

## THE NEIGHBOURHOOD EFFECT IN A LOCAL ELECTION

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ONE of the more popular ideas in electoral geography is that there is a positive correlation between residential proximity and voting behaviour. Often referred to as the neighbourhood effect, the idea is quite simply that individuals within a given local area tend to vote similarly. The process involves, it is suggested, social contacts between neighbours leading to political discussion and information flow which exerts an influence on the way people vote. Closely related to, but distinguishable from the neighbourhood effect is the friends-and-neighbours effect whereby neighbours of a particular candidate will tend to know him better, discuss him more, and support him more avidly than they will other candidates. Since the concepts of the neighbourhood effect and the friends-and-neighbours effect have been adopted into the literature of political geography, and have become central as explanatory models for certain spatial patterns of voting behaviour,<sup>1</sup> the rather inconclusive and contradictory findings of researchers using these concepts require examination, and the concepts and process require an empirical test.

A recent body of literature has emphasized the salience of neighbours as a secondary reference group for the voting decisions of individuals. Foldare<sup>2</sup> found that individuals tend to vote in accordance with the majority of partisan voters in their residential area. Putnam<sup>3</sup> tested the hypothesis that community influence is mediated through numerous personal contacts among members of the community and that social interaction would support the political attitudes commonly held by the community members. He found a high association between involvement in community organizations and conformity with community norms.

Making use of research findings in innovation diffusion, Cox<sup>4</sup> has further conceptualized the neighbourhood effect as a product of political information flow. In explanatory models for both the neighbourhood effect and the friends-and-neighbours effect he suggested that both effects can be attributed to the characteristics of social contact networks, the physical and functional distance between an individual and his social contacts, and the connectivity between them. Political discussion and discussion of local candidates take place between neighbours and friends, and in this way political support is transmitted outwards. Reynolds<sup>5</sup> likewise attributed an observed pattern of distance decay in support for a local candidate to a decrease in interpersonal contacts between his neighbours and friends away from his place of residence. Johnston,<sup>6</sup> in a series of papers, identified three ways in which a spatial influence may be exerted upon political behaviour to produce what may be regarded as a neighbourhood or local effect: the social context

of the neighbourhood; the residential location of the candidate; and the information which would be generated and diffused.

These geographic models of the neighbourhood effect and friends-and-neighbours effect rest upon the inadequately tested assumptions that social contacts between neighbours and between friends are more effective than other social contacts; that they do transfer information, specifically political information; and that the contact and information transfer is influential in effecting a conversion and yielding a favourable vote.

There has been little detailed investigation of the processes at work producing the identified effects. The effects have been adduced from aggregate data. While there is considerable understanding of social contacts between neighbours<sup>7</sup> there is less understanding of the transfer of specifically political information<sup>8</sup> and of political discussion.<sup>9</sup> Although widely assumed, the process remains at base poorly examined. It is the purpose of this paper to present the results of such an examination.

Prior research has indicated that the neighbourhood effect and friends-and-neighbours effect are most likely to operate in a local, multi-candidate, non-partisan election. The study was, therefore, conducted in the small city of Guelph, Ontario (population 66,000), prior to the civic election of 2 December 1974. In this at-large election every eligible voter in the city could select up to eleven candidates from the twenty-two who were running. As is customary in Canadian local elections, the candidates did not bear party labels, although individual affiliations were, in several cases, known or presumed.

Three residential areas in the city were selected for detailed analysis. Because of the difficulties inherent in defining macro-neighbourhoods<sup>10</sup> small areas were chosen. Indeed, the study employs the concept of neighbours (people residentially adjacent to one another who have contacts with each other, but also with friends and business acquaintances) rather than that of neighbourhood. Selection of the three residential areas was dependent upon criteria established for the selection of candidates and the selection of types of residential areas.

Candidates were to be non-incumbents.<sup>11</sup> To reduce confusion as to the meaning of local candidate and neighbour, selected candidates had to be residentially isolated from other candidates. The areas were to be residential, single family, middle to upper middle income areas, since research suggests that such areas are likely to have high rates of political interest and political participation. Streets selected were to be of a design conducive to interaction among neighbours.<sup>12</sup>

These criteria narrowed the selection to the following three areas.

*Area A.* In area A the candidate was male, living in the corner house of a T-junction (Figure 1). The houses in the area were built between 1967 and 1969. The candidate and over half of the residents had lived in the area six years; the others a shorter time. Of the thirty-nine houses included two were vacant, six produced no response, and one was the candidate's own. Thirty respondents were interviewed.

