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## VARIATION IN RURAL COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE AGENDA

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### Introduction

Rural administration has been a neglected area of study. Accompanying this neglect has been the continual existence of several untested assumptions. One assumption made is that the administrative environments in rural areas are generally similar, and that differences among rural areas are not theoretically or practically significant.

This article studies one aspect of the problem; namely, the link between policy formation and public administration in rural areas. In addition, it examines the composition of the rural public policy agenda and the factors that may have an impact upon it. Specifically, I analyze the extent to which rural county administrators and policy-makers share a common perception of policy problems; and I measure the impact of socio-economic, individual, and state factors on the determination of the policy agenda of administrators and policy-makers in rural counties.

### Rural System(s)

The assumption made by many scholars in rural public policy analysis is that "ruralness" defines a distinct homogeneous dimension. This assumption is also accompanied by a concern that variation among rural areas should take a backseat to an examination of variation between rural and urban areas. This concern has a long history spanning the 20th century. Horace Plunkett, in an essay written in 1910, for example, developed the themes that ruralness must be viewed as a holistic life perspective, and that the rural areas must band together to oppose the predominance of urban elements in American life [17]. These theses, in time, became the philosophical premise that much of the nation's rural-oriented legislation accepted and propagated [1], and which remained the foundation of much contemporary work in the field.

Economists often assume that the concept of ruralness exists, and they direct their activities to the measurement of the differences in economic

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ers. As a result of the structural composition of the census region's manufacturing industries, any comparison among them will not reveal any significant difference. This condition is due to the fact that the counterbalancing effect of the divergent growth patterns of the states comprising the census regions would tend to dampen (conceal) interregional differences. Table 15 is a cross-sectional analysis of variance of exponential growth rates among the nine census regions.

**TABLE 15**  
**CROSS SECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE AMONG**  
**EXPONENTIAL GROWTH RATES OF TOTAL MANUFACTURING VALUE**  
**ADDED FOR CENSUS REGIONS 1960-1964, 1967-1971**

Source	Variation	Degrees of Freedom	Variance	F Value
Between Census Regions	71.5340	8	8.9417	1.5208
Within Regions*	170.5052	29	5.8794	
Total	242.0392	37		

\* 9 Census regions and 38 states.

The F value is statistically non-significant. Clearly, there exist no significant interregional growth differences among *census* regions. This finding contrasts significantly with the results presented in Table 7 in which case the state is the region.

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1) The Output Model: Coefficients of output elasticity for each dominant industry revealed that the impact of the dominant industry varies widely among states within each of the industry regions.

2) The Growth Model: The growth model failed in two out of three cases to predict growth. The model was tested assuming a perfect or close to perfect capital market (marginal theory).

3) Manufacturing Economic Growth:

a) The *disparities among census regions'* exponential growth rates of manufacturing are quite great — a high of 8.5 percent and a low of 3.2 percent. The coefficient of variation for the exponential growth rates of the nine census regions is .33.

b) The *disparities among regions'* exponential growth rates of the selected industries are great (Table 2); the coefficients of variation were: SICC 20 - .4019, SICC 28 - .1146, SICC 36 - .5909. Mid Atlantic experienced the smallest exponential growth rates for each of the selected industries observed.

c) There exist variations among exponential growth rates within industry

definition of salient political issues. Finally, it analyzes the accuracy of "ruralism" as a distinct policy dimension.

## The Rural Agenda

The data for testing the accuracy of the possible relationships are based upon a six state mail survey and follow-up of rural county policy-makers which was conducted in the spring of 1982. The states include Arizona, Illinois, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Utah. They were selected to represent the major geographical regions of the country and to represent the major political cultural groupings of states [7]. A minimum of fifteen rural counties were selected from each of the states with the exception of Arizona and New Mexico which each had fewer than fifteen rural counties. The relatively large number of counties per state will permit us to be more confident about drawing conclusions about the attitudes of rural decision-makers in particular states. The counties possessed less than thirty percent urban population (census definition) and generally were not contiguous to counties in an SMSA.

