

Golfing with Trump: Social capital, decline, inequality and the growth of populism in the US

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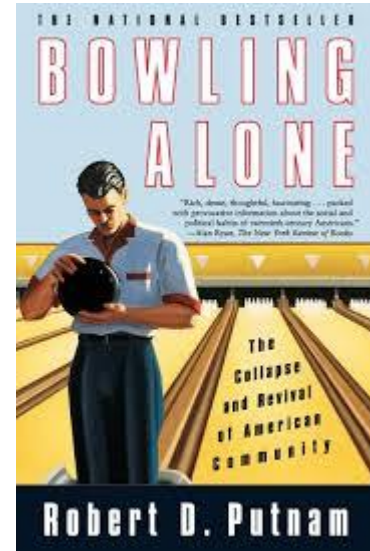


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The prediction

Putnam and Bowling alone

- In 2000 Robert Putnam wrote *Bowling Alone*



Bowling alone as a sign of civic disengagement

- ***Bowling alone* was a metaphor for the decline in civic engagement and political participation – and in all forms of social capital – that had become the trend since the 1960s**
 - Americans were increasingly bowling alone because bowling clubs and bowling leagues were disappearing



- **There was wane in all other sorts of civic engagement and social trust:**
 - Political participation, voter turnout, newspaper readership, personal letter writing, or union membership, to church attendance, club meetings, social visiting, card playing, charitable giving, or volunteering

Inequality, social capital decline & democracy

- **This happened in parallel to a rise in interpersonal inequality**
 - “The timing of the two trends is striking: Sometime around 1965–70 America reversed course and started becoming both less just economically and less well connected socially and politically.” (Putnam, 2000: 359)



- **Inequality and social capital combined the biggest threat to democracy**
 - “Our economy, our democracy, and even our health and happiness depend on adequate stocks of social capital.” (Putnam, 28).

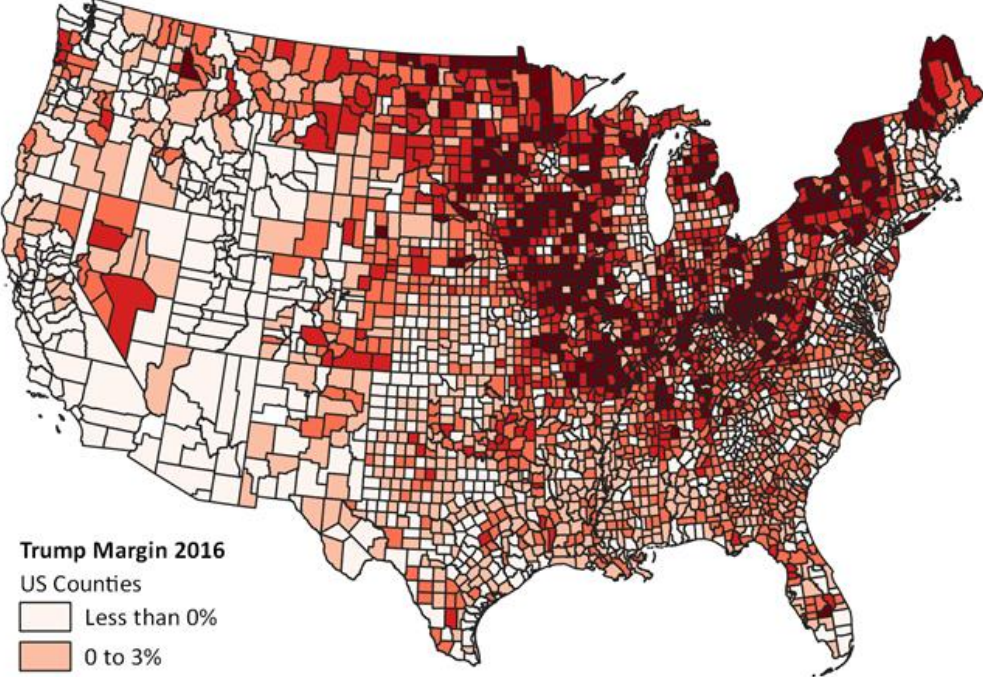
Was Putnam right?

