

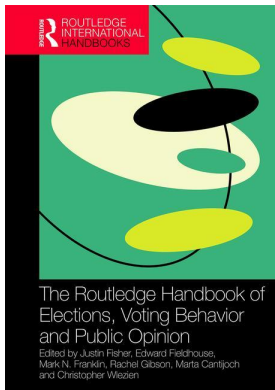
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LOCAL CONTEXT, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND NEIGHBORHOOD EFFECTS ON VOTER CHOICE

Ron Johnston and Charles Pattie

Most elections, both for the composition of a legislative body (a parliament, say, or a city council) and for a single legislator (such as a president or mayor), are contested across a territory that comprises a number of – if not a myriad – separate places. Overviews of election results often treat that territory as a homogeneous unit – relationships between voter characteristics and choices are assumed to be invariant across all of its constituent places. Much research has shown that this is rarely the case, however, and that there are significant differences between places in voter behavior. Such differences are often grouped together as neighborhood effects, and their cause associated with the flow of information through local social networks.

Much media and other commentary on voter behavior, and some academic studies, therefore (implicitly at least) treat members of the electorate as isolated atoms who make decisions on whether to vote and who or what to vote for without any reference to the places where they live and the people they interact with there. Many treat them as members of some idealized concept – such as a social class – but fail to recognize that none of those concepts are “natural”; they are social constructions and if people are both assigned to a group and accept its membership, they then have to learn what that membership involves and how they are expected to behave. Such learning – like all other forms of learning – involves interactions with others and, despite the growing importance of the internet and electronic communications, most of those interactions occur in places: they literally take place – we do not yet live in placeless worlds.

However important membership of particular groups – age, gender, ethnicity, social class, etc. – are in the structuring of society and as influences on patterns of behavior, therefore, place matters as a behavioral context as exemplified in a wide range of studies of public opinion and voting behavior. This chapter reviews that literature. Its main sections illustrate three separate – though in most cases inter-linked – place-based vote-winning strategies: inter-personal interactions in local contexts; local environmental effects; and organizational effects.

Neighbors and networks: the neighborhood effect

A very substantial component of the literature on voting patterns and local contexts concerns what has become known very widely as the neighborhood effect. The classic work was by Tingsten (1937), who noted that working-class support for the Swedish socialist party increased the more working-class the voting precinct in which class members lived. The implication was

that people's political opinions are influenced by their neighbors', so that, for example, the more socialist party supporters individuals encountered in their neighborhood (or at their workplace, or in a range of other formal – such as churches and trade unions – and informal organizations and settings) the more likely they were to be influenced by them and vote socialist too.

Many have followed Tingsten's example and found evidence that where a party's support base was strong, in terms of an area's class structure, for example, it tended to attract above-average levels of support, but where it was weak its vote was below-average; electorates were spatially more polarized in their support for particular parties than they were in the social characteristics of the individual members. That this polarization came about through personal influence was in most cases only inferred, however, because the evidence was obtained from aggregate data only: Cox (1971), for example, knew how many manual workers (*ouvriers*) there were in each district in a sample of Parisian *arrondissements*, and what percentage of the votes cast there were won by the Communist party, but could only infer that the larger Communist vote in the districts with most *ouvriers* resident there resulted from inter-personal influence – what Miller (1977) referred to as “people who talk together vote together.” But the findings were consistent with Cox's (1969; see Johnston and Pattie 2012) model of voting decisions in a spatial context. Individuals operate as nodes on social networks – receiving, processing and sending out information along their links. Many of those networks are spatially restricted, focused on the individuals' home neighborhoods, so that if (some) people (at least) are influenced in their political opinions by those they interact with, then where the weight of information in an area favors one party over others participants in its social networks are more likely to vote for the majority party than their contemporaries who may have similar individual characteristics but live in areas where the party has much less support.

