America's Frontier Culture: A Particular(istic) Individualism*

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Abstract

The United States is one of the most individualistic countries in the world. But unlike Western European individualism, which historically emerged in combination with moral universalism, America's "rugged individualism" is morally particularistic. We link the United States' distinctive cultural configuration to the country's history of frontier settlement: the frontier favored self-reliance; at the same time, cooperation had high-returns, but could only be sustained in the presence of strong, local group identities. We show that counties with longer frontier history are more localist: they disproportionately oppose federal taxation (much more than state taxes); they have stronger communal values relative to universalistic values; they display lower charitable giving for distant counties; and they show weaker social connectedness with people in distant counties.

Keywords: American Frontier, Culture, Individualism, Moral Universalism

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1 Introduction

The United States is among the most individualistic countries in the world. Compared to societies with comparable levels of individualism (in particular, those in Western Europe and the Western offshoots), the U.S. has an unique strand of individualism. This paper describes the notion of particularistic individualism and shows that frontier history fostered its inception across America, with persistent legacies for its cultural and political landscape.

The early history of the United States was marked by a process of westward expansion. The rapid stretch of the population created a frontier of settlement marked by low population density and isolation from urban centers, entailing very limited government presence and social infrastructure. These conditions attracted settlers with individualistic inclinations, and then amplified their individualism. At the same time, cooperation had very high returns, but could only be sustained through strong local identities. The frontier environment thus fostered a distinct cultural configuration that combined individualism with moral particularism. We lay out a historical and conceptual framework for this argument, and then take it to the data.

Individualism and moral universalism are two critical dimensions that distinguish cultures across the world. Individualism, often defined in opposition to collectivism, reflects how individuals see themselves (and their immediate family) relative to others; it shapes other-regarding preferences (i.e. how much individuals care about themselves versus others), whether individuals try to fit in or stand out, whether they feel compelled to conform to group-level norms, and whether they are prone to engage in costly collective actions (see Hofstede, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Moral universalism, defined in opposition to moral particularism, describes how individuals see others that are socially close to them relative to those that are socially far away, with important implications for the structure of ideology, political attitudes, and the scope of cooperation in civil society (see Haidt, 2012; Enke, 2023).

Individualism and moral universalism appear in combination as defining traits of modern Western Europe's cultural configuration, defined in opposition to the collectivistic particularism that characterizes kinship-based societies all around the world (Schulz et al., 2019; Henrich, 2020). Against this background, American frontier culture showcases a distinct character.

The American frontier fostered a distinctive blend of individualism and moral particularism. As shown by Bazzi et al. (2020), those who ventured to the frontier often did so with a sense of self-reliance and a desire for independence, and their experiences in this environment further solidified these traits. Self-reliance, independence, and resourcefulness were essential traits for survival and material progress.

Here, we show that the frontier environment also fostered moral particularism. While frontier settlers were in many where in many ways out there for themselves, cooperation had the potential for high returns, but sustaining cooperation was very challenging for several reasons, and could only be enforced through particularistic local identities.

One of the factors that made cooperation hard was the high mobility of frontier locations, which made interactions more of a one-shot rather than a repeated game. This limited the ability to es-

tablish long-term cooperative relationships. Another factor was the absence of established government and social infrastructure, which made it difficult to enforce cooperation and punish defectors. Sustaining cooperation required the formation of groups based on common ancestry or religious identity. Thus, there was an evolutionary advantage for traits that encouraged group cohesion and cooperation among individuals with shared cultural and moral values, such as a common religious or ancestral identity.

After laying out the historical and conceptual framework, we provide evidence linking the American frontier to moral particularism. We start by showing that individuals living in locations with longer frontier exposure are more prone to morally particularistic views relative to universalistic views. Moreover, we show that people in high-TFE locations not only exhibit higher opposition to government spending, they express disproportional opposition to federal spending compared to state spending.

We then turn examine the moral particularism of frontier culture using data on donations to schools across the U.S. and social connectedness based on Facebook activity. For both measures, we adopt geographic distance as a metric of social distance. Our findings show that residents in counties with a longer history of frontier exposure (high TFE) tend to exhibit localist tendencies. In high-TFE counties charitable giving is not only lower overall, but also differentially lower for counties that are geographically distant. We also find that social connectedness declines with distance more strongly for high TFE locations. We further examine and confirm these patterns in more flexible specifications, where we leverage the spatial granularity of these measures and show see that the elasticity of donations and connections with respect to geographic distance is stronger in places with longer frontier histories.

Finally, we document the presence of assortative matching on historical frontier exposure, both for both charitable giving and social connectedness. The granular data we use, which includes pairwise connections, allows us to show that counties are more likely to donate money to schools in other counties with similar TFE levels. Similarly, counties with similar TFE levels tend to have more social connections between them. These results indicate that the frontier's imprint shapes people's attitudes in a way that affects who they interact with. This could, in turn, be a factor of persistence, insofar differential contact among people with similar ideas may prevent them for having interactions and experiences that might push in a different direction, and may instead reinforce initial differences.

This paper contributes to a growing literature on the deep historical roots of culture and ideology (see, e.g., Nunn and Wantchekon, 2011; Voigtländer and Voth, 2012; Alesina et al., 2013; Guiso et al., 2016). Our findings focus on the roots of moral particularism in the United States, in a way that links them with individualism. Our findings shed light on contemporary U.S. politics and provide broader insights about the configuration of culture and ideology.

Our study suggests that the the combination of individualism with particularism—partly underlying opposition to government regulations—has deep historical roots in the United States. Alexis de Tocqueville, a famously acute historical observer of American institutions and culture, noted both the individualism engrained into U.S. democracy and a strong associationalist tendency of lo-

calistic nature as parts of the same social configuration (see, respectively, Chapters II and V De Tocqueville, 1840).[1] This historical perspective suggests that political expressions that combine a strong emphasis on individual freedoms with a preference for limited government intervention and local governance may be gain traction from touching on deep cores of American ideology. This may in turn shed light on the nature of support for right-wing populism in the U.S., which combines individualistic attitudes (Bazzi et al., 2020) with moral particularism (Enke, 2020).

