

Political Geography, Political Behavior and Public Opinion

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In most democratic countries, the uneven geographic distribution of votes for major party candidates is readily apparent from any number of official maps prepared by government authorities following an election. Whether we are staring at a map of Canada's 13 provinces and territories, the 50 United States, the 29 states of India, or the 26 Swiss Cantons, differences in expressions of support for candidates will appear as a variable patchwork. The mapped patterns are a direct reflection of the fact that in response to elections, spatially situated voters go and cast their ballots but express differing levels of enthusiasm, voicing uneven support for major parties. These choices, in turn, are carefully recorded, then aggregated for further study at multiple scales of observation (Rohla et al. 2018). As data analysis and recording technology have advanced, it has become possible to obtain observations of political choice at ever more granular scales; down to the postal code; the voting district or precinct (Johnston et al. 2019); and for less sensitive information, even down to the household and individual levels (Fieldhouse and Cutts 2018; Cutts and Fieldhouse 2009; Brown and Enos 2021).

The study of the spatial arrangement of the variability in political participation and expression is much of what we study in the field of electoral geography.¹ Whatever pattern emerges from a

¹This review essay focuses principally on the question of whether geographic concentrations of individual actors, as displayed in maps of voters' political support for political parties, policy positions, or displaying particular types of behavior such as voting, contributing, or volunteering, are anything more than the composition of individual characteristics that describe them. To this end, the essay addresses whether social influence is geographically constrained, and points to the long history of debate about contextual and neighborhood effects on opinion and behavior. Given page constraints specified by the editor, the essay cannot even lightly address the myriad intersecting topics that have been the focus of thorough and insightful review essays elsewhere, including: legislative districting (LaRaja 2009); gerrymandering (McGhee 2020); the representation of political preferences distributed in geographic space (Rodden 2010; Chen and Rodden 2013); the use of GIS as a device for studying political geography (Cho and Gimpel 2012); the creative use of spatial statistics in social science (Anselin 2010; Anselin and Rey 2010; Darmofal 2015); ecological inference in social science (Freedman 1999); or the seemingly innumerable works addressing electoral polarization, whether spatially construed or not.

particular election, it is unlikely to reflect a chance sprinkling of voters across a geographic space. Republicans, Democrats, Tories, Laborites and Liberal Democrats, Libertarians and Greens are not settled across the landscape in an indiscriminate manner. The first and most elementary reason for this is that human populations are not settled either uniformly or randomly but in changing densities moving from crowded cities out to sparsely settled, largely uninhabited areas. One of the most fundamental characteristics of human population settlement is this fluctuating concentration. We are likely to find more of everyone: people over six feet tall; vegetarians; people who own goldfish; people who have owned Ford automobiles; and people who wear size nine shoes, in places that have more people overall.

A central question in the geographic study of political behavior is whether the distribution of *political* characteristics in an area extends beyond the distribution of people there (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003). Are Green Party members *disproportionately* concentrated in particular places while absent in others? Does the support for Donald Trump in a town exceed or fall below the numbers we would expect from knowing the total number of residents? A location might contain four percent of a state's total residents of voting age. But if it contains far more (less) than four percent of that state's voters, or, say, Democratic voters, then political geographic inquiry becomes a worthwhile undertaking.

For there to be a political geography in the first place, there must be variation across space, whatever the units of observation might be. At certain times and places, it is possible that everyone, or nearly everyone, votes for the same candidate, as in elections held in some authoritarian countries. But for political geography to have anything to offer the study of political behavior, the explanations it offers must address the uneven nature of political belief and expression. The relevance of political geography has grown in recent decades as election data for more granular geographic units have become available

for the study for more countries. Smaller scale observations usually mean that social scientists have greater variation to examine in their effort to account for voters' attitudes and activity.