Many patterns of voting consistent with this “contagion by contact” model have been identified, but the evidence presented is usually circumstantial only, and similar patterns could be the outcome of different processes: people favoring a particular party may choose to live in areas where it is already strong, for example, so that the observed neighborhood effect is a result of self-selection rather than “conversion by conversation” (Walks 2004, 2006, 2007; Gimpel and Hui 2015: that argument is also central to Bishop and Cumming's [2008] contention that the recent growing spatial polarization of voting in the USA reflects selective migration – an argument strongly countered by, among others, Abrams and Fiorina 2012; but see Johnston, Manley and Jones 2016). To counter that, researchers have sought more convincing evidence that the processes are as assumed. This has invariably involved using data obtained from individuals, taking advantage of small and large social surveys that include data on conversations and behavior. Work by, for example, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) and Mutz (2006) has provided convincing evidence of the “contagion by contact” model's veracity, and although not all of the applications of this approach have had locational data relating to the geography of the social networks involved (though see Pattie and Johnston 2000), it has become increasingly clear that the socio-spatial polarization of electorates is the norm.

The tendency for people to align their party support with that of their conversation partners is at the heart of the classic neighborhood effect, therefore, and research shows that people who talk together do, to a noticeable degree, vote together, as a result of conversion processes. However, this hardly ever results in complete unanimity within neighborhoods or within conversation networks: dissent persists. In part, this is because conversation networks are rarely politically homogeneous: most people talk to supporters of several different parties and of none. As a result, they are open to sometimes heterodox opinions. Not all conversations point in the same direction (Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague 2004). In part, too, it is because some voices are more influential than others. People pay more attention to those they know well than to

strangers, to those whose opinions and judgments they trust, and to those who they think have expertise on the subject than on those whose views and judgments they trust less (Huckfeldt 2001; Huckfeldt, Pietryka and Reilly 2014). Not surprisingly, the stronger an individual's own political views and partisanship, the less likely he or she is to be influenced by divergent views coming from conversation partners (Cox 1969; McClurg 2006). Not all of the studies such as those discussed here have data on the geography of the conversation networks studied; those undertaken by Huckfeldt do, however, and a reworking of the data showed that most conversations took place between people living no more than three miles apart (Eagles, Bélanger and Calkins 2004; see also Johnston and Pattie 2006).

Of course, very few neighborhoods are exclusive to one social class, and many social networks contain individuals who differ in their political persuasions. All networks and districts are open to external – and challenging – influences, therefore, and although continuity is the dominant pattern in any area's voting over time change is possible as a result of new information flows, perhaps introduced through what Granovetter (1973) termed weak ties (as illustrated in Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague 2004). Area populations change too, as people die and others move out, and their replacements may bring new ideas and affiliations. Those who move away from a neighborhood where they spent their formative years may retain the attitudes learned there, however, as illustrated by Wright's (1977) study of voting for the American Independent Party (Southern populist and segregationist) candidate George Wallace in the 1968 US presidential election: the larger the black population of the area in which white voters lived, the more likely the latter were to vote for Wallace – but it was the level of black concentration where they lived in 1940, when many of those who voted for Wallace 30 years later were being politically, socially and culturally socialized, rather than where they lived in election year itself, that had the strongest impact on their political attitudes (in this example, the smaller the white minority in an area the greater the cohesion around attitudes against the local black majority).

When change is slow, new residents in an area may be strongly influenced by the majority opinion there – especially if they are both open to persuasion and participate in neighborhood activities. Many studies of political attitudes have found that, while some people are strongly committed to one set of ideas and one party, and vote for it whatever challenging information they may encounter, others (and an increasing proportion of the population in many countries) are less committed than their predecessors and open to considering alternative ideas and party manifestos. Research (see, for example, Johnston et al. 2005a) has found that those with strong levels of neighborhood social capital were more likely to conform to local electoral behavior patterns than those who were “spatial isolates”; joining local social networks encourages embracing local majority attitudes.

Many studies of neighborhood effects have, because of the nature of the available data, been constrained to analyses of its operation at one spatial scale only – basically, whatever data are available at a scale that seems to approximate that of the neighborhoods within which (many) people interact. As more data have become available and as it has become possible to merge social surveys comprising data on individuals with census and other data on aggregate populations at a variety of scales, so more sophisticated modeling of neighborhood effects – broadly defined – has become feasible. One scale largely omitted from most studies has been that of the individual household, yet this is the context within which most people are politically socialized. People who live together, and especially those who talk politics together at home, should show the effects of inter-personal influence – a hypothesis confirmed by studies using data on all members of households: not only do they vote together but they also tend to change their partisan preferences together (Johnston et al. 2005b; Zuckerman, Dasovic and Fitzgerald 2007). Not all research focuses on interactions within neighborhoods: Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995),

for example, looked at church congregations as local contexts, and Mutz and Mondak (2006) explored workplace contexts, both with the same results – people who worship together, vote together, as also do people who work together.

