SOCIAL CHANGE IN APPALACHIA

PROHIBITION: REPEAL IN A SMALL TOWN

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INTRODUCTION

One of the structural avenues for social change in democratic societies is a referendum. Local option elections have provided opportunities for people on both sides of an issue to organize, to petition the government for an election, and to formalize their positions as law if victorious. This paper portrays a recent local option election in Lake City. Lake City as well as all names throughout this paper are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the community and its citizens. Because of the sensitivity and emotional involvement of many citizens, I have also chosen to avoid using names even when statements were made in public forums or settings.

The data in this research are derived from participant observation, interviews with committee leaders and members of "Citizens for Progress" (Wets) and "United Dry Forces" (Drys), letters to the editor, radio and TV programs, newspaper articles and open community meetings where wet/dry issues were discussed. The paper is organized by reviewing previous local option elections in Lake City and Lake County. Next, I discuss the recent campaign and finally I address broader issues by phrasing local option elections within the context of the sociology of social movements. I've chosen to do this because, in large part, the comments, letters to the editor, interviews, and advertisements can stand alone as direct evidence of community sentiments and interests.

PREVIOUS ELECTIONS

Local option elections in Lake City as well as other areas of the state have not been rare occurrences. Table 1 presents the results of the previous
six local option elections held in the city and county. The first election after the repeal of Prohibition was in 1936; the Drys lost by slightly over 400 votes. Interestingly, a local newspaper reported that "... the Drys received 600 less votes than they had signatures on the local option petition which called for the election." Shortly after this election the local newspaper described "worsening conditions relative to alcohol problems" primarily because of laxity in law enforcement. In response several precincts held local option elections won by the Drys. These elections held in 1937 and 1940 were some of the first local option elections in the state held in single precincts.

Prior campaigns as portrayed in local newspapers were emotional, sensational struggles in which the defenders of the status quo (1930's and 1940's - Wets) and 1970's (Drys) perceived change as an attack and responded aggressively. When the Drys petitioned for Local Option in 1936 the Wets' advertisements highlighted the dangers of local option:

1. The Return of Bootleggers and Moonshiners.
2. The Making of Criminals of Boys and Girls.
3. Loss of Tax Revenue.
5. Increase Reckless Drivers Going to Liquor Stores Surrounding the County.
7. Unsafe Church Services.
8. Increase in "Shysters" and Racketeers.
9. Increasing Court Dockets.
The campaigns of 1943 and 1944 were substantially different than the county and precinct campaigns of the 1930's. The Drys were better organized and they advertised more vigorously. Both sides made appeals within their ads to support the war effort through the purchase of war bonds. The state distillery association also ran ads supporting the wets and highlighting the distillers contribution to the war effort. The wets highlighted the "horrors" of a return to prohibition, "dirty politics and corruption," and "taking advantage of the war." The Drys described the "Wet County" environment as producing "drunks," "drunkards," "neckers," "revelers," and "tin-horn sports." The fervor of these campaigns that saw both the city and county going dry by wide margins is illustrated by the following data -- first, a half-page ad in the local newspaper and second, a letter received "at the last minute" by the Drys:

**BEER IS WORSE THAN LIQUOR**

Beer does not satisfy thirst; it creates thirst. Beer drinkers become liquor drinkers. Beer sets up a thirst in the throat which demands more beer, then whiskey. A large majority of whiskey drinkers started on beer. Then beer "joints" have the low-brow crowd, the juke box, the vulgar dancing, slot machines, and all the attendant evils of revelry and drunkenness. If you would choose between them, put down beer as public enemy No. 1. (Local newspaper ad).

**A DRUNKARD'S LAST APPEAL**

"PLEASE GET OUT ALL THE VOTES YOU CAN, JUNE 7th TO VOTE OUT WHISKEY. I AM A DRUNKARD AND AS BADAS. (sic) I HATE TO OWN UP TO IT, I HAVE NO WILL POWER TO PASS UP THE TEMPTATION TO DRINK WHEN IT IS IN MY SIGHT.