Survey instruments and the follow-up were given to three categories of respondents. They included county board members, major elected and appointed county administrative officials, and other non-county government employees such as agricultural agents, regional planning directors, and others. The usable sample consists of 463 respondents (35 percent of the total sample). Returns were reasonably well distributed by state, county position, and county, and the response rates were not biased in any appreciable manner<sup>1</sup>.

One of the questions asked was designed to determine the problem agenda in rural county governments. It included items ranging from broad federal relationships to specific policy issues<sup>2</sup>. Scores ranged from "very important" (Value of 4) to "not applicable" (Value of 1). Summary means for the entire population and for each of the three groups of community leaders are provided in Table 1. Table 2 lists the means for each of the six states. Higher mean scores demonstrate more saliency for that particular issue.

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<sup>1</sup> One exception was the disproportionately high response rate from the county extension agents.

<sup>2</sup> The question used was "Here is a list of problems that your county may face. Please check to what degree these are now problems in your work." The programs included: personnel management, public safety planning, financial management, promotion of business and industrial development, land use planning and zoning, housing and community development, roads, public health, water supply and sewage, public transportation, and capital improvements. Possible responses included: very important, somewhat important, not very important, not applicable.

The overall means listed in Table 1 indicate the existence of several clusters of problem issues ranked in order of importance. The most significant problem, as perceived by the total sample population is roads (mean = 2.46), and among the subcategories of positions, board members are more strongly convinced about the importance of this item than are the other position groups. The next category of problem issues is composed of traditional problems considered to be the heart of rural county governance. This includes financial management, promotion of economic development, land use policy, public health and capital improvements. For all these issues, except capital improvements, county board members perceive the problem as more serious than the other two positional categories. Capital improvements have generally been resisted by board members who must pay the political price for such schemes, thereby accounting for the board members lower ranking of this issue. A third, relatively moderately important category of issues includes personnel management, public safety, housing, and water & sewage. These issues, particularly housing, are relatively peripheral or new to the politics of rural county administration and county leader involvement with these issues is correspondingly less. Finally, public transportation is the weakest of the problem issues surveyed. Apparently, this issue has not yet entered the domain of rural county administrative politics.

**TABLE 1**

**Overall Mean, Standard Deviation (in parentheses), Position Means, Dispersion, and Dispersion Score (in parentheses)  
For Problem Issues By Position**

Problem Issue	Overall Mean	Board Member	Population Means		
			Adminis- trators	Other	Dispersion
Personnel Management	1.73 ( .97)	1.83	1.52	1.79	.31 (32)
Public Safety Planning	1.60 ( .93)	1.81	1.44	1.49	.37 (39)
Financial Management	2.26 ( .91)	2.35	2.07	2.31	.28 (43)
Promotion of Development	2.33 ( .93)	2.51	2.11	2.41	.40 (43)
Land Use and Zoning	2.17 ( .98)	2.24	2.03	2.16	.21 (21)
Housing	1.84 ( .92)	1.96	1.61	2.20	.59 (64)
Roads	2.46 ( .86)	2.65	2.31	2.37	.34 (39)
Public Health	2.04 ( .88)	2.21	1.84	1.94	.37 (43)
Water and Sewage	1.92 (1.05)	2.01	1.99	2.09	.32 (30)
Public Transportation	1.27 (1.06)	1.26	1.13	1.75	.62 (58)
Capital Improvements	2.17 ( .92)	2.11	2.47	2.64	.53 (57)
N	463	179	160	90	

In Table 1 we also examine the extent of differences in the problem agenda of the three occupational groups sampled: county board members, county administrators, and other county officials. The differences in the importance of

agenda issues across position levels appear to be substantial<sup>3</sup>. Dispersion scores across groups ranged from twenty-one to sixty-four percent, and averaged forty-three percent. Clearly, county board members, county administrators, and county officials do not share a common agenda of problem issues. The rural county political leadership groups do not hold homogeneous policy perspectives.

If the national rural agenda were homogeneous, we would expect to find similarities in the mean values of the perception of rural problems across states. The data listed in Table 2 indicate that this is not the case. The dispersion of means across states is quite high and averages forty-nine percent. For no problem issue does the relative state dispersion score fall under forty percent, indicating a high level of inter-state dispersion. The Table 2 data demonstrate that a single national rural agenda is a fiction, and that different states' rural county agenda vary widely around the mean.

