



Public opposition and the neighborhood effect: How social interaction explains protest against a large infrastructure project

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ABSTRACT

In the literature on public opposition against spatial projects, social acceptance is considered a key variable in predicting protest. However, the process by which low levels of social acceptance are translated into real protest actions has received less attention in academia. Social movement theories predict that protest participation is strongly affected by social interaction. This article aims to connect theories on locational conflict with the growing literature on the neighborhood effect in social mobilization by conducting an empirical study of rare and unobtrusive data of protest participation, on the neighborhood level in particular.

Our case study focuses on opposition against a highway project in the city of Antwerp, Belgium. Based on a large, geocoded database with addresses of protesters and activists, we build a model to analyze activism and mobilization in neighborhoods. We control for the distance between the neighborhood and the project, as well as the socio-demographic profile of the neighborhood.

As expected, we find that distance has a significant impact on the occurrence of protest. Contrary to expectations, the aggregated socio-demographic profile of a neighborhood is not significantly related to levels of opposition. However, the presence of social capital and the presence of active protesters are good predictors of protest participation in the neighborhood. These findings support theories on the collective efficacy of neighborhoods.

1. Introduction

Since the 70s, a growing body of scholarly literature has endeavoured to understand and predict public opposition to spatial projects. Such conflicts are sometimes referred to as locational conflict (Lake, 1987), land use conflicts (Forester, 1987) or land use disputes (Suskind et al., 2003). In planning practice, public opposition has been referred to with the acronym NIMBY or Not in My BackYard (Dear, 1992), a term that has become controversial in academic literature (Bunningham, 2000; Wolsink, 2006).

Theories of locational conflict and public opposition have traditionally focused on social acceptance as a predictor for opposition. Social movement literature however has long since recognized that, not only social acceptance, but also social interaction plays an important role in understanding mobilization and protest participation (Klandermans, 1997; McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978). More recent work in urban geography has started to unravel the role of geography in shaping local activist networks (Loopmans, 2010; Nicholls,

2009; Sampson, 2012), particularly in an urban context. In line with this work, this article aims to connect theories of locational conflict with the growing literature on the neighborhood effect in social mobilization by conducting an empirical study of rare and unobtrusive data of protest participation.

Our case study is the Oosterweel connection—a planned highway around the city of Antwerp, Belgium. After 20 years of planning and more than 10 years of public opposition, the highway remains in its inception phase. In our paper we ask which neighborhoods have the highest rate of participation in protest actions and why. We use databases containing addresses provided by the principal action group, Ademloos, to map and explain levels of protest in different neighborhoods.

Our paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss some of the main theories on public opposition. Next, we review the theory and evidence of the neighborhood effect. Following that, we present the case of Oosterweel. Then, we discuss the data and measures. The remainder of the paper describes the results and discusses the theoretical and practical implications.

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2. Social acceptance as a predictor of community protest

In the literature on public opposition, social acceptance is considered a main predictor for protest. In particular studies on siting processes of wind turbines have found a relation between individual perceptions of wind turbine technologies and one's willingness to accept the construction of turbines in the vicinity (Swofford and Slattery, 2010). Similar findings come from studies on different sorts of facilities, such as waste disposal (Groothuis and Miller, 1997), nuclear energy (Tanaka, 2004), human facilities (Takahashi and Dear, 1997), or affordable housing (Tighe, 2010).

Social acceptance is a multidimensional construct. Most scholars differentiate between general public attitudes toward a certain type of facility and the attitudes of host communities in which such facilities are located (Wüstenhagen et al., 2007). The disparity between general and local attitudes has given rise to the so-called NIMBY theory. Whereas general social attitudes towards a facility might be positive, local stakeholders around the site may have different perceptions since they must bear the negative impact of the project. The NIMBY theory is then explained as a typical social dilemma, in which non-acceptance is rational from an individual perspective, but undesirable from the perspective of society (Wolsink, 1994, 2000). As externalities and impact decrease with distance (Papageorgiou, 1978), one can expect that proximity is strongly related to negative perceptions. Empirical evidence for different types of facilities supports the distance decay argument (Swofford and Slattery, 2010; van der Horst, 2007).

As an alternative to the rationalist framework, authors in social psychology have associated NIMBY behaviour with emotional, irrational behaviour, resulting from biased risk perceptions of externalities (Kasperson et al., 1988; Kunreuther et al., 1996). According to these scholars, laymen often perceive the risks associated with a project to be higher than the risk perceived by experts. Risk aversion leads people to overestimate the risks and underestimate the benefits of projects. These risk perceptions are often socially amplified (Kasperson et al., 1988).