The differential expressions of support for political positions, whether opinions on issues, or voters for parties and candidates, are rooted in the variable characteristics of individual voters (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960, 24-32; Lewis-Beck, Norpoth and Jacoby 2008). If we are explaining the 2024 presidential vote, observations of individual characteristics (e.g., employment, income, political knowledge) and viewpoints (e.g., candidate and party evaluations) proximate to the time of that vote are among the most relevant of considerations. These characteristics of survey respondents are likely to have a discernible geographic arrangement across space. Standard sized surveys that sparsely sample subjects across the national terrain simply cannot reveal it (Gimpel 2018).

Composition vs. Context

As for what explains the geographic quilt of political support, there are two possibilities. The first is that the unevenness of expression reflects the clustering or dispersion of the individual-level traits, identities, and allegiances that are thought to give rise to a particular preference. There will be Trump support wherever there are less well-educated, white voters of low- to moderate income. Republicans will be found concentrated in areas where evangelical Christian voters are concentrated. Democrats will be found in higher proportions wherever there are concentrations of African Americans, feminists, or in neighborhoods full of college faculty living near a university. If we inventory the socioeconomic groups that underlie each political party's support in a given place at a particular time, then any geographic patterns can be directly traced to the presence, absence, and relative shares of those groups resident at those locations. Some may argue that there is nothing more to political geography than the distribution of economic and demographic characteristics across a city, state or region. These are the same characteristics commonly revealed by ordinary surveys of voters.

Communities of interest are formed when these characteristics are found clumped together in pockets of similarity.

Does location in a particular area add anything to the explanation for variability in attitudes or behavior over and above the collection of observed traits we can inventory in the population? This is a classic social science question, asked across a number of fields, from education (Garner and Raudenbush 1991; Duncan and Raudenbush 1999; Lee 2000), health and epidemiology (Leyland 2005; MacIntyre and Ellaway 2000; Ross 2000; Duncan et al. 1998), and economics (Graham 2018; Naz et al. 2015; Iannides and Datcher Loury 2004) to political science (Anoll 2018; Gallego et al. 2016; Hopkins 2010; Gay 2004; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, Prysby 1989), sociology (Coleman 1966; Sharkey and Faber 2014; Raudenbush and Sampson 1999; Moore and Vanneman 2003) and recently, even psychology, probably the most individually-focused of all the social sciences (Rentfrow 2020; Ebert et al. 2020; Rentfrow and Jokela 2016; Obschonka et al. 2015; Oishi 2014; Oishi, Koo and Buttrick 2019). No one doubts the advantages to studying political expression at the level at which it is taking place: the individual. Aggregate observations of precincts, counties, regions, and states risk committing the ecological fallacy if their results are interpreted as reflecting individual opinions and behavior (Freedman 1999). County level data may show a positive association, for example, between black voters and Republican voting, that does not reflect the individual-level reality (Thorndike 1939; Robinson 1950; Selvin 1958).

On the other hand, individual level explanations may also be inadequate. Two locations may be similarly composed but one votes 40 percent Republican, and the other one 60 percent Republican. Processes of social influence and communication may alter the impact of individual level variables on behavior. The odds that a working-class voter supports Republicans may rise as the prevalence of Republicans in the community rises (Berelson et al. 1954; Fenton 1966; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). The individual relationship between social class and party support changes as the partisan balance in the surrounding area changes (Feinberg et al. 2017). Geographic influence renders the individual

relationship unstable since it is contingent also on the voters' social environment. Relying only on a tally of individual characteristics will be inadequate if there is something about the locations that contributes to participation levels, the expression of opinions, party loyalty, candidate evaluation, or some other outcome of interest. Characteristics of individuals are not the only causes of these outcomes.

