



Book Review

Close to Home: Local Ties and Voting Radical Right in Europe

Fitzgerald, Jennifer

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Who votes for radical right parties? In *Close to Home*, Fitzgerald provides a novel and unexpected answer to this old yet topical question: she argues that localism, understood as people's feeling of attachment to their local communities, matters for radical right support. With their emphasis on traditional communities, anti-globalism, and sovereignty, radical right parties appeal directly to the small-scale "we" that localists seek, so the argument goes. Relying on survey- and aggregate-level data from OECD countries as well as on two case studies (Switzerland and France), Fitzgerald shows that localists are particularly likely to support radical right parties and that this relationship is stronger when 'the local', e.g. local institutional structures and political processes, is more politically salient.

In chapters 1 and 2 of the book, Fitzgerald reviews existing literature on voter behavior and radical right support and sets out her argument in two steps. First, she argues for a distinction "between actual connections among citizens [socio-structural factors] and the emotional or mental connections individuals have with particular places and social collectivities [socio-psychological factors]" (p. 23) in a localist model of radical right support. In line with social capital research, she expects locally engaged individuals to be less supportive of radical right parties. By contrast, unengaged individuals with strong local attachment should be more likely to support radical right parties, because these people are "less insulated from the mobilizing efforts of radical elites" through direct social contact (p. 28). Second, Fitzgerald argues that the association between local attachment and radical right support is stronger when 'the local' is politically salient: identities need to be activated to matter for electoral behavior. Institutional structures or events rendering localities more salient facilitate radical right entrepreneurs' appeals to localist sentiments. The relevance and the timing of local elections (closeness to national elections) as well as the extent and recent change of local authority (e.g. through municipal mergers) are expected to act as moderators in the relationship of localism and radical right support.

In chapter 3, Fitzgerald provides first evidence for her arguments using data from the European Values Study, the Swiss National Elections Study, the Swiss Household Panel, and the French Political Barometer. Local attachment is positively correlated with radical right support. The associated change in radical right support is equally strong for nationalism – but much weaker than the corresponding changes in political trust, anti-immigrant sentiment, and education. As expected, active local engagement is negatively correlated with radical right support.

Chapter 4 asks who the localist radical right voters are. Localist radical right supporters "are especially likely to be women, to avoid associational memberships, to feel close to neighbors (but not to frequently help them), to be low on self-reported xenophobia and

high on anti-EU sentiment, and to be of the center to center-left politically” (p. 66). This suggests that “the localist model is in many ways a conditional model” (p. 83).

In chapters 5 and 6, Fitzgerald corroborates the findings from the previous chapters by focusing on vote choice for the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) and the Front National (FN). The Swiss case predominantly serves to further disentangle the effect of active local engagement from emotional attachment to the local community. Using data from the Swiss Household Panel (1999-2010), Fitzgerald shows that emotional, but not behavioral, components are linked to support for the SVP but do not predict vote choice for other political parties. In a second step, Fitzgerald provides first evidence for the moderating effect of local political salience: in cantons with a higher share of parliament municipalities – Fitzgerald’s indicator for municipal authority – the relationship between emotional ties to the neighbors and SVP vote is particularly strong.

Fitzgerald further explores the role of local political salience in chapter 6. Using municipal-level data from the French presidential election in 2002, she shows that Jean-Marie Le Pen performed better in municipalities that were recently “intercommunalized”.¹ Moreover, municipalities with strong local cohesion were especially prone to vote for Le Pen when their municipality recently lost political authority. This corroborates the idea that localism is a particularly relevant route to radical right support, when ‘the local’ is politically salient.

Moving to the country level, Fitzgerald expands the aggregate-level analysis in chapter 7. Looking at elections in OECD countries between 1980 and 2010, she shows that the coincidence of local and national election years fuels radical right support in national elections. Importantly, this link is stronger, the more radical right parties emphasize devolution and decentralization in their party manifestos. This suggests that local political salience – operationalized through electoral timing – “positively influences the success rates of radical right parties that campaign in favor of decentralization” (p.157).

