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Localism and radical right-wing populism

Simon Otjes^{1,2}

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Book reviewed:

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

Jennifer Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018), 245 pp. ISBN: 978-1-108-421153-9

Recent decades have seen a rise of radical right-wing populist parties, whose message is directed against international immigration and established national parties. In her book, *Close to Home. Local Ties and Voting Radical Right in Europe*, Jennifer Fitzgerald argues that this backlash against national political elites and international developments is fuelled, in part, by localism.

Fitzgerald describes localism as ‘a strong feeling of pride in [one’s community] and positive views of its residents. It also includes a desire for the locality to have status and some autonomy’ (p. 10). In the empirical chapters of the book, Fitzgerald looks at localism from these different angles. The chapters offer a wealth of data: large-N analyses, encompassing up to thirty-five advanced industrial democracies, are combined with more focused analyses of support for the Front National in France (FN) and the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) in Switzerland.

In the first empirical chapter (chapter 3), Fitzgerald understands localism primarily as a psychological attachment to one’s local community. She shows that people who feel a greater attachment to their community are more likely to vote for radical right-wing populist parties. In chapter 4, Fitzgerald pursues this line further. She finds that the effect of attachment to one’s community is greater among groups who traditionally do not support the radical right, such as women and voters with a left-wing political orientation. This effect is also greater among respondents who are willing to help their neighbours. Chapter 5 explores this finding in more detail by examining how individuals relate to each other in their local communities in the Swiss case. Fitzgerald shows that such ties are related to voting for the SVP.

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At the end of chapter 5, Fitzgerald takes a more institutional perspective, an approach which is used to frame the rest of the book. She finds that in the same period that municipalities in Switzerland were being amalgamated, support for the SVP grew. Chapter 6 examines how removing decision-making authority from municipalities affects support for the FN in France. It shows that support increases for the FN in presidential elections where municipalities had to give up autonomy to inter-municipal cooperation. Finally, in chapter 7, Fitzgerald looks at the question of autonomy in a comparative analysis. She finds that as municipalities became more autonomous, support for radical right-wing populist parties increases. She argues that local issues become more salient to voters in national elections as national politics has less to say over local issues.

This book offers a wealth of data, analyses and conceptualisations of localism. The latter, however, would benefit from some more rigorous definition as different conceptions of localism are incorporated in different analyses. For example, in chapter 6 Fitzgerald argues that a backlash to municipalities *losing* autonomy leads voters to vote for radical right-wing populist parties in national elections. Yet in chapter 7 she argues that in systems that have given their municipalities *more* autonomy, the increased salience of local issues leads voters to vote for radical right-wing populist parties. For the reader, the question arises—how can both greater *and* lesser autonomy for municipalities be part of the same ‘localism’ that fuels radical right-wing populism?

A more rigorous conceptualisation of ‘localism’ would be desirable to unpack and explain its different facets and effects. Moreover, an empirical analysis that brings these different facets together is necessary to understand how these different aspects of localism relate and how exactly they drive radical right-wing populism. In chapter 5, Fitzgerald looks at the combined effect of local attachment and the willingness of citizens to help their neighbours (as a proxy for ‘positive views of their neighbours’). This is a very good first step.

Fitzgerald’s key argument that the local context matters for how citizens behave in the national elections in general and for voting for the radical right specifically is reasonable. Yet more conceptual clarity is needed to understand all the complexities and nuances of local communities and contexts.

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