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Housing tenure, local context, scale and voting in England and Wales, 1997[☆]

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Abstract

The absence of data at the correct spatial scales has made testing for the neighbourhood effect in voting at British general elections very difficult to undertake. A specially-constructed data set for ‘bespoke neighbourhoods’ at a range of small scales makes such tests feasible for the 1997 general election. These are used in conjunction with individual data obtained from the British Election Study to test whether voting by housing tenure varied according to the composition of the local housing market. The results provide evidence that is entirely consistent with the hypothesised effect (although it is only circumstantial regarding the reason for it), and strongly indicates that how people vote is substantially influenced by the nature of their (very) local milieux. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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The issue of the neighbourhood effect, as one example of spatial–contextual influences on voting, has been debated within the British election studies community on

[☆] Lest it be thought that there is some ‘padding’ in the association of six authors with this paper, it is desirable to point out the significant role that each has played in the overall project: Danny Dorling was responsible for designing the algorithm which enabled us to create the bespoke neighbourhoods, while Helena Tunstall and Dave Rossiter made it work and collected the census data; Iain MacAllister took those census data and linked them to the individual records in the British Election Study and Ron Johnston and Charles Pattie designed the analyses. All have been associated in the final stage of preparing the paper.

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a number of occasions, without any firm conclusions being reached. Some authors have doubted that it operates at all: others have produced data consistent with the hypothesis that there should be greater spatial polarisation of support for a party than there is of its basis in the relevant cleavage structure. The assumed rationale for this exaggerated polarisation is that members of the minority in an area are more likely to be won over by the majority than vice versa. Unfortunately, much of the discussion is inconclusive, because of the poverty of data sources available to test the hypothesis. (For a general introduction to the literature in the British context, see Johnston, 1986.)

Huckfeldt and Sprague (1990, p. 25) provide a formal statement of the neighbourhood effect hypothesis, which they summarise as:

. . . an individual is embedded within a particular context, the context structures social interaction patterns, political information is conveyed through social interaction, and the individual forms a political response based upon this information.

They clearly distinguish between that context—i.e. the voter's immediate milieu—and the wider political environment within which it is set: the former, in the British case, may be a local authority housing estate; the latter may be a safe Conservative Parliamentary constituency within which the estate is set. The two will interact to influence the voter's behaviour. The flows of information through social interaction may occur in either or both of formal and informal settings, resulting in what they term a learning process of 'behavioral contagion' (p. 28)—or 'conversion through conversation'.

Huckfeldt and Sprague's (1990) empirical findings regarding the impact of social context on the Presidential vote in the USA in 1972 and 1976 clearly illustrated the importance of both local context and general environment, with the latter defined as the composition of the voter's immediate neighbourhood and the former as the political complexion of the county within which it is set. They concluded that lower-status people were more susceptible to environmental as well as contextual influences than were their higher-status contemporaries, so that lower-status people living in lower-status contexts and lower-status environments (i.e. strongly pro-Democrat counties) were most likely to conform to the latter, and vote Democrat. Those who lived in higher-status contexts but similar environments (i.e. lower-status residents of middle-class neighbourhoods in pro-Democrat counties) were much less likely to vote Democrat, however, indicating that local context successfully competed against the wider environment for them—which Huckfeldt and Sprague found was not the case if voters lived in lower-status contexts but pro-Republican environments. This leads them to point to the important role of the 'social context as an interceptor of environmental influence' (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1990, p. 42). Thus the study of neighbourhood effects calls for multi-scale analyses, setting local contexts in their wider milieux.

A major contributor to the poverty of data issues regarding tests of the neighbourhood effect hypothesis relates to this question of spatial scale and the absence of data on the local context. Aggregate voting data for general elections are only available for

Parliamentary constituencies in the UK, and since the average constituency has an electorate of some 70,000 (and a population of around 90,000) this is much too large to represent the neighbourhoods within which the social contextual effects are assumed to operate. Although contextual data collected by the census are available at two other spatial scales—wards (with average populations of about 5000) and enumeration districts (average population just under 500)—there are no general election voting data that would allow finer-grained spatial analyses at those scales, although ward voting data are available for local elections (Rallings and Thrasher, 1997).

Given these data deficiencies, the best that can be done is to combine individual and contextual data, with the former obtained from surveys (such as those conducted by the British Election Study (BES) after every election since 1964).¹ These have their own difficulties, however. Although the sample sizes are sufficient at national and regional scales to give good estimates of the relationships between voting and various individual characteristics, they are insufficient for detailed studies of particular contexts or context-types at sub-regional scales, despite such surveys using cluster sample designs: however, it has been possible to explore differences at other spatial scales, such as housing markets (Pattie et al., 1997).²

Interestingly, however, although it is feasible if the survey data are adequately geo-referenced to merge individual and ecological data at the ward level to test hypotheses based on the neighbourhood effect concept, very little such work has been done. The major exception is a paper by Harrop et al. (1991), who used classifications of wards into various socio-demographic types and showed not only that they varied very substantially in the percentages voting either Conservative or Labour but also that home-owners were more likely to vote Conservative in certain types of area than in others. This latter is exactly the sort of finding suggested by the neighbourhood effect hypothesis, and although it does not indicate the underlying process (whether it was that ‘those who talk together vote together’—as Miller 1977, 1978 argued) it formed a much more robust test than anything previously reported. Harrop et al. (1991) also analysed other BES data using a very broad neighbourhood-type classification (whether it was pro-Conservative or pro-Labour) and showed that, for example, people who talk to Conservative voters and who lived in pro-Conservative areas were more likely to vote Conservative than similar people who lived in pro-Labour areas, but they had no material on where the discussants lived—it may not have been a neighbourhood effect at all. Similar data have been analysed by Curtice (1995) and Pattie and Johnston (1999, 2000), with comparable results regarding the impact of conversation but also lacking any spatial component.³

¹ The first survey was undertaken in 1963, and obtained retrospective voting data for 1959.

² This can in part be circumvented by estimating the relevant ‘characteristics by vote’ matrix for smaller areas using entropy-maximising methods (as in Johnston et al., 1988).

³ Unfortunately, the 1992 BES did not also ask respondents where their discussants lived. However, a parallel study of some 8000 adults (the British Household Panel Study) did ask each respondent where her/his three closest friends lived. The following table shows that just under one-third lived within a mile of the respondent’s home and some 60 per cent within five miles: close friendships appear to be spatially concentrated.

