


Do Improving Conditions Harden Partisan Preferences? Lived Experiences, Imagined Communities, and Polarized Evaluations

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Abstract

Despite growing attention to an increasing partisan divide and populist voting, little attention has been directed at how social contexts might encourage greater or lesser political polarization. We address this gap by studying how county-level conditions—economic resilience, population change, and community health—intersect with individuals’ political orientations and communication patterns to shape partisan evaluations. Our context is Wisconsin around the 2012 election, with our focus on two prominent political figures: Governor Scott Walker and President Barack Obama. Multilevel modeling reveals that partisans living in counties with more affluent, less precarious conditions during 2009–2012 exhibited more polarized partisan attitudes toward Walker and Obama. Our analysis also finds a significant role for interpersonal communication and digital media in shaping polarized attitudes.

It is widely understood that a systematic political shift in a handful of U.S. states—Iowa, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania—made the election of Donald Trump possible in 2016 (Cataneese, 2016). There is particular interest in understanding so-called “Obama–Trump” voters, who appear to be most prominent among the White working

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class. Some assert that the roots of this phenomenon can be traced to social dislocation and the hollowing out of communities that led White voters, particularly those in rural areas, to vote in defense of localities in decline (Morgan & Lee, 2018). Linked to this is an economic argument, that the “Great Recession” was felt more acutely in some localities, with recovery occurring more slowly, fostering resentment about being left behind (Cramer, 2016). Some voters resided in communities with higher than average rates of morbidity and mortality, and, despite the promise of the Affordable Care Act, were still struggling with health-related issues (Monnat, 2016). The role of such socioeconomic contextual factors in softening or strengthening partisan support for candidates merits deeper attention.

Political scientists have investigated the role of local contexts in vote choice, especially in relation to far right and populist parties and candidates in Europe (Bowyer, 2008; Poznyak, Abts, & Swyngedouw, 2011). While some find radical-right candidates fare better in rural areas, regions with higher concentrations of foreigners, and locales with “increases in unemployment rates and in the number of college-educated citizens” (Stockemer, 2017, p. 41), others conclude that diversity or economic disparities do not explain support for these parties (Patana, 2018). Clear explanatory frameworks for these phenomena are difficult to construct, likely due to the fact that local contexts vary over time which requires multilevel approaches attentive to dynamic changes (Poznyak et al., 2011). Even more challenging is explaining how social contexts interact with individual-level dispositions such as partisanship to amplify or attenuate the partisan divide.

Communication scholars have emphasized the importance of mass communication and social networks as they intersect with contextual characteristics in shaping political discussion and participation but have paid limited attention to contextual and cross-level effects on polarization and political evaluations (Paek, Yoon, & Shah, 2005; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Wells et al., 2017). This work considers how individual-level interactions and social integration condition the effects of community differences on local norms and participatory behaviors. Related work has emphasized the role of interpersonal communication alongside news sources as key to constructing a sense of community (Howley, 2005). Building on this prior work integrating community, context, and communication, our research considers how local contextual conditions interact with individuals’ partisanship and communication channels to shape political evaluations and polarization. We employ multilevel modeling to examine the interplay of county-level characteristics—economic resilience, population change, and health status—with individual partisanship and communication practices in shaping political judgments.

Community, Partisanship, and Communication

To understand the intersection of community, partisanship, and communication, we must begin with the concept of community. Stamm and Fortini-Campbell (1983) define community as a multi-dimensional concept concerning physical boundaries, social products, societal institutions, and common goods. A community provides social contexts to individuals who reside within it, physically or symbolically (Iversen & Gudmund, 1991). Characteristics of communities and shared experiences of being within them function as the social structure constraining individuals’ assessments. While the experience of being in a community is often defined by physical boundaries and social networks (Friedland, 2016), communities are also “imagined” (Anderson, 1991). This sense of “imagined community” is often developed through mediated and interpersonal

communication (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001). Connections and insights may also “derive from the online imagined community that social media create,” (Kavoura, 2014, p. 490), though individuals have meaningful misconceptions about the composition of their online community (Acquisti & Gross, 2006).

Local and regional news may also provide a basis for constructing a sense of community (Jenkins, 2016), with editors imagining communities of niche readers toward whom they feel a kinship and obligation (Lewis, 2008). Indeed, print media serving specific communities share much with digital media in that they center their production and interaction around an abstracted sense of commonality (Beetham, 2006). Individuals’ perceptions of their social surroundings are crucial political information, which can be primed by access to local news through formal and informal channels (Mutz, 1992). As Weatherford (1983, p. 162) stated regarding “the dilemma of choosing between personal and national referents for economic voting,” we consider two routes of understanding contexts—lived experience as seen through a lens of partisanship and represented community constructed through communication—shapes political judgments.

Local Contexts, Lived Experiences, and Partisanship

People’s lived experiences in their local communities influence their political judgments. Political scientists stress the importance of contextual determinants in individuals’ vote choice (Bowyer, 2008; Poznyak et al., 2011) and policy attitudes (Koehler, Weber, & Quiring, 2018). Similarly, growing research on populism around the globe has led scholars to investigate how local contextual factors such as population shifts and economic stagnation are associated with support for populist parties and candidates (Patana, 2018; Stockemer, 2017). However, contextual explanations of populist party voting and political polarization turned out to be inconsistent and counter-posed to each other, as noted above.

