From Extreme to Mainstream: The Erosion of Social Norms

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Overview

Motivation and Objectives

Motivation:

- ▶ Do social norms change with new public information?
- ▶ People care about what other people think about their opinions. Do they change what they say in public in order to fit the crowd's opinion?

Objectives:

- ▶ Do people get more xenophobic if they realize that the public opinion is xenophobic?
- ▶ Are people more willing to show xenophobic opinions if they think the public opinion is xenophobic?
- ▶ Authors aim to contribute to the literature about information treatments, as well as to the literature about election impacts.

Main Results

▶ The authors find that social norms, typically considered relatively stable, can shift quickly when new information becomes available.

▶ People don't become more xenophobic after discovering that the public opinion holds xenophobic views. However, those who are already xenophobic feel more comfortable expressing these opinions publicly.

▶ This finding suggests that social norms around the expression of such views in the United States may have been causally influenced by Trump's rise in popularity and subsequent electoral victory.

Empirical Strategy: Information Treatment in a RCT

▶ The authors recruited a sample of 1600 participants through an online panel survey company.

▶ They manipulated respondent's perception of Trump's local level of popularity in the 2016 election by exploring the fact that in some areas of the United States where that election was close, the candidate who won the election at the county level was different from the winner at the metropolitan statistical area (MSA) level.

▶ In this case, they used Pittsburgh, where Donald Trump won in the metropolitan area and Hillary Clinton won in the county.

▶ Participants were then offered a bonus cash reward if they authorized the researchers to make a donation to a strongly anti-immigration organization on their behalf.

Empirical Strategy: Information Treatment in a RCT

► All participants were told that the donation decisions would be posted on a website to be shared with all the participants from their area.

► One-half of the participants were assured that their individual responses would be kept completely anonymous.

► The other half, instead, were exposed to a treatment designed to make them think that the responses posted on the website would not be anonymous.

► The idea was to capture the impact of social stigma associated with the donation.

Model Summary

- ▶ The society consists of two types of citizens:
    - ▶ $\Pr\{t_i = A\} = p$ and $\Pr\{t_i = B\} = 1 - p$
    - ▶ p is a random variable: $p = p_H$ with probability θ, and $p = p_L$ with probability $1 - \theta$
- ▶ Each citizen:
    - ▶ Knows their type (A or B)
    - ▶ Receives a public signal $s \in \{p_L, p_H\}$ that is informative about p (with precision $\mu \geq 1/2$)
- ▶ Action choice:
    - ▶ Citizens choose between two actions: A or B
    - ▶ A is preferred by type A citizens and B by type B citizens
    - ▶ Utilities: $V_A > 0$ and $V_B > 0$; utility of the opposite actions is zero

Model Summary

- ▶ Public or private decision:
  - ▶ Private decision: maximizes direct utility from V_A or V_B
  - ▶ Public decision: includes social image concerns h_i
    ($h_i = n_{pub} \times \chi_i$)
- ▶ The audience observes the choice and updates their beliefs about the citizen's type based on the public signal and the action taken
- ▶ Assumption about social image:
  - ▶ h_i is independently distributed
  - ▶ The direct payoff from actions (V_A and V_B) cannot be too small relative to social image concerns

Model Summary

- The model seeks Perfect Bayesian Equilibria satisfying the D1 criterion (Cho and Kreps, 1987):
  - **CRITERION D1.** If for some type t there exists a second type t' with $D_t \cup D_{t'} \subseteq D_t$, then (t, m) may be pruned from the game.

- Absent social image concerns, xenophobic individuals should strictly prefer action A (they help an aligned organization and get a dollar) and tolerant ones should strictly prefer action B (implicitly, we assume that associating with the organization creates more than a dollar of disutility for tolerant people).

Main Findings

- In the Clinton Won treatment, participants in the public condition were significantly more likely to forgo the donation bonus payment than those in the private condition.

- However, they find that for the participants who received information that positively updated their perceptions of Trump's popularity, the wedge in the likelihood of undertaking the xenophobic action in private and public disappeared.