Even the use of wards carries problems, however; they vary in size and homogeneity, with in general the larger the ward the more socially heterogeneous it is. Large wards are commonest in urban areas: in England in 1991, for example, the average ward in a Metropolitan District had some 10,200 electors (in Birmingham the figure was 18,900), compared to 6500 in a London Borough and only 3200 in a non-Metropolitan County. Thus if ward characteristics are used as a measure of a voter's local context they may say little about her/his immediate neighbourhood. Much depends on the scale of the local context, however, of which we know very little. Is neighbourhood social interaction (within which political discussion may take place) limited to, say, an average elector's nearest 500 people, nearest 1000, 5000, or what? Alternatively, are the areas in which people share common experiences (unemployment, etc.), and in which voting behaviour is structured, just a few streets close to their homes, or is it the fortunes of entire estates, even towns, that form the milieux in which their political preferences are nurtured? Huckfeldt and Sprague's American analyses suggest both; that the structuring takes place in very local contexts (the streets and estates) and in wider political environments, such as towns. Hence the need to study spatial variations in voting at a range of scales, if the full nature of the neighbourhood effect is to be uncovered.

Many unanswered questions remain with regard to the operation of neighbourhood effects, therefore, as well as to the extent of the spatial polarisation which it is supposed to produce. In this paper, we report some results from an exploratory investigation related to just one of them—the scale effect. Using a new method of defining 'bespoke neighbourhoods' for individual voters, we look at variations in voting according to housing tenure at various neighbourhood scales.

1. Voting and housing tenure

There is a substantial body of literature relating voting and housing tenure in the UK that indicates a substantial cleavage between, on the one hand, those in the owner-occupier market and, on the other, those renting homes from local authorities (or, in some cases, the housing associations and other bodies that have recently replaced local authorities as managers of the public-sector housing stock). As Dunleavy (1979) argued in his paper on consumption cleavages in British politics, this has involved owner-occupiers traditionally voting for the party which promotes the free market in housing provision—the Conservatives—while public-sector renters

Percentage distribution of closest friends' homes

	Closest	Second closest	Third closest
Less than 1 mile	32.1	30.0	29.2
Between 1 and 5 miles	30.0	31.4	30.1
Between 5 and 50 miles	23.4	24.4	25.9
More than 50 miles	14.5	14.2	14.8

have supported Labour, which (until very recently) has strongly pressed for substantial public-sector housing provision.

Table 1 shows the pattern of voting by tenure at the 1997 general election in England and Wales, according to the BES cross-section. (We use England and Wales only because of difficulties in creating the ‘bespoke neighbourhoods’ introduced below for Scotland. The tenure groups are collapsed into just three because of problems with small sample sizes at later stages in our analysis.) Labour was clearly the party of choice among local authority tenants, with neither the Conservatives nor the Liberal Democrats attracting support from even 10 per cent. Owner-occupiers also preferred Labour to the other parties, though with only a small margin over the Conservatives at an election when the latter achieved their smallest share of the electorate during the entire twentieth century. The Liberal Democrats performed much better among the owner-occupiers than local authority tenants. Those in other tenures, mainly the private-rented sector (which varies greatly in its characteristics, from penthouse suites in London hotels to ‘squats’ in abandoned housing), were twice as likely to favour Labour as either of the other two UK-wide parties. In addition, whereas about one-third of both local authority tenants and those in other tenures abstained, this was twice as many as among the owner-occupiers.

But does this pattern of voting hold across all parts of the country and all neighbourhoods? Research on earlier elections has shown that local authority tenants living in constituencies with large proportions of their households in that tenure were much more likely to vote Labour than were tenants living in constituencies with relatively few in that category (Johnston, 1987). This could be taken as indicative of a neighbourhood effect, of local authority tenants living in areas where the majority of their neighbours were in the same situation being more likely to vote Labour than other such tenants, most of whose neighbours obtained their home through the owner-occupier market. But constituencies are very large, and many of those with relatively small local authority housing stocks include some areas where such dwellings are in a majority—and where a majority of the local authority tenants live and vote.

Why, more importantly, should there be variations in the propensity of people in the same housing tenure category to vote differently according to the characteristics of their local milieu? According to the classic ‘conversion by conversation’ process that underpins the neighbourhood effect hypothesis, the greater the density of sup-

Table 1
Vote by housing tenure at the 1997 general election, England and Wales

	Owner- occupiers	Local authority tenants	Other tenures
Conservative	28.1	7.6	16.8
Labour	34.8	51.3	31.5
Liberal Democrat	15.2	6.2	14.0
Other	5.1	4.9	2.8
Did not vote	16.8	30.0	34.9
<i>N</i>	1908	437	387

porters of any one party in an area, the more that political discussion there will be dominated by opinions which favour that party, and the more 'converts' to the party than to that supported by the minority view in the area. Thus the larger the percentage of local authority tenants in an area, the larger the expected support for Labour, among all tenure groups, with the same for Conservative support the larger the percentage of owner-occupiers in an area. Other explanations for the same phenomenon pay less attention to 'conversion by conversation' and more to 'conversion by observation' of the general situation locally (see, for example, Books and Prysby, 1991; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Mutz, 1998). Many local authority estates are being 'residualised' through the public sector housing allocation process: only the poorest applicants and, increasingly, the homeless are allocated homes because of a shortage of dwellings available to councils following the 'right-to-buy' legislation of the early 1980s which not only encouraged tenants to buy their homes at very large discounts (and many who did, mainly the better-off, voted Conservative at subsequent elections: Garrett, 1994; Field, 1997; Hills, 1997) but also prevented local authorities from replacing them with new stock. Increasingly, therefore, people who live on or near local authority estates are aware of some of the extremes of poverty in society—which may encourage them to vote for the party most committed to the welfare state and to poverty-reduction through government policy rather than market mechanisms.

This voting-decision model gives priority in the neighbourhood effect to the role of informal social interaction within the local area—Miller's (1978) inferred process of people who talk together voting together. It may well be sustained, if not enhanced, by a further process. The larger the percentage of local authority tenants in an area, the more substantial should be the formal Labour party organisation there, although some local parties in very safe Labour seats were moribund through the 1980s and early 1990s (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992, p. 185). This should mean more local activities and activists mobilising commitment to and support for Labour in such areas; conversely, the larger the percentage of owner-occupiers in an area, the greater the formal Conservative presence and the better mobilised the local electorate in its favour. Such variations in the parties' local presence should then be reflected in their campaigning activity at elections: the larger the local party, the more canvassing and other campaigning activities it will undertake, the more aware the local electors will be of its candidates and policies, and the more likely that they will turn out to support it. An increasing body of literature shows that local campaigning does matter at British elections, so parties should perform better where their support base is strongest (see, for example, Denver and Hands, 1997; Johnston and Pattie, 1997).