One framework argues that socioeconomic hardship and sociocultural threat lead people to turn to political extremes. For example, Stockemer (2017) associated support for radical-right candidates with higher percentages of college graduates and foreigners, and increases in unemployment rates. Similarly, Bowyer (2008) found support for the British National Party, the extreme right-wing party in Britain, to be strongest in economically deprived urban areas and districts with large ethnic minority populations. The findings are consistent with a group conflict framework, which emphasizes that precarious social conditions raise conflicts among groups, especially among people with different party identifications or among those with different power dynamics (e.g., locals vs. immigrants, more vs. less educated).

Moving beyond local contexts, Inglehart and Norris (2016) argue that rising economic insecurity and social deprivation among the “have-nots” have fueled political resentment. Resentment leads citizens to respond to populist rhetoric by political figures, like “us” versus “them,” emphasizing the conflict between in-group (the disadvantaged) and out-group (the advantaged) (Hughes, 2019). This perspective suggests that when people experience deprivation or threat in social, cultural, or economic contexts, they show support to the party or candidate that advances a populist agenda and rhetoric.

Whereas both of these explanations suggest a relationship between localized or aggregate-level threats or disadvantages and the tendency of political extremity, another

approach runs against that conclusion. Patana (2018), for example, contends “ethnic diversity or economic hardship poorly predict support for [populist] parties.” Similarly, scholars supporting this evidence suggest that European populist radical right and left parties have been successful in areas with economic prosperity and well-established social welfare systems (e.g., Austria, Netherlands, Switzerland) while having only modest success in countries suffering more from the Great Recession (Mudde, 2017). Evidence even finds a *positive* relationship between contextual prosperity and the extreme left-right divide (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006). This can be explained by chauvinistic attitudes toward welfare among people in wealthier regions, who regard economic and social benefits as reserved for those who earn them and are concerned about their erosion, thus retreating to political camps (Poznyak et al., 2011).

Somewhat similarly, the “Hidden Tribes” report found that among the seven major clusters of American voters, the most politically active groups were the economically well-off and highly educated “Progressive Activists on the left” and “Devoted Conservatives on the right” (Hawkins, Yudkin, Juan-Torres, & Dixon, 2018). People who are experiencing stress in their lives pay little attention to politics, and following this logic, resource-rich communities are likely to entrench into partisan camps. This is also in line with previous evidence that inequality and instability have depressive effects on political involvement (Solt, 2008).

Such mixed findings call for more scholarly attention on the interplay of contexts and partisanship in driving political judgments, especially with respect to how “direct” experiences in one’s communities intersect with party ties. Previous literature has mostly focused on individual-level vote choice, especially on non-mainstream parties, across different countries using national-level determinants as contextual factors of interest. However, national-level aggregates likely mask local-level granularities which might have more influence on electoral choice (Patana, 2018). As such, we examine the effects of local features on political evaluations.

Local Media, Interpersonal Talk, and Community Perceptions

As noted above, the interpretation of local contexts come from representations in media (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001) through the sense of “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991). Although first formulated to understand the nation as a socially constructed collective, imagined communities exist wherever people perceive themselves as bound together. Communication plays a key role in integrating systems and binding people to real and imagined communities (Friedland, 2016). At a local level, residents construct their identities and understand their surroundings through discourse. As such, local media and interpersonal talk are important agents in the narrative construction in enhancing community integration and sense of belonging (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001).

Relatedly, researchers have examined how local contexts can shape individual political judgments and behaviors through mediated and interpersonal communication channels. Through local newspapers and television stations, residents get to conceive of the community and its membership beyond their contact with neighbors and coworkers. In other words, local media representations of local contexts help residents shape the perceptions of their communities, possibly both in contrast with other localities in the state, region, or nation and as a reflection of national changes in a local microcosm (Vinson, 2003). Studies have found that informational uses of media interact with community

context to influence civic engagement (Shah et al., 2001) and aggregate-level local news readership increases the likelihood of community participation, especially among those deeply integrated into community life (Paek et al., 2005). It is likely that contextual features of the community through media representations create a sense of communal solidarity as well as shape social perceptions, thus providing sources for political judgments.

A sense of community is also shaped by interpersonal communication. Cramer (2016) explains that many rural Wisconsin residents understand politics and public issues through a lens of rural consciousness—a perception that rural residents do not get a fair share of political power, resources, and respect. This “rural identity” is shaped and strengthened through talk with family, friends, and neighbors in local communities. Communication ties can take various forms, including family, relatives, friends, neighbors, and coworkers, with varying degrees of tie strength. As Granovetter (1973) put it, a tie strength is a “combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy, and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie” (p. 1361). In a sense, family, relatives, and close friends are often important components of strong interpersonal ties, whereas colleagues in workplace constitute relatively weaker social networks. Heterogeneous encounters in workplace are inevitable, because coworkers are not chosen by self-selection (Mutz & Mondak, 2006). The nature of communication networks plays an important role in how individuals understand politics, further shaping their judgments.

