



## LOCALLY EMBEDDED POLITICAL BEHAVIOR: “My Town Is My Steeple.”<sup>1</sup>

by *Jennifer Fitzgerald*



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How do people think about, relate to, and experience their local communities? What implications do such personal processes have for individuals' political views and choices? These questions are relevant for analyses of urban political behavior as well as the study of those who call suburbs, towns and villages home. More broadly, these considerations should concern all students of political behavior and political outcomes, since a local lens can color the ways citizens perceive and engage in politics.

Recent explorations into the local dimensions of political behavior across a range of countries have yielded critical insights into phenomena such as economic voting (Larsen et al. 2019), party support (Patana 2018; Baker et al. 2020), views on inequality (Newman et al. 2018), perceptions of crime trends (Bessen and Fitzgerald 2019), political engagement (Nelson-Núñez 2019), support for violence (Linke et al. 2018), and participation in forest restoration (Chang and Andersson 2019). As our locally-oriented knowledge of politics deepens, I propose that we stand to enhance our scholarly treatment of the subject in two main ways. First, we can devote careful attention to the political behavior

of the “locally embedded individual,” meaning that, in addition to studying contextual effects (as measured through community-level indicators of a variety of local features and conditions) on citizens' political behavior, we also consider the political implications of the ways individuals *relate to* their communities. Second, we can work to specify the conditions under which, and the processes through which, locally embedded individuals forge mental connections between their day-to-day local lives and the political arena.

In this essay, I draw on classic and contemporary literature, as well as fieldwork I conducted in rural France—corroborated by statistical analyses of data from multiple countries—to sketch out a set of locally-based concepts that matter for political behavior. In my own research, I find that these factors influence support for radical right parties in national elections (Fitzgerald and Lawrence 2011; Fitzgerald 2018) and shape citizen attitudes on immigration (Fitzgerald 2012; Bessen and Fitzgerald 2019). Yet the potential for these considerations to influence different aspects of political behavior, I suspect, are much more wide-ranging. I therefore aim to

1. Many thanks to Eugene Finkel and Lisel Hintz for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. This essay is dedicated to three groundbreaking scholars: Susan Clarke, Nonna Mayer, and (the late) Sophie Body-Gendrot.



encourage comparative researchers to expand their thinking about individuals' ties to their local contexts and the resultant implications for myriad political outcomes across communities, across countries, and over time. By emphasizing the relatively general concept of the local, I invite scholars of urban politics to further explore the implications of embeddedness as it applies to residents of cities' constitutive neighborhoods and broader metro areas.

### Affective and structural community ties

Decades of scholarship demonstrate that local contexts shape many forms of political behavior (e.g. Books and Prysby 1991; Huckfeldt et al. 1993; Dancygier 2010; Boulding 2014; Charnysh 2015).<sup>2</sup> Yet our understanding of how, when, and where individuals' ties to their communities

matter for politics lags in comparison.

One important distinction to make when attempting to unpack local ties is that feelings about a place or community differ from actual participation in it. This nuanced approach to studying local embeddedness has a

distinguished intellectual pedigree, traceable back to LaPiere, who specified the attitude-behavior gap (1934): that one's feelings or viewpoints can be independent of, and possibly tension with, one's actions.<sup>3</sup>

Putnam (1966) details the importance of this gap for the study of electoral politics, putting Campbell's (1958) theorizing on the importance of community identification and perceptions of community norms for voter behavior into conversation with Berelson et al.'s (1954)

emphasis on the role of social engagement and interpersonal networks in influencing citizen vote choice. Putnam writes:

"Whereas Campbell's theory emphasizes a resident's psychological attachment to his community, the social interaction theory emphasizes the resident's social involvement in the community. Obviously, we would expect these two factors—psychological attachment and social involvement—to be related, but they are distinct, both logically and (it will turn out) empirically" (1966, 641).

Fresh insights into individuals' conceptualizations of their localities stem from Wong et al. (2020), who task research subjects with map-drawing and otherwise describing their communities, and Cramer's (2016) exploration into place-based identities and politics.

Similarly, my own research shows that the ways in which individuals relate to their local communities can have significant implications for their likelihood of supporting a radical right party in national elections (Fitzgerald 2018). But I also find that there are major differences in the political implications of distinct kinds of local ties. Feeling connected to one's local community (measured, for instance, as local belonging, local attachment, or local identity) renders radical right parties more appealing. In contrast, active engagement in one's local community diminishes the attractiveness of radical right parties. These insights further underscore the importance of distinguishing feelings about one's community from actual social and organizational engagement in it, offering a small-

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2. Maxwell (2019) contributes an important counter-point to the local context literature, arguing that compositional effects trump contextual ones with respect to attitudes about immigrants among urban versus rural populations.

3. Key works in comparative politics illustrate similar complexity through the study of public actions and their (debatable) links to people's privately held views (see Scott 1990; Wedeen 1999).



scale perspective on the notion of "imagined communities" (Anderson 2006 [1983]) that has divergent electoral effects when compared with in-person local interactions.

