Explaining the Return of Racial Voting: Economic Anxiety, Psychological Wellbeing, and Identity

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Key findings

- We confirm previous findings that there is an association between racial animus and the share of people in a county who voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

- Trump's vote share is also highly correlated with rates of worry. However, worry matters less when people feel a sense of relatedness to their community and the people around them.

- Racial animus becomes an important factor in determining Trump's vote share only in situations where people are worried about the future and lack relatedness.

- The need for relatedness appears to be a key underlying factor in the rise of right-wing populism which is resorting to racism and anti-immigrant appeals to provide worried voters with a sense of relatedness.

- Self-determination theory and worldview defense theory both suggest that people may turn to racial identification to bolster their sense of relatedness.

What we knew

- The political revival of racial identity and the rise of right-wing populism in western democracies is one of the defining political phenomena of our era.

- Some have argued that this is driven primarily by economic factors. Autor, Dorn, Hanson and Majlesi (2020), for example, establish a causal relationship between rising exposure to trade competition in US counties dominated by manufacturing and rising political polarization in those counties since the 1980s.

- Others have argued that it is driven by 'racialized voting'. Sides, Tesler and Vavreck (2018) argue that neither individual economic circumstance nor macroeconomic conditions explain Trump's 2016 victory. They argue instead that Trump's willingness and ability to leverage 'racialized voting' led to his victory.

- Racialized voting is the tendency among some voters to consider economic issues not through an individual lens but through a racial one instead.

What we do

- We draw together data on:

  1. well-being, including on worry and basic psychological needs;
  2. racial animus;
  3. socioeconomic and demographic information on individuals including social capital;
  4. county-level trade shocks and
  5. vote choice.

- We combine socio-psychological data from nearly one-half million individuals from the Gallup Daily Poll from 2014-2016 with a measure of racial animus derived from Goole search data. We use county level election outcomes data.

- We map questions in the Gallup Poll to basic psychological needs which inform Self-Determination Theory (SDT):

  1. Competence
  2. Relatedness

- We use data on social capital from the Joint Economic Committee's Social Capital Project and trade shock data from David Dorn's webpage (`https://www.ddorn.net/data.htm`).

- We estimate models of Trump's vote share at the country level in the 2016 presidential elections where we control for trade exposure, relatedness, racial animus, social capital and a rich set of interactions between these variables. We also estimate models of Trump's vote share in the Republican primaries and of the changes in the Republican vote share in the presidential election from 2012 to 2016.

What we know now

- The idea that voting for Trump is explained by racism is too simplistic.

- Our results show that Trump was more electorally successful in counties with high rates of worry and low rates of relatedness.

- They further show that racial animus only impacted positively on Trump's vote share in counties where relatedness is poor. Rising racial sentiment appears to be related to people seeking relatedness.

- Our results are consistent with two theories from psychology. *Worldview defense theory* argues that a natural response to anxiety is to bolster feelings of in-group affiliation. *Self-determination theory* predicts that people feeling mentally unwell will seek to improve their sense of relatedness.

- People who already feel a sense of relatedness will be buffered against anxiety. Those who do not may reach for broader in-groups, such as racial and national identity.

- Racialized voting might be less about outright prejudice and more about meeting needs for relatedness to support psychological well-being.

- Once we control for racial animus, relatedness, competence and social capital, we find no role for trade shocks in explaining Trump's vote share.

What this means for policy

- Governments should focus on restoring social capital, community infrastructure, and a sense of shared civic life, and tackling loneliness alongside promoting economic opportunity.

Where to now?

- Creative thinking and research on place-based policies is needed.

More information

- Get the full working paper at: `https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Bowling-with-Trump_Fabian-et-al.pdf`

- We would welcome the opportunity to present our research to your team and to discuss potential joint research projects on related or similar topics.

- Contact us at `robert.breunig@anu.edu.au` or `mark.otto.fabian@gmail.com`

References

Autor, D., Dorn, D., Hanson, G. and Majlesi, K. (2020). Importing political polarization? the electoral consequences of rising trade exposure, *American Economic Review* **110**(10): 3139–3183.

Sides, J., Tesler, M. and Vavreck, L. (2018). *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*, Princeton University Press.