Field Evidence of Social Influence in the Expression of Political Preferences
The case of secessionist flags in Barcelona

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SOCIAL INFLUENCE (SI)

- **SI**: The probability of agent I doing A is affected by his perception of members of the same ‘relevant’ group doing A.

- **SI as a mechanism to explain social diffusion**
  - Spread of obesity, divorce, tastes, altruism, political mobilization, electoral preferences…
SOCIAL INFLUENCE (SI)

- Different sources of evidence
  - Surveys, longitudinal data
  - Virtual networks
  - Historical records
  - Experiments

- But few data on large SI patterns coming from direct observation of behaviour in natural social settings.

- We offer such kind of data and we provide evidence that
  - Not only political preferences but also their expression are affected by SI
  - SI has an important spatial dimension
    - Distance between agents seems to be an important component of SI.
THE CASE: The Catalan independentist process

- From 2010 Catalonia has started an independentist process

- On Catalonia’s National Day (11th September, the ‘Diada’), people traditionally hang a Catalan flag in their balconies or windows.

- But since the 2012 Diada, lots of flags stay hanged in order to express political support for Catalonia’s independence.
THE QUESTION

- Clearly, flags are clustered in a non-random way,
- but…
  - Is flag distribution completely explained by voting behaviour?...
  - … or is there a process of SI?

- Assumptions:
  - SI don’t affect political preferences as such, but their expression
THE HYPOTHESIS

- Gap between having a political preference and publicly expressing it.
  - The probability of posting a Catalan flag in your balcony is correlated with voting for secessionist parties…
  - but is also significantly affected by the number of neighbours who hang a flag

A has secessionist political preferences

A observes a high density of flags in his neighbourhood

A is more likely to post a Catalan flag in the balcony

A observes a low density of flags in his neighbourhood

A is less likely to post a Catalan flag in the balcony
METHODS
First study

- July 2013 we observed the complete distribution of flags in a representative sample of electoral districts (ED) in the city of Barcelona.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>total</th>
<th>mean per ED</th>
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<tr>
<td>households flags</td>
<td>213667</td>
<td>774.2</td>
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<td></td>
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<table>
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<th>2012 election</th>
<th>total</th>
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<tr>
<td>registered electors</td>
<td>293144</td>
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<td>pro-independence vote CIU</td>
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<td>ERC</td>
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<td>Abstention</td>
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</table>
METHODS
Second study

- We selected a sub-sample of 16 spatial areas in different EDs following a 2x2 typology
  - Density of flags: under or over the average.
  - Type of street: wide or narrow

- Daily observations during 15 days around September 11

- We registered not just the number of flags but their position in the buildings’ facades
Positive correlation between X and Y, but...

Pro-independence voters are more likely to place a flag when they perceive they are a majority in the neighborhood

- Less dots above the dashed line $Yu(X)$ than below (specially on the left side).
  - This asymmetry indicates that a local SI mechanism is at work

- The moving average helps to visualize the non-linearity induced by SI
  - At low values of X the EDs tend to have flag densities below the expected value $Yu(X)$ whereas the contrary occurs at high values of X
RESULTS AND ANALYSIS
SI at the microscale (household level)

- There is a Diada global stimulus reflected in a significant bump in the density of flags around September 11.
- There is a large dispersion in the density of flags among facades at any date and the evolution patterns are very diverse.
- But is there a local mechanisms of SI affecting the distribution?
- “Clustering index” measures in standard deviation units the departure of the observed distribution from the average distribution of a large number of random sets.
The distribution of $C$ is clearly shifted toward positive values, indicating that in overall the flags on the observed facades are markedly more clustered than expected for an average random distribution.
DISCUSSION

- We show that a SI process is at work (at ED and at facade levels)
  - It would be extremely hard to account for the observed non-random flag distribution without assuming some process of social influence at a local level

- Which is the mechanism?
  - We cannot infer concrete psychological mechanisms from the observation of flag-hanging patterns: same patterns of influence may be caused by different psychological mechanisms (social pressure, reciprocity norms, rational behaviour in a social dilemma….)