Our expectations, therefore, are that there are spatial variations in the level of support for the various political parties among the main housing tenure categories, according to the characteristics of voters' local milieux. We anticipate that:

1. The larger the percentage of households in an area who are local authority tenants, the larger the percentage of voters, in all housing tenure categories, who supported Labour at the 1997 general election, and the smaller the percentage who voted Conservative.

In addition, however, it may be that turnout varies according to the characteristics of the local milieu. In general, the less affluent areas have lower turnout (higher abstention) rates (Pattie and Johnston, 1998), reflecting both greater voter alienation in such areas and, where the local constituency is very safe for the Labour party, less incentive to vote, hence a second hypothesis that:

2. The larger the percentage of householders in an area who are local authority tenants, the higher the abstention rate at the 1997 general election.⁴

The remainder of this paper reports tests of these hypotheses, using the 1997 BES cross-section data for England and Wales plus specially-created census data sets used to define local milieux at a range of scales.

2. The scale issue: 'bespoke neighbourhoods'

As stressed already, little is known about the spatial scale of social interaction and the extent of the communities within which either the informal social interaction that might generate neighbourhood effects takes place (in neighbours' homes, on the street, in pubs and social clubs, etc.) or people observe their neighbours' situations. But it is almost certain that it is much smaller than the average constituency: people's socio-spatial horizons are more constrained than those of an area with 70,000 or more voters. The ward is a closer approximation to the neighbourhood, but even so it may be too large, especially in urban areas. (The wards which contained respondents to the 1997 BES survey in England and Wales, for example, varied in their population from a maximum of 31,612 to a minimum of 1226 with a mean of 7604 and a standard deviation of 4773.) So are there smaller areas that can be employed to test the neighbourhood effect hypothesis?

The only scale smaller than the ward for which census data are released is the enumeration district, the area used for the administration of the census to households. These average just under 500 residents in England and Wales and although they are not defined to produce homogeneous social areas (as Morphet 1992, 1993 indicates for Newcastle), nevertheless their very size suggests that they are much closer to the assumed 'local neighbourhood'.

Through a special arrangement with the team who conducted the 1997 BES we have been able to locate each respondent to that survey in England and Wales in her/his enumeration district, which allows testing of the neighbourhood effect hypothesis at much more local scales than has heretofore been possible. In addition, we have used these data to create bespoke neighbourhoods for each sample respondent, defined as that group of enumeration districts closest to her/his home containing

⁴ An alternative hypothesis, which cannot be tested here, relates turnout to polling station location: Taylor (1973) showed in the 1970s that turnout was related to distance from the polling station and later unpublished research by David Rossiter has confirmed this. What we don't know is whether the location of polling stations discriminates (intentionally or otherwise) against some groups rather than others.

the nearest n residents to that location, where n varies between 500 and 10,000. Five such bespoke neighbourhoods were created, comprising the nearest 500, 1000, 2500, 5000 and 10,000 persons to each respondents' home, thereby allowing us to explore the scale aspect of the neighbourhood effect in greater detail than has been undertaken before: all census and other data available for constituencies, wards and enumeration districts can be assembled for these bespoke neighbourhoods.

The procedure for creating these bespoke neighbourhoods was undertaken without compromising the confidentiality undertaken given to BES respondents. The algorithm that we developed works by searching outwards from the respondent's 'home enumeration district', adding adjacent districts to the neighbourhood until the threshold n has been reached. For example, we may want to define a 'bespoke neighbourhood' for an individual respondent containing the 1000 persons who live nearest to her/his home. Building the neighbourhood starts by identifying the enumeration district in which her/his postcode is located, which may give the 200 nearest people. The algorithm then finds the nearest neighbour enumeration district, which may contain another 250 people, giving a total of 450. It then finds the next nearest, in a search procedure which continues until the total population of the nearest neighbours exceeds the 1000 person threshold. This provides us with a list of the enumeration districts which comprise the bespoke neighbourhood, and which was then used to extract the relevant census data from the MIDAS files held at the University of Manchester.⁵ Matching the various files was much more difficult for the Scottish than the English and Welsh samples, and so our analyses reported here relate to England and Wales only.⁶

Table 2 indicates one of the main advantages of these bespoke neighbourhoods for testing the neighbourhood effect hypothesis. The smaller the neighbourhood the greater the spread of respondents across all categories defined by the percentage of households living in local authority tenancies. Among owner-occupiers, for example, with the n10000 neighbourhoods only six of the respondents live in areas with 60 per cent or more council tenancies, whereas with nED and n500 there are 42 and 40 respectively; no constituency had as many as 60 per cent of its homes in that tenure category, and that was the case also with all but one of the wards sampled (which contained nine respondents). Similarly with council tenants: with n10000

⁵ We ran this algorithm five times for the respondents in the 1997 BES survey, creating bespoke neighbourhoods which identify the nearest 500, 1000, 2500, 5000 and 10,000 people to their homes. This was done without in any way compromising the confidentiality undertakings given to the BES respondents by the CREST team. Initially we were provided with the postcode data only, with no identifier that would link that file to any other with data about the individual. We then created our bespoke neighbourhoods, and returned these to the CREST team, with the postcodes on. They merged the bespoke neighbourhood files with another file of identifiers which allowed us to link them with the individual characteristic files. In other words, at no time were we able to identify where individual respondents live at a smaller scale than that of the electoral ward. We are very grateful to John Curtice and other members of the CREST team for their collaboration in this procedure.

⁶ In addition, the BES had a 'booster component' for Scotland and weighting is necessary in investigations using the full sample: we have been exploring other weighting issues (not discussed here) which required us to concentrate on England and Wales only.

Table 2
Sample sizes in ‘bespoke neighbourhoods’, wards and constituencies^a

%LAT	nED	n500	n1000	n2500	n5000	n10000	ward	const
Owner-occupiers								
0.0–19.9	1452	1445	1391	1360	1397	1401	1404	1386
20.0–39.9	228	245	291	377	368	381	383	473
40.0–59.9	134	126	134	101	71	58	105	49
60.0–79.9	42	40	42	22	18	6	9	0
80.0–	3	3	2	0	0	0	0	0
Council tenants								
0.0–19.9	71	72	76	93	135	159	141	201
20.0–39.9	89	97	120	170	156	159	167	202
40.0–59.9	136	132	128	100	94	88	100	25
60.0–79.9	103	99	84	54	34	15	25	0
80.0–	25	25	16	9	4	1	0	0
Other tenures								
0.0–19.9	278	278	261	254	254	253	247	269
20.0–39.9	42	40	64	82	89	91	104	88
40.0–59.9	30	33	25	20	15	11	17	14
60.0–79.9	9	10	11	5	3	2	1	0
80.0–	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0

^a Key to columns: %LAT, per cent of households in the area who are local authority tenants; nED, nearest enumeration district; n500, nearest 500 persons; n1000, nearest 1000 persons; n2500, nearest 2500 persons; n5000, nearest 5000 persons; n10000, nearest 10000 persons; ward, electoral ward; const, Parliamentary constituency.

neighbourhoods, only 16 of the 437 live in areas with 60 per cent or more sharing that tenancy, whereas with nED (the respondent’s nearest enumeration district) there are 128—and even with n2500 and n5000 there are 100 and 63 respectively (compared to only 25 when wards are used as the neighbourhood definition). If there are neighbourhood effects and if they are local, therefore, they should be much more apparent in our smaller bespoke neighbourhoods than in wards and constituencies—which are more heterogeneous and less likely to conform to the territories within which people’s social networks are constrained.