-- AND THERE'S MANY A GOOD FELLOW LIKE MYSELF. I WOULD HATE TO BE IN THE FELLOW'S PLACE THAT SELLS IT, AT THE JUDGMENT, AND I WOULD HATE TO CALL MYSELF A CHRISTIAN AND BE AFRAID TO GET OUT AND WORK AGAINST IT FOR THE SAKE OF A FEW DOLLARS.
--AS LONG AS I DRINK THIS STUFF, I CANNOT BE TRUSTED. I KNOW IT. I CANNOT TRUST MYSELF, I GET A FEW CENTS AHEAD AND GIVE IT TO THE WHISKEY DEALERS INSTEAD OF BUYING FOOD' AND CLOTHES FOR MY CHILDREN AND WIFE. SO THIS IS MY LAST CHANCE, AS I LIVE IN LAKE COUNTY I EXPECT THE GOOD PEOPLE TO DO THIS MUCH FOR ME, TO GET IT OUT OF MY SIGHT SO I CAN BE A MAN ONCE MORE. DON'T LET ME DOWN. ARE YOU YOUR BROTHER'S KEEPER?

Signed: A Drunkard

Battles over the legality and the fairness of local university students voting in local option elections characterized the election of 1971 and the petition efforts of 1974 and 1975. While 335 students registered or attempted to register, few voted in the 1971 election because of challenges by court officials and "Temperance League" workers as to the students being "permanent residents." Newspaper coverage of the 1971 election painted a picture of an emotional, wild campaign. Wets accused the Drys of allowing bootlegging to continue and of supporting a gangster era. The Drys countered with a portrayal of the other side as a "few greedy men" interested in "Whiskey dollars." One of their ads claimed "... as vile as the bootlegger is, he is not more vile than the tavern keeper, who, under license, sells the same beverage -- alcohol." Another 1/2 page ad portrayed a passed out drunk in the street with a bottle. The picture was captioned "The finished product of the brewers art." Prior to election day, the Bridge, a vacant building house that had been the most well known road house in the area was dynamited and according to the newspaper "blown to smithereens." The following letter to the editor illustrates the emotional level manifest by both sides in this highly contested dry victory.

To make our fine city wet, will turn it into a South African Hottentot Society of Jungle Savagery. There will be a love-in beer-joint on every street. Cursings, foot races, rock throwing, muggings and shoot-outs from dusk to dawn. Look for chaos and utter disorder. Let's hope it will never happen. Let's not allow it to happen.
In addition to the local option elections described, two petition drives were organized by "Wets" in 1974 and 1975. In both efforts the county court argued that an insufficient number of signatures ruled the petitions invalid. Additionally, in the 1975 attempt, the petition forms were not properly labeled and several local citizens maintained that their names had been forged by others. These attempts by "Wets" clearly led to bitter feelings between university students and locals and this split was raised and heightened during the most recent campaign.

The Campaign(s) of 1982

The most recent local option election was substantially different from earlier campaigns. First, not only were students involved but they were also primarily responsible for organizing, directing, fund raising and registering voters. Two students, both involved in student government, formed a coalition with other citizens interested in a "wet" community. Their organization, Citizens for Progress, drew heavily from the city's large medical community and from the local Catholic community. This election also differed in that the initial vote won by the "Wets" was challenged by the Drys on the grounds that hand bills were not posted in the city precincts. Although the lower court ruled in favor of the wets, the state appeals court voided the election results and a second petition drive, campaign, and election were necessary.

Once Citizens for Progress submitted their petition calling for a local option election, the Drys began to formally organize. Their organizational meeting held in a local church drew about 125 and consisted of singing hymns, forming a committee to organize opposition, a presentation by a state temperance
league official and a question and answer period. The spokesperson for the committee, United Dry Forces was a local minister. While other clergy were represented on the committee, their representation was substantially less than prior local option campaigns. The political rationale behind this decision was the belief that "this was a community issue rather than a church issue." Other members of the committee reflected business interests, both current and retired, and several younger members including students. Many of the members had been involved in previous local option election committees or had immediate family that had been involved.

Student Participation

Many residents of Lake City highly resented students' rights to participate in local option election. Compounding the issue was the frequently made point that while "eighteen to twenty year olds are free to vote, they are not legally free to drink." The issue of student involvement further intensified when the county judge-executive changed dates for the election from the Tuesday specified on the petition to a Saturday -- eleven days later. Whatever the official's intention, it was interpreted and used by "Wets," as a rallying point to solidify student involvement. Comments by the judge-executive published in the newspaper illustrate how students were defined as "outsiders."

