ECONOMIC AND OTHER UNDERLYING REASONS FOR DONALD TRUMP'S SUPPORT IN THE AMERICAN MIDWEST

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ABSTRACT

This article summarizes the main results of my Fulbright pre-doctoral research conducted in the United States in 2023. I examined the reasons for the support of Donald Trump in the American Midwest in the state of Iowa. My findings show that there is a combination of factors that explain the support, with economic factors playing a fundamental role.

Keywords: Donald Trump • Iowa • American Midwest • unemployment • poverty

BACKGROUND

With many uncertainties, I left the flourishing Iberian Peninsula's Spring to encounter the (fortunately) last scourges of Iowa City's cold winter in 2023. The reason was simple: conduct a six-month pre-doctoral stay funded by the Fulbright Commission at the Department of Political Sciences of the University of Iowa. Initially, I had various concerns: such as finding accommodation in the middle of an academic year in a city of just over 60,000 inhabitants, and the fear of cultural shock compounded by my somewhat rusty English.

I left my comfort zone to complete my doctoral thesis, which analyzes economic issues and support for ultranationalist parties, with a study of the reasons for supporting Donald Trump's candidacy in the American Midwest. This study was going to take the state of Iowa as a reference during the electoral processes of 2016 and 2020. I still remember the surprise when I received an email on a Friday afternoon on the eve of a long weekend confirming my selection for a pre-doctoral stay. But the surprise dissipated during the Orientation Days held in Madrid (Spain) in June 2022, where I had the opportunity to meet my fellow program members.

INTRODUCTION: NOT JUST A SIMPLE *FLYOVER STATE*

But why did I choose Iowa for my pre-doctoral stay? This was a question I received countless times before starting a long trip that included two flights and as many bus rides from home. All this to get to a state often referred to as a *flyover state*. The answer was clear: beyond the prestige of the University of Iowa, and the research excellence of Professor Frederick Solt (my academic supervisor at that institution), the choice of Iowa was driven by the fact that it is something much more than a simple *flyover state*.

Iowa is a benchmark state in US politics. Despite its small size, it is the state where the Republican Party's caucus begins, making it a reliable gauge for forecasting the outcome of the political process. In the 2016 elections, Iowa stands out as the state where a significant number of counties switched to supporting the Republican Party after supporting the Democratic Party in 2012. It was the state that shifted the most from Democratic Party in 2012 (with +5.8%) to the Republican Party (by +9.4% in 2016). Considered a swing state together with Florida, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, Iowa has also become a Republican state. This backed by the lack of mentions of Iowa by Donald Trump in all the electoral debates held during the 2020 campaign and only being mentioned once by Joe Biden, indicating its status as a Republican state no longer contested in presidential elections.

While population growth is often seen as a sign of regional prosperity, Iowa is characterized by the lowest population growth over the past several decades. This pattern of demographic change is a constant in northern states versus growth in southern and western states. In fact, Iowa's population growth has been half of the national average over the past twenty years, up to four, five, and seven times lower than states in the South and West (such as Arizona, Nevada, Texas, and Utah). As a direct consequence of these changes, Iowa has seen a decrease in its congressional representation. Between 1972 and 2020, Iowa lost two members of congress, decreasing from 6 to 4. In comparison, other states have experienced a significant increase in congressional representation. California gained 10 members of congress while Florida and Texas gained 12. Nevada for instance experienced a 300% rise (from 1 to 4 congressmen), Arizona increased by 125% (from 4 to 9), and Utah doubled its representation from 2 to 4 during the period spanning from 1972 to 2020.

Research Findings

Thanks to the countless trips within the United States to learn first-hand insights into American reality, dispel prejudice, and build the hypotheses of the research, I was able to emerge some key conclusions. There is an amalgam of reasons behind the support for the candidacy of Donald Trump in the state of Iowa during the US presidential elections in the years 2016 and 2020.