3. Housing tenure, context and vote in 1997

As a first, exploratory, stage of our tests of the neighbourhood effect hypothesis using this new data set regarding local context, we have grouped the neighbourhoods (including wards and constituencies) into five categories, depending on the percentage of households there who were local authority tenants. The percentages who voted Conservative and Labour and who abstained, in each category, by housing tenure, are shown in Tables 3–5 (percentages are not given where the relevant cell size is less than 10 respondents). In all three the pattern is consistent with the neighbourhood

Table 3

Conservative voting by housing tenure: bespoke neighbourhoods, wards and constituencies^a

%LAT	nED	n500	n1000	n2500	n5000	n10000	ward	const
Owner-occupiers								
0.00–19.9	30.2	30.5	30.3	30.4	30.4	31.1	31.8	31.7
20.0–39.9	23.2	21.6	23.4	24.4	22.6	21.8	18.8	19.7
40.0–59.9	19.4	18.3	20.9	15.8	16.9	10.3	16.2	8.2
60.0–79.9	14.3	17.5	11.9	9.1	22.2	*	*	*
80.0–	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Council tenants								
0.0–19.9	9.9	11.1	10.5	11.8	9.6	7.5	9.9	10.0
20.0–39.9	10.1	9.3	10.0	8.8	7.7	9.4	6.6	5.4
40.0–59.9	10.3	9.8	7.0	5.0	7.4	4.5	7.0	4.0
60.0–79.9	1.0	2.0	3.6	1.9	2.9	6.7	4.0	*
80.0–	4.0	4.0	6.3	*	*	*	*	*
Other tenures								
0.0–19.9	18.0	18.0	19.2	17.3	16.9	18.2	17.0	19.0
20.0–39.9	14.3	17.5	10.9	18.3	19.1	14.3	17.3	10.2
40.0–59.9	16.7	12.1	16.0	15.0	13.3	9.1	5.9	14.3
60.0–79.9	*	10.0	9.1	*	*	*	*	*
80.0–	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

^a * *N* less than 10. Key to columns: %LAT, per cent of households in the area who are local authority tenants; nED, nearest enumeration district; n500, nearest 500 persons; n1000, nearest 1000 persons; n2500, nearest 2500 persons; n5000, nearest 5000 persons; n10000, nearest 10000 persons; ward, electoral ward; const, Parliamentary constituency.

effect hypothesis as set out above—although it appears to be as strong at the constituency scale as at that of the small neighbourhood, an issue to which we return below.

For Conservative voting (Table 3), the patterns for owner-occupiers are very clear and entirely consistent with the hypothesis: the larger the percentage of dwellings in an area occupied by local authority tenants, the smaller the Conservative vote. With a few exceptions, the same is the case with council tenants: the more council tenants there are in the local milieu, the smaller the Conservative vote. That is also generally the case with other tenures, though with slightly more deviations from the overall sequence down the individual columns of the table.

Turning to Labour voting, the data in Table 4 are slightly less in accord with the hypothesis, largely because of deviant values in the neighbourhoods with 60 per cent or more local authority tenants—in many of which the number of respondents is small. Among owner-occupiers, for example, there is an increase in Labour voting down the columns for the first three categories (i.e. up to 60 per cent local authority tenancies in an area) at all scales except the constituency but with a substantial decline in the fourth, where *n* is small.⁷ Among council tenants, the pattern is consist-

⁷ One possible reason for this is suggested by Miller (1978), who introduces the concept of a 'reactive contextual effect', whereby individuals in a small minority in an area react to the majority view by being even stronger in their support for minority opinion. This is not consistent with the results in Table 3 for Conservative voting, though it is with the patterns of abstention in Table 5.

Table 4
Labour voting by housing tenure: bespoke neighbourhoods, wards and constituencies^a

%LAT	nED	n500	n1000	n2500	n5000	n10000	ward	const
Owner-occupiers								
0.0–19.9	32.8	32.8	33.6	32.9	32.9	32.0	31.6	30.1
20.0–39.9	40.8	40.8	40.9	38.7	38.6	44.1	43.1	48.4
40.0–59.9	47.0	46.8	45.5	48.5	52.1	51.7	44.8	36.7
60.0–79.9	33.3	35.0	35.7	36.4	38.9	*	*	*
80.0–	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Council tenants								
0.0–19.9	49.3	44.4	52.6	46.2	48.9	47.8	46.8	48.6
20.0–39.9	51.7	53.6	43.3	51.2	51.9	54.7	53.3	53.5
40.0–59.9	50.0	52.3	56.3	53.0	54.3	47.7	53.0	56.0
60.0–79.9	59.2	57.6	57.1	61.1	47.1	73.3	60.0	*
80.0–	36.0	36.0	37.5	*	*	*	*	*
Other tenures								
0.0–19.9	32.4	32.0	33.3	33.9	31.5	31.2	32.4	27.9
20.0–39.9	23.8	25.0	26.6	25.6	31.5	33.0	28.8	44.3
40.0–59.9	30.0	33.3	28.0	26.0	46.7	36.4	47.1	28.6
60.0–79.9	*	50.0	36.4	*	*	*	*	*
80.0–	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

^a * *N* less than 10. Key to columns: %LAT, per cent of households in the area who are local authority tenants; nED, nearest enumeration district; n500, nearest 500 persons; n1000, nearest 1000 persons; n2500, nearest 2500 persons; n5000, nearest 5000 persons; n10000, nearest 10000 persons; ward, electoral ward; const, Parliamentary constituency.

ent with the hypothesis for the first four categories, but there is much lower support for Labour in areas with 80 per cent of more council tenants for nED, n500 and n1000. Part of the reason for this is suggested by Table 5, which shows the patterns of abstention. Non-voting in 1997 was very much higher among council tenants and other tenures than owner-occupiers, especially in the neighbourhoods with high percentages of local authority tenants: as a broad generalisation there are higher rates of abstention the larger the neighbourhoods' percentage of local authority tenants, especially among owner-occupiers at the smaller scales, suggesting that where members of a tenure group are in a small minority in a small area they are more likely to abstain.

