The Politics that Places Make: Contextual Effects and the Future of Political Behavior Research

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Abstract

An emerging theme of political behavior research political behavior is that individual behavior is influenced by context. However, most practitioners of contextual effects research are reluctant to engage with the theoretical foundations of their work. The concept of context, as used by political scientists, is vague and overly broad. The practice of contextual effects research has also encountered important methodological challenges, not the least of which is how to observe and measure the causal mechanisms of contextual effects. In short, contextual effects research is under theorized, and will benefit from the development of a more concrete theoretical foundation that connects context to actually existing places. I argue that conceptualizing context as connected to space and place provides a rigorous theoretical foundation that allows for analytical flexibility, as well as methodological diversity for this emerging area of political science research.

Keywords: contextual effects; political geography; place; space

1. Introduction

A recent book assembled the thoughts of one hundred political scientists on important future directions for political science research (King, Schlozman, & Nie, 2009). The collection contained several brief essays that stake a claim for the importance of contextual effects research to the future of political behavior scholarship (Gay, 2009, Jones-Correa, 2009; Hochschild, 2009). The claim that context represents an important part of the future of political science represents an important shift for the scholarship of contextual variation. There has long been a tension between contextual effects scholars and the mainstream of political behavior research, represented by work connected to the Michigan approach. This tension can be seen in the effort by many of the early contextual effects scholars to defend the importance of their work by addressing the fundamental question of whether or not context matters at all. These scholars often posited contextual effects as an alternative approach to political behavior, an approach that challenged the behavioral practice of treating voters and others engaged in political activity as essentially disconnected from surrounding communities and social networks.

The inclusion of essays advocating for the importance of understanding context into a collection about the future of political science is also somewhat ironic given that the lead editor of the volume, Gary King, once argued that context does not matter, and moreover, that it should not matter to political science researchers (King, 1996). His argument represented the mainstream political science perspective at the time, and yet, a decade on, research identified as being contextual has been published in the leading journals. Moreover, as a conceptual tool driving interest in new ways of understanding political behavior, context is gaining adherents.

In this paper I address the question of whether contextual effects analysis is a viable future path for research into political behavior? To answer the question, I examine the theoretical foundations, substantive contributions, and methodological practice of contextual effects research. My conclusion is that researchers addressing questions of context have contributed important insights to our understanding of political behavior. Contextual effects scholarship has conclusively demonstrated that context does matter, and in so doing, represents a potentially essential analytical strand of future research into political behavior. Additionally, several scholars have made important methodological contributions to the study of contextual effects. King's solution to the ecological inference problem is increasingly accepted as a valid method for using aggregate ecological data, which is crucially important for many questions of context and geographic variation (Calvo & Escolar, 2003; King, 1997; Liu & Vanderleeuw, 2007; Voss, 2004).

Wendy K. Tam Cho has almost single handedly pioneered the use of spatial regression models in political science to examine context and behavioral contagion effects (Cho, 1998; Cho, 2003). Finally, multilevel modeling is becoming a more commonly utilized method, and is potentially an excellent way to address contextual determinants of individual behavior (Gelman & Hill, 2007). These methodological advances offer a diverse array of sophisticated tools for scholars to pursue questions of contextual variation.

Despite the substantive findings and methodological advances, I find that, in general, contextual effects research is under-conceptualized and, often, only vaguely connected to a coherent theory of context. The concept of context, as used by political scientists, is overly broad. Context is too often used as catchall proxy for difficult to measure or poorly operationalized variables. The thread that is common to most contextual research is an interest in geographic variation. However, much of the research, although specifically concerned with variation in place and space, does not adequately conceptualize the relationship between place and political behavior. I advance the argument that the concept of context is inherently connected to actually existing places. Embedding the concept of context within a theory of space and place offers an important way to organize and unify political science approaches to contextual effects research. Specifically, a place-context approach can make an important contribution to the serious debate over whether or not context is something more than the product of social interaction.