- **There was, indeed, a threat to US democratic health**
- **But it may not have come from:**
 - Decline in social capital
 - Growth of interpersonal inequality (at least, at the local level)
 - Or their combination
- **But from the long-term economic and demographic decline of American towns and rural areas**
 - The related rise in interterritorial inequality
 - And its combination with strong – not weaker – social capital
- **Leading to a geography of discontent (McCann), a politics of resentment (Cramer), and to the revenge of the ‘places that don’t matter’ (Rodríguez-Pose)**

Prediction fulfilled

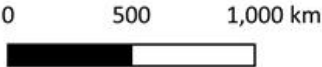
Swing to Donald Trump

2016

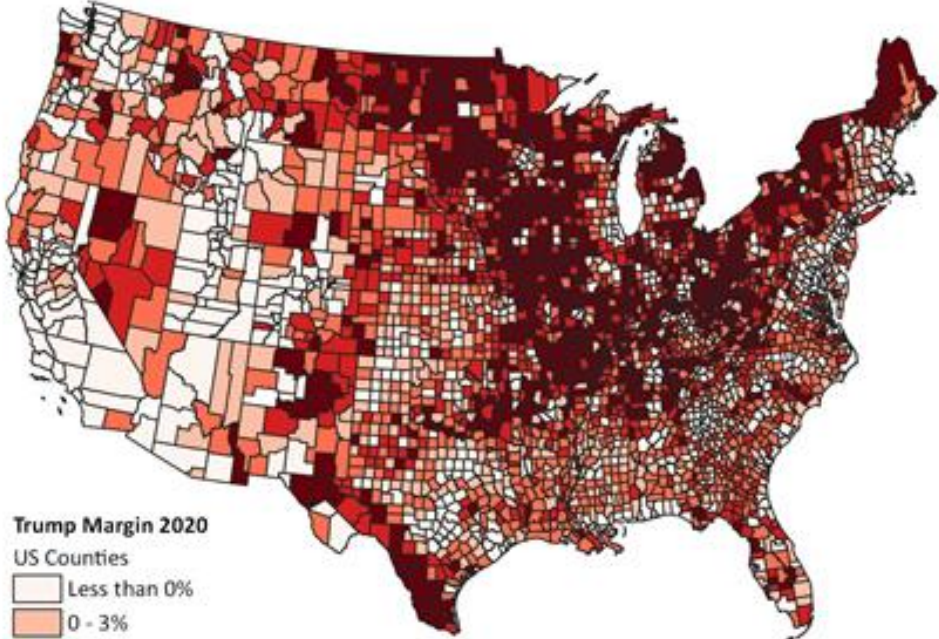


Trump Margin 2016
US Counties

- Less than 0%
- 0 to 3%
- 3 to 6%
- 6 to 9%
- More than 9%



2020

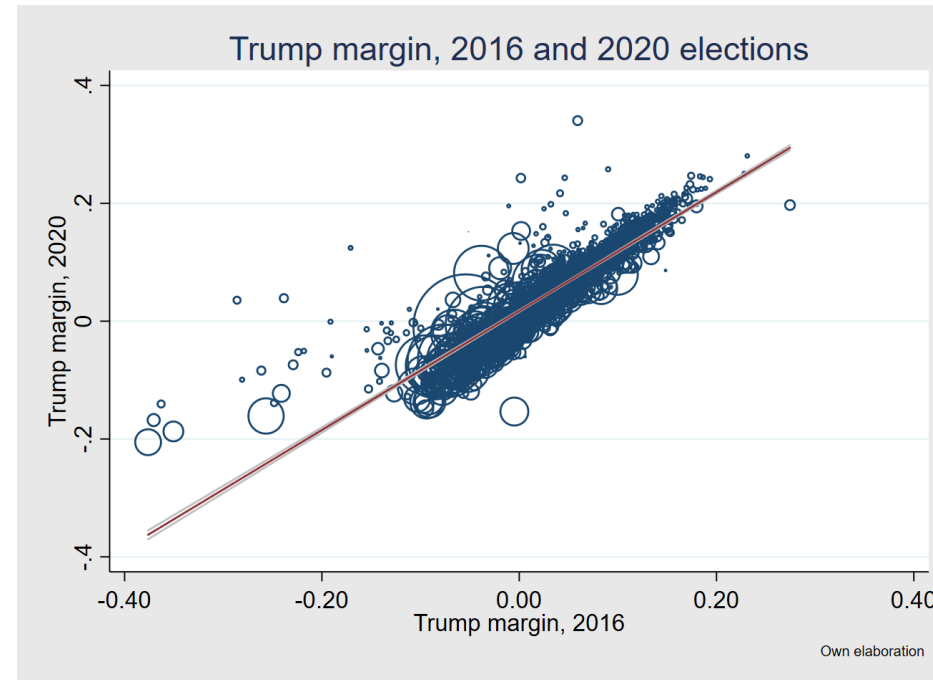


Trump Margin 2020
US Counties

- Less than 0%
- 0 - 3%
- 3 - 6%
- 6 - 9%
- More than 9%



Correlation in the swing to Donald Trump



Why?