The advantages of using the bespoke neighbourhoods are very clear from these three tables. Because of their size, most constituencies are heterogeneous in their housing tenure composition, especially with regard to their percentage of households living in local authority tenancies. Most residents of England and Wales live in constituencies (and also wards) with less than 20 per cent of their households in such tenancies. So do the majority of residents of smaller areas, as Table 2 shows. Of the minority who live in areas with more than 20 per cent local authority households, however, at the constituency scale only 4.2 per cent of owner-occupiers, 5.8 of local authority tenants and 3.8 per cent of those in other tenures lived in areas with more than 40 per cent of their residents in homes rented from local authorities.

Table 5
 Abstention by housing tenure: bespoke neighbourhoods, wards and constituencies^a

%LAT	nED	n500	n1000	n2500	n5000	n10000	ward	const
Owner-occupiers								
0.0–19.9	15.4	15.2	15.9	15.1	15.4	14.9	14.8	16.1
20.0–39.9	21.1	22.0	17.9	20.7	20.7	21.8	21.9	17.5
40.0–59.9	17.2	16.7	16.4	19.8	21.1	20.7	21.9	28.6
60.0–79.9	38.1	38.5	38.1	31.8	22.2	*	*	*
80.0–	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Council tenants								
0.0–19.9	25.4	29.2	26.3	29.0	26.7	28.3	27.7	27.6
20.0–39.9	25.8	23.7	26.7	24.7	29.5	28.3	31.1	32.7
40.0–59.9	27.2	26.5	28.9	37.0	29.8	38.6	31.0	28.0
60.0–79.9	33.0	33.0	34.5	29.6	47.1	13.3	32.0	*
80.0–	56.0	56.0	43.8	*	*	*	*	*
Other tenures								
0.0–19.9	33.8	33.8	33.0	32.7	32.3	32.0	34.4	36.8
20.0–39.9	38.1	37.5	35.9	37.8	39.3	40.7	37.5	31.8
40.0–59.9	36.7	36.4	44.0	40.0	26.7	27.3	29.4	21.4
60.0–79.9	*	20.0	27.3	*	*	*	*	*
80.0–	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

^a * *N* less than 10. Key to columns: %LAT, per cent of households in the area who are local authority tenants; nED, nearest enumeration district; n500, nearest 500 persons; n1000, nearest 1000 persons; n2500, nearest 2500 persons; n5000, nearest 5000 persons; n10000, nearest 10000 persons; ward, electoral ward; const, Parliamentary constituency.

But at the smaller scales, many more live in such areas: at the n1000 scale, for example, 9.3 per cent of owner-occupiers live in areas with more than 40 per cent local authority tenants, as do 53.3 per cent of local authority tenants themselves and 27.2 of those in other tenures. If neighbourhoods are the crucial local contexts, then they are poorly represented at the constituency scale. (Even at the n10000 scale, 24.3 per cent of local authority tenants live in areas with 40 per cent or more of their neighbours in that tenancy, compared to the 5.8 per cent at the constituency scale.) The heterogeneity of constituencies precludes a full testing of the neighbourhood effect hypothesis, therefore, as clearly demonstrated by Tables 3–5: differences are much greater at the smaller scales, because the polarisation in tenure composition is so much greater.

3.1. Formal testing: logistic regression

Although the descriptive data in Tables 3–5 show trends that are entirely in line with the neighbourhood effect hypotheses, the problems of small sample sizes in a number of the cells preclude firm conclusions regarding the relationship between tenure, local context and voting. As a first step towards such firmer conclusions Table 6 reports logistic regressions of the probability of voting either Conservative or Labour, or abstaining, against tenure and local context. Tenure is entered as a

Table 6
 Logistic regressions of vote by tenure and percentage of local authority tenants in the local area^a

	nED	n500	n1000	n2500	n5000	n10000	ward	const
<i>Dependent variable=voting Conservative</i>								
Constant	-1.37	-1.34	-1.33	-1.27	-1.21	-1.11	-1.14	-0.92
Tenure (comparator group=owner-occupier)								
Council tenants	-1.11	-1.11	-1.13	-1.16	-1.19	-1.22	-1.20	-1.37
Other tenures	-0.63	-0.63	-0.63	-0.62	-0.62	-0.62	-0.64	-0.67
%LAT	-0.013	-0.015	-0.015	-0.019	-0.023	-0.030	-0.030	-0.044
-2 log likelihood	2753	2751	2750	2745	2743	2737	2781	2777
Improvement	126	128	129	134	136	142	98	102
<i>Dependent variable=voting Labour</i>								
Constant	-0.57	-0.59	-0.60	-0.63	-0.69	-0.78	-0.74	-0.92
Tenure (comparator group=owner-occupier)								
Council tenants	0.51	0.48	0.49	0.50	0.49	0.47	0.48	0.54
Other tenures	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
%LAT	0.005	0.006	0.006	0.008	0.012	0.017	0.014	0.025
-2 log likelihood	3443	3443	3443	3441	3436	3428	3512	3499
Improvement	92	92	92	94	99	107	23	36
<i>Dependent variable=abstention</i>								
Constant	-1.27	-1.25	-1.21	-1.23	-1.25	-1.26	-1.25	-1.23
Tenure (comparator group=owner-occupier)								
Council tenants	0.42	0.45	0.54	0.55	0.57	0.60	0.59	0.69
Other tenures	0.95	0.95	0.97	0.94	0.95	0.95	0.98	0.98
%LAT	0.009	0.009	0.007	0.008	0.010	0.011	0.011	0.011
-2 log likelihood	2648	2651	2656	2655	2655	2655	2730	2735
Improvement	92	89	84	85	85	85	10	5

^a * Not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Key to variables: %LAT, per cent of households in the area who are local authority tenants; nED, nearest enumeration district; n500, nearest 500 persons; n1000, nearest 1000 persons; n2500, nearest 2500 persons; n5000, nearest 5000 persons; n10000, nearest 10000 persons; ward, electoral ward; const, Parliamentary constituency.

series of dummy variables, with the comparator being those in owner-occupier tenures: local context is represented by the percentage of homes in the relevant neighbourhood which are local authority tenancies, at an interval scale. The regressions have been fitted at all eight spatial scales. (The goodness-of-fit measure used is -2 log likelihood: the improvement figure compares the reported regression with one which excludes the local context variable.)