Studies of political behavior may need to evaluate the individual level data along with information about the communities in which the individuals are embedded (Huckfeldt 2014). Some of the earliest studies of political behavior pursued this course, examining the politics of a citizenry in particular towns over the course of a major election campaign (Berelson et al. 1954; Lazarsfeld et al. 1944). More recent research has suggested the importance of taking measures of social settings as a means of understanding how individuals apply their partisanship to form preferences (Butters and Hare 2020; Conners 2019; Klar 2014; Sinclair 2012; Mutz 2006; Visser and Mirabile 2004; Pattie and Johnston 2000; Burbank 1997; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; 1987). Geographic context can provide information related to social networks that may exert an independent effect on political behaviors or attitudes (e.g., Sinclair 2012).

Geographic contexts have staying power, likely due to the long-term clustering of human traits and economic activities in specific places (Obschonka et al. 2018). The adversity associated with the difficulties of being employed in labor intensive industries during the industrial revolution can be seen as psychological imprints on the present-day populations of the locales where these industries were concentrated. Apparently, the persistent experience of stressful, exhausting, and dangerous working conditions has an enduring, *trans-generational*, impact (Obschonka 2018). These findings are consistent with the familiar idea that through the socialization process younger people learn their values and outlook from the example of their elders. Early political behavior researchers indicated that community patterns of opinion and party allegiance have a remarkable capacity to persist for decades,

even generations, after the disappearance of the issues that originally animated them (Campbell et al. 1960, 152; Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Key 1949). Party attachments become habitual, even a family tradition, and are informed by little if any knowledge of policy. These long-term contextual forces have been found to inform contemporary patterns of political behavior more than a century later in the case of racial divisions data to the Civil War (Archarya et al. 2017). A similar study with an eye on deeply seated tradition suggests that electoral support for Donald Trump is traceable to the historical isolationism of German American populations in the period between the two World Wars (Dentler et al. 2021). Spelling out the precise causal mechanisms at work over such long periods of time is complicated, as is putting in place a suitable set of controls for rival explanations. But few would contend that the history of a place shapes its current circumstances. Just as it is reasonable to say that people's opinions, values and behavior are contingent upon features of the place they live, that place has a past, some features of which have left a deep impression.

Social Influence and Proximity

But are these influential social settings geographically bounded and constrained? Or is social space non-geographic or aspatial? In the internet age, it is routine to communicate at low cost with family, friends and workmates who are thousands of miles away. Social may not mean local in the way it did in decades past. Astounding advances in transportation and communications technology over the last half century have led some to predict the "death of distance" (Cairncross 2001) and the end of geography (Friedman 2005). These arguments posit that geographic proximity simply does not matter now that cyberspace has replaced geographic space. A related implication is that the internet substitutes for the locational advantages associated with urban concentration. Proximity used to be important for innovation, for example, making cities magnets for creativity. Internet communication is now a substitute for proximity, so the argument goes (Iaonnides et al. 2008; Craig et al. 2017).

While not all social interactions are bounded by geographic space, it appears that the more influential ones are (Small and Adler 2019; Latané 1981; Latané and Liu 1996; Huckfeldt 1983, 661). Face-to-face contact has been found to diminish with geographic distance between individuals (Van Den Berg et al. 2009, 7). Even in online social platforms, users are more prone to connecting with those who are geographically close to them than to those further away (Laniado et al. 2018; Spiro et al. 2016; Scelatto et al. 2010). Long range ties can be formed through online means, but short-distance contacts dominate networks of frequent contact (Takhteyev et al. 2012). The regularity of cellular phone contact in a large-scale communications network declines as distance increases (Lambiotte et al. 2008; Krings et al. 2009). As the geographic distance between two firms increases, the prospects for business-related research collaboration drops significantly (Reuer and Lahiri 2014; Chandra et al. 2007). Urban concentration apparently complements internet development and interaction, rather than serves as a substitute for it. Perhaps innovation requires a physical component for which online contact is a weak replacement (Craig et al. 2017, 28).