Social capital

- **Erosion of social capital**

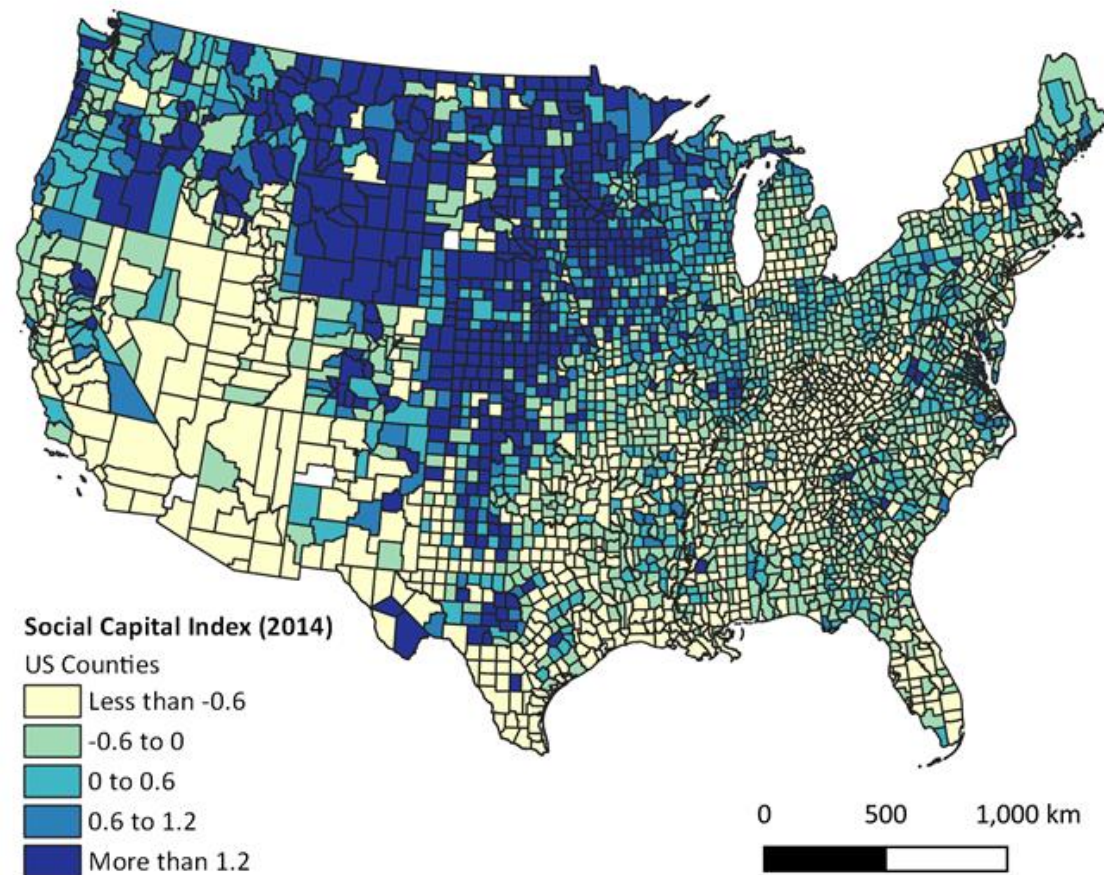
- “Without at first noticing, [Americans] have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.” (Putnam, 27)
- “Social capital, the evidence increasingly suggests, strengthens our better, more expansive selves.” (Putnam, 394)

- **“The performance of our democratic institutions depends in measurable ways upon social capital” (Putnam, 394)**

- “Nowhere is the need to restore connectedness, trust, and civic engagement clearer than in the now often empty public forums of our democracy (Putnam, 412)