The combination of individualism and particularism in the U.S., compared with the universalistic individualism of Europe, presents a puzzling contrast. Our paper, combined with the contribution of Schulz et al. (2019) on Western Europe, points to the importance of history in the configuration of culture. In Europe, the church contributed to the dissolution of kinship-based social structures, which fostered moral universalism by increasing the need for cooperation among strangers. In the American frontier, individualism was also fostered, but in this case cooperation had high returns but was only possible with strong local identities. This comparative perspective echoes the emphasis of Muthukrishna et al. (2021) on psychology as emerging from the historical process. It also echoes Acemoglu and Robinson (2021)'s view of cultural configurations as sets of interrelated traits, that may be bundleded together in different ways.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 lays out a historical and conceptual background on the American frontier, the notions of individualism and moral particularism, and how the frontier historical experienced shaped culture along those dimensions. In Section 4, we take our argument to the data, using donations and Facebook connections to measure particularism at a granular level, and to document how historical exposure to the frontier across U.S. counties is associated with a steeper elasticity of connections to geographic distance. The final section concludes.

2 Historical and Conceptual Background

This section begins provides a brief overview of the history of frontier settlement and the distinctive characteristics of frontier societies. We then offer a framework for understanding how frontier conditions shaped a culture of moral particularism.

2.1 American Frontier History

From the colonial period to the late 19th century, the United States went through a process of rapid population growth and territorial expansion. Successive waves of settlers pushed the western fron-

[1] de Tocqueville's comments on the tendency of Americans to form associations reflect that the particularistic and goal-specific aspects of this pervasive form of cooperation in the U.S.: "Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds-religious, moral, serious, futile, extensive, or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found establishments for education, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; and in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools." The contrast with state-level organization is also clear: " Wherever, at the head of some new undertaking, you see the government in France,[...] in the United States you will be sure to find an association."

tier displacing indigenous communities. The concept of the frontier, initially delineated by the U.S. Census in the "Progress of the Nation" report (Porter et al., 1890) and later by Turner (1893), was defined as the demarcation between population densities above and below two people per square mile.

Frontier counties historically exhibited dual forms of isolation: low population density and geographical remoteness. Low density implied limited interaction among residents, while proximity to the frontier often meant detachment from major population centers and eastern markets, often with minimal engagement with the federal government. This isolation led to a dearth of social infrastructure and a challenging way of life, as noted by Overmeyer (1944). Conversely, the frontier offered abundant land, creating economic prospects for those migrating from densely settled eastern regions, particularly in agriculture.

Using Census data and GIS methods, Bazzi et al. (2020) operationalize the defintion from classic texts to track the frontier's movement between 1790 and 1890. Frontier counties are classified as those in close proximity to the frontier line (within 100 kilometers) and with a population density below six individuals per square mile, consistent with the threshold for post-frontier settlement adopted by (Porter et al., 1890) and Turner (1893). Non-frontier counties were those situated more than 100 kilometers from the frontier line or with a population density exceeding six individuals per square mile. Population density was calculated annually, with interpolation for intercensal years. The frontier was delineated by contour lines segregating counties based on their population density, either above or below two people per square mile. Detailed GIS procedures are available in Overmeyer (1944) .

Furthermore, a metric of "Total Frontier Experience" (TFE) was devised, reflecting the number of years it met both criteria (proximity to the frontier line and low population density) during 1790-1890. Maps illustrating the frontier's historical progression during this period are displayed n Figure 1, while Figure 2 depicts TFE.

2.2 Individualism and Moral Universalism

Individualism has attracted relatively more attention in the social and cultural psychology literature. This literature—a prime source of data and ideas for studies of culture in economics—often portrays individualism as the most important dimension of cross-country variation in culture (e.g., Triandis, 1995; Heine, 2010). The notion of individualism is emphasized in the influential work of Hofstede (1980), who associates it with a concern for oneself and immediate family, an emphasis on personal autonomy and self-fulfillment, and the foundation of identity on personal accomplishments (see also Hofstede, 1991). Individualism is most often defined by contrast with collectivism. Triandis (1988, 1995, 2001) makes the distinction in terms of four major attributes: in individualism, the self is independent rather than interdependent, there is primacy of personal goals rather than group goals, behavior is regulated primarily by personal attitudes rather than social norms, and market exchange is more important than communal relationships.

The notion of moral universalism and particularism a key element in "Moral Foundations The-

ory" (MFT), as developed in a series of studies that map the moral contrast between liberals and conservatives (Graham et al., 2009, 2011, 2012). While liberal ideology is characterized by individualizing values (such as fairness and justice) and universalistic morals (directed toward socially distant and structurally looser targets), conservatives' values are binding, group-specific (e.g., loyalty and authority) and their morals are more parochial (directed toward socially closer and structurally tighter).

In a series of studies on political and social attitudes, Enke (2020), Enke et al. (2022), Enke et al. (2023b), and Enke (2023) propose a precise representation of moral universalism as feature of utility functions with social preferences. Full universalism is the case where the utility of an individual has the same weights for people socially far and those socially close. In contrast, particularism means that weight for others' utility decreases in social distance. More generally: particularism is captured by the elasticity of utility with respect to social distance.

We can combine this precise concept of moral universalism with the concept of individualism into a unified representation. In Figure 3, we capture the utility weights for people at different social distances following the graphical representation proposed by Enke (2023), and add one category to this diagram—self and family. Importantly, while this diagramatic representation focuses on utility as a salient dimension of social preferences, the implications are not only about altruism and other-regarding utility functions, but also about trust and cooperation as key dimensions of social structure.