For methodological purposes, I advocate asking individuals how they feel about their communities and also detailing patterns of their engagement with others in their local lives. In these ways we can enrich our comprehension of local contextual effects by seeing communities through residents' own eyes. Statements elicited through just such an exercise conducted in France demonstrate the value of this approach. The quotations from my fieldwork that I supply in this essay come from small towns and villages with relatively high levels of Le Pen (National Front, now National Rally) voting. Yet my interview prompts were not specific to anything political; in this instance I asked about the nature of changes in the area in recent decades.

"We have 36,000 distinct communities in France. This is huge! We like our little communities. And we love our steeples. You know that we are a little regionally biased and we love our home... we are all very attached to our commune. Yes, a great deal. That's quite typical. In general, the French, it's 'my steeple.' There you have it." <sup>4</sup>

This villager professes his deep affection for the community he calls home, drawing attention to the profoundly impactful symbolism of the church steeple that serves as a landmark, a

feature of distinction, and a source of pride.<sup>5</sup> To distinguish feelings for community from active engagement in it, this individual later returns to the subject of the village steeple.

"And I find this more and more. My town is my steeple. That's it – we're back to the steeple. People need a communal identity, even if they don't participate."

This is an astute observation about the ways the psychological and social dimensions of community engagement differ.<sup>6</sup> That people may feel tied to a community in which they spend and invest little time reminds us of the complex nature of local ties.

## Neighboring

Local social networks in general and neighborly ties more specifically can affect various political orientations and actions (Bourdieu 1986; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Mayer 1999). Just as affective and social ties to communities merit nuanced attention from researchers, local embeddedness involves similarly distinct aspects of neighborly relationships. Yet what political scientists have not done especially well is to separate out, conceptually and operationally, the political implications of how people feel about their neighbors as compared to the ways in which they are actively connected to them. Community psychologists pioneered this practice, differentiating affective from social dimen-

4. French communes are the lowest level of state administration, akin to municipalities elsewhere.

5. Astor's study of anti-Mosque movements in Spain unearths a similar sentiment in the Greater Barcelona metropolitan area: "Catalonia means my neighborhood, my park, my street – they are not as nice as those in the center, but those are not mine. So if you take this away from me, what do I have left?" (2016, 115).

6. A parallel conceptual distinction comes from Eulau and Rothberg, who offer an abstract depiction in the form of a series of progressively larger concentric circles to denote multiple, over-lapping life spheres in which an individual (the point at the circles' center) is situated. The authors separate out the notions of contexts and environments, clarifying that a context is "something that emerges out of interpersonal relations" (1986, 131). In contrast, they explicate that "environments are more remote, more stable, and less contingent on changes in personnel than is context" (1986: 131).



sions of neighboring in their research (Unger and Wandersman 1985). Sociology supplies similarly distinct concepts for latent versus manifest neighborliness. According to Mann,

"neighborliness is a twofold concept. On the one hand, there is what will be called 'manifest neighborliness.' This is characterized by overt forms of social relationships, such as mutual visiting in the home and going out for purposes of pleasure. On the other hand, there is what will be termed 'latent neighborliness,' which is characterized by favorable attitudes to neighbors" (1954, 164).

My research connects individuals' neighborly relations to support for radical right parties (Fitzgerald 2018). Most of the evidence I supply on this point comes from Swiss panel data, which measure four distinct dimensions of neighboring over time: expecting receipt of emotional aid from neighbors, expecting receipt of practical aid from neighbors, number of neighbors with whom the respondent is on friendly terms, and frequency of contact with neighbors. An index of these four measures in combination predicts invigorated support for the Swiss People's Party (SVP) from year to year.<sup>7</sup> Yet disaggregating the index shows that the positive feelings about neighbors (expecting emotional support and being friendly) drive SVP support. There is no discernible impact of interacting with neighbors or expecting practical support from them on far-right support.

In qualitative terms, my village interviews in France help to flesh out some aspects of neighboring that merit additional consideration. A relevant aspect of the local area is the spatial placement of homes. One participant observes:

"Because [our commune] perhaps is not representative of the villages of France, we don't really have a village center. We're very dispersed: many little hamlets, little neighborhoods...there you go...so, we don't meet up with each other...one doesn't see many people. They are dispersed. There are villages like that in France..."

Another respondent laments changes in neighboring patterns in their village over time:

"...there are fewer interpersonal relationships between residents than there used to be. Before, there was support when someone had difficulties. There was a neighbor, friends, who would come to help them."

This last statement illustrates how powerful social memories can be for shaping individuals' perceptions of their localities. Feelings of nostalgia for a more vibrant local environment can leave an impression that fuels affection for a place that is disconnected from the actual people who live there. As my research shows, positive feelings for the locality without active social engagement present the best-case scenario for radical right parties' electoral prospects. What other political outcomes might such a constellation help to explain?

## Work

Generations of scholars have connected work to politics. One important stream of this research details how certain social dimensions of people's work lives shape their political behavior (Mutz and Mondak 2006). Directing attention to the theme of local embeddedness, certain dimensions of a person's job can structure the nature and extent of integration into

7. The neighboring index has no statistically significant influence on adoption of support for other major Swiss parties.

her local community (Wikinson 1986; Cox and Mair 1988). Thus, an important consideration when studying local ties is whether an individual works within her community or whether she commutes outside the locality for her job. We know from research into community cohesion that high levels of commuting far from home for work fray the local fabric of communities (Putnam 2000; Mattisson et al. 2015).