I'll choose the date in which I think most of the permanent, paying residents of the city of Lake City will be able to vote in it.

If anyone should have an advantage, it should be the ones that are going to have to live with it for the rest of their lives. Students can legally vote if they've been here for 30 days, but they're only here from one to four years and then they're gone.

The issue of student involvement continued to intensify. At one of the "Dry" organizational meetings several persons asked about stopping the students.
"Can we legally challenge their vote?" "Can we make them pay taxes and register their cars?" "This isn't fair, how can we fight against this?" Realizing that little could legally be done and that some students, perhaps many, could be Dry supporters; the Drys moved to presenting the "real facts," to students and to involving them in their campaign. However, the 'student issue' remained volatile particularly because the "Wets" saw it as a good issue and because the county judge-executive crystallized the boundaries between "permanent taxpayers" and students. All levels of field notes, from interviews to letters to the editor highlight the student issue. A few representative comments include:

Why does the college have the right to come in here and corrupt our community?

Students shouldn't be able to control our town.

Who are these students that they think that they can come in here and run our town?

... changing the way of life for the real heart of Lake City -- the townies.

We are the one's who will have to pick up after them with their beer cans and bottles and put up with their hot rodding.

The Issues

Although the style of the campaign waged by both sides was more civil than in previous campaigns the issues remained essentially the same. Illustrations 1 and 2 present sample ads that cover most of the issues. The Wets argued that the legal sale of alcohol would increase tax revenues, create jobs, and provide the community with some of the revenues that local drinkers were spending in wet counties. Additionally local prohibition just like national prohibition was a failure and produced political crime and corruption.
The Drys mentioned that legal availability would increase alcohol consumption thereby increasing crime, accidents, divorces and a long list of other problems. Additionally selling alcohol in the community would change the "character" of the community and would be a step backwards. Comments and ads reflecting the "Wets" view of progress include the following:

Vote to change it. Do it because you're tired of the backward element in Lake City. Let's not allow this opportunity to pass us by.

Things that make a community successful and progressive are good education, good transportation, good medical facilities, recreation, and entertainment. Lake City has them all, except the last.

The Lake City economy is the same now as it was 25 years ago. We need to be more progressive and this is definitely a step in the right direction.

Fellow students, if you would like more places to enjoy a meal, or perhaps due to finances you could use a part-time job, or who knows, maybe even some night-life in Lake City.

Isn't it time we try something that's proven and make Lake City a growing place instead of a town with empty stores and a look of frustration.

The choice is one that will determine whether we are to continue to allow organized crime to exist in our community, or whether we, as responsible citizens, are ready to come to grips with the 20th Century. We need to step out of this status quo of austerity and into the 20th Century.

Data reflecting the Drys view of a wet Lake City include the following:

... can you put a price-tag on the good things of life -- a nice, peaceful, secure place to live and raise a family? We love Lake City the way it is, PLEASE VOTE NO!

To all of you ... who love your quiet, little city just the way it is, get out and vote dry . . .
... I am alarmed at the serious consequences that would follow a vote in favor of a wet Lake City ... If one of my family, or any of the students I teach or coach becomes a victim of an automobile accident, stabbing, rape, or murder that has an association with alcohol or drugs, you and I both know that the ones who voted for a wet Lake City helped bring it about.

If all the facts are given on the sale and use of alcohol, it presents an ugly picture? I, for one, cannot see how people who have the best interests of the community at heart could favor the legalization of alcohol in our community!

Without even touching on the moral implications, many questions flood my mind. For example, the name "Citizens for Progress." What is progressive about public drunkenness, broken homes, increase in area drunk driving, the need for bigger jails (or drying-out tanks), larger police force, alcoholic rehabilitation centers, just to name a few ... This is truly an example of moral and economic decay.

The real backers of this issue stand to gain much as folks make their way into our city to purchase their bottled progress and many jobs. The doctors will need more assistants to help mend the broken bones, the undertakers will have more bodies (let's hope it's not one of your children), the outlets will need more clerks. I can hardly wait for all the money to flow into their pickets. In the meantime I get to pay extra taxes to support the alcohol abuse center, spouse abuse center, ad infinitum!

Per capita consumption is related to availability and consumption is related to the problems of alcohol, such as the numbers of driving accidents, drownings, fires and even private airplane crashes.

