The Trump Donor 2015-2024: Assessing the Geographical Differences Across Different Elections

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Previous research indicates that most of the contributions raised by candidate committees and political committees are largely raised from narrow regions of the country, specifically the densely populated areas (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995; Gimpel, Lee, and Kaminski 2006; Sebold, Dowdle, Limbocker, and Stewart 2012; Mitchell, Sebold, Dowdle, Limbocker, and Stewart 2015). However, Donald Trump, who has arguably been the one major constant in presidential campaigns since many of those studies were conducted, derives a disproportionate amount of his support from rural areas (Albrecht 2019). In this study, we conduct two different geographic analyses, local indicators of spatial autocorrelation (LISA) and global indicators of spatial autocorrelation (GISA). We find that there is a difference in the spatial distribution of donors between 2016, where Trump donors are geographically dispersed, as opposed to 2024 where donations are more concentrated as would be expected.

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The Trump Donor 2015-2024: Are They That Different from Other Co-partisan Contributors and What Impact Will They Have on Partisan Fundraising?

For most of the period following the McGovern-Fraser reforms, presidential campaigns have typically relied on direct contributions to their official campaign organizations or public funding (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995; Hinkley and Green 1996; Francia et al. 2006). This spurs candidate committees and their surrogates to spend an enormous amount of time and money courting potential donor. Yet, contributing to a political campaign is one of the political activities that Americans participate in the least (Nickerson and Rogers 2014). Given these circumstances, candidate committee and other political committees rely heavily on small static pool of repeat donors (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995; Hinkley and Green 1996; Francia et al. 2006). Presidential candidates and their fundraising teams target the same pool of donors for cost effective reasons and for reasons of survival. By soliciting the same donors, time and time again, presidential candidates and their fundraising teams cultivated a small group of repeat donors who remained in the pool because thy continued to be solicited for donations every four years.

Candidates have finite time and money, so they must maximize their fundraising efforts by focusing on areas that will provide the greatest payoff. Overtime, this led to a geographical bias in the political contributions received by presidential candidates toward populated regions of the country, where the fundraisers target their solicitation efforts to maximize their chances of success (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995; Gimpel, Lee, and Kaminski 2006; Sebold et al. 2012; Mitchell, Sebold, Dowdle, Limbocker, and Stewart 2015). These targeted areas also happen to be the densely populated areas where the incomes and accrued wealth are higher than the national average (Badger 2013). In fact, the Center for Responsive Politics (2011) has been tracking the

participation of donors by state and have identified California, New York, and Texas[1] as the top three states habitually who donate the most individual campaign contributions to presidential nomination candidates in the 1996, 2000, and 2008 contest

The money raised early on in these areas helps aspirants purchase the resources they need to compete in initial contests, build images among viability among elites and the press, and create the mechanism needed to raise more money (Adkins and Dowdle 2002; see Thomson 2025 for effect on other races). They then expand their networks as their campaigns proceed or are likely to be winnowed from the race (Steger et al 2002; Adkins and Dowdle 2004; Norrander 2006; Damore et al. 2010). This path dependent fundraising behavior deterred the entry of new donors to a minimum. After all, most people are more likely to donate if they are solicited to contribute (Mutz 1995; Johnson 2013). Therefore, if you are not solicited for a donation to a presidential candidate, you are not likely to contribute. However, this may be changing with the increased use of the Internet and social media to reach out to new voters and small donors

[1] In the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau Demographic and Housing Census the population estimate was 281,421,906 people, with the top three most populated states being California at 33,871,648 people, New York at 18,976,457 people, and 20,851,820 Texas at people. In the 2007-2009 American Community Survey Demographic and Housing Census the population estimate was 301,461,533 people, with the top three most populated states being California with 36,308,527 people, New York with 19,423,896 people, and Texas with 23,819,042 people (US Census Bureau 2011).

(Adkins and Dowdle 2008). In this new environment, we want to see if Trump is bringing in new types of donors.

Most of these studies relied on decades worth of data collected before the 2016 election and were adequate guides to the geographic patterns of presidential fundraising that existed up until that time. However, Donald Trump, who has arguably been the one major constant in presidential campaigns since many of those studies were conducted, derives a disproportionate amount of his support from rural areas (Albrecht 2019). Additionally, during the last several years, there have been meaningful changes in campaign finance law and fundraising technology that have increased the fundraising prowess of political candidates (Sebold and Dowdle, 2018). At the same time, economic trends have also contributed to a greater disparity in the geographical distribution of wealth (Arundel and Hochstenbach 2020).