According to Slater (2007), partisans seek out like-minded individuals which in turn result in a greater salience and accessibility of partisanship. This further reinforces their preexisting values and beliefs. Through this mutually reinforcing process, homogeneous communication with strong ties has been linked to more extreme attitudes. On the other hand, studies show that heterogeneous talk weakens associations between one’s own opinion and those of others (Kim, 2015). Political discussion in workplace, for example, which is based on weakly connected ties and dissimilar viewpoints, has been known to increase awareness of the opposite side as well as tolerance (Mutz & Mondak, 2006). While such cross-cutting exposure can also spur defensive mechanisms that strengthen existing attitudes (Taber & Lodge, 2006), a deliberative democracy perspective emphasizes the critical role of heterogeneous talk for the democratic ideal of social cohesion.

Everyday political talk is a primary mechanism of community understanding and integration, thus affording residents ways to reconceptualize the self within communities and political action (Habermas, 1984). Research has identified the importance of talking to neighbors on local issues in cultivating a sense of belonging, efficacy, and civic participation (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). Local contexts provide avenues for residents to seek out like-minded others, building closely-tied networks that share similar understandings, as Slater (2007) would suggest. In contrast, talking to weakly tied networks containing more dissimilar viewpoints may foster a wider range of interpretations. Less is known, however, about how interpersonal networks intersect with local contexts to motivate people to reinforce or question their understanding of their community which shapes their political judgments.

Scholars have also suggested that digital media, such as online news and social media, provide another picture of community. Unlike traditional local news sources, whose local representation is often vetted and subject to gatekeeping by journalists, the

digital media landscape affords people new avenues for understanding local communities. Digital communication technologies have reconfigured people's social contexts, expanding previous network boundaries constrained by geography. This has further aided building online communities (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011), as well as networked public sphere (Benkler, 2006) for discussion on public affairs. Evidence on whether online sorting has hastened network homogeneity and exposure to like-minded viewpoints (Boutyline & Willer, 2017), or opened people to more ideologically cross-cutting, diverse viewpoints (Barberá et al., 2015), is decidedly mixed. With the growing body of literature on how the use of digital media encourages civic engagement, but with growing animus toward the opposite party and distrust in institutions (see Shah et al., 2017), it is especially important to investigate how local contexts are understood through a lens of digital media.

In addition to online sorting, scholars have studied the tantalizing possibility that partisan geographic sorting—the intentional moving to live in localities that are more politically homogenous—is contributing to contemporary partisan battles (Bishop, 2008). Early claims that the country was engaged in a “big sort” faced criticism for not directly measuring the variable of interest: which partisans move where. In a seven-state study of migrating registered voters, Tam Cho, Gimpel, and Hui (2013) found evidence that some Republicans and Democrats moved to locations that were better fits for their partisanship, but noted that disentangling partisan preferences for other factors associated with moving, such as cost, schools, and neighborhood aesthetics, was difficult. Martin and Webster (2018) further found that partisan sorting is not a major factor in individual relocation but the political preferences of those who move are more likely to adapt *themselves* to match the modal partisanship in their new neighborhoods. This highlights the importance of context with respect to shedding light on polarized attitudes and behaviors.

In sum, people interpret their local contexts and communities through combinations of collective and shared experiences *and* represented and mediated experiences. The question of how local contexts are experienced or understood and how they shape political judgment is the focal research question guiding this research. In answering this question, we seek to provide a fuller picture of the dynamic relationship between local context and people's understandings of politics: Under what conditions do people retreat into partisan preferences, and entrench in their support for candidates on the left or right? And under what conditions are they open to candidates from the opposing party, and shifting support to political alternatives?

Polarized Politics in a Divided State

We examine these questions in Wisconsin, a state in the US that provides an excellent context for this sort of analysis because of its status as a so-called “purple state,” shifting between completely “blue” Democratic control of both the governorship and legislature in 2008 to a completely “red” Republican control in 2010. The new Republican Governor, Scott Walker, immediately set off a political firestorm with the introduction of Act 10, which ended public sector workers' right to bargain and triggered a statewide counter reaction. This was a strategic application of “divide and conquer” politics, leading to widespread contention in both the public and private spheres (Cramer, 2016). Even friends and family members stopped talking to each other in a wave of political

contention that continues to the present (Wells et al., 2017). This contention culminated in recall efforts directed at Governor Walker in June 2012. While Walker survived the attempted recall, later that year the pendulum swung again, as the state voted for President Obama and elected Tammy Baldwin, the first openly lesbian member of the Senate. How do we explain these shifts, narrow in vote totals but a chasm apart, ideologically? Focusing on Wisconsin in 2012, when both gubernatorial recall and the presidential elections were held, we attempt to tease out contextual and individual factors that led Wisconsin residents to vote for Scott Walker *and* Barack Obama in the same year.