In the concluding chapter 8, Fitzgerald connects her findings to current political ruptures, such as Brexit and the Trump election, and discusses the role of localism in these events. She further points to a potential “dark side” of decentralization – namely that it creates more favorable conditions for radical right party success by rendering ‘the local’ more politically salient. With respect to the socio-psychological causes of radical right support, Fitzgerald argues that localism and anti-immigrant sentiments are alternative compatible pathways. While localism emphasizes the “we” of identity politics, anti-immigrant sentiments emphasizes the “they”. Fitzgerald concludes by stating that political behavior research should focus on better understanding in-group sentiments compared to the well-researched out-group sentiments.

The book has many strengths. First, it makes several important contributions to different research areas. Most notably, it contributes to research on the radical right (Betz 1994), in that it proposes an alternative explanation for radical right success – the resurgence of ‘the local’. Moreover, it advances research on social capital (Putnam 2000) in that it emphasizes the importance of distinguishing behavioral and attitudinal aspects of local ties. Finally, it contributes to research on multi-level governance (Hooghe and Marks 2016) in highlighting political consequences of territorial reforms. Second, Fitzgerald relies on a wealth of different data sources to substantiate and triangulate her findings, which

¹ Intercommunalized municipalities are integrated in so-called “communautés des communes”, which represents a substantial loss of local authority for the individual municipality.

makes the book's argument rather convincing. Especially praiseworthy is the substantiation of the aggregate level analysis in chapter 6 with evidence from focus group discussions Fitzgerald conducted with municipal officials in Southern France. Finally, the main argument – that localism is linked to radical right support and that this link is stronger when 'the local' is politically salient – runs nicely through the whole book, making it easy to follow and read.

The book also has some less convincing aspects, however. First, Fitzgerald only discusses the phenomenon of 'glocalism' – individuals feeling attached to both the local *and* the global/international, but not necessarily the national, scale – in passing. The way in which Fitzgerald operationalizes territorial attachment implies that people cannot identify equally strongly with two territorial scales at the same time. As a consequence, the hipsters cherishing their Berlin, Paris, or London neighborhood while also identifying as cosmopolitan citizens of the world are not captured by her analysis. This omission is particularly regrettable as 'glocalism' provides a useful explanation for a finding left unexplained in the book: among individuals having positive sentiments towards the EU, localism is *negatively* correlated with radical right support.

My second critique concerns the treatment of local authority structures. Using the share of parliament municipalities as an indicator for municipalities' strength in Swiss cantons (chapter 5) is problematic for two reasons. First, local parliaments are required in some cantons – not exactly an expression of municipal authority. Second, parliaments are more widespread in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, which differs from the German-speaking part in many respects. The positive interaction effect between localism and the share of parliament municipalities might result from differences across language regions and not from local authority difference across cantons. In addition, Fitzgerald presents graphical representations (in chapters 5 and 7) that show changes in local authority and radical right support over time. These graphical representations are somewhat misleading, as they suggest a direct connection between the two phenomena when they might as well be contemporaneous but unrelated phenomena – an issue that is not critically discussed. This somewhat uncritical handling of descriptive evidence is unfortunate, especially since rather sweeping conclusions – e.g. about the "dark side" of decentralization – follow from it.

Finally, the role of political parties themselves in activating localism receives comparatively little attention (only in chapter 7). Yet, the main argument of the book – that localists are more prone to support radical right parties – is based on an argument about the localist rhetoric these parties employ. While Fitzgerald provides some anecdotal evidence on the rhetoric of the SVP and the FN, the book would have benefitted from more empirical evidence corroborating this assumption.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the book is a highly recommended read for scholars of political behavior, social capital, and multi-level governance – and for all those interested in how 'the local' shapes and influences politics in contemporary democracies.

Michael A. Strebel 
University of Zurich

References

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