The regressions of the probability of voting Conservative (a dummy-dependent variable, coded 1 if the respondent reported voting Conservative in 1997, and 0 otherwise) show the expected differences between the tenure types: at the nED scale, for example, a local authority tenant was only 0.33 as likely to vote Conservative as an owner-occupier (the exponent of the regression coefficient, -1.11), and somebody in the other tenure category was only 0.53 as likely. These differences were statistically significant at the 0.05 level or better, as were the relationships with local context: the higher the percentage of local authority tenants in an area, the smaller the probability of a vote for the Conservatives—holding tenure constant. (At the

nED scale, the negative coefficient of -0.013 indicates, for example, that in a neighbourhood with 10 per cent of its households in the local authority sector the probability of a Conservative vote is 0.88 of its level where there are no local authority tenants: with 30 per cent that probability is 0.68; and at 60 per cent it is 0.46.)

With regard to the probability of a Labour vote (a dummy-dependent variable, coded 1 if the respondent reported voting Labour in 1997, and 0 otherwise), the second set of regressions shows a significant difference between council tenants and owner-occupiers, but not between the latter and those in other tenures: council tenants at the nED scale were 1.66 times more likely to vote Labour than were owner-occupiers (the exponent of 0.51). There was also a significant relationship between the probability of voting Labour and local context at every scale: the more local authority tenants in an area, the more likely people were to vote Labour, whatever their own housing tenure, with a regression coefficient of 0.005 at the nED scale, for example, indicating that for every 10-point increase in the local authority tenure component of the local housing market, the probability of a Labour vote increased by 0.05. (Thus in an nED neighbourhood with 5 per cent of its homes rented from local authorities, the probability of an owner-occupier voting Labour was 1.025 greater than it was in neighbourhoods with no local authority tenants; if 25 per cent of the homes were so rented it was 1.13; with 45 per cent it was 1.25; and with 65 per cent, 1.38.)

Finally, in Table 6, the block of regressions for abstentions (coded 1 if the respondent reported not voting at the 1997 general election and 0 otherwise) shows that all of the relationships tested for were statistically significant at the 0.05 level or better. Council tenants were more likely to abstain than owner-occupiers (a ratio of 1.51 to 1 at the nED scale, as shown by the regression coefficient of 0.42) and those in other tenures even more so (a ratio of 2.59 to 1). And local context was significantly related to abstention rates irrespective of tenure: the more local authority tenants in an area the greater the probability of an individual not voting in 1997—at the nED scale, with 10 per cent of the local homes rented from a local authority, the likelihood of an owner-occupier abstaining, compared to the situation in areas with no local authority tenants, was 1.09, for example, whereas with 70 per cent it was 1.89.

As well as confirming all of the hypotheses regarding the neighbourhood effect and voting in 1997, independent of the impact of local authority tenure, there are two other interesting features of Table 6: for all three dependent variables, the regression coefficient for %LAT (per cent of households in the area who had local authority tenants) increases the larger the spatial scale, but the improvement in the model goodness-of-fit falls, especially for the last two scales—the ward and the constituency. Both of these are probably related to the relative heterogeneity of the last two scales: because so few respondents at those scales live in areas of high local authority tenure, there are substantial differences in the voting probabilities at the higher end of the spectrum—which accounts for the small increase in the goodness-of-fit. We return to this issue of scale differences below.

3.2. A fully-specified model?

Although the regressions reported in Table 6 provide strong supportive evidence that the neighbourhood effect operated at the 1997 general election, it could be argued that this is because the models there are underspecified: omission of other independent variables that are normally related to voter choice in England and Wales might have led to them being incorporated in the local context variable. For example, it is well-known that working-class respondents are more likely to vote Labour than those in the middle-class (a relationship shown by Sanders, 1997, even though he argues that the class cleavage has disappeared from British politics), and that those who identify with the working-class vote differently from those who identify with the middle-class, whatever their 'objective status'. Thus, for example, owner-occupiers living in areas with high percentages of local authority tenants may be more likely to be members of the working class on occupational status grounds, and also more likely to identify with the working class, than owner-occupiers living in other areas and as a consequence more likely to vote Labour—because of who they are and think they are rather than where they live.⁸ Thus it is desirable to include independent variables reflecting both of these—their 'objective' social class (as measured by the Heath–Goldthorpe five-category scale) and their 'subjective class' identification. In addition to these, variables representing educational qualifications and household income should also be included: low-income owner-occupiers are more likely than high-income owner-occupiers to have their choice of residential areas constrained to those either with or close to others with large percentages of local tenants, for example, and, because there is a relationship between income and party choice, more likely to vote Labour because of their income rather than where they live.

To take these further independent variables into account, the regressions reported in Table 6 were re-run for each of the three independent variables: only those for the n1000 and n5000 bespoke neighbourhoods are reported here to save space. They show that, even with those additional variables held constant, the relationships with local area context remain: the higher the percentage of households who are local authority tenants in an area, the higher the probability of either voting Labour or abstaining and the lower the probability of voting Conservative (Table 7: in these the improvement in the $-2 \log$ likelihood value is compared to regressions with all of the variables included except %LAT).

As anticipated, all of the regressions have significant relationships with respondent's housing tenure, with the expected signs. There are also significant differences between occupational classes: those in the two manual classes were significantly less likely to vote Conservative and more likely to abstain than members of the salariat, for example—although the only difference in the likelihood of a Labour vote was between the petty bourgeoisie and the salariat (the former were only 0.53 as likely

⁸ On the other hand, it could be argued that such people—e.g. owner-occupiers who identify with the working class—are more likely to choose to live in areas dominated by local authority tenants, so that where they live is a function of who they think they are.