Marketing studies show that social influence on adoption of a recommended brand is far more successful if previous adopters live nearby, even if the ties between old and new adopters are weak (Meyners et al. 2017, 53-54). Geographic proximity is read by consumers to be a marker of similarity and trust. Someone recommending or endorsing a product who lives nearby must be like me, so I consider their judgment to be of greater value than someone far away. This is similar to the trust that is engendered by politicians when they highlight their own local ties and background in constituency meetings. Common geographic origin serves as an additional credential (Hunt 2020; Munis 2021; Gimpel et al. 2008).

Distance is an unavoidable cost for infrastructure networks such as highways, rail lines, air links, waterways. It is perhaps surprising that social network contact also seems to hinge critically on proximity (Barthélemy 2011). People can form more contacts over long distances than in the past, but

that does not seem to have diminished the weight placed on contacts close-by. While social influence is not strictly bound by distance, it does diminish with distance, pointing to the continuing relevance of geographic space for human interaction, communication, and persuasion. In our view, distance between two locations offers an important hypothesis for predicting the degree of political differentiation between the two populations residing at those locales, assuming that the populations have resided there for some duration and are not newly arrived from elsewhere. Information and ideas flow within communities, shaping the political values and expressions of populations. With interaction, there can be outflows of information to other locations, as well as inflows from the outside, but the limitation of distance is not easily overcome.

Isolation: Differentiation and Protective Benefits

Isolation brings about differentiation. This is a well-known relationship among animal and plant biologists; genetic and geographic distance is correlated because distance limits interaction (Wright 1943; Slatkin 1993). In human populations, distinctive place identities are likely to be reinforced as geographic isolation increases. Distance, the attendant isolation from populated urban centers, is also associated with powerlessness and political resentment (Cramer 2016).

Not all isolation is the product of distance, however. Population interaction can be limited by barriers in the physical and built environment even when populations are not far apart. Individuals may not freely move about in an area if impedances limit movement. Populations on either side of an imposing natural barrier, such as a mountain range, or a substantial body of water, may produce an isolation that yields surprising variation on each side of the divide, even if other characteristics are similar (Cho and Nicley 2008, 813-814). Features of the built environment, including highways and other development, along with boundaries imposed by political entities can limit interaction between two otherwise proximate populations (Singh and Marx 2013). Demolition and destruction of housing developments might bring about the separation of two populations that were previously in contact

(Enos 2016). To be sure, highways and bridges can also bring populations together that had been separate, so the potential for infrastructure to reduce isolation and promote the mingling productive of homophily should also be examined.

Isolation whether present through physical or constructed barriers, or imposed by distance, can also be protective of populations, an outcome often neglected in research literature. The emphasis in most research is on the manifold benefits of connectedness. Parents are among those routinely aware of the potential for bad ideas to circulate in peer networks. Within academia, few outside of the fields of public health, adolescent psychology and criminology have stopped to ponder, much less study, the harmful influences that might diffuse through space via increased linkage. A small body of research is investigating the negative influence of online word-of-mouth and rumor mongering (Pfeffer et al. 2014). Fake news dissemination, witch hunts, privacy abuse, aggression and bullying are regularly observed in network communications and have proved difficult to control. Our point is that information and ideas diffuse with contact, but surely not all transmitted content is worth welcoming, or productive of desirable outcomes. Communities that have strong peer groups, families and family networks, a sense of collective efficacy, and local institutions, may find that limiting outside contact facilitates the maintenance of these advantageous conditions. Risks are raised with interaction with outsiders importing influences that undermine community standards, potentially leading to behavioral problems and social deviance.

