

COURSEWORK COVER SHEET

Date: 30/03/2023



Module: Investigating the Social World

Article of choice: Ansell, Ben, and Asli Cansunar. 2021. "The Political Consequences of Housing (Un)affordability." *Journal of European Social Policy* 31(5): 597-613.

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Question 1

This article uses quantitative methods (mainly linear regression and multi-level linear regression) to explore the question of how housing affordability impacts people's views on housing policies, and more broadly people's left- or right-wing political leanings. In formulating this research question, the authors define housing affordability as house prices relative to income. Survey questions used to gauge political attitudes relate to government responsibility for wealth distribution and for providing housing, respondents' support for more housing being built in their area, and opinions on government spending priorities. For

UK data, election results are also used as a proxy for left- and right-wing attitudes in constituencies.

The impact of housing affordability on policy opinions is thoroughly tested. Ansell and Cansunar start by examining evidence from 11 European countries collected across three surveys (EU-Survey on Income and Living Conditions, as well as International Social Survey Programme for both 2006 and 2009). They then move on to additional analysis centered on the UK, and use British Social Attitudes survey as well as election outcomes to compare the UK to the rest of Europe, but also test how housing affordability affected Conservative vote share between 2010 and 2019. The use of regression allows them to test not only whether the relationship exists, but also how much of the variance it accounts for. They are also able to compare the impacts of a few similar but slightly different variables, such as house prices vs housing affordability, as well as control for demographics-related variables such as gender and race.

Epistemologically, the study is positivist; it implicitly frames the mechanism it is describing as an objectively real way in which people's economic circumstances impact their political choices. The fact that the study attempts to quantify this impact does not make it positivist, but the authors' assumptions about the nature of political opinions do. Ansell and Cansunar do not argue that economic interests play a part in constructing people's political identities; instead, they describe a scientifically observable process in which people support policies that are objectively advantageous for them, and change opinions when their circumstances change. This is not to say that they treat the impact of housing affordability on political leanings as a foregone conclusion. On the contrary, their study is thorough and rigorous. It is just that, on a philosophical level, they are not trying to find whether people vote according to their wallet; what they are trying to find is whether housing affordability has a significant enough impact on said wallet to in turn impact people's politics.

Question 2

While the authors don't make explicit references to a theoretical framework, their assumptions made in designing the study follow closely the paradigm of rational choice theory. In the Argument section, homeowners and renters are described as fully rational actors whose political choices are driven by the desire to increase or at least maintain their net worth. What is interesting is that there is no reflection on whether participants fully understand which policies would maximize their net worth, or whether they are motivated by net worth even if they do. Ansell and Cansunar also explicitly describe houses as investments, which of course they can be. However, owners (especially owner-occupiers) might have more complex motivations, and care not just about the value of their homes, but for example ways in which changes to housing stock impact neighborhood infrastructure. Some owners might not even know how the value of their house fluctuates in response to local market trends, especially if they are not recent buyers or imminent sellers. Despite these, the authors present owners as savvy investors who deliberately protect their portfolios at the voting booth, which shows that Ansell and Cansunar operate firmly within a theoretical paradigm they do not seek to question.

Another paradigm that the authors follow in their research design is the concept of infinite growth. This shapes the way they determine the most rational choice that homeowners and renters could make, i.e. to maximize the value of their assets, or to get on the housing ladder and then start maximizing the value of their assets. The relationship between housing (un)affordability and right-wing leanings is seen as linear; the more expensive the housing, the more conservative the homeowners are, and the more polarized society is. But this assumption that endless growth is possible does not allow for asking questions about whether there is a level of unaffordability at which the mechanism might stop working. Both rational choice theory and concept of infinite growth help streamline the study and allow the authors to produce results that can be in better dialogue with existing literature, but they also create blind spots.

As for alignment between theory and empirics, the study leans towards deductive; the authors are aware of existing work pertaining to how housing prices impact political attitudes, which gives them a good reason to suspect that affordability would also have an impact. They already know that there is a link between housing and politics; what they are trying to find is whether prices relative to incomes are a better predictor than prices alone. This means that, rather than casting a broad net and looking at data with the aim of finding previously unidentified processes or dependencies, they can ask specific questions aimed to fine-tune their description of a mechanism they are already aware of. The two hypotheses they form at the end of their Argument section are not just tools for structuring quantitative analysis, but statements that could legitimately be inferred based on existing literature.

Question 3

While the authors make efforts to improve the regressions by controlling for multiple variables (such as gender, race, education, class, etc), I am not convinced that the causal link between housing affordability and political leanings was argued sufficiently strongly. The correlation they found is undeniable, but I think the way the authors interpret it has two issues: undefined scope condition, insufficient control for class as a confounding variable.

Scope condition of this study is not clearly defined, which (intentionally or not) creates an impression that the findings are universally applicable. However, looking at the sample of countries used in the first part of the analysis, I would define the scope condition as wealthy countries with well-embedded, long-lasting, capitalist economies. Citizens of these countries have enjoyed a long period of peace on their own soil since 1945, which gave many (but not all – renting is still quite widespread) an opportunity to build up generational wealth, often in the form of family homes. Because of this, I would expect that the findings could be generalizable to countries like the USA, where state-supported mortgages and redlining created a similar housing market even before it emerged in Western Europe.

To better define the scope condition, it would be interesting to see how Ansell and Cansunar's findings compare to what can be found in countries that fit some, but not all of the conditions above – for example Japan (wealthy and capitalist, but having gone through more rapid growth than Western Europe), or Eastern European countries (relatively wealthy and peaceful, but with shorter-lived capitalism, and smaller rental markets). This

comparison would help establish which elements of the lengthy definition given above are truly relevant to the relationship between housing affordability and political leanings.

As for control for class, it is present in the analysis where possible (i.e. in the UK data), but in the context of housing, I do not think it is as good a proxy of generational wealth as might be in case of other research questions, as people might be primarily thinking about their profession when self-reporting class. Since the study argues that when renters buy, their political views are likely to change, it would be useful to control specifically for whether owners inherited their homes (or the money to pay for it), or are financing them from their own incomes. This might be difficult to do with the existing data sets, but it would help improve the argument for a causal link between housing affordability and political views of homeowners by showing that inherited wealth is not a confounding variable which causes both higher likelihood of home ownership and right-wing views.

Given the issues described above, I would be cautious with using this study in electoral strategy planning by political parties, or with extrapolating results to countries with very different economies. That said, the argument behind political polarization between home owners and renters was compelling, and using housing affordability rather than prices in the analysis provided interesting insights.

Methodological review “The Political Consequences of Housing (Un)affordability.”

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

73/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

The filename can only contain your student ID number.

Q1: Good job! 75

Q2: According to Geddes, rational choice is best to be seen as a theoretical approach as it does not dictate a universally agreed set of thesis and arguments (we talked about this in class). The authors only used the rational choice approach to develop a theory to explain how housing prices will shape the choices of voters and the proposed theory aligns with the key characteristics of “theory as paradigm.” Your response was a bit unclear. 68

Q3: Excellent discussion. 75

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