2. Politics and a Theory of Place Context

When Gary King made his argument that context should not matter to political scientists, he was engaging in a debate with political geographers who conduct research from a theoretical position that strongly posits the spatial embeddedness of political processes, institutions, and behavior. According to Henri Lefebvre, French social theorist of urban space, the concept of space has been largely absent from Western thought. That is, physical, practical, social space has been absent. Instead, Western thought – especially since Descartes – has developed in mental space, philosophical space, and linguistic space. From mental space we get a profusion of so-called spaces, all of which are detached from physical, social space. "We are forever hearing about the space of this and/or the space of that: about literary space, ideological space, the space of the dream, psychoanalytic topologies, and so on and so forth. Conspicuous by its absence ... is not only the idea of 'man' but also that of [physical] space" (Lefebvre, 1991, 3). By separating mental and physical space, a duality is created whereby mental/ philosophical space is presented as the site of activity, agency, knowledge, and power.

Conversely, physical space is presented as a neutral container of human existence. Space "is equivalent, practically speaking, to a set of institutional and ideological superstructures that are not presented for what they are ... alternatively it assumes an outward appearance of neutrality, of insignificance, of semiological destitution, and of emptiness (or absence)" (349). According to Lefebvre, it is erroneous "[t]o picture space as a 'frame' or container into which nothing can be put unless it is smaller than the recipient, and to imagine that this container has no other purpose than to preserve what has been put in it" (94). It is an error to view space as a neutral container because that obscures the social character of space and the way it is organized by political power. "[S]pace is neither a mere 'frame,' after the fashion of the frame of a painting, nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it" (94). Space is portrayed as a natural and neutral realm, the realm of the abstract, the general, and the homogenous. It lacks the imprint of particular human experience; it is the plane of undifferentiated individuals without apparent agency subject to universal causal influences.

Rather than the abstract generality of space, place is particular and specific. Place is defined by the presence of human identity and social experience. In making the distinction between space and place, political geographer John Agnew emphasizes human experience:

> Place represents the encounter of people with other people and things in space. It refers to how everyday life is inscribed in space and takes on meaning for specified groups of people and organizations. Space can be considered 'top-down,' defined by powerful actors imposing their control and stories on others. Place can be considered as 'bottom-up,' representing the outlooks and actions of more typical folk. Places tend to be localized when associated with the familiar, with being 'at home.' But they can also be larger areas, depending upon patterns of activities, network connections, and the projection of feelings of attachment, comfort, and belonging … [Place] is also the spaces of everyday life that continue to be formed and reformed in a technologically and economically shrinking world (Agnew & Smith, 2002, 5).

Place denotes specific locations that contain a wide array and unique configurations of individuals, institutions, and social networks, all of which have a dialectical relationship with the places in which they are grounded. The individuals and institutions transform places through their actions. And, in turn, their behavior is influenced by place in numerous ways over both the short and the long-term. Places are irreversibly transformed by the removal of individuals and institutions. It follows that those people, social networks, and institutions will be transformed by changing places.

Place and space are distinct and yet exist only in relation to each other. They are "necessarily interrelated geographical scales which are always defined in reference to one another" (Agnew, 1996, 130). What connects the two analytical scales of place and space, what Agnew calls "local" and "global," is human activity that expresses a local particularity of social relations, cultural norms, and behaviors, while also being subject to more general, or global, causal influence. Agnew combines these two perspectives of place and space together into a concept that he calls, variously, hierarchical-geographical context, strong contextualism, or "context-as-place." Agnew intends for it to be a richer and broader conception of context that can bridge the desires of political scientists to find universal and generalized causal influences, and the objective of geographers to call attention to local particularity. "In a contextual view human action is seen as threading out from the here and now of face-to-face social interaction into more extensive fields of mediated interaction managed by institutions and organizations. In this way social relations can be thought of as stretching over time and space yet linked to the concrete production of individual attitudes and behavior" (131). A place context perspective preserves the theoretical connection to individual activity while allowing for multiple causal forces to be considered at multiple geographic and temporal scales. "From this point of view, context refers to the hierarchical (and non-hierarchical) 'funneling' of stimuli across geographical scales or levels to produce effects on politics and political behavior. These effects can be thought of as coming together in *places* where micro (localized) and macro (wide-ranging) processes of social structuration are jointly mediated" (132).