*Area B.* The candidate in area B was female and lived towards the middle of a crescent-shaped street (Figure 1). The area was built up during the 1950s. Forty per cent of the residents had lived in the area for more than ten years. The candidate had

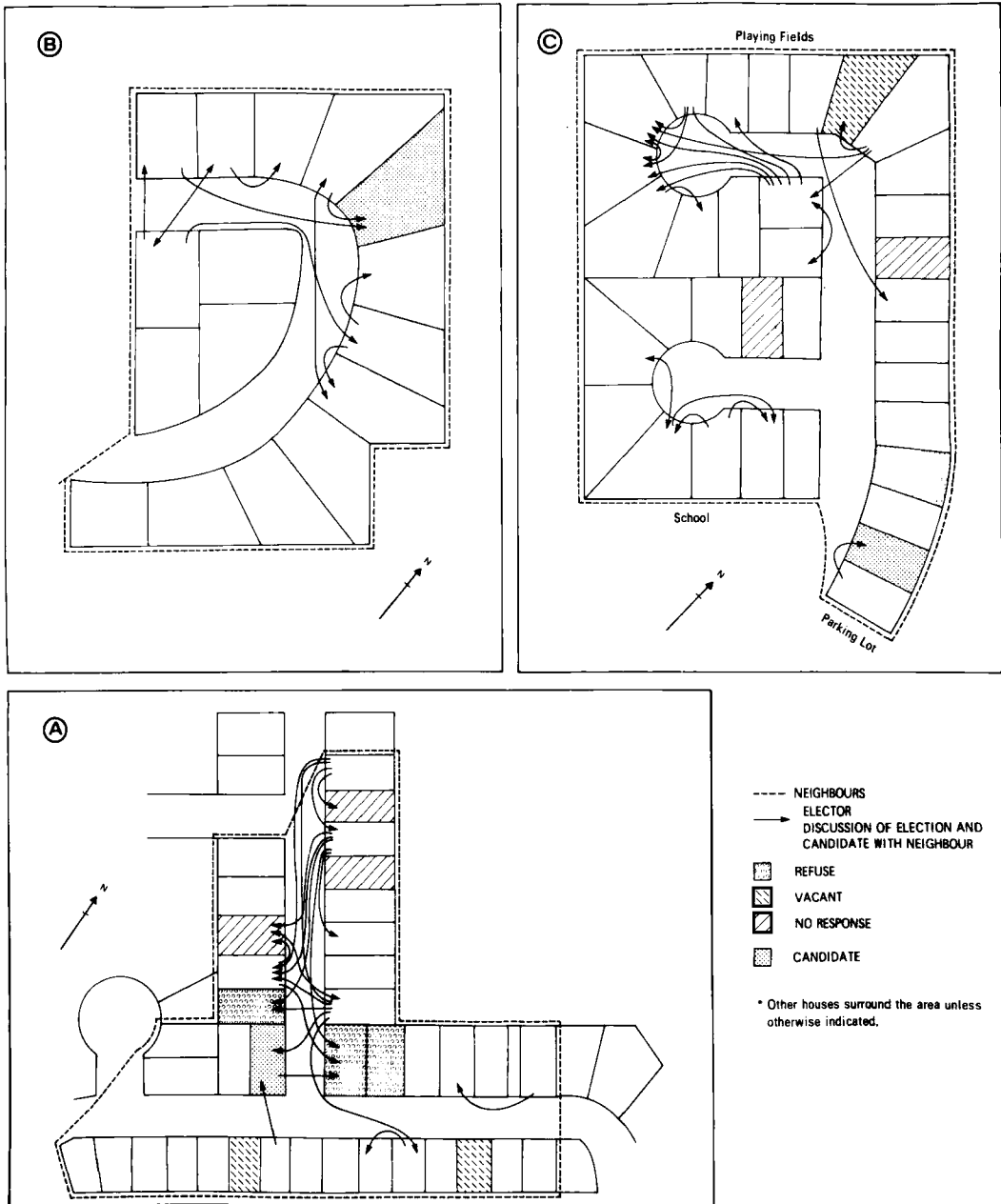


FIGURE 1. Neighbours' discussion of election and candidates.

been there for eight years. All fifteen of the households (excluding the candidate's) responded to the questionnaire.