Contextual Changes from 2009 to 2012

Wisconsin also has experienced a variety of contextual shifts at the community level, especially in economic resilience, population change, and patterns of health and well-being in the wake of the Great Recession. Focusing on the county level, we look at contextual characteristics from 2009 to 2012, as these conditions do not have immediate, short-term effects but rather cumulative consequences (Herd, Carr, & Roan, 2014).

Economic Resilience

Unemployment rates are a common proxy of economic difficulties. Over time changes in unemployment stand as a key indicator of local economic health, reflecting the extent of the downturn of the Great Recession in 2008 and the degree of economic resilience over time. A closer inspection of each county reveals distinct county differences in terms of recovery patterns. In Dane county, a metro core with the state capital, Madison, a major research university and a healthcare IT giant as major employers, unemployment was 5.8% in 2009 but by 2012 it had declined to 4.9%, inching back down toward 2006 levels. In contrast, the downturn was more acute in Milwaukee's suburban ring (the "WOW" counties of Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington), with unemployment rate still being 2% higher in 2012 than the pre-Recession period. Likewise, the state's urban clusters, like Rock county, and rural areas, such as Adams county, began with higher unemployment rates over 12% in 2009 and had a slower recovery, with unemployment still above 10% in 2012.

Population Change

Past studies also considered population mobility as a predictor of individual vote choice. The changing demographic makeup of a locality can also impact residents' perceptions. Population growth has been linked to fears of cultural threat and loss of community integration (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017); but its mirror image, population loss, may be associated with local fiscal stress with fewer services and state aid to residents, as well as changes in demographic composition (Kim & Warner, 2018). Wisconsin experienced unequal county-level population change in the wake of the Great Recession. From 2009 to 2012, Dane County (a metro core) had the most influx of residents (increasing by more than 13,000). The WOW counties' (suburban) of Washington and Waukesha also saw population growth (more than 10,000 and 3,500 residents, respectively), but 20 counties out of 72 counties experienced a population loss, most of which were rural areas.

Health and Well-Being

As important as economic and population changes are to understanding contextual differences across Wisconsin, so are the health and well-being status of Wisconsin communities. Geographic inequalities in health status have increased in America, with rural residents experiencing higher rates of mortality from violence, suicide, and alcohol and opiate abuse, and declines in life expectancy (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). According to *Wisconsin County Health Rankings* (n.d.) from the University of Wisconsin's Population Health Institute on the mortality and morbidity measures, Dane County, one of the strongest economies in the state, showed a high health status, ranking 13th (of 72 counties) on average health scores from 2009 to 2012. While the WOW counties underwent nontrivial economic distress, their average health scores from 2009 to 2012 ranked in the top ten. Meanwhile, Rock and Adams Counties (our urban cluster and rural examples) had on average ranked 60th and 69th from 2009 to 2012, respectively, signaling low status in community health.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Based on the literature, we first offer hypotheses regarding the interplay of partisanship with political talk before considering the individual-level relationships between local media use and support for these contrasting political figures. Communication networks plays an important role in how we understand politics and public issues, with homogeneous encounters with family and friends reinforcing partisan preferences (Slater, 2007) and heterogeneous encounters in workplace likely weakening such alignments (Mutz & Mondak, 2006).

H₁: Partisans more frequently engaging in political talk with family and friends will exhibit more polarized attitudes toward (a) Governor Walker and (b) President Obama.

H₂: Partisans more frequently engaging in political talk with coworkers will exhibit less polarized attitudes toward (a) Governor Walker and (b) President Obama.

The literature is less clear regarding the interplay of partisanship with local news consumption as it relates to political attitudes. Local newspapers, both in print and digital form, have seen a decline in resources dedicated to local reporting and in readership; in contrast, local broadcast news have maintained a more stable audience (Wadbring & Bergström, 2017). However, the stability of audience size has not been matched by a stability of content. Ownership changes have resulted in the growth of national over local political coverage and “rightward shift in the ideological slant of coverage” (Martin & McCrain, 2019, p. 372). Yet despite these changes, there is limited basis for predictions regarding the interaction of local news consumption in print, broadcast, and digital forms with partisanship on political judgments, so we instead propose the following research questions:

RQ₁: At an individual level, how do local newspaper, TV news, and digital media use relate to evaluations of (a) Governor Scott Walker and (b) President Barack Obama?

RQ2: At an individual level, does partisanship condition the relationship of local media use on evaluations of (a) Governor Walker and (b) President Obama?

We further investigate the direct and conditional relationship of local contexts with support for politicians. We begin by considering the direct effects of contextual differences in economic resilience, population growth, and community health on these judgments, then turn our attention to the interplay of these contextual variables and individual-level characteristics, formally cross-level interactions with party ID, interpersonal talk, and local media use.

RQ3: How do contextual differences in economic resilience, population growth, and community health relate to evaluations of (a) Governor Walker and (b) President Obama?

RQ4: How do contextual differences in economic resilience, population growth, and community health interact with individual-level local news use and interpersonal to shape evaluations of (a) Governor Walker and (b) President Obama?

RQ5: How do contextual differences in economic resilience, population growth, and community health interact with individual-level party identification to shape evaluations of (a) Governor Walker and (b) President Obama?

