Mapping politics: how context counts in electoral geography

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ABSTRACT. Electoral geography, indeed political geography in general, has been largely concerned with mapping distributions which are then ‘explained’ by non-spatial factors. To the extent that spatial context itself has counted, it has been largely in terms of locality or neighborhood effects which are presumed to work against ‘larger’ or ‘wider’ social processes. This paper takes issue with conventional mapping and locality-effect accounts of context on the ground that each involves a radical ontological separation of space and society that cannot be sustained. A concept of context-as-place is elaborated which abandons the identification of context with a single (local) geographical scale and provides a way of bridging the gap between abstract sociological and concrete geographical analysis. The potential of the concept is explored in a series of analyses of Italian electoral geography over the period 1947–94.

It strikes me that a case can be made that Euro-American social science is going through the same kind of crisis of confidence that it did one hundred years ago. At that time neo-Kantianism called into question the comfortable positivism that had been all the fashion. Today theoretical and methodological pluralism are de rigueur. Established models of explanation are now perpetually on trial. That this coincides with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a world economy increasingly out of the control of the Great Powers suggests that the crisis in social science is in part a crisis of thinking that grew up around the nostrums and common sense about ‘theoretical coherence’ and ‘satisfactory methodology’ of that long period of apparent political stability from 1945 to the 1970s.

One manifestation of the crisis is the re-emergence of old intellectual debates that many thought were long since settled or transcended. An important example is the debate over the ‘universal’ versus the ‘particular’ in accounting for the features of a specific place or group of people. From the first point of view, wherever we are on the earth’s surface we are subject to similar influences and as a result we are all more or less alike (and ever more so). Usually, a single transcendental factor or cause is invoked to account for a particular phenomenon irrespective of spatial variation in its incidence. From the second point of view, there are essential differences between peoples and places which are perpetuated because of persisting cultural and/or economic divisions. These perspectives draw from two opposing traditions of social thought. The first, that of universal causes and effects, is usually associated with the physical sciences and positivistic social science. The second, that of particular reasons and intentions, is common to the humanities and
idiographic historical and geographical studies. There is increasing unease with this intellectual division. Neither position seems relevant to the times. Particular reasons and intentions can in fact be accommodated within a framework that rather than eschewing causal influences views them as the product of enduring social relations and norms (e.g. Isaac, 1987) specific to particular contexts.

Context and political studies

In the present intellectual climate I realize the fatuity of claiming much of anything for what I want to say. But I do believe that an adequately broad concept of 'context' does offer one way out of the universal/particular conundrum. The universal and the particular have been seen as separate effects, usually the general and the specific. An alternative framing would replace the universal with the 'global' and the particular with the 'local' as necessarily interrelated geographical scales which are always defined in reference to one another. What connects them is the human agent who in engaging in practical reason brings together a variety of influences emanating from a range of geographical scales. The term 'context' opens up the possibility of avoiding a specific scale commitment while retaining an analytical spatial reference that transcends the impasse into which the universal/particulars debate has fallen. The context refers to the geographical scope of specific influences, the limits thus set to practical reason, and the distinctive meanings or discourse associated by the human agent with living with these influences (for a similar but more analytically 'separated' understanding of context, see Goertz, 1994).

There has been little self-consciousness about the nature of 'context' in political studies. Indeed, perhaps only international relations specialists concerned with the 'ecology' of decision-making (such as Goertz) and methodologists interested in the 'ecological (or aggregative) fallacy' of statistical inference (such as Achen and Shively, 1995) have systematically addressed the issue. Otherwise, there has been a tendency to adopt one or other of two definitions without much scrutiny: either (1) a geographical territory, usually a national state, onto which a culture or society can be mapped, or (2) the impact of social group membership upon individual attitudes and behavior. In the first case space is a neutral grid on which social attributes and political activities are inscribed. In this way space functions as a key organizing principle even as it disappears from the analysis. In the second case space is incidental to the frame of reference and only has effects when local-level bias in group membership (defined by national or universal criteria, such as those for social class from the census) leads to a geographical refraction of social or cultural processes. The so-called neighborhood effect identified, for example, by Butler and Stokes (1969), is of this kind. The main objective of this paper is to persuade the reader that there is much more to 'context' than either of these conventional understandings would lead us to expect.

The 1960s revival in political geography began with attention to how elections could be used to demonstrate the impact of space or distance on people's political behavior. In many ways —theoretical, methodological and empirical—political geography has come a long way since then. One trend, however, has been unmistakable. Serious theorizing about such geographical concepts as space and place and the study of elections have largely parted company. Perhaps this is because so much of the best new thinking has come from a political-intellectual left inclined to regard elections as exercises in a bourgeois politics they would like to put behind them. But I also think it is the outcome of an electoral geography content to map election results without attending to how analysis of the results might engage with more abstract questions relating to the putative
links between space and politics. My claim would be that Friedland and Boden (1994: 42) are correct when they write: ‘Thinking with space and time requires rethinking central concepts of social theory, most particularly the notion of the territorially and temporally bounded and bonded society’. But it is equally the case that established conventions of spatial analysis have not had much to offer. The geographer’s concept of ‘mapping’, therefore, also stands in need of rethinking.