Table 7

Logistic regressions of vote by, social class, self-assessed class, educational qualifications, household income, tenure and percentage of local authority tenants in the local area^a

	Dependent variable					
	Conservative		Labour		Abstention	
	n1000	n5000	n1000	n5000	n1000	n5000
Constant	-1.42	-1.24	-0.78	-0.96	-0.95	-0.97
Social class (comparator=salariat)						
Routine non-manual	*	*	*	*	0.47	0.47
Petty bourgeoisie	0.37	0.38	-0.63	-0.64	0.46	0.46
Foremen, etc	-0.51	-0.53	*	*	0.48	0.50
Working class	-0.50	-0.52	*	*	0.44	0.46
Self-assessed class (comparator=middle class)						
Working class	-1.15	-1.15	0.84	0.83	0.25	0.25
Highest educational qualification (comparator=degree)						
Less than degree	1.08	1.09	-0.62	-0.61	*	*
No qualifications	1.45	1.48	-0.48	-0.47	*	*
Household annual income (comparator=£11,999>)						
£12,000–25,999	*	*	*	*	*	*
£26,000–40,999	*	*	*	*	*	*
£41,000<	0.39	0.37	-0.45	-0.44	*	*
Housing tenure (comparator=owner-occupier)						
Council tenant	-1.03	-1.02	0.21	0.15	0.52	0.57
Other	-0.57	-0.56	-0.26	-0.26	0.86	0.86
%LAT						
n1000	-0.013		0.003		0.007	
n5000		-0.025			0.009	0.009
-2 log likelihood	2156	2143	2871	2865	2289	2289
Improvement	68	81	76	82	68	68

^a * Not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Key to variables: %LAT, per cent of households in the area who are local authority tenants; n1000, nearest 1000 persons; n5000, nearest 5000 persons.

to vote Conservative as the latter). Similarly, those who identified with the working class were more likely to vote Labour and to abstain, and less likely to vote Conservative, than were those who identified with the middle class. On educational qualifications, somewhat unexpectedly, those with degrees were less likely to vote Conservative and more likely to vote Labour than those with either lower or no qualifications. There were few significant differences between household income groups.⁹

The relationships with %LAT reported in Table 7 are all statistically significant. For two of the dependent variables—Conservative vote and abstention—they are of

⁹ The same pattern was present in the baseline regressions excluding %LAT: inclusion of the latter variables does not mask any other relationships.

virtually the same magnitude as those reported in Table 6 for the same scales: introduction of the further independent variables has not reduced either the significance or the substance of the relationship with local context. With Labour voting, however, the regression coefficients for %LAT are substantially lower than those reported in Table 6 (though still significant at the 0.05 level). Overall, therefore, local context remains an important influence on voter choice in these fully-specified models: whatever their own housing tenure, social class, self-assessed class and educational qualifications, individuals living in neighbourhoods whose housing markets are dominated by local authority-rented dwellings were much more likely either to vote Labour or to abstain, and much less likely to vote Conservative, than were their contemporaries who lived in neighbourhoods with few local authority-rented dwellings.

To illustrate the strength of these effects, we have used the coefficients for %LAT in Table 7 to estimate the impact of changes in the local environment on the relative likelihood of a person either voting Conservative or Labour, or abstaining—holding other variables constant. For example, at the n1000 scale, for a working-class, low-income, educationally unqualified council tenant, the odds of that person voting Labour rather than for any other party (including abstain) rise from 0.84 where %LAT is 10 to 0.94 where %LAT is 50: the odds for the same person abstaining rather than voting for any of the parties similarly rise from 1.39 where %LAT is 10 to 1.84 where %LAT is 50. At the n5000 scale, the comparable increase in the odds of voting Labour is from 0.70 to 1.00, and of abstaining from 1.49 to 2.14: the differentials are more substantial at the larger spatial scale. In a similar fashion, at the n1000 scale, the odds of a middle-class, high-income degree holder who is also an owner-occupier voting Conservative rather than anything else (including abstaining) are 0.31 where %LAT is 10 and 0.19 where it is 50. At the n5000 scale, too, the likelihood of that person voting Conservative falls from 0.33 to 0.12: again the change is greatest at the larger scale. Thus these two examples both show that the more local authority tenants in a voter's immediate environment the greater the likelihood of them either voting Labour or abstaining and the smaller the likelihood that they will vote Conservative—but these differentials are greater, the larger the population of the immediate environment being analysed, and not the smaller as we anticipated might be the case.

3.3. *Scales within scales*

The discussion of Tables 3–7 provides strong circumstantial evidence of neighbourhood effects at the 1997 general election, at a variety of scales most of which are more akin to those normally associated with local milieux than are those provided by either constituencies or wards, the only scales employed in earlier analyses. What they do not provide, however, is any evidence of which—if any—scale best reflects the neighbourhood effect processes; does it operate most in small areas (less than 1000 persons per neighbourhood), medium-sized areas (1000–2500 persons), or larger ones (5000–10,000)? The evidence of the last paragraph of the previous section suggests that the larger the area, the greater the apparent neighbourhood effect impact.

To address this issue further, we have undertaken analyses of ‘scales within scales’.¹⁰ Exploratory analyses such as those in Tables 3–5 showed, for example, that of the 1386 owner-occupiers who lived in constituencies where less than 20 per cent of all dwellings are rented from local authorities, 1062 lived in n1000 neighbourhoods where local authority-rented dwellings formed less than 20 per cent of the housing stock, but 202 lived in n1000 neighbourhoods where local authority dwellings formed 21–40 per cent of the stock, as did 81 where the percentage was 41–60. Table 3 shows that 31.7 per cent of the owner-occupiers in those constituencies voted Conservative, 30.1 per cent voted Labour (Table 4), and 16.1 per cent abstained (Table 5). But were there variations within each constituency according to the composition of those owner-occupiers’ n1000 neighbourhoods? The tabulations (not reproduced here) indicate that they did. The percentage voting Conservative declined from 33.3 per cent in n1000 neighbourhoods with less than 20 per cent local authority-rented dwellings, through 26.7 in the next group to just 21.0 per cent where local authority-rented dwellings made up 41–60 per cent of the local housing stock. The Labour vote increased correspondingly, from 28.2 through 37.1 to 43.2 per cent, and the percentage abstaining also increased, though only slightly, from 15.3, via 17.3 to 18.5.

Turning to those owner-occupiers who lived in constituencies where the percentage of local authority-rented homes exceeded 20, 18.6 per cent voted Conservative, 47.3 per cent voted Labour, and 18.6 per cent also abstained. But there were differences again according to the housing market composition of the respondents’ n1000 neighbourhoods. Those who lived in neighbourhoods with less than 20 per cent local authority tenancies (i.e. below the constituency figure), 20.9 per cent voted Conservative, 46.4 per cent voted Labour, and 17.6 per cent abstained. Among those who lived in n1000 neighbourhoods with more than 20 per cent local authority rented homes, on the other hand, only 15.7 per cent voted Conservative, 49.4 per cent voted Labour and 19.1 per cent abstained.

The implication is that contextual effects operate at both large and small spatial scales. Owner-occupiers who live in constituencies with few local authority-rented dwellings were more likely to vote Conservative than those living in constituencies with many such dwellings, and were even more likely if their own neighbourhood within that constituency also has a low percentage of local authority-rented homes. To test for this joint effect formally, we re-ran the regression models of Table 7 with %LAT included at two scales—constituency and either n1000 or n5000. These show that both scales were statistically significant for both Conservative voting and abstentions, but not for Labour voting (Table 8). Whatever an individual’s class (objective and subjective) and housing tenure, the more local authority-rented homes in both her/his constituency and local neighbourhood (n1000 or n5000) within that constituency, the greater the probability of them abstaining and the lower the probability of a Conservative vote. The more pro-Labour the neighbourhood, at both scales, the less likely they were either to vote for its main opponent or to abstain.