If contact with outsiders threatens harm, taking countermeasures to limit such contact is surely in order. To secure the benefits of isolation, communities strive to erect barriers to outside interaction or prevent the development of closer linkages to populations regarded with suspicion and mistrust. The opposition to the construction of new subway stations in certain neighborhoods comes to mind, as does the manipulation of land use regulations to prevent certain kinds of housing development. A common form of protective isolation in affluent communities is maintained through the erection of a guard and

gatehouse limiting neighborhood entry only to verified residents. Such reactions are deemed reasonable and necessary if threats are especially proximate. But sometimes protective isolation is maintained by a place being situated well out of the pathway of commercial development, and the menace of a major highway. Many small towns scattered across the country fit this profile. Their geographic location is itself a kind of natural barrier against corrupt outside influence. Greater connectivity from these places to those considered more centrally located is not a development that weighs only on the positive side of the ledger. What happens when protective seclusion ends is well worth documenting. One study demonstrated how the level of neighborhood activism intensified when a homeless population moved nearby. The closure of a bridge forced low-income residents to relocate bringing disorder to the neighborhood that had previously been protected from the troubled population. A predictable political response followed, with a consequent rise in the mobilization of established residents at the next mayoral election (Brown and Zoorob 2020).

The combined impact of distance and isolation from difference should contribute to the formation of distinct clusters of political attributes across the terrain of population settlement, sharing high within-group similarity, but minimizing across-group similarity as distance and isolation between clusters grows. This is a central prediction of electoral geographic research. An association between political differences and isolation can be confounded by other population differences that make two groups distinct. For this reason, it is sensible to evaluate differences between populations with covariates in mind, including the income, race, education level, age and religious belonging of community members (Gimpel et al. 2020).

Population Size and Density

That increasing population size and density have momentous consequences for human populations is not disputed. Moreover, these consequences seem to be more than just what the assemblage of people in one place might predict based on their individual characteristics alone; the

results of differing densities across space are more than just compositional. Relevant outcomes attributed to variable density go to diversity and specialization; fertility; mortality; child rearing and schooling; crime; aggression and deviance; civic engagement; voluntarism; and physical and mental health (Durkheim 1932; Wirth 1938; Calhoun 1962; Galle et al. 1972; Choldin 1978; Smith 1994; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Sampson 2003; Oliver 2003; Oliver 2000; Oishi 2014). We understand density to mean the number of residents per unit of space, typically square miles. Though some might distinguish social density (social contacts per unit of space) from physical density (individuals per unit of space), we often lack adequate measures of the former. A related and helpful distinction is between physical density and density of acquaintanceship – the latter being the density of one’s friendship and family network in a community (Freudenberg 1986).

Research into the reasons why density matters has usually pointed to crowding in the presence of resource constraints (housing, employment) producing greater competition and stress. Diversity accompanies density because differentiation is required to sustain ever larger groups in a fixed amount of space (Wirth 1938, 14). If one group gains an upper hand in this environment, in-group favoritism will ensure that advantages to that group accumulate through time, widening inequality of opportunity and outcome. Persistent inequality produces anger and resentment, making crowded spaces much more unpleasant places than they would be otherwise.

High density seems to be accompanied by indifference and antagonism wrought by weak social ties among residents. Some have speculated that in crowded environments there is a natural tendency to minimize friendly contact due to the sheer volume of possible interactions (Milgram 1970; Fischer 1982). Close relationships are difficult to form and to maintain, and no one can afford very many. Resulting loneliness is considered to have many negative ramifications for well-being (Putnam 2000, 326-332; McPherson et al. 2006). In locations where density is accompanied by social disorder, there is further stress, discomfort, and withdrawal (Kelling and Wilson 1982; Steenbeck and Hipp 2011). There

is surely a lower bound on density below which these social outcomes do not improve, leveling off at a variably propitious population concentration.

By residing in less densely populated areas there is a relative scarcity of possible interactions, so residents are inclined to invest more in the people they do encounter. The greater strength of ties may account for the regular reports of trust and agreeableness among townspeople, compared to residents of big cities. In turn, population stability and established residence maintains these ties across long spans of time. People care for one another, as described by Wuthnow (2013, 117-119), they greet one another with a wave, and make eye contact when passing on the sidewalk. Routine types of nonverbal communication send signals of neighborliness and civility, and people strive to get along with one another (Wuthnow 2013, 123).

