

COURSEWORK COVER SHEET

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

Question 1

What is the main research question? State the research question in your own words, and then briefly describe the methods used in the article and explain the underlying epistemological and/or ontological stances (positivism and/or constructivism/interpretivism).

The main research question is: How has the sharply rising unaffordability of housing in Europe over the last few decades affected the public's appetite for redistributive transfers and housing policies from governments, and how is this impact affected by individuals' position in the housing market? There is also a secondary query in the paper as to whether it has affected actual election results. Behind the main stated question there is the underlying implicit assumption, or question: To what extent are individuals' policy preferences or voting choices driven by their material interests? The theoretical claims are discussed in more detail in second section below.

The methodology is exclusively quantitative. The approach for the analysis of attitudes and voting behaviour is fundamentally different. For the attitudes analyses, in both Europe and the UK, there is a cross-sectional approach looking at the impacts of housing affordability at a given point in time, combining regional data on housing costs with individual responses from survey data, set in 2009 and 2006 for the European research, and 2010 in the UK. This approach is despite the fact that the main research question is longitudinal – around the impact of the worsening affordability over the last few decades. The analysis models attitudes to redistribution and/or housing policy based on individuals' housing status (where available – there is a 'homeownership propensity' variable where it is not) and the housing affordability in their region, along with a range of control variables. By contrast, the analysis of the impact on voting behaviour is longitudinal, exploring the effect of housing affordability on the Conservative vote in the four elections from 2010-19. The dependent variable is the change in the Conservative vote in the constituency, while the key independent variables are changes in housing affordability, measured in a range of ways, along with demographic control variables.

The underlying stance behind the article is unambiguously positivist. The ontology is foundationalist, believing that the social world is real, like the physical world, and the epistemology positive, in that that social world can be measured, and analysis can 'prove' causal relationships between social phenomena, in this case the state of the housing market and attitudes to redistribution and housing policy. The authors are looking to explain the public's attitudes, and seem to be searching for a generalisable truth about them, not restricting the time and space the relationships can work in. The narrowing in on the UK in the second half of the article is down to the extreme house price appreciation, and thus deteriorating affordability, rather than any local cultural factors.

Question 2

Summarize the key theoretical claims in your own words. Identify and explain the nature of these claims (i.e., paradigm and/or approach), as well as the alignment between the theory and empirics (i.e., induction, deduction, and/or abduction) in the article.

The authors test two main hypotheses. The first is that housing becoming less affordable reduces the public's support for left-wing policies around redistribution and intervention in the housing market, as homeowners, the majority group in the European populations studied in the piece, become more 'asset rich', making redistribution a less attractive prospect, and also look to protect the value of their appreciating housing asset from government intervention in the housing market. The second is that the deterioration in housing affordability will drive a wedge between the preferences of groups on either side of the housing divide, namely homeowners and renters, given that the latter group are losers from higher house prices, as rental costs rise and the ability to buy falls. The authors also suggest, within the first hypothesis, that the attitudinal shift to the right driven by the falling affordability of housing will be associated with reduced support for left-wing parties. I prefer to view this as a separate third hypothesis rather than part of the first one, as it can fail even if the first one succeeds, if deteriorating housing affordability does reduce support for redistribution but this is not reflected in a reduction in support for left wing parties.

The research seems mainly to use 'theory as paradigm'. There is no normative view underlying the analysis, which suggests that it is not 'theory as ideology'. It is rather a process of attempting to explain public attitudes and how they are affected by the state of housing market. There is a coherent world view, that individuals are motivated by material concerns, and can recognise the impact of government policies, be they redistribution or intervention in the housing market, on those material concerns. As such it seems to fit the 'theory as paradigm' best, though it could be claimed that the materialist rational choice lens that the authors seem to view the world is in itself a particular approach, implying an element of 'theory as approach'.