Therefore, it is time to reconsider the political geography of individual donations to determine if there is a tightening of the geographic distribution of donations due to the economic disparities over the last few years or if the fundraising technology has mitigated these effects and has allowed candidates to raise money from outside the typical densely populated areas of the country. Furthermore, prior studies may not have accurately described the disproportionate impact of the densely populated areas because most of them use the Geographic Information System (GIS). [2]

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[2] This type of analysis will reveal important distribution properties of campaign contributions. Ideally, one would employ a newly developed technique, the Geographically Weighted Regression (GWR) technique, was designed with the assumption that there is geographic variation in variables, not a global value as in traditional regression models. As a

In this study, we analyze Trump donors from the 2016 and 2024 election. Our purpose is twofold. First, we will analyze local spatial patterns to determine if there are any areas with higher levels of campaign donations. Second, we will also analyze global patterns to determine if there are any significant changing patterns across election cycles. We find that there are differences, but other techniques such as the Geographically Weighted Regression (GWR) need to be employed. This type of analysis can reveal causal factors and their respective spatial properties when campaign contributions are analyzed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To help construct this model, we rely on previous research that traces general trends that elaborate on how presidential campaigns raise money directly from contributors. At the same time, we argue that Trump is part of a subset of political "amateurs" relying on alternative sources of fundraising. To help set up a proper theoretical network to measure Trump's 2016 and 2024 fundraising patterns, we divide the literature review into two sections: (1) a geography of presidential campaign fundraising. We then analyze the geographic patterns within Trump's

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spatial method developed by Brunsdon et al (1996), it calibrates models for data that vary over space (Wheeler & Páez 2010). Due to multiple methodological advantages, GWR is often preferred over other methods, such as spatial lag or spatial error model. First, it accounts for geographic neighbors that vary by size (Cho and Gimpel 2012). Second, the model produces coefficient estimates that can change across space. Third, this modeling allows external and local factors to influence adopters simultaneously. We will analyze how patterns of geographic donations shifted over 2015-2024 and hypothesize that Trump's donor base became more heterogeneous as time progressed.

fundraising network and look at fundraising by non-politicians running for the Republican presidential nomination.

The geography of presidential campaign fundraising

Scholars have written several studies addressing which campaigns are likely to be successful in raising money (Adkins and Dowdle 2002; Goff 2004; Smidt and Christenson 2012; Case and Porter 2025). However, few have written about where candidates have raised money and how those patterns change during a campaign. Scholars in the 1990s found that presidential candidates relied heavily on preexisting political bases of political support to solicit donations (Hinkley and Green 1996). This led to presidential candidates to rely on a small static pool of repeat donors (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995). By soliciting the same donors, time and time again, presidential candidates and their fundraising teams cultivated a small group of repeat donors who remained in the pool because they continued to be solicited for donations every four years. The presidential donor pool became a small static group of who gave when asked; studies indicate that at close to majority donors who contributed to presidential candidates gave in the previous election, with an even higher rate of repeat donors in competitive elections (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995).

Presidential candidates and their fundraising teams target the same pool of donors for cost effective reasons and for reasons of survival. Money is not only a necessary means to obtain the resources and attention needed for a successful campaign in a frontloaded system; it is also a barometer of viability in the primary (Goff 2004). Without money, candidates have little chance of attracting positive media attention and the support needed to establish viability (Goff 2004). According to Brown, Powell, and Wilcox (1995) serious money creates a perception of viability by giving candidates an air of certainty and this gives them the psychological advantage. This in

turn, attracts more attention from the media, which in turn, attracts more supporters and more media attention (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995, 2; Norrander 2010). On the other hand, lack of initial money may be the biggest factor that determines if a potential candidate officially steps into the political ring. In fact, the money factor has dissuaded prominent candidates from running, as demonstrated in 1999 when Texas Governor George W. Bush's lead in early fundraising and in the polls convinced Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander, Republican activist Patrick Buchanan, North Carolina Senator Elizabeth Dole and former Vice President Dan Quayle to drop out of the race for the Republican nomination months before the Iowa Caucus (Adkins and Dowdle 2004, 1-27). This leads candidates to spend an inordinate amount of time on fundraising.