A place context perspective, especially one influenced by Agnew's understanding of context, reveals a flaw in the way that political scientists often understand context. In general, political scientists see contextual effects as external influences on political behavior. Agnew criticizes this approach to contextual analysis because it fails to consider the particularity of place; the unique configurations of social and political relations and contextual influences that vary from place to place. "Contextual effects are usually seen as external effects on individual behavior arising from social interaction within an environment … but the hierarchical-geographic structuring of that environment is not examined" (Agnew, 1996, 133). Theoretically and methodologically, contextual effects analysis by political scientists tends to treat geographic place as a neutral container rather than as a rich medium that constitutes and structures political behavior through a variety of contextual processes at specific localities. In this way, geographic place is treated as a surrogate or placeholder for other, more important variables such as race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status. Place is treated as an "epiphenomenal or residual influence – either a superficial representation of a deeper set of influences (geography as merely a surrogate) or a trivial influence, to be taken into account when all others have been considered" (Johnston & Pattie, 2005, 187).

A place context approach requires accounting for the spatial embeddedness of individuals, local organizations and institutions, and other political actors. This differs markedly from the standard approach to political science analysis that sorts individuals into social categories that are detached from places. Recalling Lefebvre's spatial theory, Agnew explains: "the categorical approach [to political research] suffers from a sort of 'agnosia' or disorder of perception in which representations of space only set boundaries for non-spatial processes. Space is thereafter eliminated from theoretical consideration" (Agnew, 1996, 131). A contextual approach should treat political processes as operating in and through space rather than external to it. Further, while the contextual unit of analysis should still emanate from the individual, it necessarily recognizes that the individual is situated within a geographic environment of social and political connections. Political and social actors are mediated by the spaces that they move through; the places they inhabit, and that they act upon. The interactions of peoples, groups, politics and economic transactions, power and weakness are all embedded in social spaces. Institutions of politics and society – institutions related to local governmental authority, or to economic activity, arts, society and culture – are also embedded in space and place.

By advocating a place context perspective, I am not arguing for the importance of geography over political behavior.

In fact, political geographers tend to be entirely too vague about the intricacies of political behavior, and rarely take advantage of the rich history of political behavior research in political science (Ethington & McDaniel, 2007). Conversely, there is a rich vein of thinking about contextual influences such as residential geography on political behavior, located within *The American Voter,* which has been almost entirely ignored by both disciplines. Recovering this tradition is an important first step in the process of situating contextual effects research into the mainstream future of political behavior research. I turn to an examination of the development of political behavior research in political science and the associated evolution of contextual effects analysis of political behavior.

3. *Place and the Literature of Political Behavior: A Tradition of Context*

The American Voter forms the lasting core of political behavior research. How does our literature deal with geographic variation? The literature posits a wealth of forces and influences upon individual behavior, is there recognition that those influences are funneled through place-based context, and can vary from place to place, even over a relatively short time frame? Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) consider several ways that place variation can influence the individual voter. For instance, formal institutional rules and informal cultural norms and rules of behavior vary from place to place, and will have a varying effect on the vote decision:

> Other more elusive forces requiring conception in purely political terms shape behavior as well. We shall complete our discussion of the political context of the voting act by considering … the rules and norms for behavior that vary by political sub-community across the national electorate. In some instances these norms have become institutionalized in the legal regulations that circumscribe political participation from area to area; in others they remain informal matters of community sentiment, reflecting local differences in political tradition (Campbell et al., 1960, 119).