One of the main findings is that educational level is a factor impacting voting tendencies. In other words, counties with the highest percentage of the population having completed higher education did not vote for Donald Trump. This finding is not surprising considering the social reality in Iowa City, where the University of Iowa is located. Specifically, Johnson County, where the Iowa City is located, voted only 27.34% for Donald Trump's 2020 candidacy (similar percentage in 2016) while the state backed Donald Trump in 2020 by 53.09% (51.15% in 2016). This is also related to other counties with a high percentage of the population with higher education.

Other findings of the research highlight that economic conditions influenced support for Donald Trump's candidacy in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. Particularly, higher levels of unemployment and increased poverty were reasons to support the Republican Party candidate, especially in 2016, in Iowa as a representative state of the American Midwest. This result is not surprising when comparing the lack of protection against unemployment and economic vulnerability provided by the state of Iowa with the reality in Western Europe. In situations of economic vulnerability, voters lean toward candidates offering messianic solutions.

The previous support for the Republican Party demonstrates its strong electoral base regardless of whether the candidate was Donald Trump or any other. This is not surprising considering the partisan loyalty in the two-party electoral system in the United States. Furthermore, population density, whether urban or not, influences voting patterns. This finding aligns with voting results observed in the five Iowa counties with the lowest support for Donald Trump, both in 2020 and in 2016. These counties are Johnson, Story, Polk, Linn, and Black Hawk, which are among the ten most populated counties in Iowa. Similarly, at the national level, counties with less than 15,000 inhabitants overwhelmingly favored Donald Trump's candidacy, underscoring a rural-urban divide in political preferences. Paradoxically, because of stringent immigration policies proposed by Donald Trump, a high percentage of immigrant population tends to correlate with a lower support for Donald Trump. This result shows the validity of the contact theory. According to this phenomenon, contact with the immigrant reduces the possibility of perceiving the immigrant as a threat. Therefore, areas with higher percentages of immigrants generate lower endorsements for a candidate like Donald Trump in the United States or, at least, in the state of Iowa.

Beyond the reasons for supporting Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020, the research also focused on analyzing the factors contributing to the increase in electoral support for the Republican Party in the 2012-2020 period. That is, how Iowa has gone from being considered a historical *swing state* to becoming a Republican state. In 2012, Barack Obama received an electoral support of 52.1% against 46.5% received by his Republican challenger Mitt Romney. However, in 2016 and 2020, the electoral landscape changed significantly towards a clear support for Donald Trump by 9.41% (8.2% in 2020). In 2016, Iowa became the state where the shift from supporting the Democratic Party in 2012 to supporting the Republican Party was most pronounced.

In conclusion, education, economic conditions and population density emerge as fundamental factors in rejecting Donald Trump's candidacy. These insights underscore the intricate impact of these factors in shaping Iowa's electoral outcomes. To reach such results, several econometric models have

been used that take as the dependent variable the electoral support for Donald Trump in 2020, 2016, as well as the electoral increase of the Republican Party in the period 2020-2012, in each of the 99 counties that make up the state of Iowa. As explanatory variables, economic indexes (such as the level of unemployment, GDP, or the percentage of population living below the poverty line) and sociodemographic indicators (such as the rurality of the county, the educational level, the percentage of immigrant population, the number of inhabitants or the percentage of elderly population) have been included. This level of disaggregation is achieved thanks to the availability of data provided by the databases of the US Census Bureau, US Bureau of Labor Statistics, and US Bureau of Economic Analysis.

CONCLUSIONS: IT IS NOT ONLY BAD NEWS

Where ultranationalism has come to widespread globally, it has shown itself to be an isolationist policy. An example of this is the withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. In addition, the different ultranationalist parties existing globally have the rejection of immigration as their backbone, taking it as a scapegoat for the current problems affecting Western societies. This rejection of the globalization process by ultranationalism resembles the English Luddism of the 19th century, but this time replacing industrial looms and spinning machineries with globalization.

Comparing the political reality in Western Europe with the United States, the multiparty system existing in the first case makes possible the emergence of ultranationalist parties such as *Alternative für Deutschland* (Germany), *Chega* (Portugal) or *Rassemblement National* (France). However, the existing bipartisanship in the US political system has meant that Donald Trump's ultranationalist candidacy has only been able to be conceived through one of the parties forming part of the system without the latter being ultranationalist.