Social capital

Social capital in 2014

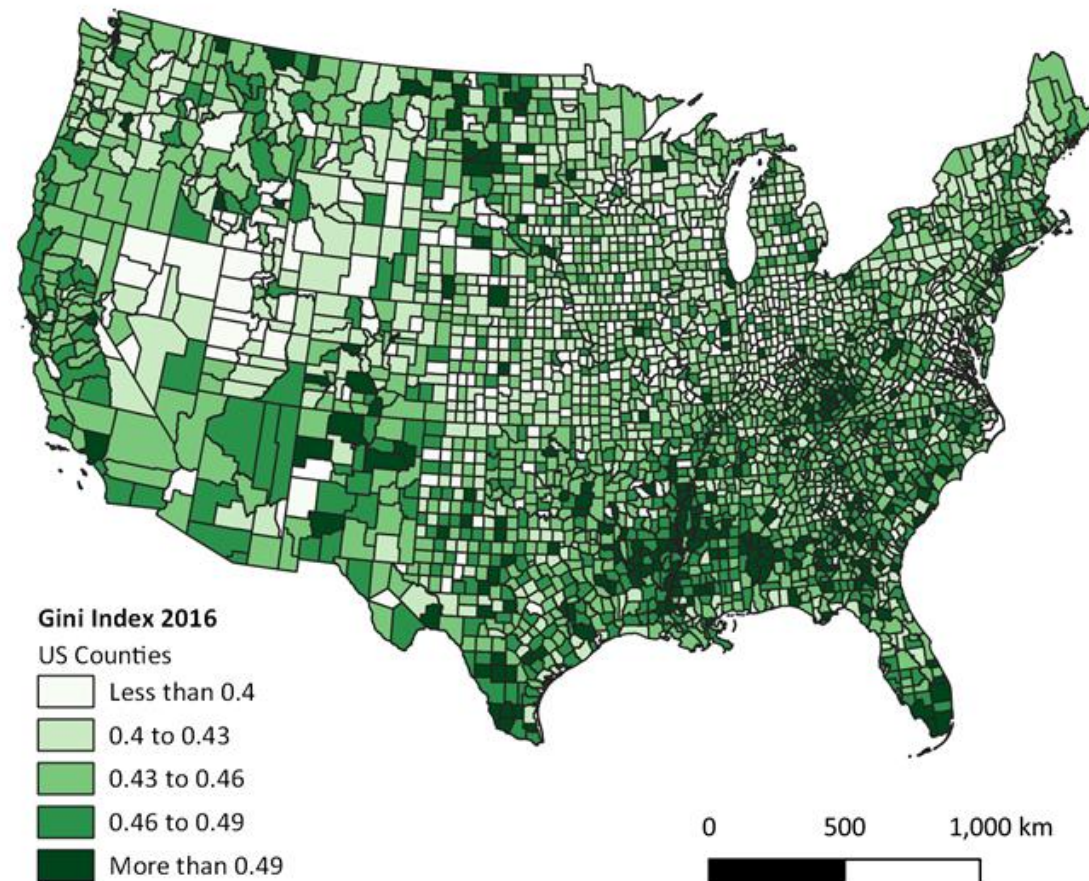


Interpersonal inequality

- **Wealth polarisation in American society**
 - “By the end of the twentieth century the gap between rich and poor in the United States had been increasing for nearly three decades, the longest sustained increase in inequality in at least a century” (Putnam, 359)
 - Work of Raj Chetty
 - But also Piketty and Saez, 2014; Milanovic, 2016; Dorling, 2019
 - Also increasing work on populism:
 - Economic insecurity (Guiso et al., 2017)
 - Social status by vulnerable individuals (Gidron and Hall, 2017)
- **People left behind, at risk of falling into poverty**
 - (O’Connor, 2017; Eichengreen, 2018; Rodrik, 2018; Pastor and Veronesi, 2018)
- **Rejection of the status quo and an erosion of democratic institutions, leading to nativism and plutocracy (Milanovic, 2016)**

Interpersonal inequality

Interpersonal inequality 2017



Combination of both

- Decline in social capital and rising inequality go hand in hand
- “The American states with the highest levels of social capital are precisely the states most characterized by economic and civic equality.” (Putnam, 359)
- “There is every reason to think that the twin master trends of our time—less equality, less engagement—reinforce one another. Thus, efforts to strengthen social capital should go hand in hand with efforts to increase equality.” (Putnam, 359)



