

Taming the Oligarchy: Pursuing Governance by Leaders and Not Entrenched Rulers

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*The formation of oligarchies
within the various forms of democracy
is the outcome of organic necessity,
and consequently affects every organization, ...*
Robert Michels (1911, p. 241)

A hundred years ago, Robert Michels put forth the [Iron Rule of Oligarchy](#) that maintained all **democratic** organizations tend toward governance by an *entrenched* ruling class. Those on top conspire to maintain their power and control, while the rank-and-file members are often apathetic or accepting of their domination.

Michels' [Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy](#), was written in 1911; a 2001 translation, by Eden and Cedar Paul, is online. For a century, sociologists and other scholars have debated whether formation of an oligarchy is inevitable. Herein, personal experience decides.

Seymour Martin Lipset's *Union Democracy: The Internal Politics of the International Typographical Union* [ITU] (©1956) described a situation where large union locals kept the central establishment from amassing dictatorial power. In 2010, the [Tea Party](#) movement succeeded in unseating many political incumbents. So, entrenched oligarchs can be replaced. Albeit, not easily. Committed opposition is necessary.

Constituents need to mobilize with sufficient force to change their governing officers. Most in command do not change voluntarily. I do not usually posit *universal* rules but we can be fairly certain that *oligarchs do not step down or adjust willingly*. Therefore, the governed need to oversee the governors and assure that they are competent.

I grew up in an era and culture that assumed all people in command were upright and right. (My birth predated the hippie generation.) In any case, authority figures were to be unchallenged and obeyed. *We* were expected to adapt if our superiors were inept.

Now, the work of [Robert Hogan](#), his associates, and others have shown leadership and management incompetence to be widespread. I elaborated on this in my "[25-50-25 rule of thumb](#)" article. Empirical studies have found incompetence could be upward of 75 percent. Even the low end estimate of 25 percent is a considerable waste of personal and group resources.

As leaders guide the fate of organizations, it behooves stakeholders to assure that the people who are charged with their administration are competent. As assured longevity of oligarchs undermines democratic control of groups, representative government requires active rank- and-file determination of who leads.

Stakeholder control of the oligarchy

Assuring honest and competent leadership is easier said than done. Seemingly democratic organizations may not have a totally fair election process. Consider how often lost ballots are "found" during voter recounts. Some unions apply "pressure" to those who oppose them. One fraternal group that I was in had a unitary regional leader who selected his assistant and successor and no members in his region could overrule him. Remarkably, an arts organization where I was a board member had an artistic director who had her own perpetuity written into the by-laws. Incumbents also have the organization's money and communication channels, not available to challengers. These examples illustrates situations where replacing entrenched rulers can be a difficult process.

Too often, when good persons experience actual operation of a nonprofit board, they quickly resign for "business" or "family" reasons. Yes, trustees have the right to opt out of volunteer organizations that provide services to a selected public. To step down, however, supports continuance of the practices that caused one to abandon the project. When resignations occur, constituencies are abandoned—be they donors, members, volunteers, employees, or those dependent on benefits.

The ITU was a bottom-up developed union where the member locals were large, active, had regional, as opposed to national, employment markets, and unseated incumbents several times. Other unions that were formed top-down had entrenched officers who ruled the roost and employer bases were geographically stratified.

Some situations are difficult to avoid, such as employment unions and citizenship. The choice is between acceptance, acquiescence, or apathy; versus weighing the consequences and attempting to correct the situation. To unseat the entrenched usually requires allies in the cause. Solo operators are often resisted by other group members that would rather deny there is anything about which to be concerned. Only when oligarchs overreach do many passive participants get involved.

The above is not written to discourage people from trying to change a group's oligarchy but to validate that change is difficult—not impossible. The empirical studies showing that large numbers of leaders are incompetent should motivate more people to pursue corrective action.

At times, organized political opposition gains sufficient steam to overcome the tenacity of long-term incumbency, despotism, and voting irregularities.

Realize, change is possible. Even America's entrenched political scene was disrupted when armies of grass-roots citizens melded into a Tea Party movement.

If we want to bring about change in politics, unions, social clubs, fraternal groups, nonprofit or community organizations, the difficulties need to be realized and an effective strategy developed with like-minded allies to garner sufficient ability to install representative officers.