Candidates have finite time and money, so they must maximize their fundraising efforts by focusing on areas that will provide the greatest payoff. Therefore, they focus a great amount of time on fundraising in the places they will be most successful (Adkins and Dowdle 2002, 256-275) and they seek out habitual donors who contribute the maximum amount each election (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995). These prized habitual donors tend to be the older, whiter, more educated, and professional middle- and upper-class members of society (Souraf 1992; Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995). Overtime, this also led to a geographical bias in the political contributions received by presidential candidates toward populated regions of the country (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995; Gimpel, Lee, and Kaminski 2006; Cho & Gimpel 2010; Bramlett, Brittany, Gimpel, & Lee 2011). These targeted areas also happen to be the densely populated areas where the incomes and accrued wealth are higher than the national average (Badger 2013). Verba, Brady and Nie (1993) found that the wealthier and better-educated citizens participate to a greater extent in politics. The Center for Responsive Politics (2011) has been tracking the participation of

donors by state and have identified California, New York, and Texas[3] as the top three states habitually who donate the most individual campaign contributions to presidential nomination candidates in the 1996, 2000, and 2008 contests.

This path dependent fundraising behavior deterred the entry of new donors to a minimum. After all, most people are more likely to donate if they are solicited to contribute (Mutz 1995; Johnson 2013). Therefore, if you are not solicited for a donation to a presidential candidate, you are not likely to contribute. People who live in populated areas are more likely to be solicited because of the numerous interest groups that exist in the urban areas where the networks of people and channels of influence are established. People in urban areas are more likely to belong to several groups, providing more opportunity for fundraisers to solicit donations (Grant and Rudolph 2002). Living in a populated area also makes it more likely that a person will be stimulated to participate in politics because of the socialization of participation that is emphasized by the social and political networks in urban areas (Rosenstone and Hansen 1992; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995;

[3] In the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau Demographic and Housing Census the population estimate was 281,421,906 people, with the top three most populated states being California at 33,871,648 people, New York at 18,976,457 people, and 20,851,820 Texas at people. In the 2007-2009 American Community Survey Demographic and Housing Census the population estimate was 301,461,533 people, with the top three most populated states being California with 36,308,527 people, New York with 19,423,896 people, and Texas with 23,819,042 people (US Census Bureau 2011).

Francia et al. 2003), although these findings are not concrete as it has also been found that urbanization may decrease participation (Verba and Nie 1972).

However, most of the studies that have addressed this issue are published before the decline of public funding offered to presidential candidates that participated in the program. In many ways, the decline of the public campaign system disincentivized attempts to broaden the fundraising base during the pre-primary system. This system encouraged candidates to broaden their fundraising beyond a narrow geographic base by requiring that initial funds be raised in at least twenty states to qualify, thus promoting smaller donors and a more nationalized process (Malbin 2008, 2009; Corrado 2011). Consequently, fewer candidates are participating in this system, as its spending requirements do not allow participants to compete effectively. The failure of the public finance system and the increased donor limits established by Bi-Partisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) is likely pushing candidates to forgo participating in the system and courting the larger donors in states with the higher number of donors to remain competitive and due to financial viability (Malbin 2008).

Theoretically this money chase should increase the race for money in these areas, especially since the cost of campaigning and the historical growth of front-loading primary and caucus states . These costs inherent in a primary process that has a frontloaded calendar with several early contests in multiple states, driving candidates to begin raising money earlier with each passing cycle to compete (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995; Damore 1997; Adkins and Dowdle 2002; Mayer and Busch 2004; Goff 2004; Norrander 2010). This is likely the primary factors that leads candidates to spend an inordinate amount of time on fundraising in areas that will have the greatest payoff. Gimpel, Lee, and Kaminski (2006) do suggest a partisan divide as as GOP aspirants “exhibit a broader geographical base than Democratic candidates in the Upper

Midwest, the Plains, and the Mountain states, many of the same places appear on both maps in the highest contributor categories" (628). Still, they conclude that both Democratic and Republican contenders raise large sums of money in the same areas, even if they are not successful electorally in these regions. However, Dowdle et al. (2015) found that these trends towards further geographic concentration had levelled off by the 2012 election. Still, the pattern was the preprimary period tended to see dense fundraising networks, while the process grew more nationally dispersed as the election season progressed (Hinckley and Green 1996; Dowdle et 2015).