In summary, the presupposition that ruralism implies a common set of policy problems does not seem to be substantiated by the data. There appears to be considerable disagreement among public officials, administrators, and other concerned individuals over the definition of the policy agenda. At the same time, there is clearly wide disparity among the states' rural counties in their self-definition of problem issues. If the perception of problems in rural areas are not standardized, then even well-meaning, rural-based, but standardized solutions are also doomed to failure.

### **Traditional Explanations**

Most contemporary research on rural problems, as mentioned above, is implicitly based on the belief that "ruralism" is a distinctive variable with relatively few dimensions. This section examines further the implied assertion, and it attempts to chart the dimensions and parameters of rural administration.

The picture of U.S. rural life, as described by rural sociologists and agricultural economists, is largely determined by the parameters of their own discipline. Economists have traditionally focused on rural income patterns [24] and rural industrial development<sup>4</sup>. Sociologists, in turn, have defined rural America by the parameters of social organizations [9], community participation [8], or interpersonal [22, 15] or interest group conflict [16].

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<sup>3</sup> The measure of dispersion is the arithmetic difference between the highest and lowest state means. The relative state dispersion score is the percentage resulting from the division of dispersion by the standard deviation. The higher the score, the greater the dispersion.

<sup>4</sup> See the extensive bibliography by Krannick and Schnell [1976].

**TABLE 2**  
**State Means, Dispersion, and Dispersion Score (in parentheses)**  
**For Problem Issues By State.**

Problem Issue	State						Dispersion
	Ariz.	Ill.	N.Mex.	N.Car.	N.Dak.	Utah	
Personnel							
Management	1.92	1.57	1.90	1.88	1.60	1.97	.39 (40)
Public Safety							
Planning	1.53	1.53	1.33	1.50	1.66	1.92	.42 (45)
Financial							
Management	2.46	2.15	2.32	2.07	2.39	2.56	.49 (54)
Promotion of							
Development	2.34	2.26	2.55	2.43	2.10	2.50	.45 (49)
Land Use & Zoning	2.41	2.02	2.22	2.07	2.23	2.50	.47 (48)
Housing	1.36	1.73	2.13	1.86	1.91	2.07	.40 (43)
Roads	2.51	2.38	2.48	1.89	2.59	2.61	.72 (84)
Public Health	2.26	1.96	2.00	1.93	2.05	2.28	.35 (40)
Water and Sewage	1.79	1.70	1.91	2.17	2.07	2.21	.50 (47)
Public							
Transportation	1.31	1.12	1.48	1.32	1.55	1.33	.42 (40)
Capital							
Improvements	2.10	2.30	2.32	2.50	2.05	2.51	.46 (50)
N	41	213	24	74	51	60	

The extent to which these sociological and economic factors effect the definition of the rural policy agenda can be examined. If a single rural policy agenda exists, then we would expect a high degree of association between the factors associated with rural life, as defined by the rural sociologists and agricultural economists, and the problem agenda<sup>5</sup>. Table 3 provides the simple correlation coefficients between the rural policy problems and various possible explanatory factors.

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<sup>5</sup> The definition of the independent variables are derived from responses to the following question: "Assess the impact of the following as each relates to the difficulty of achieving program improvement in your county." The potential problems include: geography of the county, population dispersion, personal income levels, political conflict among board members, political conflict among county administrators, political conflict between board and administrators, insufficient tax base, insufficient tax revenue, insufficient administrative skills, county debt load, opposition of community groups, general lack of community interest. Possible responses include: none, some, great, very great, and don't know. Greater concern registered received higher scores.