The purpose of this paper is to refocus electoral geography upon what it can offer to political studies by way of relevant information about the impact of historical-geographical context on a range of political activities. In my view the geographical theory–elections connection was abandoned prematurely and stands in need of re-establishing. This seems especially apt at this historical moment when in many countries entrenched models of electoral politics, such as those of party identification or a twofold social class division, do not offer the theoretical purchase they did in less dynamic times. Recent history, then, provides an opportunity for a re-evaluation of the importance of geography. This is not to say that giving central attention to context can somehow resolve all theoretical disputes. Ontological and methodological priorities, such as privileging ethnocultural versus economic determinants and narrative versus analysis, respectively, will still differ. The relative significance of social group formation by flows of information and images through space versus their constitution by means of immediate territorial proximity also remains at issue (Gerstein, 1987).

The first section of the paper provides an overview of the concept of geographical context in relation to politics. Attention then turns to three ways in which context is claimed to count in electoral geography: the political geography of electoral choice, the geographical nesting of influence processes, and the geography of party horizons. Italian case studies are provided of each of these, drawing on work that is reported more fully elsewhere. Finally, I offer some conclusions about the nature of the contextual accounts reported here and of their virtues relative to alternatives.

Geographical context and politics

The concept of geographical context can be used to draw attention to the spatial situatedness of human action in contrast to the non-spatial sorting of people out into categories based on census and other classification schemes that inspires most conventional social science. The categorical approach 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 (see Agnew, 1987, 1993).

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. A parallel can be drawn between this idea and so-called configurational explanation. This involves the claim that, rather than adding together the categorical traits of an abstracted individual, explanation is better served by establishing the configuration or juxtaposition of stimuli to behavior within a relevant space–time matrix. This perspective combines commitments to the theoretical primacy of ‘the human agent’ (who does the behaving) with the analytic primacy of ‘the social-geographical’ (the setting for behaving). In this way the human agent and the social context can be integrated into analysis without getting into the abstract swamp of ‘the micro–macro
problem' or unproductive debate about the relative merits of reduction and emergence (on this see, for example, Wippler and Lindberg, 1987).

From this point of view, context refers to the hierarchical (and non-hierarchical) ‘funnelling’ 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. As a result, politics can be mapped not simply as the geographical outcome of non-spatial processes of political choice, but as a spatialized process of political influence and choice.

By way of example, recent years have seen a dramatic falling off in electoral participation in Italy. But the character of the process of decreasing electoral participation is best understood contextually. Closer analysis reveals that the highest rates of abstention are among older voters (particularly women) in the metropolitan south and young voters in the largest metropolitan areas of the north. Different sets of reasons are at work in producing this pattern; a set that in the south give rise to increased alienation from politics in general, particularly among older women, and in the metropolitan north a set that produces a protest against the existing parties on the part of the least-affiliated, younger voters (Corbetta and Parisi, 1994). It is not simply the compositional differences between different regions but the nature and understandings of politics in the regions as experienced by different groups of actors that are at play in this case.

With respect to what are recognizably political activities (voting, lobbying, starting political parties, parties establishing their appeal, and so on), a number of processes enter into the contemporary spatial configuration of context in Western Europe and North America. In general terms these define the geographies of economic activity and political-cultural regulation as these unfold in tune with changes in the historical geography of the world economy (Lash and Urry, 1987; Knox and Agnew, 1994). Together these processes frame the range of possible political activities and actions for human agents in particular places.

First of all is the social division of labor. This takes a spatially differentiated form and evolves in rhythm with changes in the world economy (Massey, 1984). There is an unevenness in the spatial distribution of investment, skills, input sources and markets. Some localities and regions are branch-plant economies, dependent primarily on flows of capital from elsewhere. Some are the headquarters of ‘international empires’, whereas others are engaged in specialized production for a range of national and international markets but depend largely on their own resources. These spatial-economic relationships have important effects on the social structure of particular areas and the character of local politics. Class and community affiliations take on meaning in relation to the context of the social-spatial division of labor.

Second is the nature of communications technology and access to it. Transportation and information technologies create patterns of relative accessibility and isolation that draw places differentially into wider networks of communication. Such networks are frequently hierarchical across settlement systems and sharply bounded by linguistic frontiers and customs barriers (Agnew, 1995c). The relative presence or absence of communication-network ties provides another contextual dimension to politics through limiting and/or enhancing interaction across space.

Third, all places are embedded in territorial states. States are conglomeries of localities and regions held together in local–central tension. Though most obvious in federations, this tension is implicit in all states. When popular legitimacy counts, states must pursue policies and distribute resources in ways that maintain legitimacy. In the presence of
economic and political inequality between places, this will involve considerable conflict over geographical redistribution of income and wealth, especially when different political parties and powerful interest groups have distinct local or regional constituencies (Agnew, 1987).