The greater familiarity among residents of low-density environments produces social pressure unlike the independence and unconventionality allowed by crowded nameless settings. Easy recognition means deviance from norms is highly visible. According to a massive social psychological consensus, having your activities monitored is a powerful influence on behavior. Even if a local populace is quite tolerant, knowledge that one's social gaffes and transgressions are on full display is easily enough to propel you to leave town if the violations mount or are sufficiently grave. No one will usher the norm violator or the lawbreaker to the outskirts of town to literally show them the door. But one might acutely sense the need for a fresh start elsewhere simply out of the sense that accumulated missteps are so readily observable. These social pressures undoubtedly produce unhappiness among residents desiring to experiment with new fashions, unfamiliar routines, and gain acceptance for beliefs and values imported from faraway. Nontraditional expressions are inhibited by even subtle signals of disapproval, which given their visibility, the independent-minded find suffocating. The maintenance of traditionalism is why small towns have often been considered a haven for people living out the final decades of their life, even as younger people flee these same places, not just for greater economic

opportunity, but to tryout new life courses. Even so, close-up observation reveals that lightly populated areas come in a surprising variety of social and economic forms, as well as densities.

Bellicose confrontations are rare. While conservative views on political issues typically predominate, there are often substantial minorities that remain silent when the majority side is clear-cut. As in other places, opinions on controversial issues are often shaded and nuanced with qualifications and exceptions. Residents identify which spaces are public, and which are private, and censor themselves accordingly. This reluctance to be quarrelsome even on divisive issues is part of what maintains the spirit of community (Wuthnow 2013, 288, 312).

Causality and Political Geography

Many academic studies have established statistical associations between distance, density, isolation, and outcomes such as opinion holding, partisan identification, voting, volunteering and contributing. Many of these also offer plausible accounts of the causal processes at work, discussing the impact of social influence on the individual, for instance, how individuals perceive the climate of opinion around them, then act accordingly. By now, after decades of research, it would be surprising to suppose that social environments have no influence on opinion and behavior. Giving an account of what is probably happening is not the same thing, however, as precisely estimating causal impact. Whether the goal is to study contagion and health, identify neighborhood effects on school performance, or to pin down measures of contextual impact during a political campaign, researchers want to precisely measure the size of these effects are and learn more about how they emerge. Moreover, misidentification of these effects can have costly consequences, if, for example, they form the foundation for important decisions and policies. Across decades, scholars have discussed several issues linked to contextual effects research that go to the difficulties of causal identification. We identify these briefly in the next few pages.

Studies of contextual effects cannot identify causal impact because they cannot randomly assign individuals to environments. They are confined to being observational designs, true experimentation is limited. Unfortunately, there is no way around this problem much of the time. Many topics of social science interest are not suitable for experimentation – and we should probably be relieved that this is so. We would not ethically assign experimental subjects to live in neighborhoods where they may encounter circumstances potentially injurious to their well-being. Often, the best a researcher can do is to make observations about people who reside across a wide variety of environments and make conscientious efforts to statistically control for rival explanations.

The welcome increase in the use of experimental designs over the past two decades has produced creative tests of the impact of social influence and of place. An important study of the impact of social threat on voter turnout demonstrated the effect of peer influence on political participation (Gerber, Green and Larimer 2008). An experimental study also identified a causal relationship between neighborhood social influence and campaign contributing (Perez-Truglia and Cruces 2017). Well-designed quasi-experiments (Shadish, Cook and Campbell 2002) are also used to improve causal inference over standard time-invariant correlational studies. One clever test for the impact of racial threat on the viewpoints and behavior of white voters leveraged an auspicious collection of data with observations before and after the demolition of a dozen large urban housing projects in Chicago. These projects lodged mainly black voters who were then removed from the area following the demolition. Observations of white voters after the relocation of the project residents showed that white behavior was arguably less racially sensitized than it had been before (Enos 2016). An intriguing experimental study on the disadvantages of place was recently carried out by sociologists using a creative design that tested the propensity for buyers to avoid purchasing used cell phones from sellers residing in certain stigmatized neighborhoods. Results indicated that sellers avoid buying from residents of badly branded places (Besbris et al. 2018). Place of residence does turn out to signal information about individuals as