We can use this representation to depict three stylized cultural configuration. In panel (c), we have *particularistic collectivism*, in which individuals see themselves as part of a group, so there is no distinction between self, family, extended family, and other in-group members, but there is then a sharp cliff whereby out-groups do not get any weight. This structure corresponds to kinship-based societies and can be related to the notion of "amoral familism" by Banfield (1967) (see also Putnam et al., 1993). In panel (b), we depict universalistic individualism, characterized by a strong empahsis on self and the nuclear family, combined with full universalism beyond—with no distinction of in-group and out-group in civil society at large.

The combination of moral universalism and individualism is a historically important cultural configuration, as described in Henrich (2020)'s analysis of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrially, Rich, Democratic) societies. By breaking up kin- and clan-based social structures and bolstering the nuclear family as the core unit in civil society, the Western Church increase the need for interpersonal cooperation and generalized trust at larger scales (see Schulz et al., 2019). Dissolving the distinction between in-group and out-group made stranger part of the feasible set of cooperators.

Finally, in panel (c) we depict the cultural configuration that we highlight as peculiar in this paper: paricularistic individualism. In this case, there is a steep slope separating the nuclear family from others, and among the latter, a steep slope separating in-groups from out-groups. This configuration embodies the distinctive nature of America's frontier culture of "rugged individualism," as well as other cultural adaptations, as explained below.

2.3 The Frontier Roots of Particularistic Individualism

As emphasized in many historical accounts, frontier conditions favored self-reliance. Independence and resourcefulness were essential traits for survival and material progress. Frontier settlers had to be self-sufficient and able to operate independently in a very challenging environment. For these reasons, the frontier presented advantages for individualistic types. It attracted individualistic people, and subsequently made settlers even more individualistic over time. Bazzi et al. (2020) document the frontier differential in invidividualism, as well as the presence of selection and exposure effects, using a wealth of Census data, and a measure of individualism based on children's names proposed by social psychologists.

In this paper, we highlight that the American frontier not only fostered individualism, but at the same time, moral particularism. Two salient features of frontier life contributed to the development of this cultural traits. First, isolation limited the scope of social interactions; limited contact would be conducive to limited morality. Second, cooperation had high returns in the frontier environment, but it was only sustainable under tight-knit groups. We discuss each of these forces below.

The first force that shaped moral particularism on the frontier is directly related to the "contact theory." The notion here is that interactions among individuals pertaining to different social groups can reduce prejudice, discrimination, and conflict. On the frontier, compared to urban centers but also more thickly settled rural areas, extreme levels of isolated greatly limited contact. Thus, those positive interactions that might have fostered tolerance and trust across the social spectrum did not occur, and thus morality would tend to remain particularistic.

The second aspect is related to the returns and constraints to cooperation. Frontier conditions entailed a high premium on self-reliance, as settlers were out there for themselves. The frontier presented a number of challenges for cooperation. Isolation implied that frequent, regular cooperation was not feasible in this context. The high mobility of the frontier environment (with settlers coming and going due to serial migration and high death rates) meant that social interactions were not perceived as a repeated game, and it was hard to enforce prosocial behavior. This limited the ability to establish long-term cooperative relationships. Another challenge was the lack of social infrastructure: the absence of established government and social infrastructure in the frontier made it difficult to punish defectors and enforce cooperation, as suggested by Munshi (2014) and Tabellini (2008). At the same time, cooperation could have extremely high returns (see Boatright, 1941). This combination of high returns and stark constraints fostered the development of a trait that could easy those constraints: moral individualism.

To reap the high returns to cooperation under conditions that made it hard required the formation of groups based on common ancestry or religious identity. This is where the concept of moral particularism becomes significant. Evolutionarily, there was an advantage for traits that encouraged group cohesion and cooperation among individuals with shared cultural and moral values, such as a common religious or ancestral identity (as proposed by Enke, 2023).

Particularistic Individualism in Other Contexts. Other historical cultural adaptions show that environments where cooperation has high returns, but at the same time is hard to sustain, can lead to

the development of individualism combined with moral particularism. One such context is that of transhuman pastoralist communities studied by Le Rossignol and Lowes (2022). These nomadic, low-density, isolated communities face hostile, high-risk, and unstable environments, which foster individualism and at the same time create strong incentives for in-group cooperation, while out-group trust is very limited.

Another case is that of the Matsigenka communities described by Henrich (2020). These communities live in tiny hamlets—comprised of a few nuclear families, each of them economically independent—dispersed across the tropical forests of the Peruvian Amazon. Their culture and social organization reflect an adaptation to the dangers of slave raids through the Inca period and beyond, which gave survival fitness to isolated, sparse communities with self-sufficient, highly-mobile nuclear families. This environment fostered individualism, and at the same time favored some specific forms of cooperation within extended kin, while increasing distrust beyond the hamlet. As a result, the Matsigenka are highly individualistic, while their communities are structured through kin-based institutions and have a strong in-group bias.

3 Empirical Analysis

3.1 Data

Our study examines the effects of frontier history on several outcomes that capture moral particularism. We measure the historical length of frontier exposure as in previous work (Bazzi et al, 2020, 2022, 2023), as the cumulative number of years spent by a county under frontier conditions. We call this variable Total Frontier Experience (TFE).

We examine several outcome variables. We start with a measure of universalism based on responses to the Moral Foundations Questionnaire. We also consider opposition to government spending, measured using data from the CCES (Cooperative Congressional Election Study). And we consider two other measures which provide very granular data: charitable giving data from *DonorsChoose*, and social connectedness based on Facebook activity.

The measure of moral particularism is based on the work of (Enke et al., 2023a). In particular, we measure the elasticity of charitable giving to geographic distance. This measure allows us to assess how individuals' charitable giving behavior is influenced by the geographical proximity of the recipients. By measuring the elasticity of donations with respect to distance, we adopt a geographic metric of distance to proxy for moral particularism.

The data on charitable giving comes from the *DonorsChoose* platform, a web-based system where schools from across the country can request donations for specific projects and initiatives. Donors on the platform have the opportunity to select projects they wish to support based on various criteria, including geographic filters. The platform provides geographic location data for both schools and donors, including the exact geographic information is available for schools, enabling precise location identification. For donors, the platform provides the first two digits of their 5-digit zip code, offering a more generalized but still meaningful level of geographic information.

