conditions explain why ECGs maintain their own identity, even within an umbrella group. First, most ECGs are rooted in a specific social structure. Hence, each group has its own specific set of wants, needs, and perceptions. Secondly, with each group maintaining their own autonomy, an image of widespread support is produced.

In addition, we have generally found that ECGs from a higher social class neighborhood approach the political process more efficiently than other ECGs. These upper class ECGs and their members initially have a clearer idea of whom to contact to begin any type of social change. We should add, however, that ECGs with lower class backgrounds eventually learn the same information. Higher class groups possess this advantage because some members may have used this process previously for other issues, such as union organizing or garden clubs. Also, as a function of social class and power, members from these higher class ECGs associate more often with the formal and informal political leaders and sources of
political power within social or professional settings.

**ECGs and elections**

ECGs usually attempt to make a political issue of the actual or potential disaster for the upcoming city or state election. ECGs formally or informally support candidates who concur with the groups' views. In only one instance did an ECG, from an upper middle class background, aid in the election of a new candidate. In all other cases, ECGs effect on a candidate's victory or defeat was negligible. If an ECG supports an incumbent, generally the incumbent is re-elected. If an ECG supports a challenger, the challenger is defeated. The importance of incumbency rather than the impact of ECGs' political support is the key operating condition. In other words, the power of ECGs in the voting booth, the primary "conventional" means of participation, is seldom significant. Clearly, if these groups are to have any impact, other political means need to be taken. Nevertheless, latent benefits are obtained by ECGs during their election activity. For example, greater issue and group recognition are received from elected officials and the public. Furthermore, improved response to ECG requests or meetings with elected officials are obtained. This is especially true when the ECG supported the elected official during the previous election.

**Defining the disaster**

As noted earlier, many times ECGs want to have a situation defined as a disaster, or have a potential natural hazard recognized. These goals are a potential source of extreme conflict between ECGs and local politicians or power brokers. It might seem that the potential for a flood or the impact from a landslide is obvious. We have seen examples where this is not the case. For reasons originating within the political and economic spheres of a community, potential or actual disasters are explained away as a chance event or not defined as a disaster. This situation agrees with Blumer's (1971) observation that social
problems may exist for years. Yet, people ignore these problems until they are defined as social problems by policy makers. For example, Blumer notes that poverty is a perpetual condition. However, not until the "War on Poverty" was declared through the support of high status authorities and the mass media did this "movement" gain success. Blumer adds that in this case the political authorities eventually initiated a policy according to their own interpretation of the movement's agencies. This phenomenon described by Blumer reflects the same process the ECGs experienced. Eventually authorities publicly recognized the actual or potential disaster and then responded to it based on their own perceptions.

**Perceptions by ECGs and officials of each other**

Elected and public officials' perceptions of ECGs generally fall into three categories. One extreme category is the perception that ECG members are "frustrated housewives" who are nothing but a nuisance. A majority of ECG leaders and members are women (for further elaboration, see McCabe and Neal, 1983). These officials do listen to ECG members, but they confide that they are not going to listen to the ECG members in any meaningful way. These public officials reflect the attitude of a technocrat. That is, they believe that only the experts should make policy decisions on such intricate, complex situations. Basically, the public's input is not considered important or relevant.

The other extreme category is the perception by some officials that ECGs are operating effectively. They also believe that there should be more groups and more citizen input in the decision making process. However, this perception and response are rare. The final category of officials' perceptions of ECGs is "middle of the road." On the one hand, these officials see that the ECGs' action are acceptable as long as the groups do not act radical and use traditional political means. But on the other hand, these officials feel that the experts'
advice must also be considered. The consequence of this perception is that the voice of citizens is ignored in favor of the advice of the "experts." Unlike the first category, these officials are willing to change their perceptions of ECGs and perhaps rule in the groups' favor. All three categories of administrators, policy makers, and politicians express some degree of surprise at how the ECGs and its members have been able to educate themselves on a particular issue and sound informed during a public forum. Yet, what we detect among most administrators is an anti-republic (in the sense of a type of political process) ideology. That is, there is a feeling that the voice of the people need not be seriously heeded.

