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Friends and neighbours voting revisited: The geography of support for candidates to lead the UK's Labour party

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ABSTRACT

Most studies of the 'friends and neighbours' effect in voting behaviour have accounted for their observed patterns using Key's classic identification of this effect as reflecting localism and voting for the 'home town boy'. This paper introduces other potential local influences, and hypothesizes that there should be separate local friends', neighbours', and political friends' effects. This expanded model is successfully tested using data from elections for the leadership of the UK's Labour Party in 1994 and 2010. All three effects operated, to a greater or lesser extent, in the pattern of voting for most of the candidates.

The concept of 'friends and neighbours voting' emerged out of V. O. Key's classic study of localism in southern US politics. He noted, in a section headed 'Friends and neighbors', that in Alabama especially (Key, 1949, p. 37):

> Candidates for state office tend to poll overwhelming majorities in their home counties and to draw heavy support in adjacent counties. Such voting behavior may be rationalized as a calculated promotion of local interest, yet it also points to the absence of stable, well-organized, state-wide factions of like-minded citizens formed to advocate measures of common concern. In its extreme form, localism justifies a diagnosis of low voter-interest in public issues and a susceptibility to control by the irrelevant appeal to support the home-town boy. In some instances, of course, localism may reflect concern about some general state issue bearing on the area.

He extended that consideration of state office elections to intra-party primary contests there and concluded (p. 41) that:

> Almost any local leader with any prospects at all who aspires to state office can cut into the strength of established state leaders within his own immediate bailiwick. He gains support, not primarily for what he stands for or because of his capacities, but because of where he lives. A more or less totally irrelevant appeal – back the home-town boy – can exert no little influence over an electorate not habituated to the types of voting behavior characteristic of a two-party situation.

After reviewing similar patterns across most of the southern states, he concluded (p. 302) that 'Among the influences determining factional alignments in particular campaigns an important place must be assigned to localism'.

The concept of 'friends and neighbours' voting in certain types of election – especially those conducted within parties, such as primary contests – became part of the electoral geography lexicon (as in Taylor & Johnston, 1979, pp. 274–290). Most of the small number of studies of the phenomenon presented circumstantial evidence only – they displayed patterns (either cartographically or statistically) consistent with the 'hypothesis' of candidates performing better close to their homes than elsewhere across the area within which support was being sought, but without any clear evidence that such patterns resulted from voters practising localism. It was assumed that they did so either because they knew, or knew of, the local candidate and voted for her/him accordingly on a personal basis, or did so because by voting for the local candidate they would gain support for locally-relevant issues. In some cases – notably in Ireland where the use of STV preferential voting in multi-member constituencies encouraged parties to maximize their support by promoting different candidates in different parts of a constituency (e.g. Sacks, 1970; Parker, 1982, 1986; Górecki & Marsh, 2012, 2014: in their 2012 paper Górecki and Marsh argue for and demonstrate the potential collinearity between friends and neighbours voting and locally-focused campaigning) – 'friends

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and neighbours' voting patterns are explicitly encouraged by the parties and their candidates, but these are rare.

Little attention has been paid to the mechanisms through which 'friends and neighbours' voting patterns might be promoted, therefore. One exception is a paper by Bowler, Donovan, and Shipp (1993) in which they argue that spatial variations in support for a candidate can result from the uneven distribution of relevant information through the relevant territory (see also Meredith, 2013). If knowledge of and information about candidates is unevenly distributed across the electorate whose support is being canvassed, then uneven distributions of support for those candidates are likely to ensue. They evaluated this argument using data for Californian elections where information about candidates was unevenly distributed through local media markets that covered parts of the state only. In a state as large as California, the mechanisms traditionally associated with 'friends and neighbours voting' cannot account for the observed voting patterns, with clear distance-decay relationships between support for a candidate and distance from her/his home: as they put it, 'it is difficult to conceive of a candidate's personal friends and neighbors contacts producing the patterns observed here' (Bowler et al., 1993, p. 486). Knowledge about candidates is also distributed through local media, and patterns of support were linked to the geography of their markets. The evidence was again circumstantial – there were no data on how voters became aware of a candidate's qualities or what determined whether they supported them – but it was entirely consistent with a model that did not rely entirely on local, inter-personal knowledge. If candidate information was locally-constrained, so might be candidate support.