We also examine patterns in universalism with measures of social connectedness based on data obtained from Facebook. Data on the connections that individuals create and maintain with others in this widely used social media platform provides valuable metrics on the social interactions between residents of various counties. To quantify social connectedness, we introduce the "Social Connectedness Index" (SCI), which measures the number of friendship links between inhabitants of different counties i and j. To facilitate meaningful comparisons, the SCI is normalized with respect to its maximum value, which is achieved when assessing links between residents of the same county (e.g., Los Angeles County). The maximum value is set to one million, ensuring that the index falls within the range of [0, 1,000,000].

Additionally, we compute the "Normalized Social Connections," which represents the relative probability of friendship between counties i and j. This normalized index scales social connections using the population sizes of the counties involved in the following way:

$$\text{Normalized Social Connections}_{ij} = 10^{12} \times \frac{\text{SCI}_{ij}}{\text{Population}_i \times \text{Population}_j}$$

In our analysis, we use these measures of donations and social connections in different way to examine how historical frontier exposure shapes the anatomy of moral universalism.

3.2 Frontier History and Moral Particularism: A First Look

To examine the relationship between historical frontier experience and various dimensions of moral universalism, we use the following estimating equation:

$$y_{cs} = \quad \beta\, TFE_c + \alpha_s + \gamma X_{cs} + \varepsilon_{cs}$$

In this specification, y_{cs} is an outcome of interest in county c, located in state s, TFE_c is total frontier experience, X_{is} is a vector of control variables that comprises geographic factors such as county area (in logs), latitude, and longitude, environmental factors like mean temperature, rainfall, elevation, distance to the coast, rivers, and lakes, and average agricultural suitability, as well as polynomials of population, capturing population-related dynamics. Throughout, we report heterocedasticty-robust standard errors, and to address spatial autocorrelation we also calculating Conley standard errors with a distance cutoff of 200km.

We start by examining the association between total frontier experience (TFE) and a measure of moral universalism versus particularism in values. This measures was developed on the pioneering work of Graham et al. (2009, 2011, 2012) and applied in a series of foundational studies on moral universalism and political and social attitudes by Enke (2020); Enke et al. (2022, 2023b); Enke (2023). Table 1 shows a negative, sizable association between historical exposure to frontier conditions and the present-day presence of moral universalism (as opposed to moral particularism). This relationship is robust to controling for a wide array of geo-climatic features.

Next, we revisit a finding from Bazzi et al. (2020) on the link between frontier experience and

opposition to tax redistribution. In that paper, we characterize "rugged individualism," the culture of the frontier, as the combination of individualism and opposition to government intervention. We argue that the latter part may be associated with the favorable prospects of upward mobility through effort in frontier locations. According to contemporary political economy theories, favorable prospects led to opposition to taxation; in addition, the importance of effort for income generation makes taxes unfair as well as inefficient. In addition, we argue here frontier culture entails a disproportionate opposition to *federal* taxes, as these infringe the particularistic dimension of "rugged individualism" much more than local taxes.

Table 2 shows a pattern of opposition to redistribution that is magnified by distance. In columns 1-2, we replicate a finding from Bazzi et al. (2020): frontier history is associated with opposition to *federal* spending. We then show, columns 3-4, that TFE is also linked to opposition to *state-level* spending, but point estimates that are much, much smaller. In columns 5-6 we focus on the gap in opposition to these two levels of spending, as a direct measure of localism in preferences for redistribution. We confirm here that the opposition to federal spending relative to opposition to state spending is much larger in locations with a long frontier history.

3.3 Localism in Donations and Social Connections

We now turn to measures of moral particularism that allow us to conduct a more granular analysis. Following the work of (Enke et al., 2023a), we examine how individuals' charitable giving behavior (using data on school donations from *DonorsChoose*) is influenced by the geographical proximity of the recipients. In additional, we consider a measure of social connectedness based on Facebook's data, looking at friendship links of individuals in a given county with individuals in countries at different distances. In other words, we proxy social distance with geographic distance.

Locations with longer frontier histories have lower numbers of donations, donors, and amounts donated per capita, as show in Appendix Table A.1. Beyond this differential in overall donations, locations with longer frontier histories display a distinct pattern of localism when we decompose donations into those within the county, those to neighboring counties, and those to other counties further away. Table 3 shows that TFE is negatively associated donations in each distance range, but particularly so for long-range donations.

Social connectedness also displays a pattern of localism consistent with moral particularlism in high-TFE locations. Table 4 shows the conditional correlations of TFE with the share of social connections within the same county, the share corresponding to neighboring counties, and the share with non-neighboring counties. The results show that frontier culture is characterized by localism.

3.4 The Elasticity of Donations and Social Connections

We go beyond the basic patterns captured above measuring the elasticity of social connections to geographic distance, and how this varies with TFE. In particular, we allow this elasticity—a key proxy for moral particularism—to vary for low- vs high-TFE counties, using the following equation:

$$\log y_{ij} = \beta_1 \log(\text{Distance}) + \beta_2 \log(\text{Distance}) \times \text{High TFE} + \alpha_i + \alpha_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (1)$$

To define High TFE, we simply consider those with above median values. We also estimate a version of this specification in which we allow for state state-specific elasticities to geography:

$$\log y_{ij} = \alpha_{s(i)} \times \log(\text{Distance}_{ij}) + \beta \log(\text{Distance}) \times \text{High TFE} + \alpha_i + \alpha_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (2)$$

Table 5 displays the results with donations as y_{ij} on the left hand side of the estimating equation. Table 6 displays analogous results with normalized connections as the outcome. We find that both donations and social connections decrease with geographic distance, but they do so in a steeper way in locations with high TFE. The same finding holds when we allow for state state-specific elasticities to distance. Overall, the results confirm the previous pattern, establishing the differential localism of frontier culture.