Generally, Campbell et al. consider place variation and social context to have a long-term effect upon voting behavior. From the quote above we get a picture of place-variable behavior as a product of long-term historical and cultural forces. The long-term effect is similar to the way the "funnel of causality" considers demographic background. Nonetheless, their examination of these long-term contextual factors leads them to the conclusion "that electoral behavior can be understood only through a comprehension of the context in which it occurs" (289).

The authors understand that context is important to a theory of voting behavior, and they do not entirely treat place context as a neutral container for individual behavior. "The American political system … embraces a variety of political sub-communities. Each of these communities is a pervasive medium within which behavior must occur. And each leaves some characteristic impress on that behavior" (266). There is a recognition that place context can influence behavior over the long term, an influence that may not be easily observed. Still, they doubt the existence of short-term effects of place variation on voting behavior. Campbell et al believe that place variation, especially urban versus suburban, will be a slow process having long-term effects on voting behavior; yet the possibility exists for short-term behavior to be influenced by place variation. This question about the possibility of contextual influences in the short and long term is one that was largely abandoned by mainstream political behavior research. It was left to those interested in contextual effects to take up the question.

4) *What is Context? The Evolution of Context and Political Behavior*

Although there are affinities and similarities in the field, political science practitioners of contextual effects do not have a concrete and shared understanding of the concept of context. Contextual effects analysts share an interest in understanding how political actors are influenced by the surrounding contextual environment. But, there are differences over how the contextual environment is defined, and as well as differences over how the contextual environment causes variation in political behavior. There is a dichotomy between those who focus on the "social context" created by social interaction and those who de-emphasize personal contact or social interaction in order to find causal factors in the contextual environment of actual geographic places.

The conception of "social context" is most prominently associated with Robert Huckfeldt, possibly the most prominent contextual effects scholar. The work of Huckfeldt and his co-authors focuses on how the partisan, social class, and/or race/ethnic composition of the social environment constrains the flow of political information through social networks (Huckfeldt, 1979; Huckfeldt, 1980; Huckfeldt, 1984). Social interaction and personal contact are structured by social context, and thus the flow of information about politics is colored by variations in the social context.

Although research into social context and social interaction is often nominally interested in geography and place variation, it fails to incorporate any theory of how place affects behavior. In fact, this research treats place as a neutral container for political behavior, which is inconsistent with established theories of space and place. Huckfeldt acknowledges that geographic space can have a bounding effect on the particular configurations of social networks, but he emphasizes that social space – the variety of personal and social network connections – is not coincident with geographic space (Baybeck & Huckfeldt, 2002).

In contrast, much of the best recent work on contextual effects is consciously place-based, and defines context as connected to the geographic environment in which political behavior is embedded. For example, many scholars are analyzing racial context, how the racial composition of a voter's surrounding environment influences racial attitudes and perceptions of racial threat, competition, or cooperation (Oliver & Mendelberg, 2000; Oliver & Wong, 2003;Baybeck, 2006; Liu, 2001; Liu & Vanderleeuw, 2007). The research into racial context is influenced by Huckfeldt's work, but tends to be dissatisfied with Huckfeldt's focus on social interaction. These scholars argue that social interaction is adequate as an explanation for their findings of contextual effects because of the ways in which racial context are spatially structured. Baybeck (2006) argues "racial context needs to be considered as a complex system of overlapping spatial units—that in order to understand the idea of racial threat, one must understand that individuals inhabit many geographic residential spaces" (386).

Huckfeldt's emphasis on social interaction and the flow of political information within networks has produced valuable findings about how context determines political behavior. Yet, placing theoretical emphasis on social interaction as the dominant cause of contextual effects leads Huckfeldt away from the ontological connection between context and place. The result is the neglect of non-social interaction contextual forces that are geographically situated to a greater or lesser degree. For instance, there are a multiplicity of contextual forces that are tied to particular places such as the way evaluations of candidates, issues, and events are mediated by place, the way political information is channeled through local media, and the way political, civic, and governmental institutions educate and target local voters.