Like many others, I am concerned about safe streets, secure homes and a peaceful lifestyle in our small town. There is no question about the fact that liquor sales would seriously threaten all of these. All the experts in social behavior, the people in law enforcement, the history of past experience and statistics tell us this is true.

I believe most churches are trying to keep this from being a moral or biblical question ... Instead they are approaching it on such grounds as increased highway dangers, misuse of family income, and abuse of one's children and spouse."
Another theme prevalent in letters to the editor, interviews, and radio programs addressed the "condition" of Lake City when it was "wet." Local newspapers during the "wet era" (late 30's to early 40's) did not reflect much crime or alcohol related behavior. However, this may reflect the small police force or different reporting standards as well as reflecting few alcohol problems. During World War II the Navy housed and trained officers in rented facilities near downtown Lake City—assumedly this complicated nightlife!

Dry descriptions of Lake City during the "wet era" include:

I can well remember when the country was wet and it was actually dangerous for a decent lady to walk on the street alone. In those years it was mainly adult males who drank; now it seems to be a common thing for our youth to drink and use drugs . . . (Letter to Editor).

The fellow I talked to said it was not a nice place to live. On Main Street there were bars. There was beer being sold and anywhere there is alcohol being sold you are going to have problems. There were people getting shot, stabbed, killed -- all the time and I don't think people are that much different than they were then (Dry leader on radio talk show).

Why is Lake City DRY? Because the people of the county and Lake City could not tolerate alcoholic beverages when they were legal in the country.

"Wets" countered these accounts by pointing out that there were few police in Lake City in the 1940's and that there was little state regulation concerning alcoholic beverage control.

Substantial effort was directed by both sides in registering new voters. Immediately prior to the election, local radio and TV stations presented debates and "call-in" programs. Probably because of the student vote "Wets" won the election by a close margin. However, as previously noted, the results were voided by the state appeals court because hand bills notifying the citizens of the local option election were not posted in each of the city's precincts.
During the second campaign the issues remained the same with few exceptions. "Wets" highlighted fair play and alleged that the "Drys" appealed because they were "poor'losers." The Drys changed their committee membership as well as their name. "United Dry Forces" became "Citizens for a Better Lake City" and then "Citizens and Students for a Better Lake City." Seemingly, the community, the committee's and all concerned were tired and burned out and substantially less energy was maintained throughout the second campaign. The "Wets" duplicated their earlier win and in fact substantially increased the margin of victory through increasing registration (see Table 1).

**Local Option Elections as 'Status Politics'**

To this point our primary focus has been to describe and portray events in Lake City local option campaigns using the "talk" of leaders and participants from both sides. In this section, our goals are more analytic and sociological and consequently more speculative. Elections by definition have winners and losers. Our view is that local option elections manifest on the small scale the characteristics and more importantly the symbolisms that Prohibition manifested on the national level. Furthermore, like Gusfield (1963), we view elections concerned with drinking/abstinence issues as "status politics."

Gusfield's (1963) analysis of the American Temperance Movement utilizes a dramaturgical metaphor (Burke, 1945) in viewing political action as being symbolic more than being instrumental. Temperance as an issue symbolizes status or prestige rather than class or economic interests. According to Gusfield (1963), "... drinking and abstinence became symbols of social status, identifying social levels of the society whose styles of life separated
them culturally." (p. 4). Even when laws aren't enforceable they still have important symbolic value. "The public support of one conception of morality at the expense of another enhances the prestige and self-esteem of the victors and degrades the culture of the losers," (Gusfield, 1963:5). What was at stake in Lake City's local option election was not only the "legal sale of alcoholic beverages," but more importantly the public validation of life styles. Just as rural, native American Protestant areas of the country were the initial strongholds of Temperance they remain the contemporary arenas where struggles between abstainers and drinkers -- where struggles between styles of life will be fought. In Lake City's most recent struggle the same issues that spelled the end of Prohibition spelled the end of local prohibition. On the national level in the 1930's the Depression severely increased the demand for increased employment and increased tax revenues, consequently status issues became secondary to economic and class issues (Gusfield, 1963). In Lake County the current national and state recessions exacerbated by a decline in the university community, the closing of two car dealerships and other economic crises made jobs and revenue the salient issues.