To provide more granular and visual evidence of the spatial decay of donations and social connectedness, we examine their overall distributions by geographic distance, computing the average share of donations (or connections) among counties closer than distance b for counties in group g (above- or below-media TFE):

$$y_{bq} = \frac{1}{N_q} \sum_{i \in q} \sum_{j} \frac{\text{Normalized Connections}_{ij}}{\sum_{k=1}^{J} \text{Normalized Connections}_{ik}} \times 1\left[\text{Distance}_{ij} \leq b\right] \quad (3)$$

The results displayed in Figure 5 show a gap between the cumulative distributions of donations as a function of distance for counties below- and above median TFE. Places with longer frontier histories display more localism, that is, their donations are more concentrated in places at shorter distances. We find a similar, somewhat starker pattern for social connections in Figure 6,

3.5 Assortative Matching

Finally, we examine patterns of assortative matching among individuals in different U.S. counties based on locations' frontier histories. The notion here is that the cultural traits shaped by frontier experience may not only create geographic variation in culture, but potentially also shape the social interactions that individuals have. Insofar as these traits influence patterns of social interactions, this suggests that these are important traits among the repertoire of cultural traits. Moreover, and more importantly, this suggests that the presence of this trait reduces exposure to contrasting cultural configurations. In other words, the prevalence of moral particularism increases exposure to moral particularism and reduces exposure to universalism. As suggested by a "contact theory" framework, this could be a mechanism for the persistence of moral particularism over time.

To examine assortative matching, we estimate the impacts of distance in levels of TFE on social connections, controlling for the impact of geographic distance (and allowing this impact to vary by level of TFE, as specified before):

$$\log y_{ij} = \delta \log(|\text{TFE}_i - \text{TFE}_j|) + \beta_1 \log(\text{Distance}) + \beta_2 \log(\text{Distance}) \times \text{High TFE} + \alpha_i + \alpha_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (4)$$

We also do this allowing for state-specific elasticities to geographic distance:

$$\log y_{ij} = \delta \log(|\text{TFE}_i - \text{TFE}_j|) + \alpha_{s(i)} \times \log(\text{Distance}_{ij}) + \beta \log(\text{Distance}) \times \text{High TFE} + \alpha_i + \alpha_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (5)$$

Table 7 displays the results with social connections as y_{ij} on the left hand side of the estimating equation. We find that counties with high levels of TFE are disproportionately likely to establish social connections with other high TFE counties.[2] This pattern suggests that moral particularism is an important trait that influences patterns of social interactions. It does so in a way that may foster persistence, insofar as interacting with people sharing particularistic values hinders exposure to universalisitc values.

4 Conclusions

This paper sheds lights on the historical roots of American particularistic individualism, a dinstinctive blend of individualism and moral particularism. Focusing on the frontier, our argument highlights how the conditions of westward expansion fostered self-reliance among settlers, but at the same time created high returns to cooperation, which was however hard to sustain. The challenges of cooperation in the frontier environment, with high mobility and limited presence of government or any social infrastructure, led to the development of moral particularism, emphasizing strong local identities based on common ancestry or religious affiliations.

Lending support to our argument, we show that areas with longer frontier exposure exhibit morally particularistic views, oppose government spending particularly at the federal level, and display localistic patterns in their charitable giving and social connections. We also document assortative matching, which may be a potential channel for persistence, insofar as cultural traits are reinforced by biasing interactions toward individuals with common inclinations. These results establish the link between frontier history and moral individualism, providing novel insights on the configuration of contemporary culture and political ideology in the United States.

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[2] We find similar results for donations, as shown in Appendix Table A.2.