We adopt and adapt this extension of the traditional 'friends and neighbours' model in our analysis here of two British intra-party elections – both for the leadership of the country's Labour party. These are high-profile events in which the party selects not only the leader of one of the country's two largest and longest-established political parties – in both of the cases analysed here, the party was in opposition at the time of the contest – but also potentially the country's future Prime Minister. Thus much of the focus is on the candidates' qualities, experience, expertise and leadership potential. Local issues, affecting part of Great Britain only, are relatively unimportant – unless one or more candidates brings them into focus by stressing the interests of one part of the country and canvasses support there accordingly, which may boost the candidate's support but in itself will be insufficient to produce victory overall. Nevertheless, as argued below, 'friends and neighbours' voting patterns may emerge for a variety of reasons, and their existence is tested for both descriptively and through regression analysis.

Although the main focus of this paper is on two case studies of a particular intra-party election, a major goal of those analyses is to develop further the theoretical framework within which friends and neighbours voting patterns are studied. According to this framework, voting for individual candidates is based on a number of decision-making influences: support for a (known) local candidate; support for and from the local area; and the spread of information through both media and social networks – the latter not only from the candidate's home constituency but also from other nodes where that candidate's political friends' and allies' support is based. The nature of those separate but inter-related influences is set out in a later section.

Electing Labour's leader, 1994 and 2010

Between 1981 and 2010, the leader of the UK Labour party was elected by an electoral college, although details of the system changed over that period. The college was made up of three component sections: one comprised the party's MPs and MEPs,[1] another contained Constituency Labour Party (CLP) members, and the last consisted of the party's affiliated organizations (trade unions for the most part). In 2014 this format was abolished in favour of a 'one person, one vote' arrangement in a single electorate and this was deployed in the next leadership election, following Labour's defeat at the 2015 general election:[2] the electoral college was however used for other internal elections within the party after 2010 – such as the Scottish Labour leadership elections in 2011 and 2014, but in neither case was a full breakdown of voting published.

The analyses of friends-and-neighbours voting reported here are based on data published in Labour's National Executive Committee's annual report for 1994 and on unpublished material distributed at the Labour party conference in 2010 (Labour Party, 1994, pp. 84–92; Labour Party, 2010). These two leadership elections are particularly apt for such investigation as the electoral system was reformed in 1993 so that all votes in section two of the electoral college (that for CLPs) were made on the basis of a version of 'one member, one vote' (OMOV) and were attributed directly, in each constituency, to the candidate for whom they were cast. Data are unavailable for a directly comparable analysis of earlier contests: before 1981, MPs alone elected the party leader while between 1981 and 1993, each CLP simply cast a single vote for a candidate without reflecting the balance of opinion within the constituency. An intervening election, when Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair in 2007, was uncontested. The party did not publish a breakdown of results for individual members voting on a CLP by CLP basis for the deputy leadership in that year (nor did it do so for other internal party elections between 1993 and 2010 in which the electoral college was deployed).

In the 1994 and 2010 contests, preferential voting was deployed in each section of the electoral college. The data used here to explore the geography of the results are: for section one of the college, the candidate who received the local MP's first preference vote; and for section two, the percentage of the first preference votes given to each candidate in each CLP. Labour MPs represented 271 constituencies at the time of the leadership contest in 1994 and 257 in 2010. In 1994 there were 633 reporting CLPs, in 2010 there were 632; constituency boundaries were redrawn in 2005 in Scotland and 2007 in the reminder of the UK (in 1994 there was neither individual membership nor constituency organization in Northern Ireland; for the 2010 leadership contest, members in Northern Ireland – who had been able to join the party since 2003 – were reported as part of a single CLP covering the whole province; those Northern Ireland voters are excluded from the current analyses).

The 1994 contest was generated by the sudden death of John Smith, who had been elected as leader after Neil Kinnock's resignation following the party's defeat at the 1992 general election (see Rentoul, 1995, pp. 353–380; Alderman & Carter, 1995). Three candidates – Margaret Beckett, Tony Blair and John Prescott – obtained the requisite number of nominations from MPs to gain access to the ballot. All were senior members of the Shadow Cabinet. Margaret Beckett, from a working class background and a metallurgist by training, had worked as a Labour Party researcher in the early 1970s. She was first elected to the House of Commons (as Margaret Jackson) in 1974, representing Lincoln, but she lost that seat in 1979; she returned as MP for Derby South in the East Midlands at the next general election in 1983 and was elected Deputy Leader in 1992, going on to be Acting Leader in the interim following Smith's death. Beckett did not have substantial local ties to either of those constituencies. Born in Scotland, educated there as well as in the North-East of England, before studying at Oxford University and training as a lawyer, Tony Blair entered the House as MP for Sedgefield, in North-East England, in 1983 (having lost a by-election in Beaconsfield in south-east England the previous year). He joined the party's front-bench in 1984, and by the time of Smith's death was Shadow Home Secretary. Blair had some slight links to the North-East: alongside some of his early school education there, his father had lectured at Durham University. He did not have any political involvement in