

Which Contexts Count?

--- A Multilevel Approach to the Analysis of the Social Ecology of Voting in New York City 2013

The political participation of the civil society is the most important part of functioning democratic societies. A broad and equally distributed support of the society is considered to be a major quality characteristic of democracy, indicating a lively participation in the political decision-making process as an expression of the state's recognized legitimacy. In reality, however, we know that political participation, civic engagement and political interest are unevenly distributed. Disadvantaged people, who are unemployed or have to live below the poverty line, participate less and therefore have little chance to represent their interests. In addition to the individual characteristics of non-voters, literature has shown that there is less social cohesion and political participation, in general, in disadvantaged areas that suffer particularly from a lack of the qualities and elements, which produce and sustain social connection and thus impinge on the neighborhood's overall political engagement. It is this dichotomous relationship of voting behavior between individual characteristics and the neighborhood and general surrounding, or rather individual activity space, which we want to analyze in this paper.

In a multilevel analysis that goes beyond the conventional hierarchical models, we will look at the relationship between voter turnout and neighborhood characteristics such as neighborhood diversity level, racial composition and contextual socio-economic status independent of the individual attributes of residents such as race and ethnicity and age, which are provided in the New York City voter registration file for 2013. Higher voter turnout tends to indicate greater civic engagement, which is a good quality for any neighborhood in terms of citizenship participation, but also with other indicators of neighborhood quality and child well being, for instance. Furthermore, the number of people voting shows, who feels engaged as a citizen and who does not. We could also ask how voting participation relates to other factors like neighborhood homeownership rate, child poverty and racial diversity? How does an increase in diversity (or, a decrease)

relate to social cohesion and voting behavior? How does an increase in segregation effect voter turnout?

Furthermore, we want to go beyond the tract-related understanding of context, but are interested in the direct impact of neighbors on a person's voting behavior. Therefore, we will use the geocoded addresses of each single individual and calculate the average value for the surrounding half-mile radius.

Research Question:

Do characteristics of neighboring activity spaces—i.e., the actual spatial and social exposures people experience in their daily routines—influence behavioral voting patterns?

Our idea behind this is that conventional theories of neighborhood effects on voting behavior have largely neglected actual routine exposures to local settings – i.e., specific locations, organizations, and institutions. Our hypothesis is that considering the intersection of individuals and actual behavior settings through use of so-called “activity spaces” (Browning/Soller: 2014) may provide us with more insight into the processes by which exposure to neighborhood contexts shape the way people participate politically. Several authors have begun to use innovative context methods instead of simply relying on pre-assembled neighborhood boundaries. Schlichting, Tuckel and Meisel's paper “Neighborhood and Community Context Effects on Voter Turnout- A Case Study in Baltimore, MD and Bridgeport” (1996) developed a special GIS-related computer algorithm, which they used to construct geographical units, which more closely align with the study's research specifications.

The reason we chose to use contextual models is that we believe that the nature of the relationship between how people vote and why they vote the way they do is inherently hierarchical.

Individuals are nested in Congressional districts and receive campaign information from numerous sources in their district and outside of their district. By using a multilevel model, we hypothesize that many of the contextual variables influenced voter turnout

through individual characteristics. Although the presence of campaign information is important, it is processed through individuals. Although the results of single-level models and multilevel models are often not extremely different, multilevel models are both theoretically and methodologically more appropriate when examining hierarchical processes.

Theory

This paper aims to tie into the debate of the neighborhood effect and its relation to civic engagement, participation and efficacy, which have been employed in electoral studies for some time, but with an emphasis on qualitative approaches. There are a few exceptions, though, that base on the contextual neighborhood approach, which is currently reemerging as an important assertion for many of the processes that supposedly shape social behavior and life chances. It is in this context of a renewal of interest in local social relations and particularly the deployment of notions of social capital that this paper picks up on the connection between political behavior and the community.

The basic argument bases on the idea that social interaction within residential communities affects people's political attitudes and voting behavior. Miller (1977) argued that rather than an individual's social class being the major predictor of how he/she voted, the best predictor was where he/she lived. People are influenced by those they talk to – so that if the majority of a person's social contacts favor one political position and/or party that person is more likely than otherwise to favor it also, even if her/his personal characteristics suggest a predisposition to favor another position/party—according to Miller, “people who talk together vote together” (Miller 1977: 65). The same is thought to be true for voting turnout in general: People living in politically and socially active neighborhoods tend to vote more, while people in inactive neighborhoods vote less.