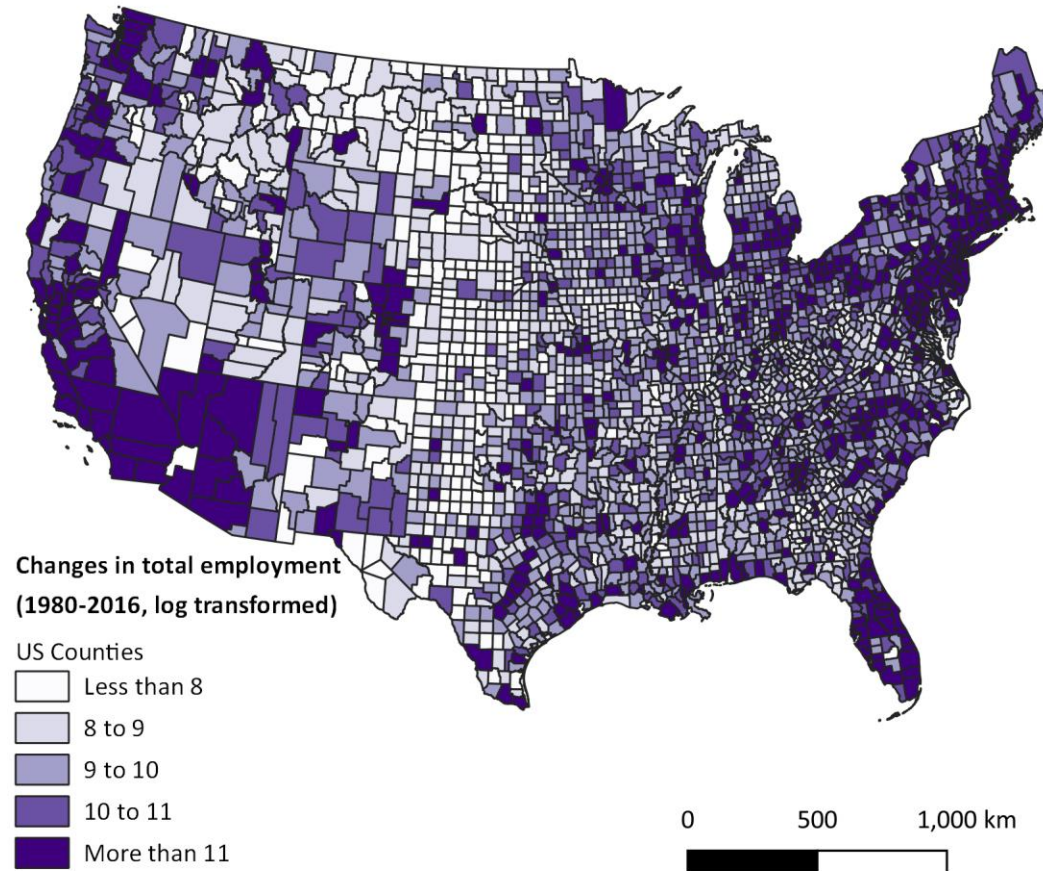
Economic and demographic decline

- **Putnam's work is all about all sorts of declines.**
 - Decline in social capital
 - Civic engagement
 - Political participation
 - Voter turnout
 - Newspaper reading, personal letter writing
 - Union membership, church attendance, club meetings, social visiting, card playing, charitable giving, volunteering, social trust.
- **Yet, one type of decline is conspicuously absent: that of midtown and rural America**
- **This type of decline at the root of the reaction at the ballot box**
 - In the UK (McCann)
 - Europe (Dijkstra et al.)
 - US (Cramer; Rodden)



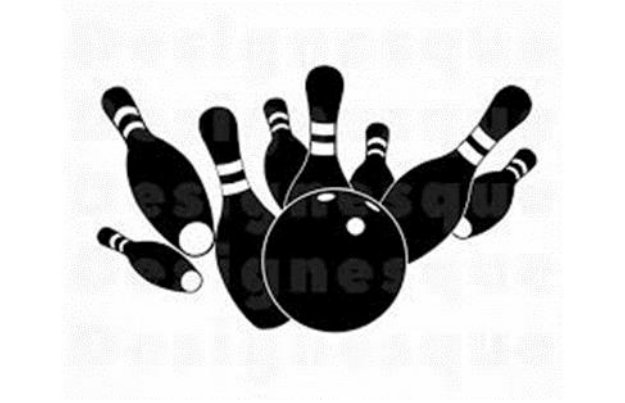
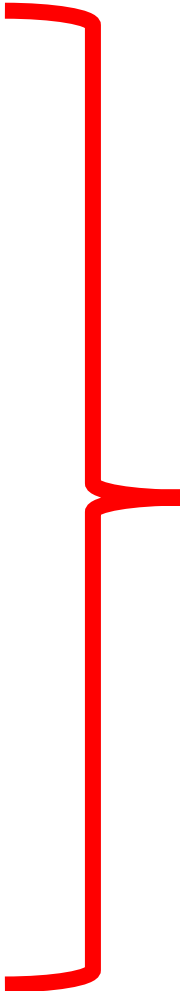
Long-term decline