¹⁰ This design is similar to that employed in Huckfeldt and Sprague (1990).

Table 8

Logistic regressions of vote by, social class, self-assessed class, educational qualifications, household income, tenure and percentage of local authority tenants in constituencies and one local area^a

	Dependent variable					
	Conservative		Labour		Abstention	
	n1000	n5000	n1000	n5000	n1000	n5000
Constant	-1.01	-0.98	-1.37	-1.39	-1.12	-1.11
Social class (comparator=salariat)						
Routine non-manual	*	*	*	*	0.48	0.48
Petty bourgeoisie	0.37	0.37	-0.62	-0.63	0.47	0.47
Foremen, etc.	-0.51	-0.52	*	*	0.47	0.49
Working class	-0.48	-0.50	*	*	0.44	0.45
Self-assessed class (comparator=middle class)						
Working class	-1.13	-1.13	0.82	0.82	0.24	0.24
Highest educational qualification (comparator=degree)						
Less than degree	1.02	1.03	-0.57	-0.57	*	*
No qualifications	1.41	1.43	-0.43	-0.43	*	*
Household annual income (comparator=£11,999>)						
£12,000–25,999	*	*	*	*	*	*
£26,000–40,999	*	*	*	*	*	*
£41,000<	0.38	0.37	-0.44	-0.45	*	*
Housing tenure (comparator=owner-occupier)						
Council tenant	-1.01	-1.03	0.22	0.16	0.53	0.58
Other	-0.58	-0.58	-0.25	-0.25	0.86	0.86
%LAT						
Const	-0.041	-0.037	0.022	0.020	0.008	0.007
n1000	-0.008		*		0.005	
n5000		-0.015		*		0.006
-2 log likelihood	2126	2123	2859	2859	2297	2297
Improvement	98	101	88	88	60	60

^a * Not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Key to variables: %LAT, per cent of households in the area who are local authority tenants; Const, Parliamentary constituency; n1000, nearest 1000 persons; n5000, nearest 5000 persons.

But they were not more likely to vote Labour with variations at the local scale: pro-Labour contexts at the very local scale only operate to make voting for another party or not voting at all more likely.

These last findings at least partly provide an answer to the apparent paradox noted earlier—that the strength of the neighbourhood effect was greater at the larger than the smaller spatial scales—and also suggest the relevance of Huckfeldt and Sprague's concept of the local context as an interceptor of environmental influence. In this case, it appears that in a constituency with a high percentage of local authority tenants, and which is likely to be a very pro-Labour environment, the more local authority tenants there are in a small part, the smaller the proportion of Conservative voters there, and the larger the proportion of abstainers. Where both environment and local context

are similar, the former enhances the impact of the latter and Conservative voting is very low. But the intercept effect does not appear to operate with regard to the encouragement of Labour support. Instead, abstention rates are higher. This may be because constituencies with high local authority housing levels are major centres of voter alienation from the political system as a whole. Alternatively, it may simply be that they are safe Labour seats in which the party did very little local campaigning at the 1997 general election and turnout was low there as a consequence (as shown in Johnston et al., 1999): the environmental effect was not enhanced by local contexts to encourage greater support for Labour because of the absence of major stimuli to vote. This possible ‘explanation’ does not account for the larger regression coefficients for %LAT at the constituency and ward scales reported in the analyses of Labour voting in Table 6, however; these suggest a clear enhancement effect in constituencies with large rather than small percentages of local authority housing—the more council tenants in the area the greater the support for Labour than is the case in smaller neighbourhoods. At this stage, therefore, some of the results presented here are rather paradoxical, which calls for further investigations not only into the patterns of voting but, more especially, into the local processes that produce them.

4. Conclusions

The neighbourhood effect is to some a ‘myth’ whereas to others, less hostile to the notion that ‘conversion by conversation’ does take place in local areas, it remains an untested hypothesis. One of the problems of testing it in the British context is that, even with good ecological data on neighbourhood characteristics, there is a complete lack of information on voting at the spatial scales at which the effect is assumed to operate. Survey data allow some testing, but the scales at which contextual data are made available (largely from the national census) have to date precluded work at scales consistent with those associated with the hypothesised effect. As a result, such tests as have been conducted have been at what may well be inappropriate scales—largely the Parliamentary constituency. The hypothesis has remained untested through lack of the right data.

The research reported here has been designed to remove one barrier to that testing by creating contextual data for bespoke neighbourhoods at scales much smaller than the ward, let alone the constituency. These have been combined with data from the most recent British Election Study to allow evaluation of hypotheses concerning voting behaviour at the 1997 general election in England and Wales regarding the role of neighbourhood context (indexed by its housing market composition) as an influence on party choice. One major aspect of the results was very clear: at a variety of spatial scales, among respondents in each of three housing tenures, especially owner-occupiers and council tenants, the larger the local-authority-rented sector in a neighbourhood the lower the Conservative and the larger the Labour vote. Furthermore, within relatively large areas having few local-authority-rented homes, the larger that segment of the housing market was in smaller areas nested within the larger one, the lower the support for the Conservatives and the larger the percentage

who abstained. Other aspects of the results leave unanswered questions, however, notably the finding that the regression coefficients for Conservative and Labour voting are larger for the constituency scale than for the smaller bespoke neighbourhoods: such questions remain to be addressed by future work.

These findings remain circumstantial with regard to the cause of the patterns identified, since the data do not allow us to appreciate why the observed differences occurred. They are entirely consistent with the neighbourhood effect at scales that can logically be used for testing the hypothesis—which has not been the case with earlier studies. As such, they provide much stronger grounds for continuing to assume that ‘people who talk together vote together’ than previously available, and provide the stimulus for work on how,¹¹ having observed the pattern, it is important to ask why it comes about—and only then will we be certain that there is ‘conversion by conversation’ within Britain’s mosaic of social milieux.

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¹¹ It could be, of course, that the people who live together and vote together, whatever their housing tenure, do so not because they talk together but rather because those in the minority have chosen to live in an area where the strongest party is not that which their ‘class’ usually supports: such self-selection (for a review, see Taylor and Johnston, 1979, pp. 264–266) is less likely to apply to people in different housing tenures than different social classes, however, because of the constraints within the housing market, especially for local authority tenants, many of whom may have very little choice of where to live (Taylor, 1979).

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