TABLE 3

## Simple Correlation Coefficients Between Problem Issues And Socio-Economic Impacts

## Problem Issues

## Socio-Economic Impact

Geography	.04	.06	.01	-.06	-.01	.03	.05	.09	-.01	-.02	-.03
Population Dispersion	.08	.01	.10	.06	.07	.09	.10	.12	-.00	.02	-.12
Personal Income	.10	.01	.03	.10	.00	.10	.03	.08	.01	.03	-.16
Conflict Among Board Mem.	.11	.02	.07	.02	.03	.02	-.04	-.02	.04	-.04	-.08
Conflict Among Adminstr.	.15	.04	.04	-.02	.00	.05	.04	.05	.01	-.01	-.03
Conflict Board/Administr.	.10	.00	.05	-.02	.00	-.03	.04	-.02	-.01	-.08	-.10
Insufficient Tax Base	.07	.00	.11	.01	.00	.09	-.02	.04	.03	.04	-.19
Insufficient Tax Revenue	.11	.04	.17	.03	.01	.09	-.01	.07	.02	.09	-.19
Insufficient Admin. Skills	.19	.04	.10	-.06	.04	-.04	-.04	-.00	.09	-.02	-.08
County Debt Load	.10	.04	.09	-.15	-.07	.04	-.01	.01	.01	.07	-.24
Community Opposition	.10	.06	.05	-.07	-.02	-.07	.01	.01	.01	-.03	-.10
Community Apathy	.08	.01	.01	-.10	-.07	-.08	-.09	-.01	.02	-.02	-.07

## Personnel Management

## Public Safety

## Financial Management

## Promotion of Development

## Land Use &amp; Zoning

## Housing

## Roads

## Public Health

## Water &amp; Sewage

## Public Transportation

## Capital Improvements

The results are very surprising. With one exception (county debt load — capital improvements), no variable of the economic or social life of the rural county was able to explain more than five percent of the variance in the perception of policy problems in the rural county. Evidently, the sociological and economic definitions of rural life do not correspond with the determination of the rural issue agenda. The perception of these economic and social criteria seem to play an insignificant role in the perception of a county's pressing problems.

A second set of variables may have an impact on the definition of the rural county agenda. These variables are the individual level characteristics of the survey respondents. Included are such factors as position, education, attitude towards government involvement, fiscal conservatism and age<sup>6</sup>. Table 4 lists the gamma scores received for the association between the individual level variables and the problem agenda issues<sup>7</sup>.

**TABLE 4**  
**Gamma Coefficients Between Individual Level Variables**  
**And Problem Issues**

Problem Issue	Individual Level Variables					
	Position	Experience	Education	Age	Fiscal Phil.	Govt. Phil.
Personnel						
Management	.09	-.19	-.06	-.03	-.02	-.03
Public Safety	.14	-.04	-.18	.06	.06	.00
Financial						
Management	.09	-.14	-.03	-.01	-.02	.09
Promotion of						
Development	.18	-.27	-.06	-.08	-.02	.00
Land Use & Zoning	.13	-.12	-.02	-.05	.03	.12
Housing	.20	-.23	-.06	-.06	.14	.18
Roads	.14	-.07	-.31	.19	.05	-.07
Public Health	.14	.01	-.16	.18	.24	.07
Water and Sewage	.13	-.05	-.05	.07	.16	.09
Public Transportation	.14	-.00	-.08	-.01	.26	.18
Capital						
Improvements	.20	-.12	.01	.16	-.03	-.10

<sup>6</sup> The range of answers about "government involvement" and "fiscal philosophy" varied from very liberal to very conservative on a given point scale with higher scores given to liberal self-identification.

<sup>7</sup> The gamma can be interpreted similarly to the Pearson correlation coefficient. The gamma was used in place of the Pearson r because three of the six independent variable measures are not interval measures.

The gamma coefficients indicate the existence of an understandable pattern of relationships. Position within the county leadership structure appears to have some impact on most agenda items. Length of professional experience associates strongly and negatively with industrial development and housing. Less education associates with concern for roads and age appears to be largely irrelevant, although it is weakly associated with the traditional areas of roads, public health and capital improvements. As expected, a liberal fiscal philosophy is associated with a greater concern for public health and public transportation issues, and a liberal governmental philosophy is supportive of public transportation and housing. The most significant finding from Table 4, however, is the general paucity of strong associations. Apparently, few personal individual characteristics are major predictors for a rural county's problem agenda.

Up to this point, the findings are quite puzzling. It is apparent that no single rural agenda exists. Moreover, social and economic criteria are not very important variables in the determination of the agenda, nor do personal characteristics of the rural county leadership have a sustained and substantial impact. Thus, no pattern for the establishment of a rural county's agenda has yet been found.