In many ways, we expect this process of fundraising dispersion as the campaign progresses for Trump in 2016 and 2024. We expect to see the pattern that Smolin (2004) noticed for John Kerry where a bandwagon effect occurred when the nominee had clinched. This momentum should help broaden Turmp's fundraising base during the late Spring of 2016-2024.

METHODS

In this study, we collected data from the FEC for Trump individual donations for 2016 and 2024. Once these data were extracted, we used the addresses of all of the campaign donors and geocoded them through the Census Bureau's batch Geocoding tool. Once this was completed, we used spatial analysis software (GeoDA) to analyze the spatial patterns that our data exhibited. Two analyses were conducted. While each analysis can be revealing, using both can provide a greater multi-layered approach to understanding spatial patterns. Global analysis can reveal an overall spatial pattern in a study. Local analyses breaks down the global value into individual locations to determine where there are significant spatial relationships. Another way to conceive of this is that global patterns tell you if there is a pattern, and local values give you evidence of where these donations are occurring.

To do these analyses, we relied on Moran's I, one of the more common measures of spatial autocorrelation. In this study, the variable analyzed was the total amount given by an individual. In turn, these higher and lower values were grouped spatially to determine if and where there are patterns. In order to spatially analyze something, spatial weights must be specified. For this study, we relied on queen contiguity, which treats every node as having an influence on other proximal nodes, much like a Queen on a chessboard. In the next section, we present our results.

RESULTS

Table 1 represents the results of our global analyses of Trump for the year 2015. Table 2 represents our global analysis. .08 is our first value, which represents almost no global patterns of campaign contribution donations. However, the positive spatial autocorrelation values does reveal that the most similar values (the higher donors) are located in closer proximity to one another than dissimilar items (which would be a negative value). In Table 2, this fact is also reflected, as most of the US does not show much in the way of a spatial pattern. However, we do see several groupings of high-high donors in addition to statistically significant areas of campaign contributions. In this context, this means that these spatial patterns are not likely due to chance. We see several of these in larger cities, but also in other areas. Additional analyses is needed to determine what is driving the spatial patterns in these areas. However, we can say that when there are high-high clusters and when there are several in proximity to one another it does reveal evidence of a campaign hotspot.

Table 3 and Table 4 represent the patterns for the 2016 election. Turning to Table 3, we see that there is much more of a global relationship between donors in addition to more significant areas (Table 4) and more frequently groupings of (high-high) value areas. According

to Tables 5 and 6, in the 2024 election, the global donation patterns are much less than they were in 2016, but there are several clusters of higher donation areas.

UNIQUE OR JUST "DIFFERENT?": TRUMP AND FUNDRISING BY OTHER "AMATEURS"

In many ways, Trump is different from the typical nomination aspirant in that he hadn't run for elected office before the 2016 election. In some ways, that should be a disadvantage since he did not have a pool of prior campaign donors to draw on in the early months when they can be critical to funding a campaign (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995). At the same time, Trump had strong residential ties to both New York City and Florida, which have served as early bases for fundraising. Since presidential hopefuls often rely on their geographic base for early fundraising success (Brown, Powell and Wilcox 1995), we would expect Trump to have an advantage in these two states.

At first glance, it would seem to be helpful to draw from the plethora of non-politicians seeking the Republican nomination since 1988 by looking at individuals such as Pat Robertson, Pat Buchanan, Steve Forbes, and Gary Bauer. Unfortunately, there are no comparative studies of these individual campaigns, and they all seemed unique. Robertson's early base was fueled by viewers of the 700 Club (Hewat and Relin 1988). Bauer also was a public figure in the evangelical community, but he had less success in raising similar sums from people who listened to Focus on the Family.

Businesspeople like Forbes and Ross Perot make better comparisons. Trump's business experience was very different from theirs though. Electronic Data Systems, Perot's firm, typically dealt with large companies such as General Motors and didn't focus on mass marketing. One account had Perot meeting his 1962 annual quota as an IBM salesman with the sale of one

computer by mid-January of that year (Behar 1992). While that may be impressive, it doesn't suggest much experience in mass marketing. Steve Forbes might be a better case but much of his campaigns were self-funded.