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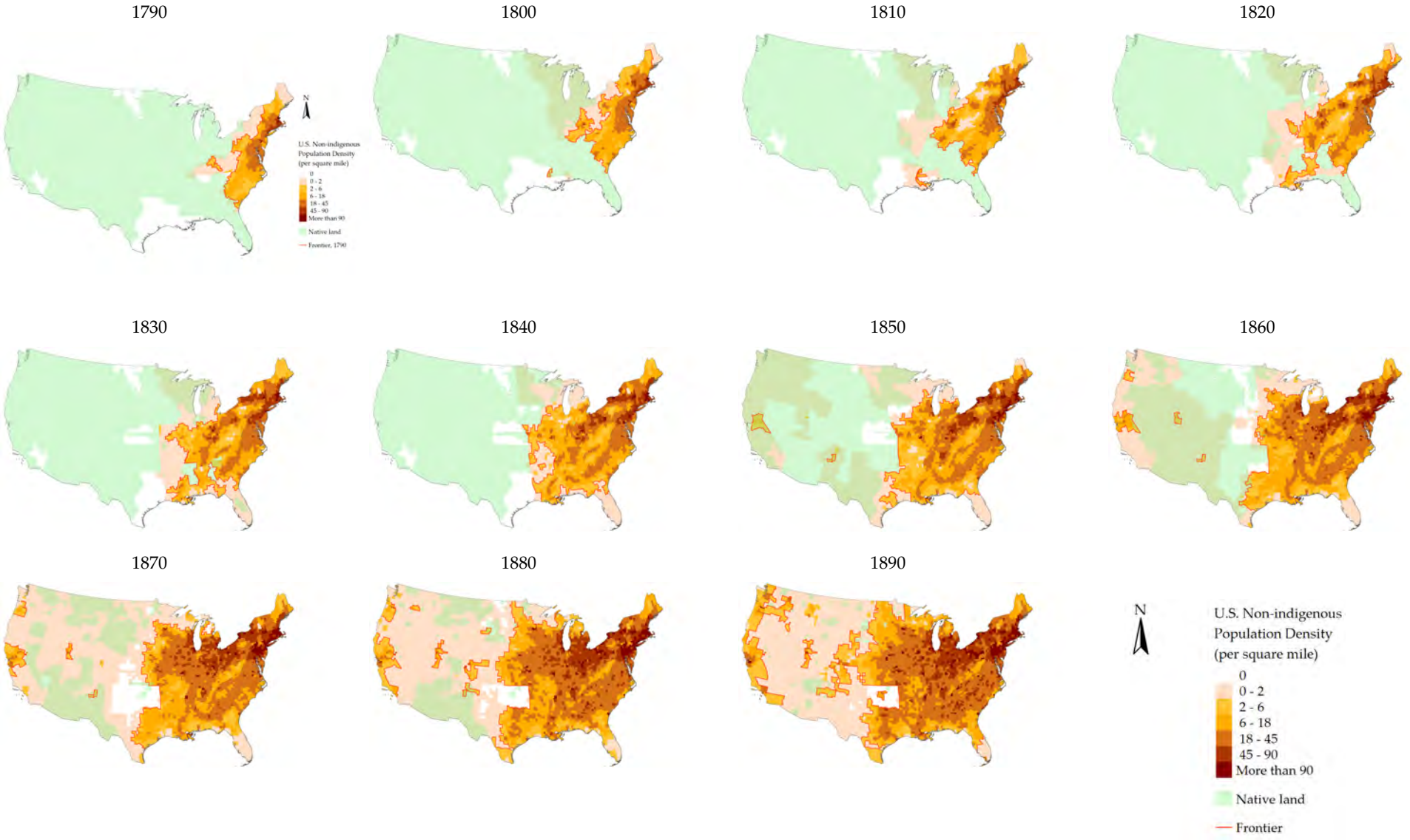
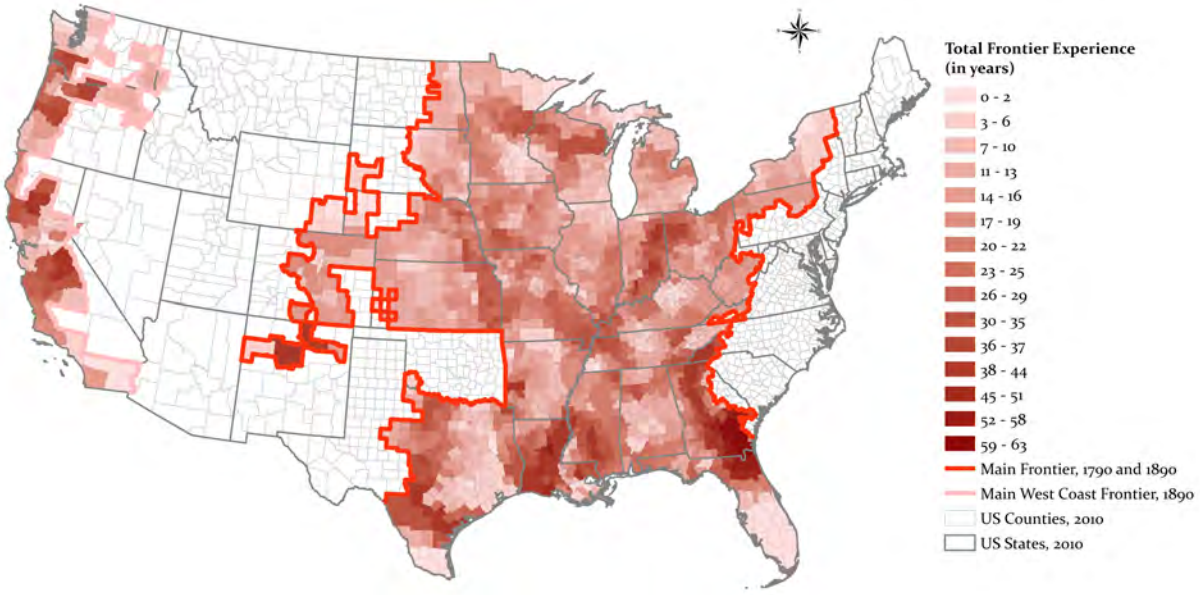
Figures

Figure 1: The Evolution of the Frontier, 1790 to 1890



Notes: The frontier lines demarcate the contour of counties with U.S. population density below and above 2 people per square mile. We exclude smaller "island frontiers" in the interior and contour line segments less than 500 km. Native land demarcation is based on shapefiles of land transfers digitized by Claudio Saunt from an 1899 publication of the Bureau of American Ethnology supervised by Charles C. Royce (see the "Invasion of America" project at https://usg.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=eb6ca76e008543a89349ff2517db47e6).

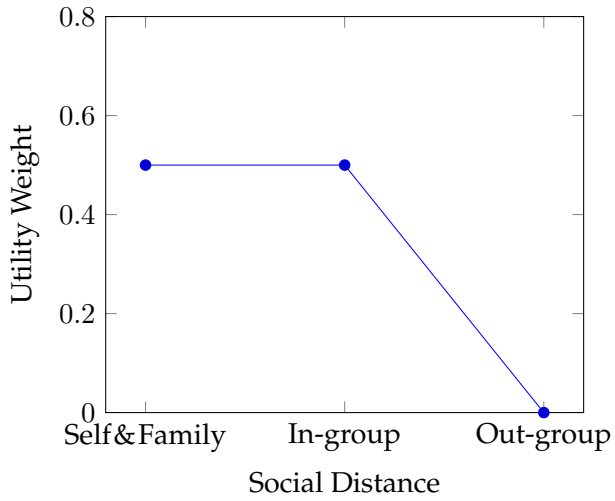
Figure 2: Total Frontier Experience, 1790 to 1890



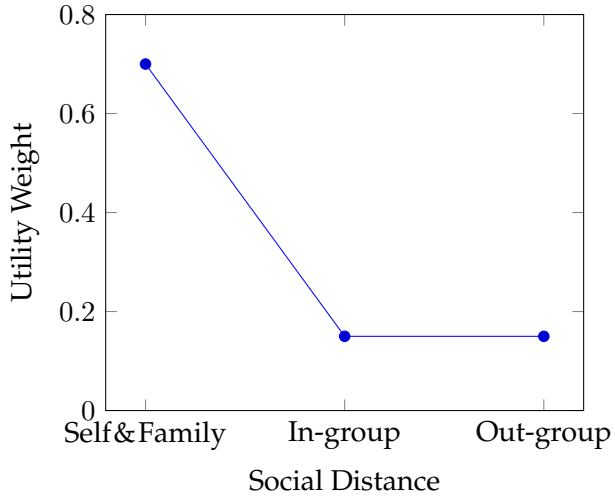
Notes: Total frontier experience is the total number of years the county was within 100 km of the frontier line and its population density was below 6 people per square mile, between 1790–1890. The white areas to the east of the 1790 main frontier line are counties for which we do not know frontier history given the lack of data before 1790. The white areas to the west are beyond the 1890 frontier line. This figure is reproduced from Figure 3 in Bazzi et al. (2020).