*Area C.* Area c had a repeat male candidate (previously unsuccessful) who lived near the entrance to a dead-end street leading to two culs-de-sac (Figure 1). The houses were built between 1968 and 1970. All residents had lived there less than six years. The candidate was one of the first residents on the street. Of the thirty-five households, thirty responded.

Questionnaires were administered at home during the six days prior to the election.<sup>13</sup> We felt it essential to interview a willing adult from each household, and hence used no sampling technique. We asked a number of questions which we felt to be basic to the neighbours and friends-and-neighbours models, and tabulated data from the replies obtained.

Respondents were asked about the frequency of their informal and formal social contacts during the two weeks preceding the election; about these channels and media channels as sources of information concerning candidates; and about discussion of candidates during their social contacts. They were questioned on their knowledge of the candidates and on their voting intentions. Neighbours and friends could thus be compared as "contact and source" channels with other social and media channels. Respondent discussion of, knowledge of, and intent to vote for the local candidate or other candidates could also be compared. Respondents were asked to identify on a map those neighbouring households they visited, those with which they had discussed the election, and those with which they had discussed candidates.

Carried to a logical extreme the neighbourhood model assumes not only that neighbours are a major social contact, but that they serve as a dominant source channel for political information and that friends play a similar, if lesser role.

The Guelph data indicate that neighbours are no more important in this regard than friends. Whereas forty per cent of the respondents mentioned receiving from neighbours candidate information (including of course information about the candidate who is a neighbour), forty-two per cent mentioned friends. Twenty per cent gave business contacts, seventeen per cent clubs, eight per cent work, four per cent school contacts, and none mentioned a church. There was considerable variation among the three areas: the neighbours' percentage was forty-three in A, fifty-nine in B (the older area), and only twenty-seven in C.

Are potential voters more likely to discuss an impending election with their neighbours than with their other informal social contacts? Greer<sup>14</sup> postulated that of the various social contacts (neighbours, friends, and fellow workers) neighbours would have the highest frequency of political discussion. His results, however, revealed high levels of political discussion for kin and fellow workers, and lower levels for neighbours and friends. He suggested that politics was too sensitive a topic for social contacts with the latter. Table 1, from the Guelph data, shows very high levels of discussion within the household. Neighbours' and friends' rates of discussion were virtually identical, and much lower; but the discussion rate with kin outside the household was lower still.

In terms of discussion of candidates, discussion between neighbours (26.6%) was

TABLE I  
DISCUSSION OF THE ELECTION AMONG NEIGHBOURS AND THROUGH OTHER INFORMAL  
SOCIAL CHANNELS  
(percentage of the respondents mentioning the channel, by area)

Area	With neighbours	With friends	With non-local relatives	Within the household
A, <i>N</i> = 30	16.6	20.0	3.3	36.6
B, <i>N</i> = 15	13.3	20.0	13.3	66.6
C, <i>N</i> = 30	23.3	13.3	6.6	66.6

a poor second to that between members of a household (42.6%), but well ahead of that between friends (13.3%), with relatives outside the household (5.3%), in clubs (4.0%), and in professional organizations (1.3%). By area, discussion between neighbours followed the above-mentioned pattern: area A had the highest figure (40%), and area C the lowest (17%).

The specific house-to-house contacts indicated in Figure 1 make it clear that there is a great variability in discussion among neighbours. In area A, where the candidate lived at the T-junction, almost all of the discussion of candidates occurred on one of the streets, and that mostly between five households adjacent to the candidate. In area B all discussion took place in the half of the crescent which included the candidate. In area C, however, there was virtually no discussion by households near the candidate, but a great deal in the inner, circular end of the two culs-de-sac, reinforcing the idea that physical configuration plays a very significant role at the micro-level.

A key assumption of the friends-and-neighbours model is that neighbours will have a higher level of knowledge of their local candidate than they will of other candidates. Only in the compact crescent of area B was this demonstrably true; there, seventy-three per cent of the respondents knew their local candidate personally, whereas no other candidate was known personally by more than seven per cent. In area A the local candidate was known personally by only a third; the next highest candidate was known by only thirteen per cent. In area C only eleven and a half per cent knew the local candidate personally, whereas another candidate was known by fifteen per cent. Nor should too much be assumed from these levels of knowledge, which can be very superficial. Only 11.7 per cent of the respondents knew the occupation of their local candidate, and only thirteen per cent knew his or her political affiliation.