Fourth, social class, ethnic and gender divisions and antagonisms have national and international histories as promulgated by political movements and influential commentators and leaders. Such divisions often become reified in political discourse and serve to anchor different political ideologies. The relative significance and meanings ascribed to the various social divisions, however, are not uniform throughout a national territory. Rather, they vary from place to place with respect to patterns of economic dependence, work authority, local cultural forms and the history of local experience with respect to the use of social divisions by political movements (e.g. Jones, 1983; Tilly, 1986).

Fifth, in their manifestos and other rhetorical pronouncements political movements make various claims about region, locality, nation and other geographical levels, as well as about social class, ethnicity and gender. These generate different appeals in different places and can tie movements and parties to particular representations of geographical scale. Even putatively nationwide parties, for example, can declare themselves for 'municipal interests' or 'states' rights' as much as (or more than) national-level policy goals (see, for example, Crewe, 1991; Agnew, 1995c).

Sixth, and finally, the micro-geography of everyday life (work, residence, school, leisure, and so on) defines the more-or-less localized settings in which patterns of social interaction and social group formation are realized. Even 'individuals' without strong social connections must navigate the relatively narrow and directed pathways of everyday life (Pred, 1990). A sense of local distinctiveness or wider territorial affiliation can be a feature of a vigorous attachment to a particular place (e.g. Cohen, 1986). This is particularly the case when a place is viewed as a 'community of fate' in which an individual's material 'life chances' and emotional well-being are strongly dependent on the condition and prospects of the local area (Agnew, 1987). But social group formation and group (class, ethnic, and so on) consciousness are also realized in the spaces of everyday life and by reaching beyond them through organizational ties to similar groups elsewhere (Cooke, 1985; Katznelson, 1993; Savage, 1993).

In summary, the hierarchical-geographical context or place channels the flow of interests, influence and identity out of which political activities emanate. This approach assumes, therefore, that political behavior is inevitably structured by a changing configuration of social-geographical influences as global-local connections shift over time. The configurations of causal influences all relate back to the historical geography of the world economy at any particular time. However, because of differences in prior experiences no place can be reduced to them.

There are three important distinctions between this conception of context and those predominant in the political science literature. First, contextual effects are usually seen as external effects on individual behavior arising from social interaction within an environment (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1993: 289). But the hierarchical-geographical structuring of that environment is not examined explicitly. Overwhelmingly, it is local-neighborhood or group effects that are the subject of analysis, even when employing multi-level methods of statistical estimation. At best local (endogenous) and higher-level (exogenous) effects are identified but seen as separate rather than interacting in their impact (Grofman, 1987). Second, political movements and parties are typically exogenous to the enterprise. Overwhelming emphasis falls on 'individual' voters and their behavior rather than on the activities of other political actors. There is a bias against seeing
institutions as involved in structuring as opposed to reacting to context. Perhaps this relates to the origins of much contextual analysis in the sociological tradition of 'abstracted empiricism' and its relative neglect of 'structures' such as political institutions (Mills, 1959: 61). Third, there is an intellectual defensiveness to much contextual analysis, reflected in the tendency to accept the claim of non-contextualists that many social characteristics such as income and race are indeed 'individual' characteristics. A 'strong' contextualism would imply that social designations (such as class, age, religious adherence and educational level) only take on meaning and affect behavior in unique ways in particular political-geographical contexts. Part of the 'field' is thus often ceded before battle has begun.

Attention now turns to three empirical ways in which context can be seen as 'counting', using some Italian case studies. I do not have the time here to discuss these in great detail, though I have done so elsewhere (Agnew, 1994, 1995a,b).

How context counts: Italian case studies

My research over the past ten years on Italian electoral politics has involved three projects that explore geographical context in different ways. The first focuses on the historical geography of electoral performance at the provincial level from 1947 to 1987, claiming that this period can be divided into three geographical 'regimes' in which different political geographies of electoral choice prevailed. Shifts in the predominant 'scale of electoral aggregation' reveal shifts in the political-economic conditions under which electoral choices have been made in different places. The second is an analysis of flow-of-vote estimates, showing how a contextual analysis is more satisfactory than a national-level analysis when the technique in use is that of Goodman. This illustrates the force of arguments concerning the impact of a geographical range of contextual effects on electoral outcomes. The third involves the ways in which contemporary Italian political parties structure Italy geographically. By this I mean the relative emphasis given by major political parties (I use the cases of the Democratic Left [PDS] and Forza Italia) to different geographical scales in their organization and rhetoric and how this relates to the geography of their support.

Political geography of electoral choice

Until the late 1970s, students of Italian politics tended to emphasize the stability of the electorate's political preferences (Martinotti, 1978). Partly this was because of an assumption of limited electoral mobility, which recent empirical analysis has shown to be false (Allum and Mannheimer, 1985). But it was largely because of the taken-for-granted view that, with the partial exception of the anomalous 'white' and 'red' zones of north-east and central Italy, respectively, political divisions had stabilized around a nationwide standard or norm (Agnew, 1988).