Employment change 1980-2016



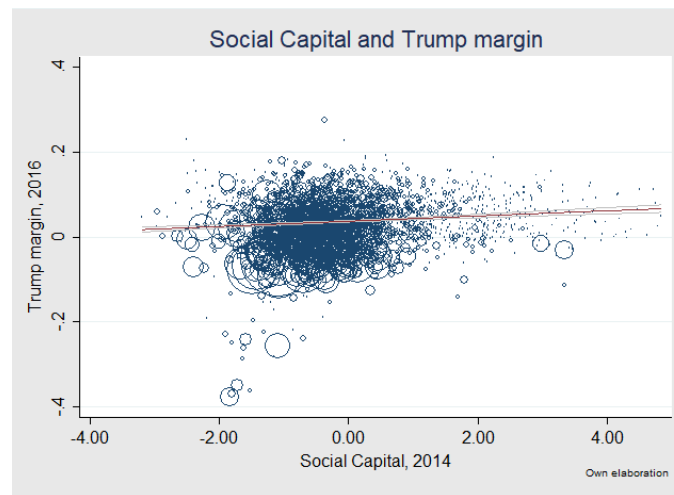
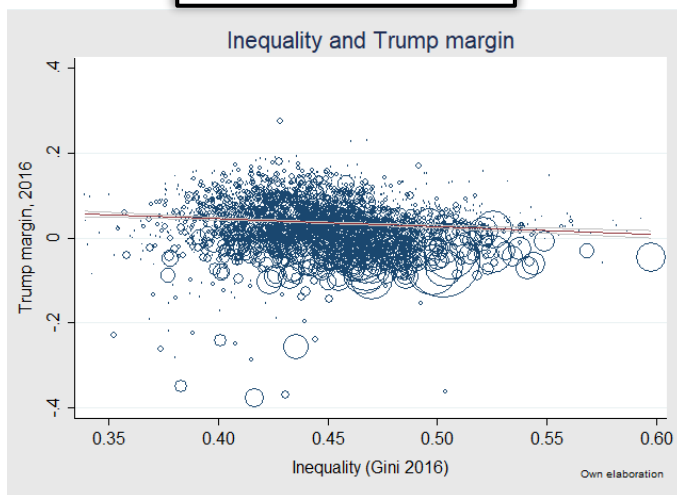
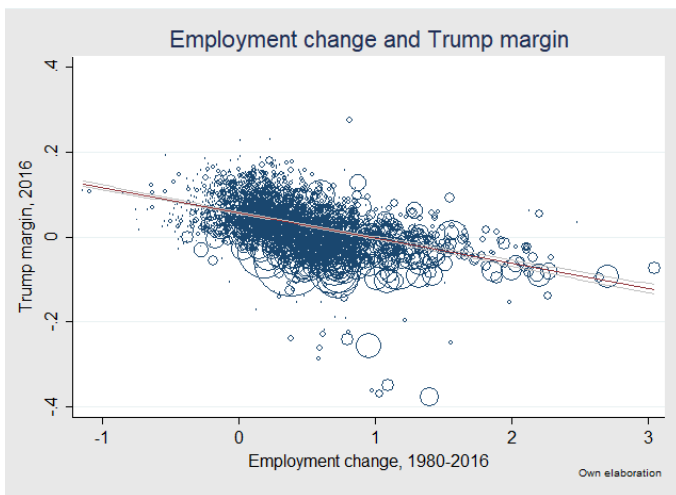
The model

The model

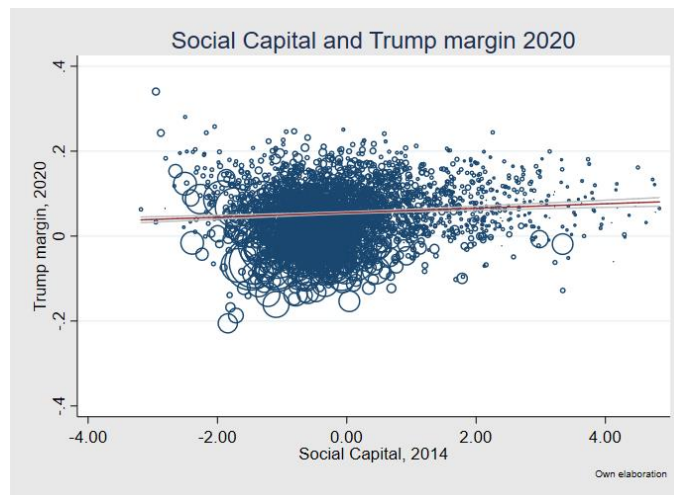
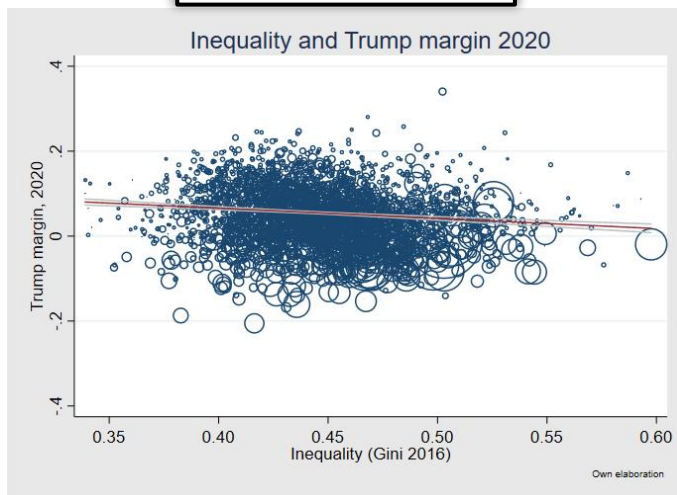
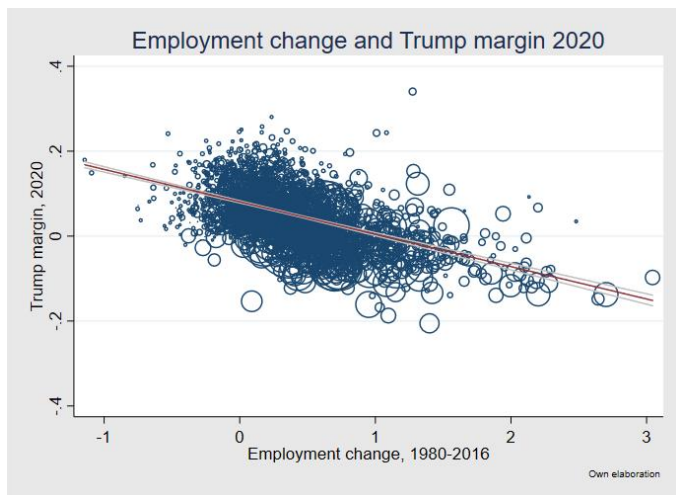


