

Abstract:

Social capital typically leads to positive political and economic outcomes. A growing literature also emphasizes the potentially “dark side” of social capital. This paper examines the role of social capital in the downfall of democracy in interwar Germany. We analyze Nazi Party entry in a cross-section of cities. Dense networks of civic associations such as bowling clubs, choirs, and animal breeders facilitated the Nazi Party’s rise. Towns with one standard deviation higher association density saw at least one-third faster entry. All types of associations – veteran associations and non-military clubs, “bridging” and “bonding” associations – positively predict NS Party entry. These results suggest that social capital aided the rise of the Nazi movement that ultimately destroyed Germany’s first democracy. We also show that the effects of social capital depended on the institutional context – in Prussia, where democratic institutions were stronger, the link between party entry and association density was markedly weaker.