Methods

Data

We used Marquette Law School Poll data (<https://law.marquette.edu/poll/>) collected in 2012 across five waves, which took place in late April, early May, late May, early June, and late October. The sample was composed of registered voters reached through telephone (both landline and cell phone) interviews using a random digit dialing design. The sample was also stratified by five geographic regions of the state of Wisconsin to ensure proportionate representation of all regions of the state. Our dataset, therefore, contains a multilevel structure, as respondents (level 1) are nested within 72 counties (level 2). The number of observations per county ranges from 4 (Iron county) to 710 (Milwaukee county), with an average of 57. Our dataset with the key variables of interest showed less than 5% missing observations; after a listwise deletion, our final sample resulted in 3,171 observations.

Key Variables

We consider *favorability* evaluations of two political figures, Governor Scott Walker and President Barack Obama, as dependent variables. Respondents were asked if they have “a favorable or unfavorable opinion” or “haven’t heard enough . . . to have an opinion.” Treating “haven’t heard enough . . .” as missing, the variable was dummy coded as follows:

$$\text{Favorability}_{ij} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{If respondent } i \text{ has a favorable opinion in county } j \\ 0 & \text{If respondent } i \text{ has an unfavorable opinion in county } j \end{cases}$$

For Walker, 51.2% of respondents responded they had a favorable opinion and 48.8% said they had an unfavorable opinion. A total of 55.0% of respondents favored Obama and 45.0% did not.

Media use and communication variables were measured. Respondents answered the number of days in the past week they had read a *daily newspaper* from 0 to 7 days ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 2.93$), and the number of days in the past week they watched *local TV news* at 5, 6, or 10 o'clock from 0 to 7 days ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 2.71$). For *digital news use*, respondents reported the number of days in the past week reading about state and local news at news websites, political blogs, or social media such as Facebook or Twitter from 0 to 7 days ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 2.45$). Lastly, respondents indicated how often they talk about politics with (a) family and friends ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.29$) and (b) coworkers ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.65$) on a 5-point scale.

Basic demographic variables were controlled in the models, including gender (50.3% female), age ($M = 55.89$, $SD = 15.83$), race (89.9% White), education level (operationalized as highest degree received; $Mdn = 2$ -year college degree), and household income (operationalized as total family income last year; $Mdn = \$50,000$ to $\$75,000$). Party identification was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = Strong Republican, 5 = Strong Democrat; $M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.65$).

We used data on unemployment rates, population change, and health status for our county-level variables. Unemployment rate data for each county from 2009 to 2012 was obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the [U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics \(2017\)](#). The *improvement in unemployment rates* from 2009 and 2012 was created by subtracting the 2012 rate from the 2009 rate, thus, higher values indicating an improvement in economic conditions. Population data for 2009 to 2012 was obtained from the American Community Survey (2017) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau; we constructed the *population change* measure by calculating a raw difference between 2009 and 2012 estimates. Lastly, each county's health status was drawn from reports of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Population Health Institute, which offered health outcome status rankings and z -scores for each county based on an equal weighting of mortality (length of life) and morbidity (quality of life) measures. Using the z -scores, we generated *average health outcome* scores by county (see [Supplementary materials](#) for visualizations of context variables).

Analytic Strategy

To test our hypotheses and answer RQs, we use a series of multilevel models. Using the multilevel modeling was supported statistically, as the empty model using multilevel analysis greatly improved the model fit compared to the counterpart using a single level, for both Walker ($\chi^2(1) = 139.44$, $p < .001$) and Obama evaluation ($\chi^2(1) = 125.72$, $p < .001$). The intraclass correlation coefficients, the degree of association among observations within the same county, of Walker and Obama evaluation were 0.038 and 0.041, respectively; about 3.8% of Walker and 4.1% of Obama evaluation were attributable to county-level differences.

We estimate logistic multilevel random intercept models as our baseline models. Starting from a simple random intercept model with only fixed effects, more complex models with the random effects and cross-level interactions followed. Exploratory data analysis as well as the result of model fit comparisons showed that a random intercept model was appropriate, suggesting that Walker and Obama favorability for each county has variant intercepts (mean) with invariant slopes (rate). To express our base model in equations:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Level 1: } & \text{Log}[\varphi_{ij}/(1 - \varphi_{ij})] \\ & = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}\text{Newspaper} + \beta_{2j}\text{LocalTV} + \beta_{3j}\text{Digital} + \beta_{4j}\text{FamilyTalk} \\ & \quad + \beta_{5j}\text{CoworkerTalk} + \beta_{6j}\text{PartyID} + \beta_{7j}\text{Female} + \beta_{8j}\text{Age} + \beta_{9j}\text{White} \\ & \quad + \beta_{10j}\text{Education} + \beta_{11j}\text{Income} \end{aligned}$$

where φ_{ij} is the probability that respondent would have a favorable opinion toward the politicians and β_{7j} to β_{11j} are demographic controls.

$$\text{Level 2: } \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}\text{Unemployment} + \gamma_{02}\text{Population} + \gamma_{03}\text{Health} + U_{0j}$$

where γ_{00} is the average log odds of having a favorable opinion across counties.