Beyond attributing the rise of *Trumpism* to its voter base (62,984,829 and 74,223,251 citizens in 2016 and 2020, respectively), it is evident that socioeconomic reasons play a significant role in the electoral success of ultranationalism in the United States. Addressing these issues is crucial, not only to prevent further electoral successes in the US but also to counter the growing influence of ultranationalist parties whether in the US or in Western Europe. Although improving access to higher education is a long-term task, a good start should be its universalization. Especially for the most economically vulnerable people so that access is not an insurmountable barrier. In addition, the results suggest that less importance should be given to variations in Gross Domestic Product than to the management of the country's wealth distribution, as research shows that is not a determining factor in understanding Trump's support in Iowa. The management carried out in the last decades has turned the country into an extraordinarily unequal society with homeless camps in every medium and large city.

Beyond controversies surrounding Donald Trump's access to the presidency in 2017, including the infamous events that took place in January 2021 on Capitol Hill and his controversial immigration policies, there is also some good news. His tenure spurred an increased voter turnout in the 2020 presidential election with growing citizen awareness of the need for political engagement. In fact, 2020 saw the highest voter turnout since 1960 and the highest number of voters in US history. However, it must be said that in the last presidential election many states articulated a series of measures to facilitate voting by mail to avoid large crowds in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

PERSONAL REMARKS

On a personal level, the academic stay has allowed to learn first-hand insights about American culture and to improve my research on the reasons behind the global rise of ultranationalist parties. Specifically, most of the studies carried out on this topic in Western Europe are based on including variables related to globalization and from an individual perspective in the explanatory models. Contact with other academic fields, thanks to the Fulbright stay, has also encouraged the inclusion of new explanatory variables such as rurality, educational level or population density to better understand the phenomenon under study. Additionally, I had the opportunity to attend as a listener to my supervisor's classes to improve my skills as a junior lecturer. Ten months after the end of the Fulbright stay at the University of Iowa, I am still very conscious of the knowledge I learned during my stay. First, to the best of my ability, I have tried to apply the teaching skills I learned from my supervisor during his classes. For example, the stay has enabled me to stretch myself in a cross-cultural and global manner. In the same way, I am directing a course at the University of Extremadura focused on the first steps to be taken in predoctoral research in Social Sciences. This course highlights not only knowledge learned during my stay but also information on how to apply for a Fulbright grant.

The academic stay has allowed me to learn first-hand insights about American culture and to improve my research on the reasons behind the global rise of ultranationalist parties

On an even more personal level, the stay allowed me to learn first-hand insights about the conservation of natural heritage in the United States. I was also very fortunate to have the opportunity to spend time in Iowa. A state often referred to as a *flyover state*. The fact of having lived in this state has allowed me to have a complementary version to the one commonly narrated in the European media, often focused on the coastal states. Having this more complete vision, I was able to enrich my knowledge of the country and, in general, of the world.

Finally, the stay allowed me to understand the American political system and to be able to compare it with the Spanish and European systems. Beyond simply demonizing the Donald Trump voter, as commonly tends to be done from the European media, the stay has enabled me on a personal (and academic) level to learn about the underlying reasons for such support. As the stay took place one year before the elections of the European Parliament and the US presidential elections, the low voter turnout in the recent 2024 European elections, and the lack of media attention paid to this event, show again how distant a true European project remains. However, a common feature on both sides of the Atlantic is the success of ultranationalist movements. In the recent elections of the European Parliament, ultranationalism was the most voted political force in Austria, Belgium, France, and Italy. Ultranationalism again in the United States? This coming November 5th, 2024 will tell. For the time being, polls show a technical tie.

Notes

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Presentation carried out in the department during the last week of the stay showing the main results achieved during the stay.

BIOGRAPHY

Javier Matamoros-Becerra is pursuing his PhD on International Economics at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of the University of Extremadura (Spain) with an estimated dissertation date in 2024. He is currently in his fourth academic year as a professor at the same institution. He carried out a predoctoral stay funded by the Fulbright Commission at the University of Iowa for 6 months (April - September 2023). He can be contacted at jmatamorosbecerra@unex.es