Pedro Fierro   Ellen Helsper   November 7th, 2024

Anti-establishment votes for Trump: Not what you know, but who you know?

As the US sees Donald Trump elected president for a second time, Pedro Fierro and Ellen Helsper explain how social capital plays a significant role in intensifying anti-establishment voting behaviours.

Who we know and interact with – our social capital – is regarded as crucial in determining the strength and health of democracies, fostering greater trust and public engagement. However, research also suggested that the impact of increased social capital is not purely positive and that it might amplify sentiments that could potentially lead to support for anti-system alternatives. Our research around the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections finds that the effect largely depends on how we define social capital.

Analyses of a large social media data set linked to specific electoral areas show that while interactions with people who have *similar* socio-economic and socio-cultural characteristics are positively associated with anti-system electoral behaviours, interactions with people from *different* backgrounds have the opposite effect, decreasing the likelihood of supporting anti-establishment candidates like Trump.

Marginalised Places and the Rise of Anti-System Narratives

In recent years—especially following the rise of Donald Trump, Brexit, and the spread of nationalist movements across Europe—there has been renewed interest in understanding the roots of anti-system behaviours and opinions that pose a potential threat to liberal democracies. Researchers have come to suspect that these phenomena are influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by specific contexts and experiences. In many cases, people live in forgotten areas, feeling increasingly neglected, powerless, and angry — sentiments that are harnessed by populist,

nationalist, or anti-establishment movements. Recent evidence from Austria, Italy, the UK, the U.S., Germany, Chile, and other countries has been crucial in shedding light on the rise of illiberal choices.

Beyond the demographic and economic decline affecting these areas, the phenomenon is deeply tied to the social dynamics of specific places. In the dramatic case of early 20th-century German Nazism, it has been suggested that Hitler's project expanded, in part, through regions with strong social cohesion. More recently, social capital has also been cited as a factor in the rise of the radical right in Switzerland and as an explanation for Trump's performance in 2016 and 2020. One plausible explanation links this phenomenon to the deterioration of traditional ways of life— including community bonds—which many attribute to modernity and the rise of urban elites. In the U.S., research from over a decade ago identified "group consciousness" – a sense of in-group pride – among residents of marginalised rural areas that influences political preferences, which was associated with social capital.

Thus, to fully understand electoral geography and the triumph of illiberal projects, it seems essential to not only consider socio-economic decline but also social interactions as drivers of the spread of anti-system behaviours.

How Can We Understand Social Capital in the Digital Age?

In today's digital environment, social capital is increasingly understood as informal networks that may not be tied to local organisations or formal institutions, theoretically creating connections between people who previously had no means of interaction.

Although the digital revolution has been underway for decades, many aspects remain unexplored, especially regarding the promise of inclusion and integration for individuals and communities left behind. This is where our research comes in.

Using data generated by the Opportunity Insights Project—based on millions of interactions from META—we analysed the electoral implications of three different types of social capital: (a) civic engagement, measured by the number of public-good organisations and volunteering rates; (b) social cohesion, assessed through clusters of direct friends and social networks; and (c) economic connectedness, gauged by interactions among individuals with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. While civic engagement and social cohesion reflect interactions within homogeneous groups of people with shared interests (referred to as "bonding social capital"), economic connectedness is driven by interactions across heterogeneous groups, bringing together individuals from varied sociodemographic backgrounds (known as "bridging social capital").