This intellectual consensus has collapsed. There has been a revival of interest in the historical development of post-Second-World War Italy's electoral geography. Some recent research has examined the evolution of Italy's electoral regions from those defined by the results of the initial post-war elections (e.g. Arculeo and Marradi, 1985; Caciagli, 1988; Cartocci, 1987, 1990, 1994). In general, this suggests that apart from the north–south division, regional differences have diminished considerably, with localized 'opinion' voters replacing the once prevalent 'party-identity' voters in the north-east and center. In the south, 'exchange' or clientelistic voting still prevails. Other research has suggested,
however, that diminished regional clustering everywhere (including the south) has been paralleled by the emergence of increased spatial variation in electoral behavior based on enhanced urban–rural differences, the breakdown of strong party identification and the increased local-level differentiation of the Italian economy (e.g. Brusa, 1984; Martinotti, 1986; Anderlini, 1987).

It is important to note that throughout the period 1947–87 changes in the levels of support for Italian political parties from one national election to the next were small by comparison to such countries as France or Britain. Italy provided powerful evidence throughout this period for Mair's (1993) claim that nothing much changed in European electoral politics during the post-Second-World-War period. But certain 'realigning' elections can be identified, when changes were greater than usual and involved 'flows of votes' beyond the confines of parties grouped into the left, right and center 'families' within which votes were more typically exchanged (Martinotti, 1986: 261). The major shifts occurred in:

1. 1948 and 1953, when the Communist Party (PCI) emerged as the main party of the left and the Christian Democrats (DC) as the main party of the center;
2. 1963, when DC lost votes to the right and the PCI began its 'long march' towards the center; and
3. 1976, when the PCI increased its vote from new voters and voters from the center and DC received votes from the right.

No previous study has tried to tie these frequently noted national-level shifts to changes in the political geography of electoral choice. I have conducted a number of empirical studies which suggest that the realigning elections mark the onset (1953, 1963) or end (1976) of periods in which distinctive geographical dynamics were at work (Agnew, 1996). Indeed, the general stability in votes cast for the main parties at the national level masks important shifts at other scales in the geographical make-up of voting blocs. This perhaps best explains 'Mair's paradox', the tendency on the part of many commentators to note change in the fortunes of parties without much demonstrable change in national shares of votes cast (Mair, 1993).

One method among others that I have used to see if the realigning elections connect with changes in electoral geography is that for measuring 'nationalization' (convergence in levels of electoral support) provided by Claggett et al. (1984: 86–87). Using their approach to variance decomposition of votes by province for DC at all elections from 1953 to 1987, for example, shows that provincial standard deviations around the national means go up from 1953 to 1968 but then drop substantially from 1968 to 1976, with an ensuing increase from 1979 to 1987 (Figure 1). Before 1963 the regional standard deviations (regional means around the national mean) of the DC vote are higher than those for within-regions (provinces around the regional means) which, with the exception of 1972–9 when they show a parallel drop, become ever larger than the regional ones over time. The trend for the PCI is similar except that the regional standard deviations are consistently larger than are those for DC, particularly after 1979. This is not surprising, given the well-known geographical ‘retreat’ of the PCI back into its heartland in central Italy after its big success in 1976 (e.g. Pavšič, 1985; Martinotti, 1986).

I would interpret these results as indicating:

1. a period of high national variance for both DC and the PCI from 1953 to 1963, with regional clustering accounting for a significant but consistently declining share of national variance:
(2) a period of nationalization from 1968 to 1976 in which standard deviations at all levels went down; and
(3) a period of increased national variance after 1976 accounted for to a large degree, particularly for DC, by increased within-region variance.

This approach is based on a largely behavioral notion of degrees of homogeneity in vote percentages at different geographical scales. A more abstract view, and more in keeping with the earlier theoretical discussion, would involve how contexts differ in the ways politics is structured cognitively by the people who live in them. In this view context directly structures the domain of discourse (and choice) and only indirectly the domain of behavior. Thus, there could be different structuring of choice with similarity in behavior. In the absence of geographically relevant survey evidence focusing on electoral behavior, this is the best that can be done.

Whatever its theoretical limitations, the periodization does help to fit together elements of the conventional wisdom about the course of post-war Italian politics that have remained fragmented and inchoate rather than joined together within a larger narrative drama. The first of these is that at one time, above all in the 1950s, Italy could be meaningfully divided into six regions on the basis of levels of support for the major political parties (e.g. Galli and Prandi, 1970). From this point of view, Italian electoral politics followed a regional ‘regime’ with the PCI predominant in the center, the Monarchists (PNM) and neo-Fascists (MSI) largely confined to the urban south, and DC pre-eminent in the north-east and the rural small-town south. In the north-east and center were two strongly rooted ‘cultural hegemonies’, the Catholic and the socialist, respectively, which produced predominance for the DC and PCI through their links to ancillary organizations such as clubs, cooperatives and unions. In the ‘industrial’ north-west class-based mass politics prevailed, whereas in the south clientelism and nostalgia

![Graph](image-url)  
**Figure 1.** Dispersion of the average vote for DC (Christian Democrats) by provinces for Italy, across Galli and Prandi's (1970) regions, and within the regions, 1953–87 (lower standard deviation scores at all levels—nation, region, within-region—indicate greater 'nationalization').
for a more hierarchical past were the order of the day. Distinctive regional contexts produced the tendency for the regionalized geography of electoral politics.

