



Long lasting differences in civic capital: Evidence from a unique immigration event in Italy[☆]



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ABSTRACT

A range of evidence exists demonstrating that social capital is associated with a number of important economic outcomes such as economic growth, trade and crime. A recent literature goes further to illustrate how historical events and variation can lead to the development of differing and consequential social norms. This paper examines the related questions of how persistent initial variations in social capital are, and the extent to which immigrant groups do or do not converge to the cultural and social norms of their recipient country by examining a unique and geographically concentrated immigration event in 16th century Italy. We demonstrate that despite the substantial time since migration these communities still display different behavior consistent with higher civic capital than other comparable Italian communities. Moreover, we demonstrate that this difference does not appear to have changed over the last 70 years. For instance, differences in voter turnout apparent in the late 1940s remain in the 21st century. This latter finding has implications for our view of the likelihood of assimilation of immigrant groups to local norms, particularly in cases of large-scale migration.

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1. Introduction

A range of evidence exists that demonstrates a relationship between social capital and important socio-economic outcomes. Using a variety of proxies, social capital has been shown to have substantial predictive power across a range of domains, including economic growth (Helliwell and Putnam, 1995; Knack and Keefer, 1997; Zak and Knack, 2001), trade (Guiso et al., 2008), well-functioning institutions (Knack, 2002), corruption and crime (Uslaner, 2002; Buonanno et al., 2009) and well working financial markets (Guiso et al., 2004). While this literature demonstrates large and long-lived within and across country differences in values and social norms, rather less is known about the origins of these differences.

Recently a body of research has developed which aims to examine the formulation of different types of social capital. Generally this literature analyzes the relationship between historical events or historical sources of variation and current levels of social capital. For instance, Durante (2010) demonstrates how trust developed in pre-industrial times as a form of mutual insurance for agrarian societies to cope with climatic risk. He shows that contemporary surveyed variation in trust

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across Europe is positively related to higher temporal volatility in climatic conditions in the 16th century. In a similar vein, [Nunn and Wantchekon \(2011\)](#) relate current levels of trust within Africa to historical variation in the geography of slave-trade related raids. While [Tabellini \(2010\)](#) shows that current civic values in Italy are correlated with historical variables (political institutions in the period from 1600 to 1850) and that the component of culture explained by history is in turn correlated with current regional economic development. Other research on Italy examines the link between geographical variation in casualties during the unification process that may have undermined trust toward authorities and election turnout ([Amodio, 2012](#)); or the emergence of free-city states in the Middle Ages, the formation of informal pacts, and social capital ([Guiso et al., 2008](#)). [Jacob and Tyrell \(2010\)](#) show how the density of Stasi informers in the former GDR is negatively related to social capital levels in today's East Germany. The persistence in social norms is also documented by [Voigtländer et al. \(2014\)](#), who find that localities where pogroms against Jews took place during the Black Death epidemic in the 14th century showed higher levels of deportations and persecution of Jews 600 years later, during the interwar period. In addition, [Voigtländer and Voth \(2014\)](#) find that the support to anti-Semitic parties in Germany in 1890 and 1920–30s is strongly correlated with anti-Semitic attitudes expressed in opinion surveys in 1996 and 2006.

While this literature suggests long-lasting differences in social capital there is other work demonstrating how social capital can be influenced by contemporaneous factors, and hence should be viewed as malleable. Much of this literature shows that social capital can be adversely affected by increasing 'openness', migration and the mixing of communities. For instance, [Di Pasquale and Glaeser \(1999\)](#) show that expected mobility reduces social capital, while [Alesina and La Ferrara \(2000\)](#), [Costa and Kahn \(2003\)](#) and [Freire and Li \(2013\)](#) argue that social capital is affected by inequality and the heterogeneity of communities. These results are in line with the theoretical model proposed by [Glaeser et al. \(2002\)](#) according to which social capital investment increases when the return to social skills is higher and in communities with higher aggregate social capital, while it tends to decrease with age and relocation to a different community. According to these arguments, the increased mobility that has been witnessed over the past two centuries should act to dissipate differences in social capital across individuals or groups of individuals.

This paper contributes to this literature but takes a different tack. Specifically, we focus on a unique immigration event in Italy that was geographically concentrated. This allows us to ask a number of questions related to how persistent initial variations in social capital are over time, but at the same time to shed light on issues related to the cultural and social assimilation of immigrant groups. We focus on the settlement of large groups of Albanians into southern Italy following the invasion of the Balkans by the Ottoman Turks in the late 16th century. Importantly, these groups moved to geographically clustered villages within southern Italy. They were granted hospitality and some privileges by the local hosting barons and still now their descendants live in some southern Italian villages, whose inhabitants are called Arbëreshë.

They have essentially lived peacefully in southern Italy for more than 500 years. This may reflect the fact that their way of life did not disturb the status quo. Some villages formerly populated by Albanian have lost their Albanian traits, while others (around 40) scattered in five regions (Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, Molise, Sicily), in the southern part of Italy, still preserve a distinct language (they speak Arbërisht, an old variant of Albanian) and/or a distinct religious rite (Greek Orthodox).

The main thrust of our paper is to investigate whether these populations show different levels of civic capital compared to "Italian" groups living in the same geographical area. This is an interesting setting in so far as Southern Italy is noted for its poor endowment of social capital (see for instance, [Bertoni et al., 2013](#) and [Paccagnella and Paolo, 2014](#)). The Arbëreshë people, apart from preserving a distinct language, may have preserved distinct social values, which could be pre-determined or the result of their attempt to be accepted in a hosting country.

We show that this group of individuals displays significantly higher levels of civic capital than comparable indigenous groups. Moreover, this is observable for a period (immediate post-war) where there was limited inter-regional mobility and interaction with other areas; but has not diminished markedly in the following half century when mobility substantially increased. This result is important as it demonstrates how substantial variations in civic capital can be created by specific historical episodes, and that these differences may be very long lasting. This latter point is of clear interest if one considers, as per the literature highlighted above, that social capital has a key role in explaining cross-country and within-country variations in institutional and economic performance. In addition, our result is of interest insofar as it has implications for the role of large-scale migration on social norms.

To deal with the endogeneity issues that might plague our results we firstly look at successively more restrictive geographic comparisons: more proximate areas should differ less in terms of unobserved characteristics that influence both civic capital and voter turnout. Then, as an alternative strategy we adopt an instrumental variable approach and use as a source of variation the historical location of two seminaries that contributed greatly to the preservation of the Arbëreshë culture. Our results remain qualitatively unchanged and instrumental variable estimates are larger in magnitude compared to OLS estimates, suggesting that unobservable confounding factors produced a downward bias.

We extend this in an attempt to examine whether differences in voting behavior are likely driven by underlying differences in civic attitudes. Typical proxies for social capital (blood donations, crimes, etc.) are available only at a provincial level and hence not suitable for our analysis. Instead, we use municipality level data sourced from RAI TV on the payment of the television license tax. This data allows us to build a measure of tax compliance that we use as an alternative dependent variable in our models. These results, insofar as the Arbëreshë have higher compliance rates, provide a further indication that these communities display 'better' civic behavior. Finally, we provide evidence suggesting that neither population homogeneity nor the retention of the orthodox religion are sufficient explanations of the observed differences in behavior.

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