Trump margin and variables of interest

2016 election

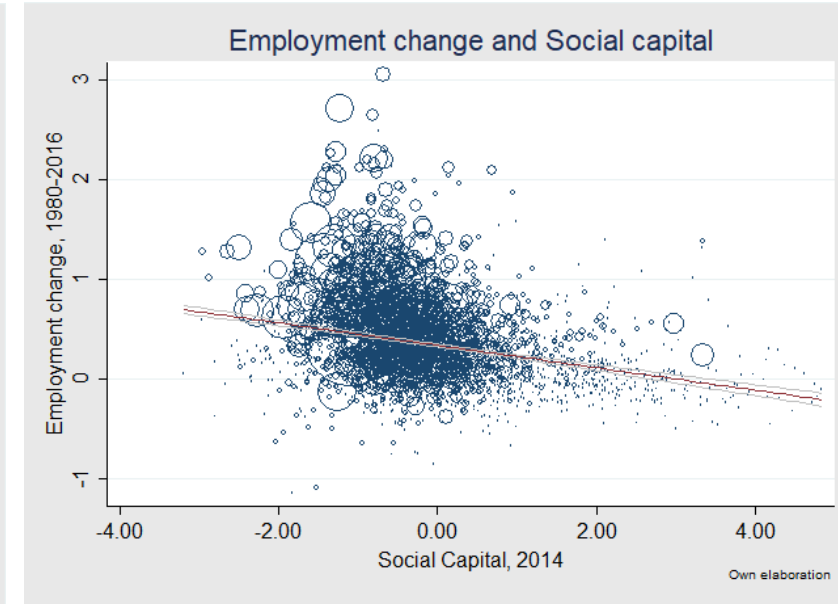
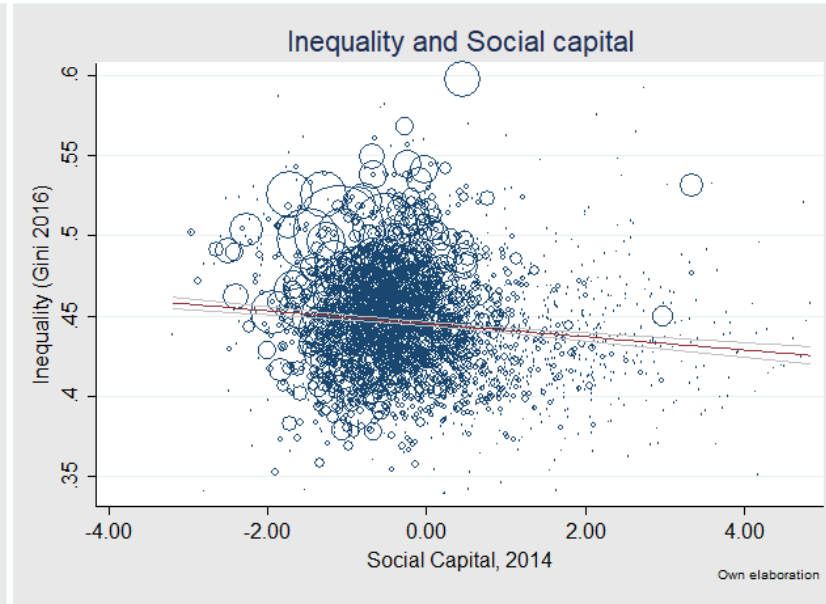
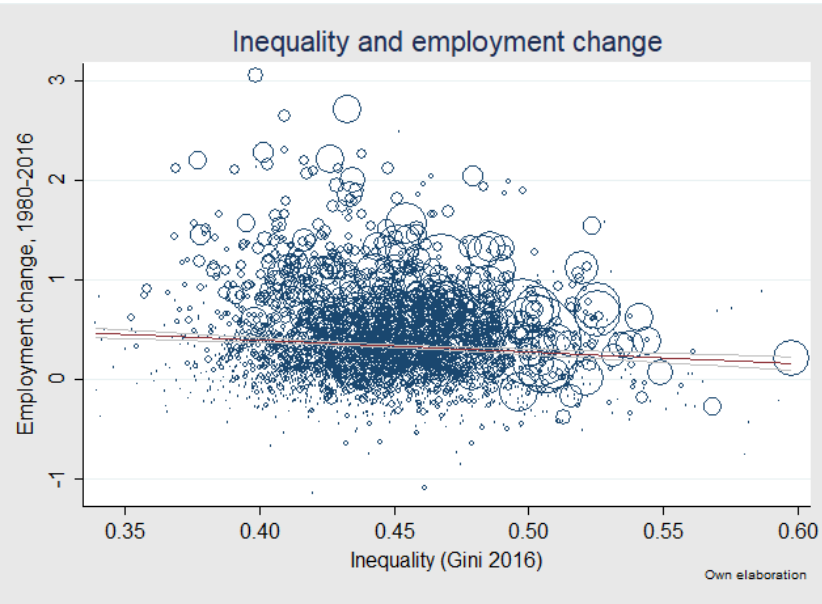