In researching radical right support with panel survey data, Duncan Lawrence and I (2011) find that commuting relatively long distances is associated with lower levels of radical right support over time at the individual level. We also find aggregate evidence of this relationship (see also Fitzgerald 2018). When locals commute outside of their communities or neighborhoods of residence to work, we argue, they are less focused on life at "home" and this can have political implications. Field work in rural France provides further insight into local connections, or lack thereof, in areas with significant out-of-commune commuting populations. When I asked whether residents were well integrated into the locality, an interviewee explains:

"Some, but there are those if you will, it's like a dormitory town.<sup>8</sup> They work outside [the commune] and they come back later on: the weekend or in the evening. They arrive, it's 6 or 7 pm, they stay at home. They come to sleep here, but they don't have time [to engage in local life]."

Working and living in the same community can broaden and/or deepen local ties; commuting for work can undermine these processes. When exploring the ways in which individuals are locally embedded—either psychologically or sociologically or both—commuting patterns

and other aspects of daily work life merit careful attention.

Another work-related dimension of local embeddedness has to do with labor market participation, or rather, its inverse: unemployment. Research on the connection between unemployment and social exclusion underscores the importance of work for psychological and social dimensions of local belonging (see, for instance, Keiselbach 2003; Body-Gendrot 2009; Clarke 2012). The classic study by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues on community life in a 1930s Austrian town plagued with unemployment is illustrative here (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel 2002[1933]). The flax factory that once dominated work life in the town was shuttered, gutting social and political life by causing deprivation, demoralization, and social isolation. Interviews with residents paint a stark picture of how local experiences had changed:

"Well, it used to be magnificent in Marienthal before, just going to the factory made a change. During the summer we used to go for walks, and all those dances! Now I don't feel like going out anymore." -Frau P. (Jahoda et al. 2002[1933], 36).

Similarly,

"I often used to go dancing with my wife. There was life in Marienthal then. Now the whole place is dead." -Herr E. (Jahoda et al. 2002[1933], 37).

Taking part in economic life can significantly influence the ways people behave in the political arena. What Lazarsfeld and his colleagues discovered in Marienthal was an unemployed population crippled by despair and disinterest (and

8. Alternative translation: bedroom community.

not, as some theories might predict, imbued with radical political purpose). Community residents beat a sad retreat from local life; Marienthal's citizenry disconnected from each other. Attention to what work looks like for individuals can enlighten a poorly understood part of local life and citizen politics.

### Politicization of local embeddedness

Under what conditions does local embeddedness—in its variety of forms—become relevant for politics? Surely, there is no obvious connection between links of various kinds to one's community and political views and behaviors. While there is not a single answer to questions about how such things become politicized, some evidence can help to frame future analyses.

In my own research I identified four factors that aid in connecting individuals' local feelings and experiences to the political—and in particular the electoral—realm (Fitzgerald 2018). The most straightforward of these is *elite rhetoric* that plays up themes of community, of belonging, of certain conceptualizations of society in terms of "we" that tap into people's feelings about their localities. Through exploration of party manifestos and other partisan platform statements, I find that where and when radical right leaders cue feelings of belonging and drive home themes of small-scale community and nostalgia their parties do best.

Second, I also find that *local authority levels* play a role in connecting community-based attachments to politics. Where and when municipal governments have significant levels of autonomy—relatively speaking—the link between community affect and electoral politics is strongest. Third, I find that where and when lo-

cal units have recently *lost governing authority*, local ties and considerations become more relevant for vote choice, as well, taking the form of a locally-rooted grievance. The fourth factor, or set of factors, has to do with the *nature and timing of local elections*: what people vote on (do they choose their own mayor, do they elect police officials?<sup>9</sup>) and how proximal the local vote is to a national election (are local and national elections held separately or simultaneously?). These kinds of politicizing factors and their attendant mechanisms can enhance the electoral relevance of individuals' local embeddedness.

### Concluding comments

Scholars of localities big and small, bustling and sleepy, world-famous and inconspicuous can learn a great deal by analyzing the multidimensional nexus between individuals and their communities. Here, I advocate a comparative behavioral agenda that unifies and deepens inquiry into local dimensions of politics. This seems like a propitious moment for such an initiative for at least two reasons. First, a fresh wave of scholarship marks renewed interest in local context (as I outline above) and also into the ways rural-urban divides structure political debate, competition, and outcomes (see, for instance, Maxwell 2019; Harding and Michelitch 2019; Dahlum et al. 2019). Second, trends that enhance the political salience of local ties, such as devolution and municipal amalgamation, are ongoing across a range of countries with scant attention to their implications for citizens' political orientations. A focus on the locally embedded individual can bridge the divide between what we know about localities and their politics and what we know about citizens' political behavior. ●

9. See Bessen and Fitzgerald 2019.



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