Different measures of online social capital in the U.S:
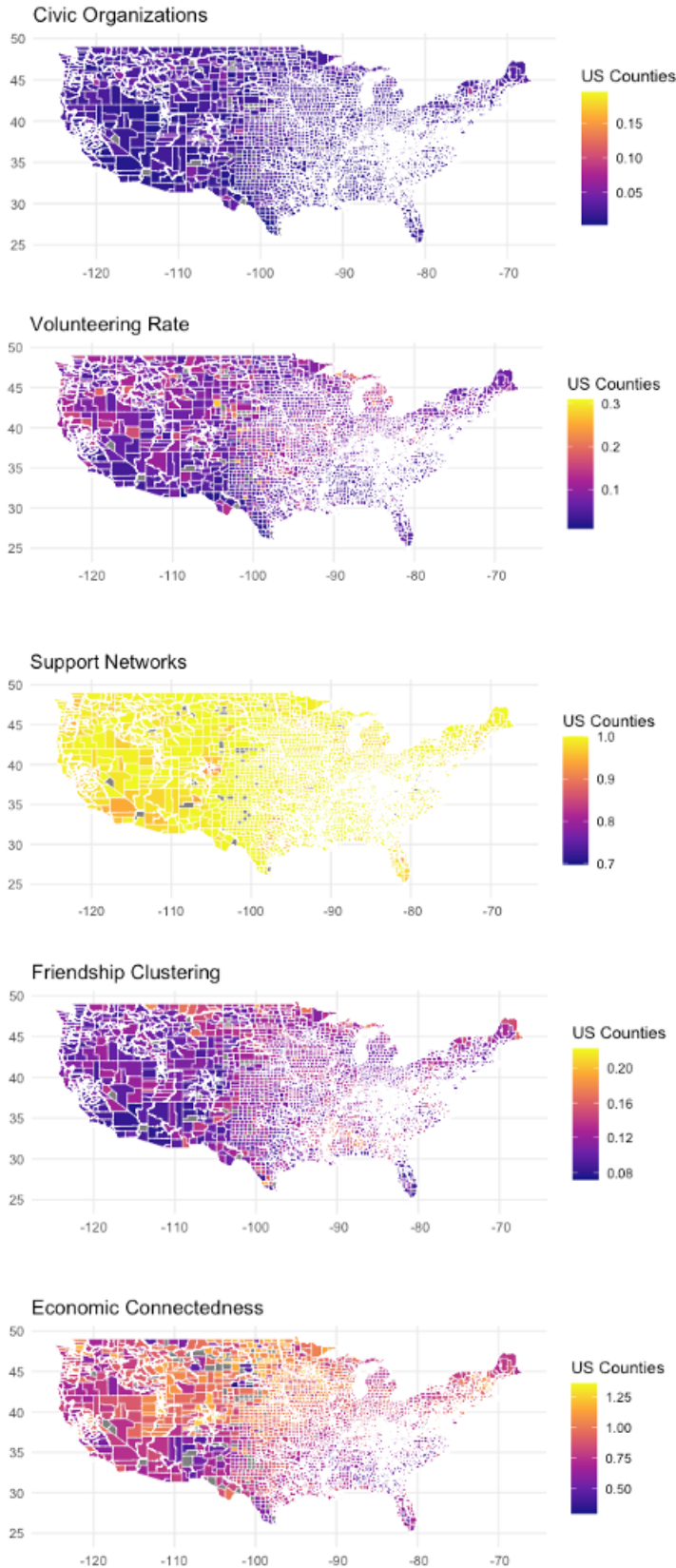
Source: Own elaboration with data collected from socialcapital.org

The Impact of Social Capital on U.S. Electoral Preferences

Preliminary results suggest that increased social capital is indeed linked to anti-system preferences —in this case, measured by Trump's vote margins compared to those of the previous Republican

candidate, Mitt Romney, who was an establishment candidate. However, the impact varies depending on the type of social capital in question. While bonding social capital—connections within a group—is positively associated with the likelihood of choosing an anti-system option, bridging social capital—connections between different groups—tends to have the opposite effect, reducing the propensity to choose that alternative. We also found that this negative relationship between bridging social capital and support for anti-system alternatives is contingent on employment and population changes; in areas experiencing greater economic and demographic changes, the negative relationship between bridging social capital and anti-system vote is intensified.

Although much work remains, these initial findings suggest that where there is greater social and economic integration between people from different backgrounds, the tendency to support anti-system candidates in elections is lower. Future research should dive deeper into the data, to explore whether cross-class interactions and relationships can prevent and counter anti-system sentiments —diminishing feelings of anger, powerlessness, and neglect—by fostering greater understanding and collaboration.

Note: This post is based on ongoing work by the authors in collaboration with Prof. Andrés Rodríguez-Pose (LSE) and Prof. Francisco Rowe (University of Liverpool). You can access the author's original manuscript (pre-print) here.

This post represents the views of the authors and not the position of the Media@LSE blog nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image: Photo by Janine Robinson on Unsplash

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