many observational studies suggest (Cho, Gimpel and Hui 2019). New experimental studies are confirming that there is a causal relationship between place and outcome. This research offers inspiration and direction for researchers working with ever more impressive and inventive data collections.

Contextual effects are small or disappear once we have controlled for the proper individual level covariates. Social and geographic influence isn't really "there". Although it is surely sensible to hypothesize that a school, neighborhood, town, or state has an independent impact on individual level outcomes, the effect identified may be trivially small or disappear entirely once we include additional individual level explanatory variables (Hauser, Sewell and Alwin 1974). In the social sciences, data collections are rarely, if ever, exhaustive of indicators for every possible explanatory variable. The General Social Survey cumulative data file contains over 6,000 items, albeit not for every year and every respondent since the study began in 1972. Still, as survey data collections go, it is considered comprehensive. As complete as it is, there are still many desirable items that are absent. Using even the best extant data will likely leave out some items for next time. There is also the counter that it is undesirable theoretically and methodologically to substitute long lists of individual-level variables, many that are highly intercorrelated, in an effort to rule out the impact of geographic and social influence. Such procedures throw open the floodgates to Type II error, concluding that certain explanations do not matter, when they really do.

The good news is that data collection has improved at a marked and accelerating pace over the past three decades. As these improvements have occurred, the study of contextual effects has not gone away with the conclusion that only more comprehensive individual information is necessary. If anything, the exact opposite has happened, with new and large datasets providing superior information by which to gauge both individual level *and* contextual effects (Gimpel 2018; Cantoni and Pons 2020; Moore and Reeves 2017, 2020). In the past, conventional surveys commonly failed to capture the

variability in environmental exposure needed for confident estimates of contextual effects (Gimpel 2018, 98). Now it is increasingly possible to work with data sources that provide not only excellent representation of the study population, but that also capture the variation in the inhabited environments thought to have an independent impact.

Contextual effects are exaggerated because of the failure to account for the impact of selection into environments. This is among the more common criticisms of the effort to assess the independent impact of social and geographic spaces on individuals net of an inventory of personal characteristics. If people select where they reside (or work) or choose to stay in a place they could otherwise leave, then they are exercising a choice to expose themselves to a social milieu that is consonant with their viewpoints in the first place. If they are choosing to live in a particular place because they find it agreeable, that undercuts the idea that the environment has an impact on their behavior that steers them toward social conformity. Contextual and social influence effects must be greatly overstated if people select into the places they live, especially if the social and political agreeability of the place is part of the calculus.

Recent research has suggested that at least some people do select into the places where they live based on assessments of their fit with the place, though fit may not be “political fit” per se (Gimpel and Hui 2017; Gimpel and Hui 2018; Carlson and Gimpel 2019; Liu et al. 2019). An unknown but substantial percentage of other people also choose to stay in a location when they might otherwise leave – a kind of tacit selection, albeit without the active consideration that movers might give to the range of alternative destinations before they choose one. Once these groups are accounted for, that leaves those who did not select into the location, but always lived there, which would include the many offspring of residents who may moved to that locale in generations past, but who did not choose it themselves. In summary, some part of neighborhood political environment is the result of self-selection by migrants, some by self-selection among residents who could move but choose not to, and the

remaining percentage is the population of natives who have never considered relocation (Cho, Gimpel and Hui 2019). In most places, the established residents are the largest group making up the local opinion distribution, though future research should pin down these variable proportions more precisely (see Liu et al. 2019). Determining how each of these groups contributes to opinion stability and change in a location is also under active investigation (Carlson and Gimpel 2019; Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003).