### Combined and State Influence

Another possible alternative explanation for the variation in rural county agendas may be the political institution of the state. Different states assist different county programs and are more or less willing to define the rural county's problems. In addition, state involvement in the county may serve to heighten awareness of a set of particular policy issues in the county governments. If states are largely instrumental in determining rural county agendas, then we must conclude that the rural county lacks autonomy and is a creature of the state.

Our study has already indicated that variation in the agenda across states is substantial. We must not determine the overall importance of state government involvement and the relative importance of state involvement vis-a-vis the other variables mentioned above. A linear least square estimating equation is an effective tool for providing the necessary information<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> The equation takes the form of:  $Y = b_0 + b_1x_1 + \dots + b_{19}x_{19} + E$   
where:

- Y = the public agenda item
- b<sub>0</sub> = the intercept
- b<sub>1</sub>-b<sub>12</sub> = the socio-economic and conflict variables
- b<sub>13</sub>-b<sub>16</sub> = dummy variables for Illinois, North Carolina, Utah, North Dakota
- b<sub>17</sub> = dummy variable for board member
- b<sub>18</sub> = dummy variable for county administrator
- b<sub>19</sub> = fiscal philosophy
- E = error term

Table 5 provides the information derived from the equation. It contains the multiple  $r$  squared and the standardized regression coefficients. The standardized regression coefficients (beta's) are comparable across the independent variables within a particular equation for the dependent variable, and the multiple  $r$  squared provides an estimate of the total amount of the variance explained by the combined impact of all the variables. Thus, we have information to judge the absolute importance of a particular factor as well as the effectiveness of the combined model for predicting a particular agenda time.

The total variance explained for each of the problem issues ranges from over twenty-seven percent to under ten percent. The explained variance is lowest for issues such as personnel management, financial management, and land use; all of which are under relatively more local control. This suggests that these issues are perceived in a localized, parochial manner, and may be strongly influenced by factors indigenous to a particular rural county. Evidence substantiating this interpretation can be seen from the relatively strong betas of the tax base and tax revenue variables received for these three problem issues.

Another set of issues also receives relatively low coefficients. These include water and sewage and housing. These issues can be interpreted as federally imposed issues which may not be responsive to the variables included in the equation. As a result, a wholly different set of county-specific idiosyncratic experiences would help explain variance in these issues.

A third set of issues emerge which possess a moderate degree of explained variance. These include public safety, economic development, roads, public health, public transportation, and capital improvements. All these issues involve a sharing of responsibility among federal, state, and local officials, and they are issues in which the individual states appear to have some explanatory impact upon the equation. In addition, the position of the respondent for most cases and his/her personal fiscal philosophy are useful predictive variables. For example, board members and fiscal liberals tend to support the importance of these issues.

Overall, the socio-economic characteristics of the county, with the exceptions of tax revenue and the tax base, are not very useful in predicting a respondent's definition of the rural county agenda. State of origin, fiscal philosophy, and position within the county leadership appear to be more useful determinants. Nevertheless, even considering the state and individual level characteristics, a considerable amount of variance is unexplained. This may indicate that the rural policy process is not as stagnant, predictable, and homogenous as much of the scholarly community has intimated.

**TABLE 5A**  
**Standardized Regression Coefficients And R Squared**  
**Of Socio-Economic, State, And Individual Variables**  
**For Each Problem Issue**