2020 election



Note: the population of the county is represented by the size of the circle.

Correlations between variables of interest



Results

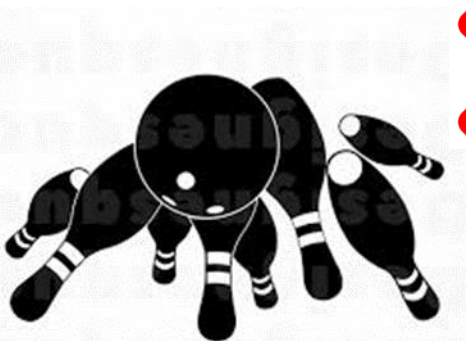
Basic model



2016



2020



2016



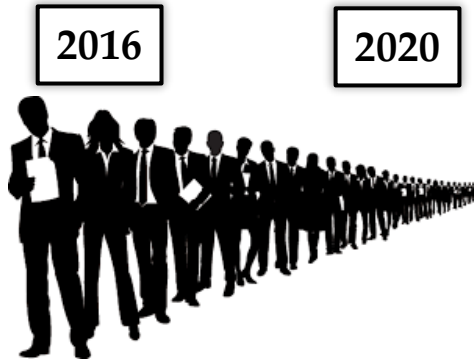
2020



Different types of decline

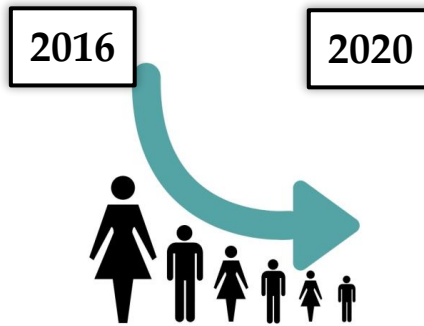


Change over time



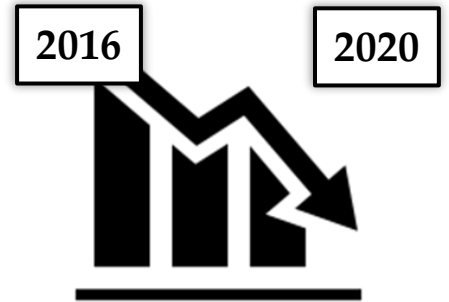
2016

2020



2016

2020



2016

2020

1970s
1980s
1990s
2000s
2010s

✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	+
✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	+	+
✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	+
✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	+
✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗

Conclusion

Taking stock

- It is the long-term economic and demographic decline of the tightly American community that drove the swing to Trump and is driving populism
- This decline has created a malaise that goes well beyond the crisis and that is increasingly manifesting itself at the ballot box
- Declining, but still rather cohesive communities with strong social capital are the drivers of this process
 - The rise of interpersonal inequalities is, so far, not doing so
- The declining American communities, that have seen better times, that have been dismissed as '**deplorables**', living in '**rust belt**' or '**red neck**' areas in '**flyover states**' are exacting their revenge at the ballot box

Taking stock (II)

- They are no longer bowling alone, they are now golfing with Trump
- And will continue to play golf with whoever is perceived to pay attention to them and promise to reverse neglect and perceived disdain



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Paper available at: <https://peeg.wordpress.com/2020/09/14/20-38-golfing-with-trump-social-capital-decline-inequality-and-the-rise-of-populism-in-the-us/>

More information at <http://personal.lse.ac.uk/rodrigu1/>



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