- This difference with respect to the Clinton Won condition was driven entirely by an increase in the donation rate in the public condition, with no change in the private condition.
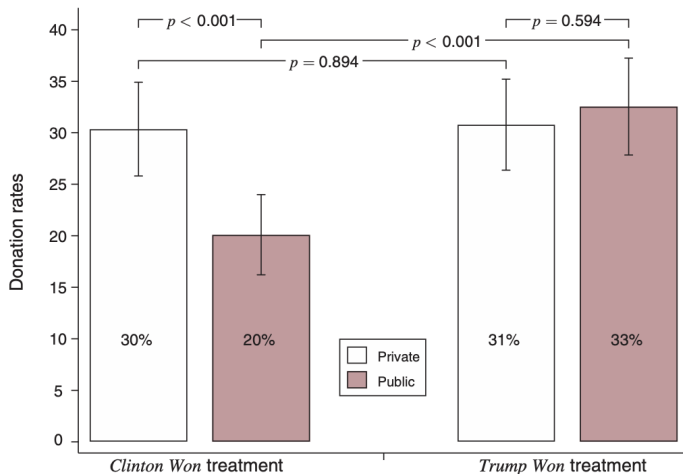
Main Results

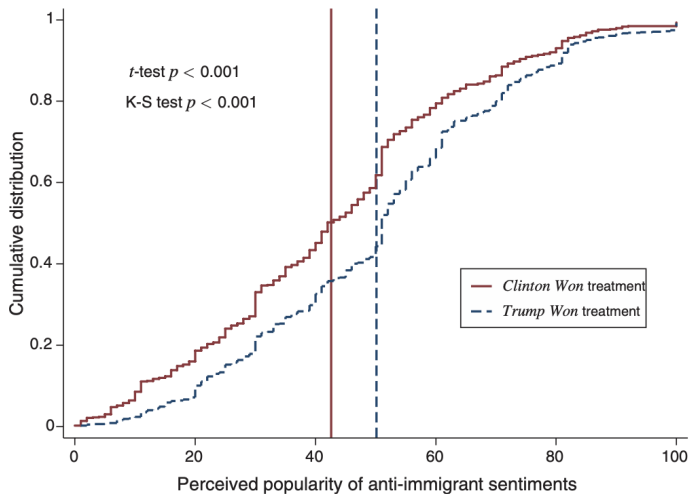Figure 1. Experiment 1: Donation Rates

Main Results

FIGURE 2. EXPERIMENT 1: BELIEFS ABOUT OTHERS

Main Results

TABLE 2—EXPERIMENT 1: INSTRUMENTAL VARIABLE REGRESSIONS

	Panel A. First-stage regressions					
	Perceived share of voters holding xenophobic views					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Trump Won treatment	7.528	7.568	9.492	9.384	5.541	5.668
	(1.111)	(1.101)	(1.568)	(1.548)	(1.580)	(1.574)
Mean perceived share						
Clinton Won treatment	42.588		41.451		43.666	
	Panel B. Instrumental variable regressions					
	Dummy: individual authorizes donation to anti-immigration organization					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Perceived share of voters			0.000	0.000	0.023	0.024
holding xenophobic views			(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Mean donation rate at a 50 percent						
perceived share of voters			0.305		0.344	
holding xenophobic views						
Sample	Full sample		Private treatment		Public treatment	
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	1,587	1,587	802	802	785	785

Concluding Remarks

- This results suggest that an increase in perceptions of Donald Trump's local popularity does not make the participants more xenophobic, but instead makes those who were already xenophobic more comfortable expressing their xenophobic views in public.

- Consistent with the underlying mechanism of updates in perceptions about the local popularity of xenophobic views, the distribution of perceptions about the local popularity of these views held by participants in the Trump Won treatment is to the right of the distribution of perceptions held by participants in the Clinton Won treatment.

- They show that a one percentage point increase in the perception of the local popularity of xenophobia increases donation rates in public by 2.3 percent- age points. On the contrary, as expected, donations in private are unaffected by the experimentally induced difference in beliefs.

References

▶ Bursztyn, Leonardo, Georgy Egorov, and Stefano Fiorin. "From Extreme to Mainstream: The Erosion of Social Norms." American Economic Review (2020).