Variable	Problem Issue				
	Person. Manage.	Public Safety	Finance Manage.	Econ. Develop.	Land Use Zoning
Geography	-.03	-.13	-.11	.04	-.02
Population Dispersion	.02	.07	.14	.07	.08
Personal Income Level	.03	n.s.	-.05	.10	-.08
Conflict Among Board Mem.	-.04	.07	.07	.02	-.02
Conflict Among Administr.	.16	n.s.	.11	.06	.05
Conflict Board/Administr.	-.10	-.10	-.04	-.07	-.05
Insufficient Tax Base	-.11	-.18	-.19	-.04	.15
Insufficient Tax Revenue	.14	.22	.33	.21	-.06
Insufficient Admin. Skills	.11	.04	.04	-.05	.10
County Debt Load	.06	-.11	.10	-.14	-.12
Community Opposition	-.07	.04	-.02	-.02	.06
Community Apathy	n.s.	-.02	-.08	-.13	-.08
Illinois	-.16	-.18	-.10	-.02	-.16
North Carolina	n.s.	-.09	-.15	.03	-.09
North Dakota	-.12	-.06	-.01	-.06	-.06
Utah	.02	.04	.02	.07	.06
Fiscal Philosophy	.01	.06	.06	.02	.04
County Board Member	.05	.29	.09	.17	.08
County Administrator	-.04	.07	-.07	-.03	n.s.
R Squared	.085	.125	.108	.128	.081

TABLE 5B

**Standardized Regression Coefficients And R Squared  
Of Socio-Economic, State and Individual Variables  
For Each Problem Issue (cont.)**

Variable	Problem Issue					
	Hous- ing	Roads	Public Health	Water Sewage	Public Trans.	Capital Improv.
Geography	n.s.	-.02	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.17
Population Dispersion	.18	.22	.15	n.s.	.03	-.08
Personal Income	.02	.01	-.02	n.s.	.11	-.09
Conflict Among Board Mem.	-.10	-.12	-.08	.02	-.11	.04
Conflict Among Administr.	.08	n.s.	.03	.05	.15	-.05
Conflict Board/ Administr.	.11	.09	-.03	-.15	-.18	-.10
Insufficient Tax Base	.07	-.15	-.06	n.s.	-.22	.05
Insufficient Tax Revenue	.07	.23	.16	n.s.	.23	n.s.
Insufficient Admin. Skills	-.08	-.10	-.05	.13	.07	.04
County Debt Load	n.s.	.03	-.06	n.s.	n.s.	-.09
Community Opposition	-.11	-.02	-.03	-.08	-.10	.04
Community Apathy	-.12	-.12	n.s.	.03	.01	n.s.
Illinois	-.04	.08	-.18	-.13	-.12	.35
North Carolina	-.02	-.22	-.11	.06	n.s.	-.07
North Dakota	-.01	.06	-.06	.02	.03	-.03
Utah	.10	.05	.01	.07	.05	.09
Fiscal Philosophy	.13	.14	.22	.19	.30	.10
County Board Member	n.s.	.26	.22	.10	n.s.	.21
County Administrator	-.09	.08	.08	-.01	-.08	n.s.
R Squared	.108	.192	.131	.100	.163	.274

## Summary and Conclusion

Rural administration has been sold short. This is true of policy-makers who have imposed a whole set of urban-biased programs on the rural counties; programs for which the county may have little need, less desire, and few management resources to implement. County administrators in rural areas do not seem to follow a consistent pattern of behavior. While the agenda are qualitatively different in rural areas as compared to urban areas, there is considerable variation among rural counties. Generally speaking, the rural agenda do not seem to be affected by the policy-maker's perception of the social and economic climate of the county. For some particular issues, personal fiscal philosophy is important. For most issues, the state is significant. For others, the position held by the county policy-maker is important. In all cases, however, there is considerable variation which has not been explained.

The major inference we can make from this study is that the perception of problems in rural county government is not homogeneous, and that it is probably based upon some composite of factors that are unique, or nearly so, to every rural county studied. While ruralism differs from urbanism, ruralism is not composed of a neat subset of easily identifiable attributes. Neither the national policy-makers, nor rural sociologists, nor agricultural economists can speak with certainty about the essence of rural life.

A second major implication of the study is the apparent heterogeneity and complexity with which rural policy-makers approach rural policy problems. A rural county's problems are not perceived to be the result of a single inadequacy or weakness. In addition, the diagnosis of one problem issue does not predetermine the diagnosis of other problem issues. For example, some problems are evidently the result of indigenous county factors. Other agenda items have state support and involvement. Still others have national-level constraints. In total, rural policy-makers tend to use a sophisticated multi-faceted assessment when diagnosing and explaining rural policy problems. The rural policy-makers cannot be easily pegged; they are individuals responding to the beat of their own drummers.

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