In addition to actual characteristics of people living in a neighborhood, there are other authors showing that the density and concentration of particular population groups yields very different results for the voter turnout: As Tam Cho, Gimpel and Dyck show in their

paper “Residential Concentration, Political Socialization, and Voter Turnout” the influence of geographic concentration or residential segregation must not necessarily have a negative impact on voter participation. They proved that segregation’s negative effects are due to other factors such as poverty and low education rather than the geographic density itself. In their paper “The Effect of Local Political Context on How Americans Vote” Joshua J. Dyck, Brian J. Gaines and Daron R. Shaw show that people’s participation is connected to at least some characteristics of the locations where people live, especially in regard to their political affiliation and voter turnout.

a) Race and Voting

It is well established that vote choice in urban elections is determined by the relationship between race and perceptions of racial conflict. There is also strong evidence that race and racial attitudes are influenced by neighborhood.

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b) Local political balance and Voting

In their text “The Effect of Local Political Context on How Americans Vote” Dyck, Gaines and Shaw analyze how the neighborhood context conditions voting decisions. They explore the possibility that local partisan balance affects turnout and the use of convenience voting in particular. Using comprehensive registered-voter lists from four swing states in the 2002 and 2006 elections, they find an intriguing asymmetry: Republican registrants are usually sensitive to partisan context, whereas Democrats are not. Republican election-day turnout rates generally decrease with the proportion of partisan registrants that are Democratic in the area. This demobilization is only sporadically counterbalanced by greater use of convenience voting. In contrast, Democrats exhibit less systematic patterns. In many cases, there are seemingly perverse effects, wherein Democratic turnout rates fall with growing Democratic registration

advantages. The asymmetry may be driven by differences in the competitiveness of elections in areas with notable imbalances in partisan registration.

c) Diversity and voting

If we try to integrate this relative specific debate into a broader context, we are bound to refer to Robert Putnam's famous book "Bowling Alone" (2000) dealing with declining overall civic engagement. Putnam found that the greater the diversity in a community, the fewer people vote and the less they volunteer, the less they give to charity and work on community projects. In the most diverse communities, neighbors trust one another about half as much as they do in the most homogenous settings. The study, the largest ever on civic engagement in America, found that virtually all measures of civic health are lower in more diverse settings.

Robert Sampson, neighborhoods are important and persistently creating a lot of residential differentiation marked by characteristics such as high rates of homicide, concentrated mass incarceration imposed by the state, foreclosure hotspots, low birth weight and high infant mortality. These characteristics persist even when controlled for income. In an interesting field experiment, where more than 3000 letters were randomly distributed, Sampson demonstrated very different return rates varying from 0 to neighborhoods where 80 percent of the population returned the letters received. Sampson stresses that change does take place in the neighborhood, but that there some sort of "stickiness" that adheres to them.

d) Individual Length of Residence/Neighborhood Residential Stability and Voting

Many scholars of voting behavior and civic participation in general have stated that residential stability in a neighborhood and the length of residence of the individual bedded in this are some of the most important factors influencing individuals' local social bond and associational ties. An important modification of the system model was made by Sampson (1988, 1991), who proposed the "multilevel system model." As the term

multilevel suggests, Sampson argued for incorporating both micro-level (i.e., individual) and macro-level (i.e., community or neighborhood) dimensions of community life in research. A key variable in his model was aggregate-level residential stability—a neighborhood property that represents the degree of residential mobility or stability among those who live within a certain geographical boundary. To Coleman (1988, 1990), this type of residential stability at the aggregate level functions to produce social capital because it not only maintains existing community ties but also expands the social network. Residential Stability. For his aggregate-level measure of residential stability, Sampson (1991) computed “the percentage of residents 5 years old and older who resided in the same house 5 years earlier and the percentage of owner-occupied homes. Both scales are based on the factor-weighted scales.” (Sampson/Graif 2009: 13).

Method

Our dependent variable is the number of times a person voted between 2000 and 2013.

The **individual characteristic** variables are:

Age

Party Affiliation

Distinctive surnames that serve as proxies for racial and ethnic characteristic

Gender

Date for Registration and status update → change in registration as proxy for how long someone lived in NYC

Age at which person registered/ length of registration

Number of people living in one household

Contextual level Variables from Census

1. Social class composition of the constituency in which the voter lives

→ The reason why I think this might be important, is that in general SES is always accounted for on the individual level, but if a person lives in an area where the middle class form twice as large a fraction of the local population as in the area where another person lives, then he or she is likely to have more middle-class contacts

2. Diversity Index/ Neighborhood Racial Composition
3. Residential Stability
4. Voting results (attributed to the block level through geocoding), and perhaps other level, such as ethnicities from the tract level
5. Educational Attainment
6. Percent men and women in tract