The greater flexibility of modern datasets – many of which are now geocoded – has seen the introduction of what are known as “bespoke neighborhoods” to voting studies. Instead of relying on data at one scale only – such as the census tract – investigators have been able to compile data on the characteristics of either all individuals living within a prescribed distance of a survey respondent’s home, or on those of the nearest number of individuals (say 2000) to that address. As many censuses now report data at very small spatial scales – with average populations of only a few hundred at most – it is possible to construct a spatial hierarchy of such bespoke neighborhoods (such as neighborhoods comprising the nearest 250 persons to a survey respondent’s home, nested within neighborhoods with the nearest 1000 persons, nested in those with the nearest 2500, and so on...). This enables an evaluation of at which scales neighborhood effects are most intensive. One early study, for example, found that in 1997 British working-class individuals were more likely to vote Labour the more working-class the parliamentary constituency in which they lived; within those constituencies, they were more likely to vote Labour the more working-class the district in which they lived; and within those districts, the more working-class the immediate neighborhood around their homes, the greater still the probability that they voted Labour (MacAllister at al. 2001). Investigations of such multi-scalar influences have been advanced by the adoption of multi-level modeling strategies (Jones, Johnston and Pattie 1992). Their application in analyses of two British general elections showed significant variations in voting behavior at two local scales (the immediate neighborhood – within 250 meters of the individual’s home – and its wider locale – within 2000 meters) as well as between regions (Johnston et al. 2005c; similar findings were reported in a study of voting at Taiwanese elections: Weng 2015; and Bisgaard, Dinesen and Sonderskov 2016 have shown that individual Danish voters’ perceptions of the state of the national economy were influenced most by the level of unemployment in their immediate neighborhoods – as the area was enlarged the effect of local context on perceptions diminished).

Friends and neighbors voting

In most elections voters are faced with a choice between rival political parties, even though the mark they make on the ballot paper may be against named candidates: most of the latter are supported not on the basis of their personal characteristics but rather because of the parties they represent. Nevertheless, there are some situations where the individual candidates’ characteristics are among the major criteria influencing voters’ decisions.

The classic study of such situations was V. O. Key’s (1949) on *Southern Politics* in the USA. Many states there during the first half of the twentieth century were dominated by a single party and the main electoral contests were between candidates seeking its nomination for a local, state or national office. Key’s examples showed that many performed better in the areas around their home than elsewhere within the territory being contested. He interpreted this as voters, in the absence of any other criteria on which to base their decisions, plumping for the local candidate (whom they may know), as a way of promoting local interests. This became known as friends and neighbors voting: people vote for local candidates because they either know them personally or know people who do – or they believe somebody with local links will best represent them in the relevant legislative body or office. Such personal knowledge is rarely extensive, however, especially in large territories, and voters depend on other cues to direct them to the characteristics of and likely benefits to accrue from support for local candidates – such as local

media, as illustrated by Bowler, Donovan and Shipp (1993) in a Californian study. Candidates who get – and may seek – high profiles in local media which cover part of the electoral territory only may perform better there than in other parts of the territory as a consequence.

Given the predominance of parties in most elections, friends and neighbors voting may be considered a minor element to the geography of voting behavior, being characteristic of just those contests, many of them intra-party, where the choice set invites electors to deploy other criteria when determining which candidates to support – as illustrated by studies of city council elections in New Zealand (Johnston 1973). Particular voting systems may encourage such behavior. In both Australia and Ireland, for example, the single transferable vote system requires candidates to be rank-ordered. Where a voter is determining which of a party's candidates to rank first, a local candidate – if there is one – may be preferred (Johnston 1978; Parker 1982). More importantly, as clearly illustrated by some Irish studies, in order to maximize the number of its representatives who win election, a party's campaigning may focus on different candidates in different parts of a multi-member constituency (Gorecki and Marsh 2012, 2014).