On the other side, ECGs generally have a negative view of many politicians and public officials. This even included many of those who have helped an ECG at some time. The main exception would be Civil Defense officials and Red Cross (where it was necessary for these groups to be contacted or when they were contacted). As previously noted, most natural hazard ECG members are inexperienced in organizing groups for political action. They are not political activists and have little experience in the political arena. Hence, the ECGs' members initial perceptions are positive of governmental officials. Only after numerous attempts of instituting change do ECGs' members develop a negative outlook toward the American political process. This is even true in situations where ECGs have success. Many group members feel they have been blatantly lied to by public officials. These groups present evidence to document their claims. In other cases, what appears to be a lie is actually a misunderstanding. Perceptions and relations between ECGs and members of the public sector are often not positive in nature.
Consequences of ECGs actions

Finally, we discuss the apparent impact of ECGs in the political arena. Generally, ECGs do not achieve total success or total failure. Rather, the degree of success varies considerably. More than anything else, ECGs are relatively successful in creating some form of public awareness regarding the disaster issue. This is accomplished through public debates, the media, or spotlighting the disaster itself. Quite often, the goal of "public education" becomes the group's main activity. Few groups are able to succeed with more ambitious goals. These other goals include mitigating potential hazards; setting up reliable warning systems; or bringing about relevant legislative changes at the city, county, or state level. However, some groups that do not become dormant and that have some success in natural hazard matters expand their goals. These include other neighborhood or community issues such as park improvements, crime watchers, sewers, street lights, and toxic waste sites.

ECGs usually cannot achieve much success by working alone. When many groups and organizations (including ECGs) succeed on a particular issue, it is difficult to ascertain specifically who is responsible for the achievement. Yet, we can conclude that ECGs are partially responsible for the success of an issue in the political arena.

Conclusion

Citizen group formation around potential or actual disaster impacts is a phenomenon that occurs often today. Unknowingly, ECGs enter a politically charged arena in an attempt to mitigate or recover from a natural disaster. Their initial capability to operate and succeed is tied into two interrelated conditions. First, groups of higher social class composition encounter success earlier than groups of lower social class composition. Secondly, group members who have previous contacts with key officials facilitate overall group success.
Usually, those in a higher social class have types of contacts which aid in developing a network which will enhance group achievement. ECGs whose members are primarily from lower social classes eventually make the same type of contacts. It simply takes them longer. These ECGs, however, often do achieve some degree of success. The groups' goals are just more difficult to obtain.

In many cases public officials and administrators express an anti-citizen participation ideology in regard to disaster and other issues. This may explain why some political sociologists, who side with these officials, call social movement activity "unconventional." Yet, ECGs may be forced into such "unconventional" activity since campaigning and voting do not result in much power. From their political experience with natural hazard issues, ECG members consequently have a negative perspective of politics and government. These group participants feel that political and governmental officials are unresponsive and are protecting the interests of the economic and political elite in the community. Given this, frequently little common ground exists between each side. This leads to many misconceptions. Such misunderstandings further exacerbate incorrect perceptions between the groups.

At times, a natural disaster site is not defined as such by local or other authorities. Victims of floods or mudslides, for example, may present evidence of direct damage. Yet, obtaining recognition that a severe event actually happened or will be publicly acknowledged is another matter. The issue of defining what constitutes a potential or actual disaster is the greatest source of conflict between governmental officials and ECGs.

Natural hazard ECGs do get involved with the political process. Their success both in terms of group maintenance and group goals, is enhanced by acquiring support from as many other group and organizations as possible. If these other groups who support the ECG's effort are more of a status quo
type as opposed to a (perceived) radical type, the possibility of success for the ECG increases. Obtaining support from these status quo organizations at times is difficult. ECGs must be willing to do some compromising if aid from these groups is to be received. ECGs do have an impact, however, in regard to natural hazard issues.

In addition, we note again that this paper pertains to ECGs that form around natural hazard concerns. Obviously, ECGs that form around technological or environmental issues should be analyzed and compared with the natural hazard ECGs. This is a future project. For example, we see that technological and environmental hazard ECGs are likely to become more extensively involved in the political arena. Issues such as toxic waste sites, air and water pollution, and nuclear power plants have local, regional, national, and even international political implications. In addition, these issues are much more politically charged. Hence, for a number of scientific and political reasons, it is more difficult to define them as actual or potential disasters. If the impact of a flood is difficult for officials to define as a potential or actual disaster, the difficulty of defining technological and environmental hazards is worse. We conclude by adding that the political dimension of disaster is an area that should not be ignored in the future by disaster researchers, political sociologists, and political scientists.
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