Because local option issues are status issues they are accompanied with the language of moral condemnation. "In the confrontation of one culture with another, each seeks to degrade the other and to build its own claims to deference," (Gusfield 1963:184). In Lake City's campaign the Drys condemned the Wets view's with some of the following:

Progress should be measured by the quality of life a community offers. More spouse abuse, child abuse, neglect, injuries, mental illness, traffic fatalities and murders certainly cannot be counted as progress.
Let's create a new moral standard and revitalize our spiritual environment.

Alcohol will continue to break up homes, starve children, and ruin lives, but not by my vote . . . . The family you save may be yours.

Let's face it, some of these people don't care about Lake City. They are just interested in getting rich.

The Wet's countered with condemnations of equal magnitude:

Let's move forward without the shameful hypocrisy of prohibition.

Free yourself from the bondage of backward ideas!

They don't care about progress and the economic conditions of the community. They have already made their money and are living in the past.

These comments highlight the symbolism behind the instrumental decision regarding alcohol roles. The change from "Dry" to "Wet" means that the "Dry's" views regarding alcohol are no longer part of the legal code of the community. In other words these views have lost some of their external validation. However, differing somewhat from Gusfield I would like to suggest that views are not only validated through winning but also through fighting. Even when defeat seemed likely, the Dry's carried on. To not fight was to not care about one's beliefs and in fact, one's essence. The following excerpts from three interviews with Dry leaders and an ad in the newspaper highlight the importance of fighting:

I believe a fellow ought to stand up for what he believes in. You need to take a stand and I think you need to do it in a Christian like manner. You don't get involved in personalities; you just do your best so that you can hold your head up when it's over.

Fighting was important. Even if we didn't win.

If I believe in something and don't fight for it, then my belief isn't worth much is it? In fighting I can be honest to myself.
A NO vote makes you a winner even if the community goes wet, for when the first tragedy occurs, you will know you did not help bring it about.

Conclusions

Local option elections instrumentally address the issue of the legal sale of alcoholic beverages. Symbolically, they represent struggles over the relative prestige and style of life between status groups. It is this theoretical dimension that is most sociologically interesting and that will be my focus in future work on local option elections.
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*Election results voided by state appeals court.
ILLUSTRATION 1
THE LIQUOR STORES AND BOOTLEGGERS

Their Product:
THE SAME - They both sell alcohol!

Their Result:
THEY BOTH PRODUCE:

CRIME
DIVORCE
DEATH
SICKNESS
SORROW
INJURY

DRUNKENESS
SHAME
DESPAIR
DEPENDENT
and
NEGLECTED CHILDREN

What is the Difference
between Bootleggers and the Legalized Liquor Traffic

Only ONE MAJOR DIFFERENCE:
The Liquor Stores Sell MORE Because
They are LEGALIZED

Paid for by United Dry Forces
CONCERNED CITIZENS OF
Make Your Own Decision About The Wet or Dry Issue!

VOTE YES

A WET AREA
☐ (1) Alcohol Abuse, Regardless Of Wet Or Dry.

☐ (2) A Limited Number of Taxed, Legal Outlets For The Sale Of Alcoholic Beverages

☐ (3) Licensed Merchants That Sell To Adults Only

☐ (4) Additional Jobs and Revenue For The Community

☐ (5) Less Distance Must Be Traveled To Purchase Alcoholic Beverages, Thus a Reduced Danger And Expense For Its Citizens

☐ (6) A Wet Vote Will Work to Control Alcoholic Beverages In It Has Worked In Other Communities in

A DRY AREA
☐ (1) Alcohol Abuse, Regardless Of Wet Or Dry.

☐ (2) No Limit to The Number of Untaxed, Illegal Sellers of Alcoholic Beverages

☐ (3) Illegal Operations That Sell to Anyone Regardless of Age

☐ (4) Less Chance of Additional Jobs and Revenue for the Community

☐ (5) Unnecessary Travel to Other Communities to Purchase Alcoholic Beverages

☐ (6) A Dry Vote Has Not Controlled Alcoholic Beverages in for Nearly 40 Years

Citizens for Progress Committee is a group of concerned who want to see prosper economically and socially, just as other communities has prospered. A YES vote on Saturday, April 24th, is indeed a vote for progress. Paid for by Citizens for Progress Committee.
REFERENCES

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1963