Books and Prysby (1991) make a similar criticism of Huckfeldt's focus on social interaction. Through their review of contextual effects research, they develop a theory of contextual effects that is grounded in place. Their theory also focuses on the way that social interaction is an important component that structures the flow of political information. Huckfeldt criticizes Books and Prysby for going too far towards a geographical model of context rather than the more pliable concept of "social space" that Huckfeldt uses by concentrating on geographical units of analysis (Huckfeldt, 1992). Yet, by locating context geographically they are able to move beyond social network interaction to examine multiple ways in which place can shape the ways that voters receive political.

5. *The Politics that Places Make: Place Context and the Future of Political Behavior*

Huckfeldt and others have persuasively shown the importance of social context and social networks for shaping the flow of political information. However, it is apparent that contextual effects analysts are increasingly unsatisfied with the concept of social context. Incorporating a theory of place context provides a clear path for the future of research into political behavior and contextual effects. What are the benefits of a place context approach? Place context theory provides conceptual clarity that may help unify the different approaches towards contextual research. Whether studying social context, racial context, economic, or partisan context, it is important to recognize that all of these various contextual environments are situated in specific geographic places.

The conceptual clarity of place context also advances research into the causal mechanism of context. Once a researcher recognizes the embeddedness of political behavior and institutions in space and place, it becomes necessary to consider the contextual environment as more than a neutral container. Instead, it becomes clear that causality is more complex. Cho and Rudolph argue for the importance of "casual observation [whereby] spatial proximity shapes behavior through low-intensity neighborhood cues that occur outside the realm of voluntary or explicit forms of social interaction" (Cho & Rudolph, 2008, 274). The causal influence of "low intensity neighborhood cues" is empirical, and derives from political science research into the importance of various forms and channels of political information. Yet, it also takes seriously the spatial embeddedness of political processes.

In addition, a place context perspective will lead to research into other ways that information and institutions, located spatially, will influence political behavior.

For instance, "the information received by a voter during an election campaign – whether through grassroots party activity, paid media advertisements, news coverage, or other sources – may depend in large part on where the voter lives" (Books &Prysby, 1991, 34). Local institutions – governmental, social, or political – will vary from place to place, and so their contextual influence will vary from place to place. "Structural properties like these cannot be measured simply by adding individual characteristics. They must be detected by observing the context itself" (65). The activity level of political parties varies geographically. A recent article on campaign effects in the 2008 Presidential Election, finds that the geographic variation in placement of campaign field offices by the Obama and McCain campaigns had an important effect on the outcome of the election (Masket, 2009).

It is already quite clear that place context influences the formation of racial attitudes (Oliver & Mendelberg, 2000; Oliver & Wong, 2003). A place context perspective also raises questions about how political identity formation may be influenced by geographic variation. There is evidence that geography can alter the perception of self-interest, which plays an important role in the formation of political identity (Williamson, 2008). There is also evidence that geographic variation can play a role in racial and ethnic group identity formation and group attachment (Gimpel, 2004; Saito, 1998).

In conclusion, contextual effects research that is grounded in a theory of place context does represent the future of political behavior analysis. Place context provides a common theoretical foundation for contextual effects research, and encourages research into the causal mechanism of context that considers causal factors in addition to social interaction and personal contact. Place context theory focuses research attention on causal factors that are embedded in space and place, and allows for the re-examination of the way geographic variation may alter our understanding of factors such as political identity formation, perception of racial group self-interest, and how local institutions can shape political behavior. A theory of place context is also consistent with leading edge methodological advances that offer contextual researchers a wealth of sophisticated tools that can be creatively used to investigate a wide array of questions.

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