

Context and attitude formation: Social interaction, default information, or local interests?

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Abstract

Contextual influences on public opinion have usually been conceived as the result of interpersonal discussion. More recently, some have suggested the locale provides a default source of political information in the absence of national-level information. I test an alternative mechanism for the influence of the local context: citizens who weigh the *local interest* in forming political attitudes. Using the 1993 Canadian Election Study merged to census and economic data down to the neighbourhood level, I find that very specific indicators of local interests influence issue-opinions and group feelings to which those interests are directly relevant. This influence is no stronger among those who discuss politics, nor among those lacking national political information. This is powerful circumstantial evidence that supports the hypothesis that the local interest is an important determinant of political attitudes.

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Keywords: Context; Public opinion; Canada; Social interaction; Local interests

In most democratic political systems, geography is the basis of representation. The old saw “all politics is local” still resonates despite predictions of the demise of localism in politics (Carty & Eagles, 2005; King, 1996). The word “community” is still most often applied to groups of citizens who live in the same locale. The effects of government policy are frequently evaluated through a geographical lens. In both popular and elite political discourse, rural areas, mining towns, fishing villages, military bases, one-industry towns, working-class

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neighbourhoods, and gated well-to-do enclaves are portrayed as distinct entities with particular local interests. The political science literature on public opinion, however, is nearly silent on the possibility that local interests play a role in attitude formation.

Undeniably, context can be an important influence on the formation of political attitudes (e.g. Agnew, 1996; Books & Prysby, 1991; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Johnston et al., 2004; O'Loughlin, 2003). But what is it about "context" that makes people living in different places think about politics differently? Two explanations predominate in the public opinion literature. By far the dominant one is interpersonal interaction (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Butler & Stokes, 1969; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; MacKuen & Brown, 1987; Putnam, 1966), culminating in Huckfeldt and Sprague's conclusive study of social communication (1995). Another, more recent perspective focuses on differences between citizens in the acquisition of local and national information, suggesting that some contextual effects emerge when citizens use their local environment as a default source of information in the absence of national information (Bowler, Donovan, & Snipp, 1993; Mondak, Mutz, & Huckfeldt, 1996; Weatherford, 1983b).

These two strands of research have demonstrated the importance of local contexts, but they have been curiously divorced from the study of political geography. They overlook the political geographer's stock-in-trade: structural social, demographic, and economic elements of place (see Agnew, 1987). Yet, in everyday political discourse it is exactly these structural characteristics that are invoked to define local interests: the steel vote in Pennsylvania, the miners' vote in north-central England, the farm vote in the great plains, or the fishery vote in parts of Atlantic Canada. Research on the influence of context on political attitudes therefore must attend to the possibility that citizens respond to these tangible local characteristics because they care more about the place where they live than elsewhere (Johnston et al., 2004; Pattie, Dorling, & Johnston, 1997).

The lack of empirical attention to this possibility among political scientists who specialize in public opinion is a particular manifestation of the lack of interdisciplinarity between political science and geography (King, 1996). The present article brings theory from political geography together with survey-based public opinion research. It bolsters previous work in both fields by demonstrating that contextual effects on public opinion are powerful in Canada. It then goes deeper and investigates the psychological mechanisms generating these effects.

The paper begins by reviewing the contextual effects literature and arguing that local interests are an influence on public opinion theoretically distinct from interpersonal interaction and informational shortcuts. Using the Canadian Election Study of 1993, I next estimate models of individuals' opinions on a range of issues and feelings about groups that include individual-level influences as well as measurements of the local environment. These estimates show that *relevant* characteristics of a person's locale influence his or her thinking on *specific* political issues over and above individual characteristics and values. Most importantly, the influence turns out to be nearly completely independent of political discussion and is evident across all levels of political information.

Interpersonal discussion, local information, and local interests

Interests are a basic building-block of individuals' political attitudes, but what interests are important for attitude formation? Self-interest is "surprisingly unimportant when it comes to predicting American public opinion" (Citrin & Green, 1990; Kinder, 1998: 801; Sears & Funk, 1991; but see Chong, 2000). Yet self-interest does matter "when the material benefits

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