The period 1963–76 marks the breakdown of the regional pattern, particularly the hold of DC over its regional constituencies and the containment of PCI in the center. The net effect of these two trends was to encourage the view that Italian politics was nationalizing (see Agnew, 1988). This was seen as the result of the arrival of consumer society after the Italian ‘economic miracle’ of the late 1950s/early 1960s challenging the hold of the Church in its areas of traditional strength and the increasing acceptance of PCI as a ‘normal’ political party. Rather than a permanent trend, however, the nationalizing regime turned out to be temporary. It peaked in 1976 when DC and the PCI between them accounted for 73 percent of the national vote and became one another’s main opponents in most electoral districts.

From 1976 to 1987 the electoral trend ran counter to nationalization but not back to an Italy of the regions so much as towards a fragmentation of political affiliations and a localization of electoral contests (e.g. Brusa, 1984; Pavisic, 1985; Leonardi, 1987). In particular, smaller parties gained ground at the expense of the big two; the Socialist Party (PSI) prospered in the south largely at the expense of DC, the PCI was driven back into its heartland as new movements such as the Greens and the Northern League drew support from a large variety of social groups, including many that had hitherto supported it or DC.

This electoral trend, continuing through and after the ‘great crisis’ of the main Italian parties in 1989–93, was paralleled by the increased geographical differentiation of the Italian economy. Uneven deindustrialization in the north-west has been accompanied by an explosion of economic development based on small firms and industrial districts in the north-east, the center, the center-south and parts of the north-west. This not only disrupted traditional livelihoods and union affiliations, it also energized a new class of small entrepreneurs with localized social and economic interests. Increased attention by professional groups in the cities of the north to pollution and environmental degradation created a new set of issues to which the old parties had difficulty responding. Thinking globally led more into acting locally than nationally so as to avoid established institutions with their built-in mobilization of bias and to directly address issues from everyday (local) life. The advent of administrative regions in the 1970s as a mechanism for governmental devolution not only helped to direct local economic and environmental concerns away from central government in Rome, but also boosted local clientelism (especially in parts of the south such as Calabria and Sicily) and legitimized the ‘sense of local identity’ that has been so important to some of the new political movements (particularly the Northern League in the 1980s).

Though the end of the Cold War and the systematic corruption of the main parties of government (DC and PSI) were perhaps central to the disintegration in 1992–93 of the party system that had dominated post-war Italy, the fragmentation and localization of Italian electoral politics after 1976 certainly played a part. The geographical context of politics had changed so much that the major established parties (DC, PCI, PSI, MSI) found it hard to adjust to new circumstances.

This abbreviated narrative account of the three successive political-geographical ‘regimes’ draws together elements of the conventional wisdom but also introduces some of the various putative causes of shifting context outlined earlier. Prime among these are the shifting spatial division of labor in the 1970s, the slow breakdown of mediating institutions that benefited DC and the PCI, changing government–locality patronage relationships after 1970, and the emergence of new political actors (Greens, the Northern
League, and so on) with different understandings of the ‘best’ geographical scale at which politics should be practised. But the relationship between these causes and electoral outcomes is not a linear one. It is how the causes ‘come together’ in diverse ways in different places with different prior histories that is important to the argument for how individual voters could make the choices that they did.

The geographical nesting of influence processes

Since the mid-1980s Italian newspapers and other media have been reporting national flow-of-vote estimates in the immediate aftermath of elections. However, this has become the center of a mini-controversy over the appropriateness of using national averages for actual flows of votes that take place in electoral districts, where the range of parties, networks of communication and logics governing party choice depart from an artifactual national average (Agnew, 1994). The method of estimation in use, that of Goodman (1959), makes very strong assumptions, which may lead to biased estimates irrespective of the geographical scale of application. Most protagonists in the controversy seem aware of this. What is more at issue concerns the best way in which the method should be used.

Before getting into this, it is important to note that contextual analysis remains statistically problematic whatever the specific problems of different methods. In particular, in conventional contextual data, aggregation effects are usually confounded with true contextual processes. This leads some commentators to the view that they ‘do not believe contextual processes can be satisfactorily evaluated using aggregated, group-level variables. Individual data are needed’ (Achen and Shively, 1995: 227). Multilevel modelling offers one response to this (e.g. Jones and Tonkin, 1994; Achen and Shively, 1995).