The approach is represented as deductive, which aligns with the positivism and the use of 'theory as paradigm'. The authors lay out their theories, which lead to two hypotheses, which I have turned into three, and then test the hypotheses using quantitative methods. It is of course very possible that the process behind the scenes was more inductive or abductive, with a variety of theories and hypotheses being tested until the authors hit upon one which fitted the data. In the absence of a published pre-analysis plan we cannot be sure that the process was truly deductive.

Question 3

Are the findings valid and/or significant? What is the scope condition? Can/should the authors extend their findings to a different case, such as a country or a city? Why or why not?

The theory is intuitive, the hypotheses clearly stated, and the results do look significant, as the analysis attacks the major issue of housing affordability's political impacts, and the authors claim that affordability has a large impact on both attitudes and electoral results. However, while the findings are potentially significant, unfortunately I do not find them to be valid. I will deal with the attitudes and electoral vote elements of the paper separately.

For the attitudes part, the fundamental problem is the use of a cross-sectional analysis, looking at individuals' attitudes at a point in time, to justify an implicitly longitudinal claim. Leaving aside the electoral element, what the analysis is focussing on is that being in a region with relatively lower affordability of housing at a given point of time implies less support for redistribution and housing intervention – an interesting finding, but a different finding. The 'rising' in 'as affordability rises' is across space rather than the time that is implied in the abstract. Even if the cross-sectional relationship holds, there is not necessarily a longitudinal relationship, in the absence of any evidence that there has been a rightward shift in attitudes. There are also potential confounders missing from the control variables, always a worry in the absence of a natural experiment. For instance, it is possible that the areas with less affordable housing are generally wealthier and have more right-wing attitudes from being wealthier, rather than having less affordable housing.

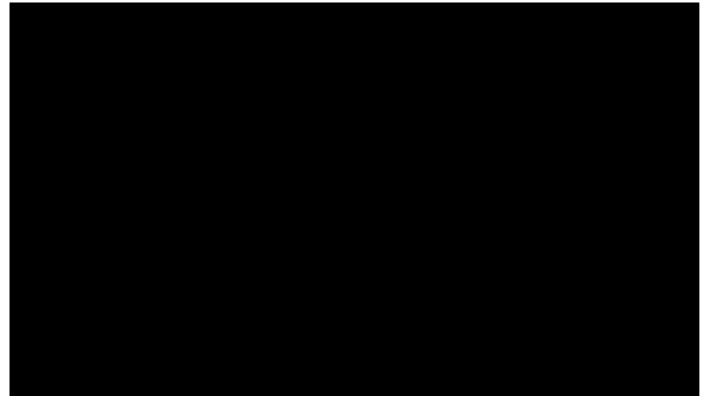
The section looking at the impact of housing on election results is at least longitudinal, looking at the four UK elections between 2010 and 2019. It is a constituency level analysis which claims to show that deteriorating affordability boosted the Conservative vote. The control variables are demographic, but there are no controls around attitudes on policy questions. The 2010s saw a significant realignment in the UK, and the conventional explanation for this shift has been the focus on 'cultural issues', which attracted socially conservative former Labour supporters to the Conservatives, catalysed by the Brexit referendum and its aftermath, and the cost of some of the Conservatives' more socially liberal supporters. The control variables, which should, if possible, include all potential confounders, having nothing on policy attitudes. As it stands, the piece implies that much of the UK's 2010s realignment was down to relative house price moves, which is a long way from the consensus view of the decade, and tough to defend.

The scope condition is set as Europe in the piece given the datasets used. The theory is stated in general terms, and the argument is materialist, rather than relying on any cultural or political factors specific to the continent. As such, it should be applicable anywhere that there is a significant homeowner segment of the population and housing affordability is an issue. The most natural extension would be to the USA, but on the face of it the generalisable nature of the argument should even work in developing countries.

FINAL GRADE

72/100

GENERAL COMMENTS



Q1: Good job! I may refrain from the use of adverbs, but that is a very minor issue. 72

Q2: Very good. Well done. 75

Q3: Nice discussion on the analysis and its broader substantive implications, and I do agree with you. Also, good job with the scope condition part, although you can say a bit more about why the US is a "natural" extension in this case. 70

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