We would argue that Trump had an innate advantage over most of the other non-politicians. By 2016, he had established a personalistic marketing empire across multiple products, which spent a great deal of effort trying to convince a wide base of people to buy products or services for a variety of reasons (see Sexton 2010). Trump's campaign also spent a large amount of time and effort on social media, which served as a large market for recruiting (Conley 2017). Therefore, we would expect Trump to draw more money from smaller donors as both campaigns progressed, especially in 2016. The next step in a subsequent study would be to compare Trump's fundraising patterns with these other campaigns.

CONCLUSION

Prior studies (Brown et al 2015; Sebold et al 2012) have indicated that presidential fundraising was predominantly from certain densely populated, affluent areas. Albrecht (2019) however argues that Trump had tapped into a base of rural financial support in contrast to his opponents. Our findings also indicate that Trump's fundraising success seems more dispersed and less focused than one would expect from candidates prior to 2016. However, the next step would be compared to other candidates in recent elections to determine whether this trend is limited to Trump or a more general phenomenon.

Similarly, 2016 deviates the most from the spatial patterns we expected, with relatively dispersed areas of fundraising. By contrast, Trump's fundraising success was more concentrated in 2024, as we expected. Further research, such as the evolution of fundraising success by other recent two term presidents, would help determine whether this finding is an outlier or follows into a more general trend.

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Table 1. 2015 Trump Donation Global Value

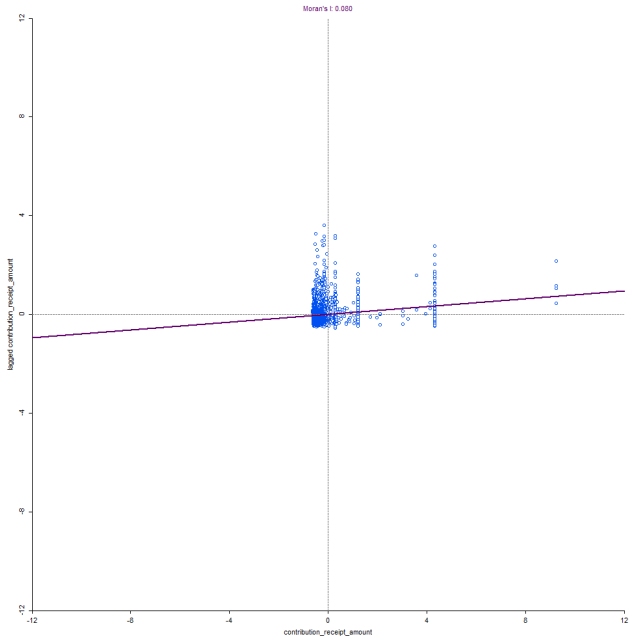
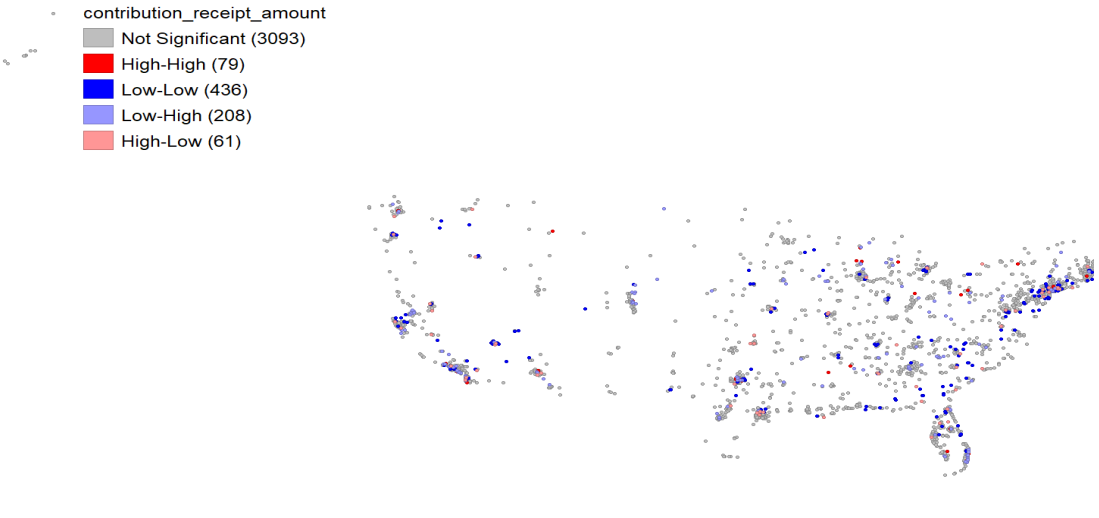