Goodman’s model can be thought of as a system of linear regression equations in which the percentages of the total potential vote (votes plus abstentions, spoilt ballots, and so on) going to the parties (and ‘abstentions, etc.’ included as a separate category) in the preceding election are independent variables ($X_{1,...,j}$) and the percentages in the most recent election are dependent variables ($Y_{1,...,k}$), with the units of analysis the smallest area (and, hence, largest number) for which results are available. Thus, if $k$ and $j$ are defined as the possible votes for each party for respectively the preceding ($X_{1,...,j}$) and the recent election ($Y_{1,...,k}$), then the system of regression coefficients will be:

$$
Y_1 = b_{11} X_1 + b_{12} X_2 + \ldots + b_{1j} X_j \\
Y_2 = b_{21} X_1 + b_{22} X_2 + \ldots + b_{2j} X_j \\
\vdots \\
Y_k = b_{k1} X_1 + b_{k2} X_2 + \ldots + b_{kj} X_j \\
1 = X_1 + X_2 + \ldots + X_j
$$

The $b$ coefficients represent fractions of the voting population that voted for party $X$ in the preceding election and party $Y$ in the recent one.

Two assumptions underpin this model. First, the population must be the same for $X$ and $Y$ so that the marginals sum to 1. This means that movement into and out of the electorate, not just valid votes, must be included. Second, the usual assumptions of regression estimation apply: linearity, homoskedasticity, absence of multicollinearity. This last is problematic and increases the standard error of the coefficients, particularly when the number of observational units falls below 100 (Biorcio and Natale, 1987). The
condition \( \Sigma x_j = 1 \) inevitably leads to a degree of correlation between the independent variables.

The critical issue in using this model with national-level data is stated clearly by Corbetta and Parisi when they write that the Goodman model

\[ \ldots \text{postulate[s]} \text{ that the movement of votes between the parties is regulated by a singular logic that is repeated across all territorial units; in other words, it is not permissible to have variations other than casual ones that differentiate one subgroup of units from another as would be the case, for example, if the electoral sections of Lombardy [in the north] presented movements of votes \textit{systematically} different from those of Molise [in the south]. (Corbetta and Parisi, 1990:146) \]

Controversy over the character of the Goodman model, therefore, provides a very good pretext for making the case for spatial context in relation to electoral behavior.

Three theoretical arguments can be associated with the contextual basis to Goodman's model (Corbetta and Scappini, 1991). First, to assume the possibility of homogeneity in voter behavior one needs homogeneity in the political arena. There must be a common list of parties and candidates to which voters can react. In Italy it was the 32 electoral districts (pre-1994) into which the country was divided and in which various combinations of parties ran their candidates that provided this context. There is also a more general sense in which context is at work in structuring the political arena. This is in terms of how people 'structure' politics in different ways in different places. This does not mean that they all arrive at different political conclusions, only that they consider the political options and what they mean in different ways. Of course, this process is impossible to examine within the constraints of the Goodman model. Second, the 'logic' of electoral choice is affected by the relative organizational strength and local roots of parties and candidates. The 'real' choices facing voters are not necessarily simply the nominal ones. Some parties may just have little or no 'electoral presence' whereas others have familiar faces to present, congenial stories to tell, and the means to communicate them both. This is a locality effect. Third, electoral choices are made in distinctively different social worlds in which the microdynamics of social segregation, influence networks and local issues affect party and candidate choice. Neighborhoods and other limited geographical areas define these local contexts.

Together these three theoretical arguments constitute a nested hierarchy of spatial contexts for the meaningful disaggregation of aggregated data and estimation of electoral flows. In an empirical examination of the evidence for the three contextual effects, Corbetta and Scappini (1991) show that their overall impact is anything other than minor. Differences in average flows in electoral sections across all parties between 1983 and 1987 are consistently lower for sections within the same electoral districts than for sections paired with sections in other districts (Table 1). The gap between 'within' and 'between' pairs is also relatively greater for sections that had the lowest average flows, suggesting that contextual differences are systematic rather than random.

In addition to flows being more alike within than between districts, there is also an important 'locality effect', which in some cases appears greater than the district effect. Using more limited data from just two cities, Genoa and Turin, there is evidence for a limited neighborhood effect. But this pales in comparison to the other two. One conclusion is inescapable, however: there are systematic differences across Italian territorial units in the values of the coefficients measuring electoral flows.
Table 1. The index DIFF87 for pairs of sections belonging to the same (*) and different (#) electoral districts, for three levels of the index DIFF83.

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<th>DIFF83</th>
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<td>11.9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: DIFF87 = average values of coefficients of flow across all parties and abstentions, etc. in 1987; DIFF83 = grouped average differences in the absolute values of support for parties in the sections in 1983; = column refers to pairs of sections in the same electoral district; # refers to pairs of sections in different electoral districts; N = number of pairs of sections.