Table II indicates that those electors who did discuss candidates mentioned the local contender more than other candidates. Area C was a noteworthy exception.

Within other social circles non-local candidates were discussed almost as frequently as the local. The exception was discussion of the local candidate with friends, by respondents from area A.

Because of their proximity to the local candidate it was expected that the respondents would notice their neighbour more than his rivals when contenders were featured by the media. The responses negated this expectation. In all the pertinent forms of the media – posters, newspaper articles, newspaper advertise-

TABLE II

NEIGHBOURS' DISCUSSION OF THE LOCAL CANDIDATE COMPARED WITH DISCUSSION OF OTHER CANDIDATES  
(percentage of respondents mentioning the channel, by area)

Area	With neighbours		With friends		With non-local relatives		Within household	
	Local	Highest other	Local	Highest other	Local	Highest other	Local	Highest other
A, N = 30	47.36	10.52	50.00	16.66	0	0	15.09	13.20
B, N = 15	85.71	14.28	16.66	16.66	33.33	33.33	19.23	15.58
C, N = 30	14.28	21.42	10.71	10.71	0	33.33	5.40	13.51

ments, and radio – the highest outside candidate gained a level of notice well above that of the local candidate. If nothing else, this fact suggests that the attention gained from proximity cannot be expected to screen out the media messages of the competition.

Research utilizing aggregate data had led to the conclusion that political influence is exerted by neighbours (or neighbourhoods) and that support for local candidates, which declines with distance from the candidate, is attributable to neighbours and friends, in those social interaction networks that are most active, supportive, and influential close to the candidate's place of residence.

Two clusters of ideas have been investigated in this paper. The first is that people living in close proximity have a high probability of social contact with each other, and that communication of a political nature is included in this contact. The general belief was that this contact and communication is more frequent and more effective than that with persons living outside the immediate vicinity. The second set of ideas follows upon the first. Persons living close to a candidate will tend to discuss him more, notice his name more, and vote more readily for him than for any other candidate. Proximity has political consequences. There is an implicit belief that physical closeness breeds support. These two sets of ideas make up the essentials of the neighbourhood-based models as applied in electoral geography.

The analysis presented above throws some doubt on the general validity of this theory and on the two processes which it assumes. Those areas and candidates selected were believed likely to display high levels of political interest and communication. Contrary to the first part of the theory, however, contact does not necessarily include political communication. Political communication is highest within a household and relatively low between neighbours and friends. Neighbours do not necessarily have the same level of interest in politics, nor do they necessarily communicate political information. The second part, concerning proximity to a local candidate, is partially substantiated by the higher knowledge level of the local candidate than of the others. However the lack of awareness of the candidate's affiliation and occupation shows how superficial such knowledge was. The local candidate was indeed discussed more than were others, but this interest was not often converted into favourable votes. Only in the smallest and most stable area did the local candidate get more local support than the others (Table III).

Perhaps the most interesting findings of this study were the differences existing

TABLE III  
 INTENT TO VOTE FOR THE LOCAL CANDIDATE  
 (as a percentage of total mentions by respondents, by area)

Area	Local candidate	Highest other candidate
A	8.42	10.52
B	11.36	10.22
C	5.64	11.29

among the three areas. We are left with strong support for the notion that the age of the area and the age and length of residency of the inhabitants have a considerable impact on the degree to which the neighbourhood theories apply at the local level. Only area B, half of whose voters have lived there ten years or more, fits the model. The newest area, C, deviates furthest from the expectations of the model.

At the micro-level additional extraneous factors intervene. Area B fits the theory, but is also the smallest and most compact area, with only half as many respondents as the other two. Area B also had the only woman candidate, which may or may not have been a factor stimulating discussion and knowledge of the candidate. The shape of the area (two culs-de-sac located slightly away from the candidate's home) may explain the deviating results from area C.

In conclusion, neighbours operate as one of several informal personal contact channels, are generally of less significance than friends, and are not much more significant than work or business channels. Neighbours are significant as an information channel only for a local candidate. The existence of the neighbourhood flow of information is not, however, any guarantee of support for the local candidate. Other channels, namely friends, fellow workers, business contacts, and the newspaper, connect neighbours to other areas and other candidates. With these contacts neighbours spread their voting support beyond the immediate neighbouring area. Considered as explanations for the processes of political information flow and political support, the neighbourhood effect and friends-and-neighbours effect models need to be applied with caution and with due consideration for scale and local circumstance.

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