Figure 3: Configurations of Individualism and Moral Universalism

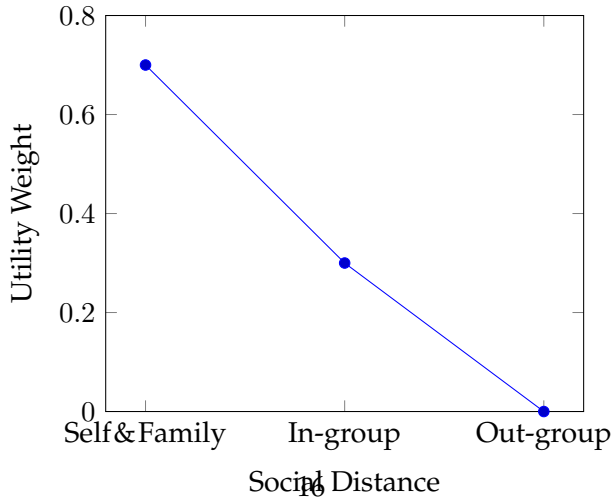
(a) Particularistic Collectivism (e.g., Kinship-based Societies)



(b) Universalistic Individualism (e.g., WEIRD)



(c) Particularistic Individualism (e.g., Frontier Culture)



Notes: This figure depicts three different configurations of utility weights in a utility function displaying other-regarding preferences three categories with increasing social distance: self and family; in-group; out-group.

Figure 5: Cumulative Distribution of Social Connections Shares as a Function of Distance

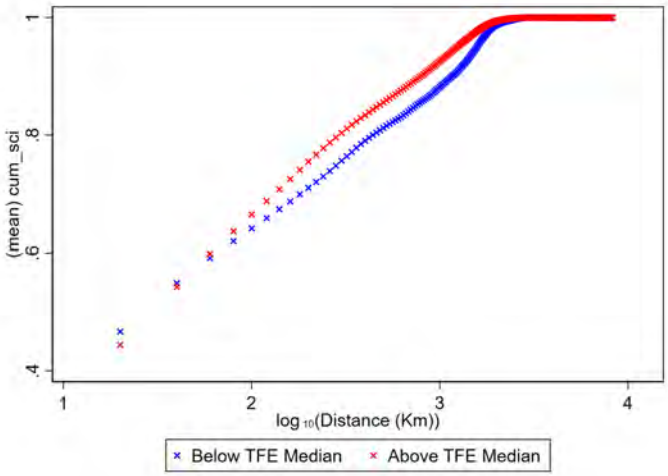
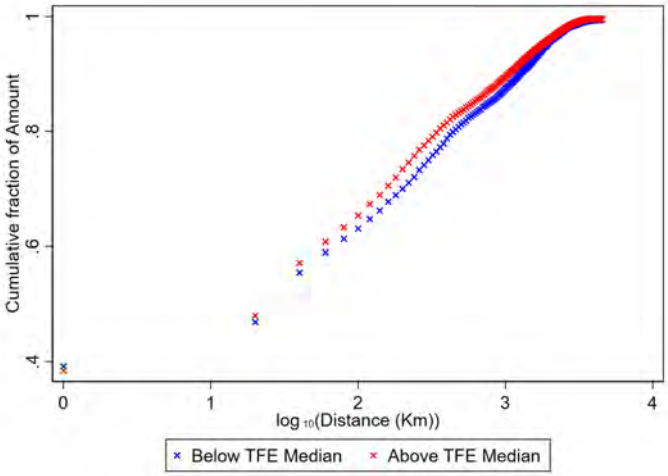


Figure 6: Cumulative Distribution of Donations as a Function of Distance



Tables

Table 1: Moral Universalism

Dep.Var.:	Universalist vs Communal Moral Values	
	(1)	(2)
TFE (std.)	-0.0661 (0.0275)** [0.0340]*	-0.0639 (0.0277)** [0.0345]*
State FE	Yes	Yes
Geo. Controls	No	Yes
N. Neighbors FE	No	Yes
Observations	1,483	1,482
R-squared	0.076	0.094

Notes: Robust standard errors are reported in parenthesis, and Conley standard errors with a distance cutoff of 200km are reported in square brackets. *** Significant at the 1 percent level. **Significant at the 5 percent level. *Significant at the 10 percent level.

Table 2: Frontier History and Opposition to (Federal/State) Government Taxes

	Oppose Federal Spending		Oppose State Spending		Opposition to Federal vs State Spending	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Frontier History	2.376 (0.431)*** [0.426]***	1.666 (0.388)*** [0.390]***	0.866 (0.267)*** [0.293]***	0.187 (0.229)** [0.223]**	1.395 (0.373)*** [0.403]***	1.019 (0.341)*** [0.357]***
Geo. Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Ind. Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N. Neighbors FE	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	73,581	73,517	78,099	77,942	73,581	73,517
R-squared	0.005	0.033	0.005	0.020	0.003	0.024

Notes: Robust standard errors are reported in parenthesis, and Conley standard errors with a distance cutoff of 200km are reported in square brackets. *** Significant at the 1 percent level. **Significant at the 5 percent level. *Significant at the 10 percent level.