The controversy over using Goodman's method with national-level data illustrates some of the key claims concerning the value of contextual analysis of electoral data. In taking seriously the assumption of homogeneity in the political arena as a prerequisite for the application of the model, critics of national-level analysis have pointed out and empirically demonstrated the systematic impact of hierarchical-contextual effects on Italian electoral behavior between 1983 and 1987.

The geography of party horizons

At the 27/28 March 1994 national election, with a largely new set of parties in competition, a totally new electoral map of Italy emerged. The major parties were the PDS and the Refounded Communism (RC—coming from the old PCI), the National Alliance (AN—an expanded 'conservative' version of the MSI), the Northern League (an alliance of northern leagues formed in 1991), the Popular Party (PP—the remains of DC), and Forza Italia (a new party founded by Silvio Berlusconi two months before the election). A new electoral system was in operation, replacing the previous proportional representation one: 75 percent of the seats were now from single-member majority-vote districts and 25 percent of the seats were elected proportionally. Voters cast two votes, one for their single-district member and one for the party list from which the proportional seats were allocated.

The main idea behind the electoral reform was to encourage pre-election compacts between parties rather than post-election coalitions (the old Italian model) that had not received popular endorsement. By brilliant maneuvering, Berlusconi negotiated two pacts, one with the League and the other with AN, such that Forza Italia had an election partner in the north and one in the south with which to share the single-member seats and provide a common face (Berlusconi's) to the Progressive alliance organized around the PDS. The distribution of the votes for the party lists in the proportional part of the election (lower house or Chamber of Deputies) by regional constituencies gives a good idea of the spectacularly heterogeneous geography of the new electoral regime (Table 2 and Figure 2). There appears to have been little split-ticket voting (votes for one alliance followed by votes for a party not in that alliance) so one can assume a high degree of parallelism between the two parts of the election (Allum, 1994).

Only PDS and Forza Italia, at the core of the alliances, showed themselves to be truly national political actors. Where each did well the other did poorly. But their 'reach' was
Table 2. Percentage of total votes cast for major parties on party lists (proportional component) in regional constituencies for the Italian Chamber of Deputies, 27/28 March 1994.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>RC</th>
<th>PDS</th>
<th>PP</th>
<th>FI</th>
<th>LN</th>
<th>AN</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Sardinia</td>
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<td>19.3</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Forza Italia did not present a proportional list in Puglia.
2 RC presented a common list with the anti-Mafia Rete (Network) that polled, respectively, 12.2 and 10.7.

Party labels: RC = Rifondazione Comunista (Refounded Communism); PDS = Partito Democratico della Sinistra (Democrat Left); PP = Partito Popolare (Popular Party); FI = Forza Italia; LN = Lega Nord (Northern League); AN = Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance).


national in scope. The other parties were either regionalized or localized. The 1994 election was conducted overtly by all of the parties as an ideological contest. Each party was proposing some sort of 'clean start' for Italy after the corruption scandals of the recent past. Each claimed to represent a break with partitocrazia, the political economy of parties, government jobs and business payoffs, upon which much of Italy's public life had been based. Each also used electoral appeals that structured 'Italy' geographically in different ways from that of its opponents. In so doing each worked with a different logic of the geographical scales at which Italian politics should be operationalized. Attention is restricted here to the PDS and Forza Italia.

As the main organizational heir of the PCI, the PDS is well organized throughout Italy. Since the institutionalization of administrative regions in 1970, the PCI had been the main party of regional governments in Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany and Umbria. The PDS inherited this role. Historically, the PCI had a strong link to the largest trade union federation (CGIL), but this had loosened in the 1970s. Nominally 'the party of the working class', the PCI (and now the PDS) had a strong appeal to other groups, particularly in central Italy.
Figure 2. The geography of support for the six largest parties in the Italian Chamber of Deputies, 27/28 March 1994, by province. Valle d’Aosta and Trentino-Alto Adige not included. Forza Italia did not run candidates in Puglia. Data and party name abbreviations are as in
As noted previously, the PDS was, with Forza Italia, one of two ‘national’ parties in 1994, in terms of substantial levels of support throughout Italy. Its greatest success, however, came in the localities of central Italy with which the PCI has been associated since 1945. The ‘red’ or socialist subculture was often invoked to explain the success of the PCI (and now PDS and RC, a ‘traditional’ communist party). But this ‘subculture’ has long been in decline as the rural/small-city lifestyles and dense networks of communist-affiliated organizations upon which it was based have withered away. One of the key myths of popular communist ideology in central Italy was the identification of the Soviet Union as the ‘homeland of socialism’. To the core constituency, ‘internationalism’ had always meant privileging the Soviet connection. Over the years this had eroded in official party policy, but it remained very much alive to the party faithful (Giaciglì, 1993). At the same time, the history of socialism in central Italy has always been the history of parties and movements, such as the cooperative movement, that involved an appeal to local interests and initiatives (Degl’ Innocenti, 1983; Sapelli, 1986). This was largely a commitment to a ‘municipal socialism’ that gave priority to local welfare over that of such abstract entities as the state or the working class. In 1994 it was to this ‘tradition’ that the PDS appealed to distinguish itself from the free market and ‘state off our backs’ rhetoric of the Northern League and Forza Italia. It did so not through a ‘pure’ localism or appeal to local pride and interests but on behalf of a strengthening of administrative regionalism everywhere in Italy. Thus a local ‘tradition’ could be combined with a national appeal.