Results

Walker Evaluation with the Local Context

RQ1(a) and RQ2(a) asks how individual-level variables, including partisanship, news use, and interpersonal communication patterns would be associated with Walker evaluation. Model M1 of Table 1(a) reveals baseline relationships between individual-level variables and support for Walker. One unit increase in education decreased the odds of being favorable to Walker by about 30%, and being White increased the odds of a respondent supporting Walker by about 51%. For partisans, one unit increase in a partisanship score decreased the odds of Walker favorability by 90% (or about 10 times); in other words, Strong Republicans had about 40 times greater odds of favoring Walker than Strong Democrats. RQ3(a) asks the direction relationship of county-level contextual differences on Walker evaluation. No main effects of county-level variables were observed once individual-level effects were taken into account.

H1(a) and H2(a) ask about the relationship between partisan communication patterns and polarized attitudes toward Walker. Our results show that the effect of party identification on Walker evaluation becomes stronger as people engage more in political conversations with family and friends. For example, for Republicans, including strong identifiers, the predicted probabilities of supporting Walker increase with more frequent political conversations within their homogeneous networks, as represented by family and friends, whereas strong and leaning Democrats exhibit the opposite pattern. In other words, more engagement in political conversations with homogeneous others strengthens partisans' preexisting political evaluations, thus leading to more polarization. On the other hand, the effect of partisanship is reduced when people engage in more political talk with coworkers; the predicted probabilities of supporting Walker decrease as people have political conversations within their heterogeneous networks, compared to when they do not engage in political talk with coworkers (see [Supplementary materials](#) for interaction plots). Therefore, the results support H1(a) and H2(a).

RQ4(a) and RQ5(a) propose to investigate how contextual differences in terms of economy, population, and health status would interact with one's communication diets and party identification to shape an individual's support for Walker. Model M2 to Model M4 in Table 1 report the cross-level interactions between contextual variables (level 2) and individual-level communication patterns and partisanship (level 1). While the results of individual-level associations remained consistent across the models, our findings of cross-level interactions show county-level unemployment rate change (M2), population

Table 1.
Logistic Random Intercept Multilevel Models

Fixed parts		(a) Walker evaluation	(b) Obama evaluation
M1	Intercept	0.785	1.577
	Level 1 predictors		
	Newspaper use	0.889	1.163*
	Local TV use	1.004	1.120
	Digital news use	1.008	0.842*
	Talk to family/friends	0.973	0.922
	Talk to coworkers	0.957	0.904
	Party ID (5 = Strong Democrat)	0.099***	13.122***
	Newspaper × Party ID	1.054	1.076
	Local TV × Party ID	0.935	0.965
	Digital × Party ID	0.996	1.252**
	Family/friends talk × Party ID	0.653***	1.483***
	Coworker talk × Party ID	1.170*	0.828*
	Level 2 predictors		
	Unemployment rate change (2009–2012)	1.096	0.878
	Population change (2009–2012)	0.928	1.005
	Health outcome average (2009–2012)	1.169	0.815
	AIC	2150.0	1921.2
	Cross-level interactions		
M2	Unemployment rate change		
	× Party ID	0.787**	1.257*
	× Newspaper	1.028	1.070
	× Local TV	0.868	1.091
	× Digital	0.960	0.956
	× Family/friends talk	0.990	1.047
	× Coworker talk	1.063	0.893
	AIC	2150.6	1923.6
M3	Population change		
	× Party ID	0.906**	1.104**
	× Newspaper	1.015	1.015
	× Local TV	0.956	0.987
	× Digital	0.980	1.007
	× Family/friends talk	1.004	1.010
	× Coworker talk	1.009	0.952
	AIC	2149.6	1923.6
M4	Health outcome average		
	× Party ID	0.812**	1.224*
	× Newspaper	1.008	1.009
	× Local TV	0.932	1.003
	× Digital	0.863*	1.141
	× Family/friends talk	1.032	0.963
	× Coworker talk	1.082	0.864
	AIC	2148.5	1921.6