Table 3: Localism in Donations

	Amount donated per 1000 hab								
	to Self			to Neighbors			to Others		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
TFE (std.)	-17.40	-18.23	-3.294	-9.490	-9.718	-5.849	-20.26	-18.97	-10.97
	(5.309)***	(5.366)***	(5.004)	(2.952)***	(2.798)***	(2.761)**	(4.570)***	(4.573)***	(4.561)**
	[7.713]	[5.684]***	[5.076]	[3.036]	[3.049]***	[2.911]**	[5.237]***	[5.896]***	[6.175]*
County Population	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Geo. Controls	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N. Neighbors FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,040	2,036	2,036	2,040	2,036	2,036	2,040	2,036	2,036
R-squared	0.071	0.090	0.156	0.050	0.080	0.111	0.082	0.098	0.133

Notes: Robust standard errors are reported in parenthesis, and Conley standard errors with a distance cutoff of 200km are reported in square brackets. *** Significant at the 1 percent level. **Significant at the 5 percent level. *Significant at the 10 percent level.

Table 4: Localism in Social Connectedness

	Share of Normalized Connections with								
	w/same county			w/neighboring counties			w/other Counties		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
TFE (std.)	2.990	3.256	0.677	1.012	0.741	0.312	-4.002	-3.997	-0.989
	(0.426)***	(0.418)***	(0.273)**	(0.191)***	(0.182)***	(0.180)*	(0.441)***	(0.437)***	(0.240)***
	[0.748]**	[0.579]***	[0.348]*	[0.383]***	[0.278]***	[0.241]	[0.931]***	[0.731]***	[0.331]***
County Population	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Geo. Controls	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N. Neighbors FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,040	2,036	2,036	2,040	2,036	2,036	2,040	2,036	2,036
R-squared	0.080	0.163	0.624	0.204	0.284	0.338	0.152	0.218	0.752

Notes: Robust standard errors are reported in parenthesis, and Conley standard errors with a distance cutoff of 200km are reported in square brackets. *** Significant at the 1 percent level. **Significant at the 5 percent level. *Significant at the 10 percent level.

Table 5: Geographic Elasticity of Donations

	Number of Donations			Amount		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Geo. Distance (log)	-0.84***	-0.82***		-0.90***	-0.87***	
	(0.02)	(0.02)		(0.02)	(0.02)	
Above TFE Median × Geo. Distance (log)		-0.18***	-0.11***		-0.22***	-0.14***
		(0.03)	(0.03)		(0.04)	(0.02)
Donor County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
School County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE × GeoDistance	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Observations	9076626	9076626	9076626	9076626	9076626	9076626

Notes: Robust standard errors are reported in parenthesis, and Conley standard errors with a distance cutoff of 200km are reported in square brackets. *** Significant at the 1 percent level. **Significant at the 5 percent level. *Significant at the 10 percent level.

Table 6: Geographic Elasticity of Social Connections

	Normalized Connections		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Geo. Distance (log)	-1.92***	-1.89***	
	(0.01)	(0.02)	
Above TFE Median × Geo. Distance (log)		-0.06***	-0.04***
		(0.02)	(0.01)
County i FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
County j FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE × GeoDistance	No	No	Yes
N. Neighbors FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	4161600	4161600	4161600
R-squared	0.629	0.629	0.643

Notes: Robust standard errors are reported in parenthesis, and Conley standard errors with a distance cutoff of 200km are reported in square brackets. *** Significant at the 1 percent level. **Significant at the 5 percent level. *Significant at the 10 percent level.

Table 7: Assortative Matching in Social Connections

	Normalized Connections		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
TFE Distance (log)	-0.01***	-0.00**	-0.01***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Geo. Distance (log)	-1.92***	-1.89***	
	(0.01)	(0.02)	
Above TFE Median $\times$ Geo. Distance (log)		-0.06***	-0.04***
		(0.02)	(0.01)
County i FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
County j FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE $\times$ GeoDistance	No	No	Yes
N. Neighbors FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	4161600	4161600	4161600
R-squared	0.629	0.629	0.643

Notes: Robust standard errors are reported in parenthesis, and Conley standard errors with a distance cutoff of 200km are reported in square brackets. *** Significant at the 1 percent level. **Significant at the 5 percent level. *Significant at the 10 percent level.

Appendix Tables

Table A.1: Basic Patterns in Donations

	Donations Per 1000 hab			Donors Per 1000 hab			Amount Donated Per 1000 hab		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
TFE (std.)	-0.855	-0.873	-0.463	-0.495	-0.490	-0.239	-49.10	-49.00	-21.53
	(0.311)***	(0.312)***	(0.309)	(0.103)***	(0.102)***	(0.0971)**	(9.409)***	(9.305)***	(8.633)**
	[0.288]	[0.386]**	[0.397]	[0.141]***	[0.143]***	[0.137]*	[13.26]**	[11.54]***	[11.06]*
County Population	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Geo. Controls	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N. Neighbors FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,040	2,036	2,036	2,040	2,036	2,036	2,040	2,036	2,036
R-squared	0.032	0.040	0.056	0.084	0.102	0.165	0.090	0.103	0.186

Notes: Robust standard errors are reported in parenthesis, and Conley standard errors with a distance cutoff of 200km are reported in square brackets. *** Significant at the 1 percent level. **Significant at the 5 percent level. *Significant at the 10 percent level.

Table A.2: Assortative Matching in Donations

	Number of Donations			Amount		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
TFE Distance (log)	-0.11***	-0.06**	-0.06**	-0.15***	-0.09**	-0.08**
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Geo. Distance (log)	-0.89***	-0.87***		-0.92***	-0.90***	
	(0.03)	(0.03)		(0.03)	(0.03)	
Above TFE Median × Geo. Distance (log)		-0.12***	-0.12***		-0.14***	-0.15***
		(0.03)	(0.02)		(0.04)	(0.02)
Donor County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
School County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE × GeoDistance	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Observations	3926115	3926115	3926115	3926115	3926115	3926115

Notes: Robust standard errors are reported in parenthesis, and Conley standard errors with a distance cutoff of 200km are reported in square brackets. *** Significant at the 1 percent level. **Significant at the 5 percent level. *Significant at the 10 percent level.