Profiling Insurrection: Characterizing Collective Action Using Mobile Device Data

David Van Dijcke, Graduate Student, University of Michigan; Austin L Wright, Assistant Professor, UChicago's Harris School of Public Policy

Partisanship, socio-political isolation, proximity to chapters of the Proud Boys organization, and local activity on Parler are robustly associated with protest participation on January 6, 2021, in Washington, DC.
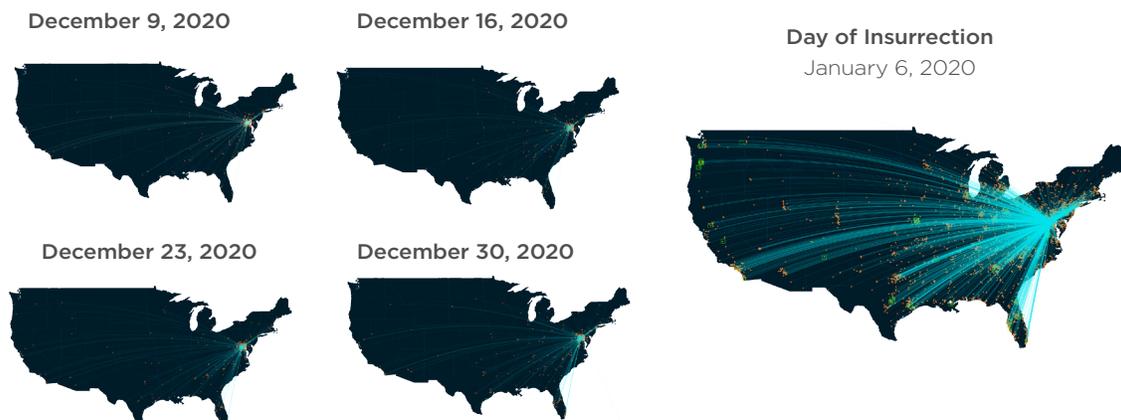
The authors propose a method to better understand what triggers collective action, and they apply that methodology to the protest and subsequent violent attempt to undermine democratic norms and institutions that occurred on Jan. 6, 2021, in Washington, DC. The authors provide evidence that socio-political isolation, proximity to a prominent hate group, the Proud Boys, as well as the intensity of local misinformation posts on social media were robustly associated with participation in this event.

While existing work yields important insights about the conditions under which organized opposition emerges and what impact such opposition may have on the various institutions within which they are embedded, it tells us little about the individuals that participate in these behaviors. This is due, in large part, to data limitations: It is difficult to characterize those engaged in collective action in a rigorous and representative manner.

This paper addresses that data gap through two central contributions:

- This work introduces an approach for estimating community-level participation in mass protest that leverages historical information about cell-phone device movement—anonymized and aggregated—to identify devices that visit places where protests or other types of collective action have occurred. The authors also characterize communities where the devices originate.

- The authors then apply this approach to the Jan. 6, 2021, rally, protest, and subsequent violent riot on the grounds of the United States Capitol building, the aim of which was to oppose or halt the official certification of the outcome of the November 2020 US presidential election. The authors' methodology helps them address a key question: What are the conditions under which individuals may engage in such anti-democratic acts? The authors find that partisanship in the form of Trump support, socio-political isolation, proximity to local chapters of the hate group Proud Boys, as well as local engagement with online misinformation through the social-media platform Parler, explain variation in protest involvement.

Figure 1 · Travel Network to Protest Census Block Group (CBGs), Day of Insurrection vs. Days Before

Notes: Figure shows origin and trajectories of mobile devices who visited the Capitol CBG, on the Wednesday of the storming of the Capitol and the 4 Wednesdays preceding. Orange dots indicate the lat-long coordinates of the origin CBGs of the devices, turquoise lines show their shortest-distance trajectory. All figures are produced with identical visualization settings (transparency of lines, etc.). Green boxes in larger figure mark the location of Proud Boys chapters, a prominent far-right hate group, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. They correspond to the lat-long coordinates of the centroids of the city the chapter is in.

Becker Friedman Institute

FOR ECONOMICS AT UCHICAGO