Finally, even among those who self-select into an environment, not every subsequent interaction will be the product of choice, as if people had complete control over whom they meet and the information they encounter. Certainly there are constraints on the supply of information in particular areas, partly the product of the decision to live there, but there will still be regular exposure to non self-selected information. There is room for social context to matter because boundaries in and out of places are not sharply defined and they are also porous, with people routinely passing back-and-forth across them. People are also residents of more than one local context, though often it has been only computationally and statistically feasible to estimate effects for one of them. As recent studies have shown, social context substantially influences the flow and accuracy of political information as it travels through social networks (Carlson 2019).

Community context research involves circular reasoning. Scholars hypothesizing about contextual effects want to say that an outcome, say, individual party identification, is shaped by the opinion distribution of the larger community. But then they follow-up by saying that individuals' party identities are a determinant of the opinion distribution of that community (Manski 1993). This inference stifling ambiguity of causal direction is certainly a problem with the many studies that are unable to vary time. As advanced research designs that have a dynamic component have emerged, this circularity can be avoided. These designs allow researchers to identify how changes at the community level will alter individual attitudes and behavior. Change-oriented hypotheses should take greater precedence in contextual effects research (Mallinson and Hatemi 2018; Prysby and Books 1987; Reiss 1954, 55-56).

The field of economics typically gathers more data using panel designs (same cross-section of respondents observed over time) than do other social science fields. Investment in this kind of data collection in political science is very much to be desired.

Moving Forward

The issues we address in this chapter are not of recent vintage. Most of the central questions have persisted for many decades, they only appear to be new as younger generations first come upon them. The obstacles to inference about the effects of social environments on behavior are well known (see, for example: Reiss 1954; Hawley and Duncan 1957; Hauser 1974; Hauser, Sewell and Alwin 1974; Durand and Eckart 1976; Weatherford 1982; Blalock 1984; Jencks and Mayer 1990; King 1996). Social science researchers attempting to identify contextual effects have been studying these problems for decades, as they try to make headway and respond to critics (Segal and Mayer 1969; Przeworski 1974; Sprague 1976; Kelley and McAllister 1985; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague 2004).

Aside from attracting the attention of scholars across the social sciences, probably the most positive development over the last two decades has been in the rapid progress on data collection that has made possible, often for the first time, convincing tests for contextual effects. It was easy to dismiss the impact of social and geographic influence when data collections were poorly suited for testing them (Gimpel 2018). Now that contexts can be captured by increasingly accessible data collections, including observations over time, it is less easy to level the criticisms that once held sway to justify the volumes of published work that ignored social and geographic context. Field experimental research is a very promising avenue for studying the relationships of distance, density and isolation on opinions and behavior, while also obtaining greater clarity on causal sequence. We are not of the view, however, that a research program on social influence, geography, and political expression should be abandoned

merely because there are persistent threats to causal inference. Social science has always relied upon the closeup study of individual cases to offer credible accounts of the probable causal mechanisms behind compelling associations in data. To offer such reports, narratives must be developed involving observations outside the offices of the campus social science building. Political geography is about explaining variation in attitudes and behavior across places. Going to those places firsthand, whether to the neighborhoods in Elmira or Chicago, the Southern Black Belt counties, or the small towns in Wisconsin, remains an important step in the research plan.

Finally, we have tried to show in this review essay that the study of geographic and social influence does not belong to a single field but is distributed widely across social science disciplines. Researchers entering this grove should be prepared to read outside of their primary field. Though the bulk of the research cited here has been in Sociology and Political Science, researchers in Geography, Psychology, Economics, Business, Urban Planning, and more specialized fields, are actively making contributions. Thorough and respectful treatments of the issues raised in this essay require scholars with greater than average bandwidth.

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