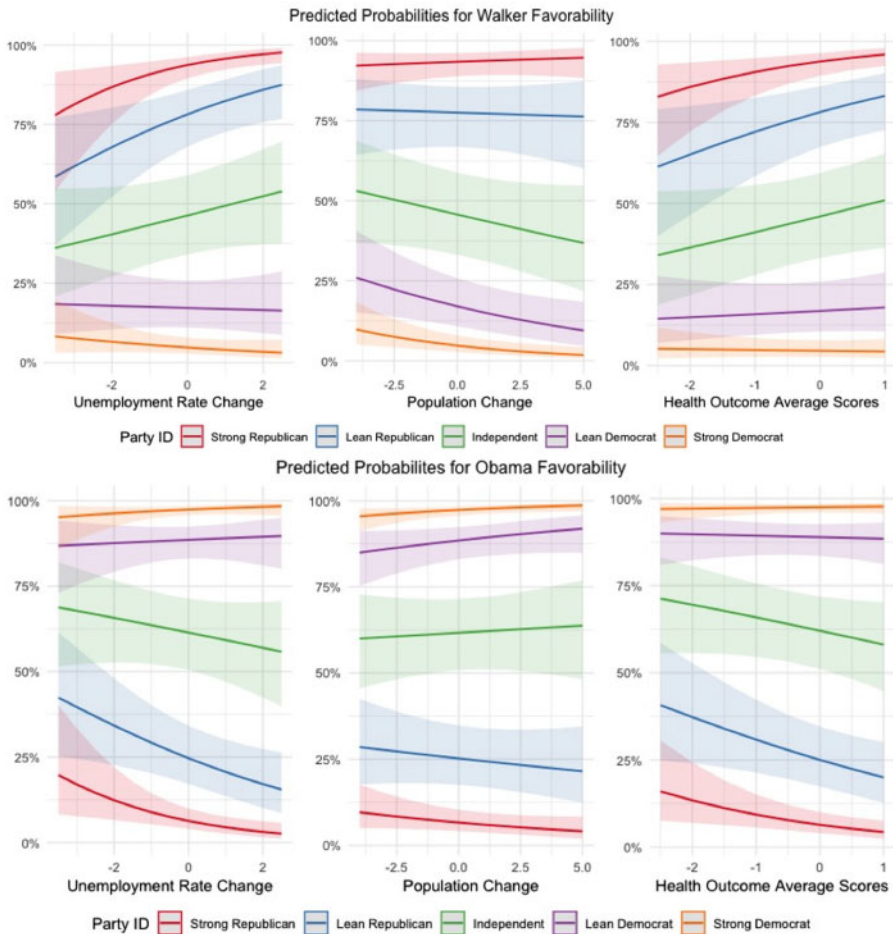
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Note: $N_{\text{sample}} = 3212$, $N_{\text{county}} = 72$. For M2–M4, level 1, 2 predictors were also included but its presentation was omitted to keep the presentation of results clear (results of M1 were consistent in M2–M4; full table with random parts available in a Supplementary file). Dummy variables referring to each wave were included in models but omitted here.

Figure 1.

Predicted probabilities for Walker (Upper) and Obama (Bottom) favorability with local contexts.

Note: The x-axis is standardized values. For the unemployment rate change, the right side of the x-axis indicate improvement in economic condition with the “decrease” in unemployment rate over 2009–2012.



change (M₃), and health status (M₄) had significant interactions with partisanship in shaping Walker evaluations. As illustrated in the upper three panels of Figure 1, counties with improvement in unemployment rate tend to show more partisan polarization in Walker evaluation: In counties with better economic conditions, Republicans show more support for Walker, and Democrats show less support for him. In contrast, partisans living in counties experiencing slower recoveries showed attenuated partisan effects when supporting Walker, especially among Republicans. Similar patterns were also observed for changes in population. Partisans living in counties experiencing population growth over the 4 years showed more polarized attitudes in Walker evaluation; however, in this case, Democrats and Independents in counties experiencing population decline were

markedly more favorable to Walker. Counties with better health outcome status on average show more partisan polarization in Walker evaluations. People in communities with precarious health status showed a considerable drop in Walker support, especially Republicans and Independents. Local digital media use also interacted with health status. In counties with better health outcomes on average, higher use of digital news media was associated with less support for Walker while lower use of digital media was related to favorable opinions toward him (interaction not plotted).

Obama Evaluation with the Local Context

We repeated the same analytic strategy with Obama evaluations. We first answer RQ₁(b) and RQ₂(b) by looking at individual-level relationships with Obama favorability. As [Table 1\(b\)](#) describes, older people were less likely to support Obama, as a one unit increase in age corresponded to a decrease in the odds of favoring Obama by about 30%. Each unit increase in newspaper use was associated with about a 16% increase in the odds of favoring Obama, while a unit increase in local digital news decreased the odds of favoring Obama by about 16%. A one unit increase in partisanship score was associated with an increase in the odds of Obama favorability by about 1200% (or about 13 times); in other words, the odds of Obama favorability for Strong Democrats were 52 times greater than Strong Republicans. The main effects of county-level predictors, however, were not significant, answering RQ₃(b).

H₁(b) and H₂(b) expected differing levels of polarized attitudes depending on partisan communication diets. Our findings reveal that partisans' increasing engagement in political talk with family and friends was associated with their strengthened partisan attitudes toward Obama. In contrast, engagement in political talk with coworkers was associated with weakening of partisan attitudes (see [Supplementary materials](#) for interaction plots), supporting H₁(b) and H₂(b). Local digital media use also interacted with partisanship: Partisans using more local digital media showed more polarized attitudes toward Obama, with Republicans expressing lower support for Obama and Democrats indicating stronger support for Obama.

