Chapter 3
Measuring Sense of Community

We see numerous examples in political science research that community matters for a host of political behaviors and attitudes. However, previous research has neglected to consider modeling the process of how context matters. Such a black box perspective suggests merely that people enter into a context and something good (or bad) comes out. We do not know how people are affected; only that context somehow matters. Attention to where sense of community develops and how much variation exists within each context are critical to broadening our understanding of how to model the process of how, why, and when social forces influence individuals’ attitudes and behaviors. The present approach takes into account multiple contexts and variance in individual attachments within those contexts. Even though it is impossible to develop an exhaustive list of contexts, we can at least improve upon the single-context approach typically used in the literature. Further, focus on variation in attachments within contexts potentially offers an important step toward understanding why context matters, and especially why multiple members of a given context may experience very different effects.

As a first step in deepening our understanding of the impact of sense of community, it is vital that the properties of individuals and their social contexts be understood. Hence, my objective in this chapter is to examine two key questions. First, how much variation in sense of community exists between and within contexts? At question is whether sense of community is more vibrant in some contexts than others, and whether, within a given context, there is consensus or conflict among individuals in the degree of sense of community they experience. Second, which context or contexts seem to matter most for the development of sense of community? Is the neighborhood
context more important to sense of community than is the workplace or church?

The analyses to be reported below unfold in several stages. First we will examine some hypothetical scenarios. The virtue of doing so is that the hypothetical examples can help us to see clearly the potential advantages of the approach I have outlined. I will then move on to an analysis of the jury pool data. Recall that the jury pool data permit an initial exploration of the degree of variation that exists within several contexts. This will be followed by an analysis of the context survey data that consist of individuals embedded within particular contexts. Lastly, I will look at the data from the telephone survey which focuses on attachment in multiple social contexts.

Hypothetical Scenarios

The hypothetical scenarios we will examine relate to the two key concerns regarding past research (1) focusing on only one context (i.e., the single-context approach) and (2) insufficient attention to variance in people’s experiences within their social contexts. Let us first turn to the choice between a single-context approach and a multi-context approach to studying sense of community. Suppose for the moment that what matters for various politically relevant outcomes—outcomes such as participation, tolerance, and so on—is the person’s total level of sense of community across all subcontexts for that person. This assumption is quite reasonable and very little research in this area assumes the opposite. For example, when researchers focus on a single context such as the workplace or association, there is typically not an assumption that the political impact of social interaction within that context differs in any fundamental way from interaction in other contexts.

Consider three hypothetical respondents. For each, I will prescribe true levels of involvement in the neighborhood, church, workplace, and association, but impose the assumption that the researcher in this case possesses data only on the neighborhood. Figure 3.1 displays the scenarios for each of our three individuals. The vertical in each graph marks the level of attachment, or sense of community, and the horizontal marks the four contexts. As the figure demonstrates, Person A has low levels of attachment in every context. Person B has a low level of attachment in the neighborhood, but high levels everywhere else. Person C has a high level of attachment in the neighborhood, but low levels in the church, workplace, and association. If we used a single-context approach with focus only on the neighborhood, we would