The friends and neighbors effect was divided into three main components in a recent study of the 2010 contest for the leadership of the UK's Labour Party (Johnston et al. 2016a), in which one part of the electoral college involved voting by party members conducted in and reported for each of Great Britain's 632 Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs). Voting by party members in each candidate's home constituency was by people who almost certainly knew the candidate – they were local friends. Candidates were much less likely to be known personally to party members in adjacent constituencies, but the flow of information across constituency boundaries through social networks and via local media could promote their cause among neighbors. Finally, there was the potential influence of political friends in other constituencies. In order to contest the election, candidates had to be nominated by a number of their fellow MPs, and those who nominated a candidate may have influenced members of their own local parties to support the person they preferred. Analyses showed that all three were relevant; even though the contest was for the leadership of one of the country's largest political parties, and thus for a potential prime minister, these local effects were clearly discernible. For example, one candidate – Andy Burnham – averaged only 8.8 percent of the members' first preference votes across all 632 CLPs: he got 69.1 percent in his home constituency, an average of 34.1 percent in the five adjacent constituencies and 19.4 percent across the remaining 68 constituencies in the northwest region where his constituency was located; he also averaged 20.9 percent in the 33 constituencies whose MPs nominated him, and 25.0 percent in the 23 whose MPs gave him their first preference vote.

Recent work has also identified voting patterns consistent with the “friends and neighbors” argument at British general and local elections. At the 2010 general election, for example, Arzheimer and Evans (2012; see also Gimpel et al. 2008, for similar findings in the United States) found that the distance between survey respondents' home addresses and those of candidates in their constituency was negatively related to their propensity to vote for those candidates (other influences being held constant); similar results emerged from their study of voting at local government elections (Arzheimer and Evans 2014). But the effect doesn't always work. Some candidates for the American presidency choose vice-presidential running mates whom they hope can deliver substantial support from certain groups and/or areas: Devine and Kopko (2016), however, found no evidence of vice-presidential candidates making a significant difference to the outcome in their home states.

Local issues

Most election campaigns, especially those to national and regional legislatures and to leadership positions, focus on issues with a wide relevance across the electorate – those that large numbers of voters consider the most important (such as the economy and immigration) and on which the contestants are offering alternative perspectives and policies. Even so, many of these salient policy issues vary locally: an economy may be booming in some parts of the country but relatively depressed elsewhere; the housing market may be buoyant in some places but not elsewhere. If those situations are important to the voters, their responses may well vary according to the local circumstances. Thus, for example, Johnston and Pattie (2001) found that in 1997 British voters decided whether to punish or reward the incumbent Conservative government on the basis of both their personal financial situations and the performance of their local economy rather than the national situation; indeed other research showed that some people voted altruistically, against the incumbent government because many of their neighbors were suffering economically, even though they themselves were not (Johnston et al. 2000). Similarly, Pattie, Dorling and Johnston (1995) found that voters' likelihood to support the incumbent UK government at the 1992 general election was related to the performance of the local housing market during its slump in the preceding years; where that slump was deepest voters, especially those who themselves experienced negative equity, were less likely to vote for the government's candidates.

As well as these spatial variations in the nature of some of the key elements in an election campaign, local issues may be more influential on some voters in a place than the general ones, and may be linked to the local candidate(s). Incumbents seeking re-election, for example, may be punished by the local electorate for their performance – as to a small extent with the UK expenses scandal a year before the 2010 general election – and their party performs less well there than anticipated as a consequence (Pattie and Johnston, 2014; for a comparable US “scandal” which involved Congressmen writing checks on overdrawn accounts, and suffering in the subsequent polls as a consequence, see Banducci and Karp 1994; Williams, 1998). Others may be rewarded by local voters – as illustrated by the large American literature on pork barrel politics, with legislators who deliver benefits for their local community, such as a major infrastructure investment, getting electoral returns as a consequence (Ferejohn 1974; Johnston 1980). Legislators will sometimes reflect local issues when voting in parliamentary divisions, even if it means opposing the party line and whips. In late 2015, for example, UK Conservative MPs were whipped to abstain in the vote against a Labour amendment regarding changes in the tax credit regime, but 20 voted for that amendment, a number of them representing marginal constituencies where the proposed cuts could significantly reduce their majority.¹

An example of the impact of a specific issue affecting parts of an area only was voting for the Mayor of Christchurch, New Zealand in 1971. The two main candidates – one representing a relatively right-wing group and the other a left-wing party – drew votes across the city largely reflecting the class composition of different neighborhoods. The city was to host the Commonwealth Games in 1974. The right-wing candidate (and incumbent mayor) backed one of the proposed sites for the main stadium, and he performed better than expected at the polling booths close to that site; his opponent favored an alternative site – and his performance around it was better than average (Johnston 1976). In a different context, research in Colombia has shown that people who move from a state-controlled part of the country to an area where right-wing militias hold sway are more likely to support a right-wing candidate for the country's presidency (García-Sánchez 2016).