The local and administrative-regional scales were moved to the center of PDS ideology. After the Soviet collapse ‘internationalism’ had no future with the core constituency. However, as Ferraresi (1994) has noted, the PDS became attractive in 1994 (and this may explain its success in the south) to those fearful of losing state protection and welfare spending in the face of an ascendant populist right. How the PDS can square this with its new-found commitment to municipalism remains to be seen.

The appeal of Berlusconi’s Forza Italia was overtly and immediately national. This ‘instant’ party was organized around the expansion of the national network of supporters clubs for Berlusconi’s AC Milan soccer club and the three private television networks that he also owned. Recruiting neophyte politicians as well as established figures from the old parties of government, Berlusconi tapped the only major instruments of national identity available in Italy—soccer and television.

Soccer supporters were mobilized through the use of the fan clubs, the explicit adoption of the language of the game in political rallies (the name of the party is the chant for the national team: GO Italy!), and the anticipated success of the national team in the 1994 World Cup (Lyttelton, 1994). Television helped turn an audience into a constituency. There was a huge audience of housewives and others fed on a diet of commercials, quiz shows and soap operas by Italian private television who had acquired national standards of taste and consumption. For the first time in Italian electoral history television was a major instrument of electoral competition, appealing directly to a national audience without party mediation. Berlusconi saturated the airwaves with the example of himself, the ‘self-made man’, to sell the idea of ‘hope’ in a new economic miracle that would follow from a government in which he was a central figure (Mannheimer, 1994).

‘What is the alternative?’ Berlusconi asked. ‘Vote for me or the Communists will get in!’ Other than this, the main political message was redolent of Thatcherism in England: business should be liberated from the shackles of the state, a rising tide of wealth would raise all ships, and so on. This message was directed strongly to the small-scale businessmen of northern Italy with whom it could be expected to resonate. Forza Italia reached its maximum level of support in Lombardy, where it picked up votes previously
cast for DC or the League. At the same time, a more generic and nationwide appeal to ‘social order’ and promised consumption was packaged in a glamorous television format which drew on the celebrity and familiarity of the leader. But the presentation of the leader was the most novel feature of the Forza Italia campaign. Anti-communism was an old hat in Italian electoral politics. DC had brushed it off at election time ever since its first success in 1948. The leader was now much more important than his partisan message. He sold himself directly to the national electorate as a national leader. Forza Italia was nothing in itself but the movement of one man. This ‘Bonapartist’ approach went straight to a largely middle-class constituency spread throughout Italy. There was no discussion of regional or local interests. Neither was there anything other than lukewarm support for the European Community. Italy was alone in front of the television with its businessman-leader.

These two examples—PDS and Forza Italia—illustrate how political parties meld geographical claims into the messages they send and how this affects the constituencies they attract. Political parties organize themselves and their appeals through the ways in which they divide and order space. The boundaries they draw, tentative and historically contingent as they may be, define the horizons of the contexts in which they operate.

Conclusion

Context counts in electoral geography, therefore, in a number of ways. Context is not just local context. It is the ways in which space across a range of geographical scales figures in the rhetorical strategies of parties, the nesting of influence processes, and the political geography of electoral choice. To examine these impacts I have had recourse to a variety of methods. I am committed to the idea that it is not enough to theorize about context, there is also a need to demonstrate its effects. But this need not drive us to a single technique. Sometimes an analytic approach is most appropriate, but not invariably so. For example, recounting the stories that political parties tell about the geographical framing of politics also counts in understanding the role of context.

There are two more theoretical conclusions. The first is that an adequate conception of ‘mapping politics’ cannot reduce it to single universal factors or causes. That is to both disengage space from any constitutive role in politics and to miss the multiscalar quality of social causation. The second is that context cannot simply be reduced to neighborhood or friends-and-neighbor ‘effects’. That is to separate out ‘the local’ as a spatial effect working against more abstract or general and aspatial social effects. Both of these conclusions challenge what has become the conventional wisdom among students of politics, irrespective of their intellectual and political loyalties.

More specifically, and finally, electoral geography has been caught between the methodological imperative to squeeze its information into some form of the general linear statistical model, on the one hand, and, on the other, models of voting that have deeply discounted the value of a geographical perspective that does more than add ‘neighborhood effect’ to a set of census attributes applied to an individual or an area. ‘Mapping politics’ can offer more than cartographic illustrations that decorate more compelling aspatial accounts of electoral geography, but only if we work harder at understanding the roles of context and showing in what ways it counts.

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References


Mapping politics: how context counts in electoral geography