M₂ to M₄ in [Table 1\(b\)](#) show the results of cross-level interactions for Obama evaluation, answering RQ₄(b) and RQ₅(b). Individual-level predictors as well as their interactions reflected the results of Model 1. Similar to Walker evaluation, partisanship significantly interacted with county-level contextual features. As visually illustrated in lower panels of [Figure 1](#), partisans living in counties with improvement in county-level economic conditions, as assessed by unemployment rates, held more polarized opinions about Obama (M₂)—with Republicans showing less support for Obama, and Democrats showing higher support for Obama. In counties struggling economically, however, the partisan gap in supporting Obama was smaller, with Republicans exhibiting higher support for Obama. Somewhat similarly, in counties experiencing population increases (M₃), partisans showed a larger gap in Obama evaluation, strengthening partisan alignment. However, in counties with population loss, partisans exhibited less polarization across the partisan spectrum. Health status also showed a significant interaction with partisanship in Obama evaluation. In counties with precarious health outcome status, Republicans were more supportive of Obama than those living in a better health context. In other words, precarious county-level health status was associated with weakening partisan cues, especially among Republicans.

Discussion

What are the social contexts that give rise to greater and lesser political polarization? What social context open partisans to the appeal of candidates from the opposing party? Examined from the vantage point of how party-identified respondents rated their governor, Republican Scott Walker, and their president, Democrat Barack Obama, we document the importance of contextual characteristics as they intersect with partisanship, beyond the role of political conversation in amplifying and attenuating partisan differences.

Our findings largely confirm the critical role of lived experiences, especially through a lens of partisanship, in evaluating politicians (see also [Martin & Webster, 2018](#)). Overall, partisans showed more polarized, party-line attitudes toward Governor Walker and President Obama in counties with improving or superior contextual conditions in terms of the economic resilience, population growth, and health status. Those experiencing social context characterized by *comparative deprivation*—slower recovery, shrinking population, and lower health status—were less aligned with their partisanship when evaluating politicians; it is likely that individuals suffering from hardship in their communities are more open to politicians proposing solutions to relieve that hardship, even if those politicians are from the opposite party ([Fiorina, 1978](#)).

Our results also provide insights, well beyond the borders of Wisconsin, about the rise of populist candidates such as Trump. Following Trump's election, there was substantial discussion about the degree to which weakness in economic and cultural conditions might be associated with individuals opening to populist candidates ([Inglehart & Norris, 2016](#)). As results suggest that contexts with economic and social hardships weaken partisan leanings, we expect that such contextual environment can be a critical factor for both partisans to consider an alternative. This potentially opened an avenue for the rise of a non-conventional candidate like Trump who spoke, using populist rhetoric, to the feeling of being left behind. Our findings likely have implications for future research linking the global populist phenomenon and contextual factors.

At the same time, it is interesting that we observe partisan asymmetries with respect to how people understand their contextual features. Difference in evaluations of Walker and Obama are particularly pronounced among Republicans, dependent on whether they resided in counties experiencing economic improvement or stagnation. This was also true for the cross-level effect of health status. It was mostly Republicans, including strong identifiers, who softened their support for Walker and improved their Obama evaluations dependent on these local conditions, suggesting some Republicans turned toward Democratic options when suffering economic hardships in their localities or experiencing precarious health conditions. In contrast, population loss appears to weaken both Democratic and Republican support for politicians from their parties, though it particularly improved Walker evaluations among Democrats. The finding that the stagnation of local economies and poor health status drives Republican voters toward Democratic candidates, whereas the thinning of communities in terms of population loss drives Democratic voters toward Republican candidates merits further attention.

Our analyses document the importance of communication patterns as another driver of favorability toward candidates. First of all, different types of communication networks drove distinct effects on partisan polarization. Consistent with [Slater \(2007\)](#), who asserts that partisans self-select into reinforcing spirals, seeking like-minded individuals, heightening the accessibility of partisanship, and reinforcing preexisting judgments, our study shows engaging in political conversations in closely-tied, homogeneous networks of family

and friends strengthened partisan support for their candidates. However, talk with more heterogeneous networks of coworkers attenuated such tendencies (Mutz & Mondak, 2006). While this provides promising evidence that heterogeneous political talk—which likely brings more exposure to diverse political viewpoints, reduces partisan polarization—it should be noted that the extent that polarization is attenuated is not comparable to the extent that polarization is strengthened through homogeneous political talk. The content of conversations, or motivations for listening to others (Weeks & Garrett, 2014) might be an important layer to understand this difference.

In addition, we also found the notable role of local digital media use (i.e., encountering local news on websites or social media) in shaping political evaluations. Partisans' use of digital media strengthened their polarizing attitudes toward Obama evaluations. On the contrary, the use of traditional media, including newspaper and local TV did not explain candidate evaluations. Taken together, it is likely that the act of active seeking and sorting online, rather than passive reception of political information, hardens preexisting partisan attitudes.

The evidence presented above has the advantage of using objective measures of county-level features of respondents' experiences: official unemployment rates, population measures, and health outcome statistics. We have shown that such county-level features have significant influence on respondents' views, conditioned by their partisan leanings. However, this approach also has the limitation that it is unable to gauge an individual respondent's experience, and thus may fail to take into account their own perception of life quality in their community. Research should explore the tension between these approaches: To what extent are individuals' opinions and assessments of elites dependent upon 'their own reality,' and to what extent the perception of 'others' realities'? For that matter, examining how closely perception and reality are related for local residents and their experiences through media and communication are likely to shape the relationship would be an important addition to the scholarship.

Supplementary Data

[Supplementary Data](#) are available at *IJPOR* online.

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