In many countries – especially those using plurality electoral systems with single-member constituencies – tackling local issues, whether personal to individual voters, relating to a local

community within the territory or concerning the area as a whole, is a major component of their representatives' workload, and what their constituents expect (Campbell and Lovenduski 2015). In the United Kingdom, for example, acting as a local caseworker and champion is seen as one of the MPs' two main roles (Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation 2010; Morris 2012); they are expected to maintain an office and a home in their constituency and to be active in social, cultural and economic as well as political life there. This can bring electoral rewards: MPs perceived by the electorate as effective operators within and for their constituents can be rewarded by greater support when they seek re-election. British studies have shown that this benefit is especially conferred on new MPs seeking re-election for the first-time (Wood and Norton 1992; Buttice and Milazzo 2011; Curtice, Fisher and Ford 2015).

Some MPs are more assiduous at the constituency role than others, although in the UK a very large proportion now give it a great deal of attention, making regular and frequent visits to the area and holding regular surgeries there, as well as (through their staff) responding to an increasing number and range of requests for assistance (many of them by email). In addition, some parties are generally more assiduous than others in the local activities undertaken by their members, in local as well as national government. In Great Britain, for example, the Liberal Democrat party built its parliamentary vote share (to over 20 percent at the 1983–1987 and then the 2005–2010 general elections) on the foundations of local activism and local government performance (as illustrated for one constituency in a former leader's autobiography: Ashdown 2009; see also Dorling, Rallings and Thrasher 1998, and Cutts 2006a, 2006b). The MPs elected on this foundation had strong local roots, therefore, which were reflected in their electoral support. At the 2015 general election, for example, the Liberal Democrats' national vote share fell to 8.1 percent from 23.0 percent five years earlier. The party was defending 57 seats; in the 46 being contested by an incumbent MP, its vote share fell by 14.3 percentage points on average, whereas in the 11 where the incumbent had retired and was replaced by a new candidate the fall was much larger at an average of 21.8 points. A similar spatially-structured campaign was the centerpiece of the electoral strategy developed by the United Kingdom Independence Party for the 2015 general election (Goodwin and Milazzo 2015).

Parties and candidates seeking votes: campaign and canvass effects

The main actors in almost all elections are the parties and their candidates, who actively seek support from the voters. Many campaigns, especially at general elections, are dominated now by the print, radio and TV and, increasingly, electronic media and forms of communication: parties put out messages promoting themselves and their candidates (especially their leaders). Alongside that, their local organizations and candidates make direct contact with voters within their own electoral districts.

Although the procedure varies from country to country (and sometimes within countries) the main goal of the local campaigns is to identify the party's supporters and then contact them – personally at their home if possible – to encourage them to remain firm in their support, and to express that support by turning out to vote on election day. Over time, parties build up databases – annotated versions of the electoral register – of their supporters who will almost certainly vote for them, those who do not support and will not vote for them, and those who may support the party. These have to be regularly updated, because of population mobility and to ensure that people have not changed their predispositions. Thus in the months before an election is due parties – especially in marginal districts where a seat could be won or lost – canvass support through a variety of means, both personal contact (on the doorstep) and indirectly (through telephone calls and email contacts where numbers and/or addresses are known). To a