In recent debates, there has been considerable criticism of the NIMBY framework and its use in empirical studies (Burningham, 2000; Wolsink, 2006). Some scholars have shown that protest to spatial projects might not be related to narrow "egotropic," pocketbook issues, but rather express wider "sociotropic" or environmentalist concerns (Michaud and Carlisle, 2008; Wolsink, 1994). Moreover, externalities or perceptions of externalities of spatial projects are not the only factors that affect social acceptance. Several studies have demonstrated that the decision-making process itself can be a source of discontent. Procedural fairness of these processes and trust in developers also has a significant impact on the acceptance of potentially unfavourable policy outcomes (Herian et al., 2012; Knudsen et al., 2015; Tyler, 1988; Wolf and Van Dooren, 2018b). Additionally, other variables such as place attachment (Devine-Wright, 2013) and individually perceived political efficacy play a role (Wolsink, 2000).

3. The role of neighborhoods in explaining public opposition

The literature on social movements has long since recognized that there are considerable barriers to forming protest movements (Coppens, 2011; Klandermans, 1997). Individual grievances are generally considered a necessary, but insufficient condition for protest groups to form. Equally important are the abilities and skills (Brady et al., 1995), resources (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), and opportunities (Kitschelt, 1986) that groups with grievances have to transform their grievances into protest behaviour. There are valid reasons to assume that social interaction, especially on the neighborhood level, plays an important role in shaping the likelihood of engagement in protest behavior (Coppens, 2011; Loopmans, 2010; Nicholls, 2009; Sampson, 2012; Thijssen and Van Dooren, 2016). Following Galster (Galster, 2001), we define the neighborhood as a bundle of spatially based attributes, associated with clusters of residences, sometimes in conjunction with

other land use. The attributes of a neighborhood are determined both by its spatial-physical characteristics and its social characteristics.

Within neighborhoods, we can discern between segregation effects and associational effects. Segregation effects can be defined as structural effects, in the sense that individuals with similar socio-demographic attributes tend to live together. Burgess and Park's ecological model (Park et al., 1925) explains segregation as the result of competition over residential space, taking into account the aggregated costs for individuals of housing and transport. The uneven and concentrated spatial distribution of individual capabilities and densities impacts neighborhood mobilization. As personal stakes and the willingness to protest might decrease with distance to a project, the uneven distribution of individual protest capabilities might distort the expected distance-decaying effect in theories on social acceptance. Some evidence supports the segregation effect. In a survey on Dutch opposition groups, Van Dijk and Van der Wulp found higher education levels among activists on the neighborhood level than in the general population (van Dijk and van der Wulp, 2010).

Associational effects, also referred to as the neighborhood effect, are emergent properties of the neighborhood (Sampson, 2012; Thijssen and Van Dooren, 2016). They are contextual effects because they cannot be defined at the individual level. Neighborhoods are social systems. Burgess and Park noted that proximity and neighborly contact create the basis of the simplest and most elementary form of association, thus making the neighborhood the basis of political control (Park et al., 1925). The idea that relations and ties matter in political participation has been profoundly elaborated on by theories on social capital and social movements (Putnam, 2001) and theories on the role of geography in shaping activist networks (Miller and Nicholls, 2013; Nicholls, 2009). Social capital refers to connections among individuals, social networks, and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Social ties are important in developing trust and shared norms among neighbors, developing a sense of community, exchanging important information, and establishing informal social control (Cantillon et al., 2003; Caughy et al., 2001).

Social networks are important channels of political mobilization (Dalton et al., 2010; Klandermans, 1997; North, 1998), particularly networks that are based on interpersonal relations. Snow et al. found that face-to-face recruitment via private channels is the most effective strategy for mobilization (Snow et al., 1980). The key proposition is that people are more inclined to participate in political or civic activities when they are encouraged by someone with whom they have a personal connection (Lim, 2009). As face-to-face interaction is very labor intensive, the range of a mobilization campaign depends on how extensive the social networks are and how the movement makes use of them. Therefore, one can assume that interpersonal interactions via private channels have a larger reach in neighborhoods with dense social networks than they do in socially fragmented neighborhoods, and neighborhoods with higher social capital are more effective in mobilization.

Empirical research on social capital and collective action in neighborhoods indicates a more nuanced reality. Drawing on the work of Wilson (Wilson, 2012), Sampson argues that residents of deprived neighborhoods are tightly interconnected through strong ties, but do not necessarily produce collective resources (Sampson, 2012, p. 150). According to Sampson, such strong existing ties in deprived neighborhoods generate basic reciprocal support and survival mechanisms, rather than producing collective actions on behalf of the neighborhood. Moreover, there is also evidence that weak ties—less intimate connections between people as a result of less frequent social interaction—can be equally important in establishing collective action (Granovetter, 1973; Nicholls, 2009). Sampson argues that although social ties and networks can be a necessary condition, they are certainly not a sufficient condition for collective action. Often the perceived political efficacy of a neighborhood is lacking, or the belief among residents that any action can and will

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