considerable extent these “get out the vote” strategies are not random exercises: parties concentrate their efforts where they are more likely to get substantial rewards – in neighborhoods within districts where their supporters are concentrated, which they identify using geodemographic classifications of small-scale census and other data. (See Cutts 2006a, on the activities of the Liberal Democrats in one English city, Green and Gerber’s 2004 account of controlled experiments designed to test the efficacy of such campaigns, and Barwell’s 2016 detailed description of his own campaigning in a marginal constituency; see also, however, the negative findings reported by Cantoni and Pons 2016.) Leaflets are distributed in those areas to ensure voters know of the election, the party’s candidate there and what policies are being promoted, and there are follow-up calls, particularly on polling day when get-out-the-vote tactics are deployed to check whether supporters have voted and, if not, encourage them to do so before polling closes. Increasingly, those local efforts are enhanced by direct contact with local voters from the party’s central (or regional) campaign organization, usually through such channels as bespoke letters, emails and postings on social media sites (Cowley and Kavanagh 2015; Fisher 2015). But contact may not always be necessary; in one experiment, Green et al. (2016) showed that the density of posters on lawns in an area had an influence on the advertised candidates’ success.

These campaigns have become increasingly sophisticated, as have the techniques deployed to explore their extent and efficacy. In the UK, for example, early studies had to use surrogate data for a campaign’s intensity – such as the amount that candidates report having spent on their campaigns (relative to the legally-imposed limits), the number of members and activists working in the constituency and a range of other measures of campaign intensity (for an overview of much of this work, see Johnston and Pattie 2014). All reach the same conclusion: the more intensive a local party’s campaign, however measured, the better its candidate’s performance. But these provide circumstantial evidence only. The development of internet panel surveys has allowed more direct evidence to be elucidated. For example, the 2011 Welsh Election Study asked respondents whether they had been contacted by one or more of the parties during the campaign. Among them, 236 had voted Conservative at the previous National Assembly election in 2007; 181 of these had no contact from the party during the campaign; and 78.5 percent of them voted Conservative again. Of the remainder, of those whose only contact was to receive a leaflet, 83.3 percent voted Conservative, whereas among those contacted personally by the party – by a home visit, for example – 93.3 percent voted Conservative. Of Liberal Democrat voters in 2007, only 36.4 percent of those not contacted during the campaign supported the party again in 2011, whereas 71.4 percent of those contacted did so; those ignored by the party in 2011 were more likely to defect to another party. Even among those who supported a party in the past, therefore, those who were personally asked to again were more likely to do so; those not contacted were more likely to change their mind and vote for another – especially if it did contact them (Johnston et al. 2016b).

Although panel survey data provide much better insight into the impact of local campaigns they are not without problems: a party is more likely to contact its known supporters in the last weeks before an election, for example, and they are more likely to vote for it – for them, contact during the campaign may have little effect as they are already committed to it. Methods have been developed to circumvent this potential problem (the technical term is endogeneity) and confirm that campaign contact has an independent impact (Pattie, Whitworth and Johnston 2015). Parties and candidates expend much more effort in some places than others in seeking votes – they spend more money on leaflets and posters, they contact more voters in their homes and on the streets, and they visit more of their known supporters on polling day itself to ensure that they vote. It works: the more active a party is locally, the better its performance relative to places where they make much less effort.

Conclusions

The much-quoted adage, generally associated with former US House of Representatives Speaker Tip O'Neill, that "all politics is local" may be hyperbole: people vote in a particular way for a variety of reasons, some, if not many, of which may have little to do with their local context. But voters, all other things being equal (which, of course, they very rarely are), prefer local candidates (Campbell and Cowley 2014; Childs and Cowley 2011), especially local candidates who know their constituency, its residents and their concerns and represent those concerns, even if it means acting against their party's wider interests. Parties are, of course, aware of this, of how information about candidates flows through local social networks and influences their behavior and they act accordingly when seeking support. Election results thus reflect a continuing interplay between the parties and candidates, on the one hand, and the local context, on the other; as studies of an increasing number of countries demonstrate (Guigal, Johnston and Constantinescu 2011; Weng 2015; Amara and El Lagha 2016), geography is a fundamental component of many aspects of elections, their conduct and their outcomes. *All* politics may not be local: but where it is locally oriented, there are substantial rewards to be won.

Note

- 1 www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2015/10/20-conservatives-revolt-over-tax-credits-five-of-them-are-2015-intake-members.html?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Friday+30th+October+2015&utm_content=Friday+30th+October+2015+CID_c9c6e7f9b4b40aba7f0e84dfba4b668d&utm_source=Daily%20Email&utm_term=20%20Conservative%20MPs%20revolt%20over%20tax%20credits%20Five%20of%20them%20are%202015%20intake%20members.

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