Table 2. **2015 Trump Local Values**



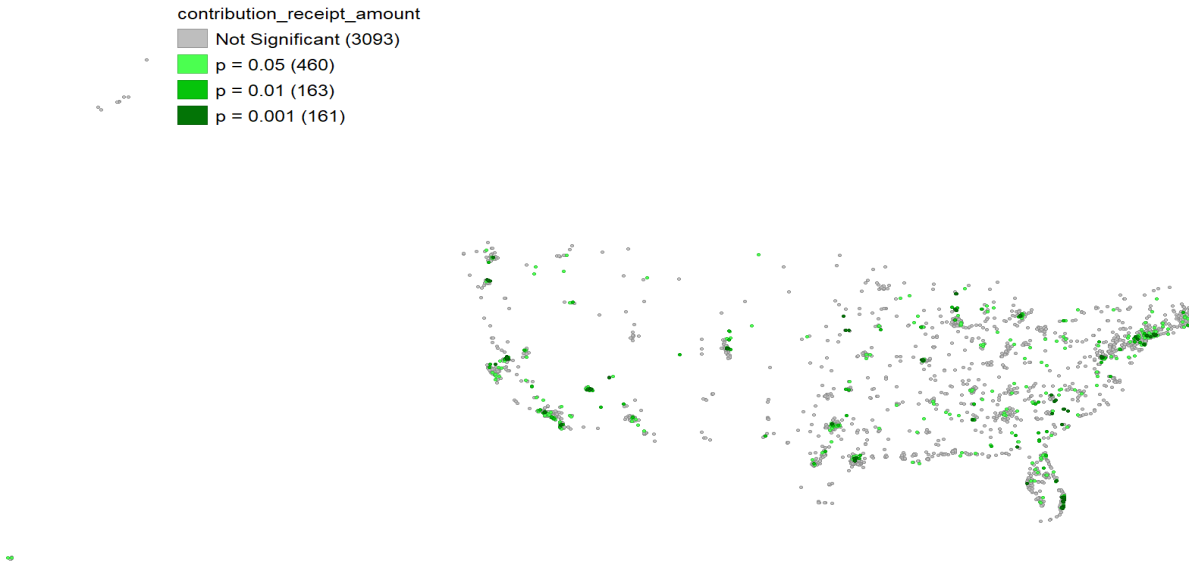


Table 3. 2016 Trump Global Value

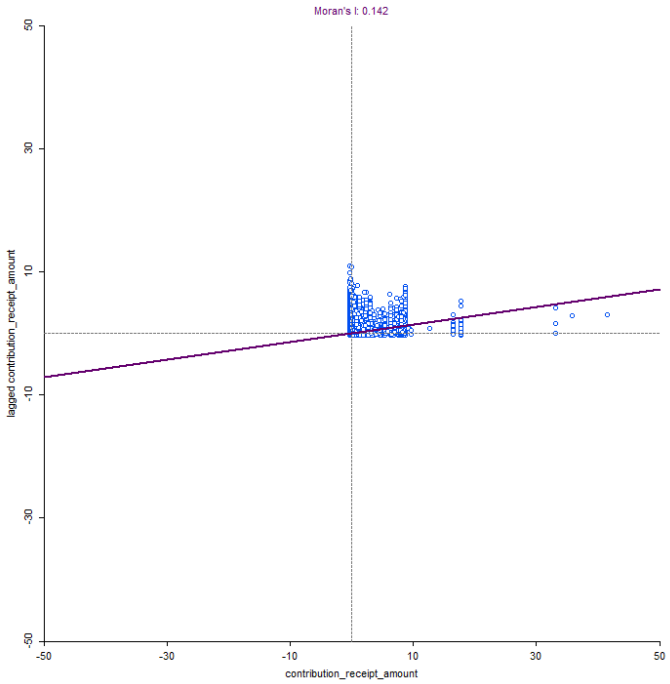
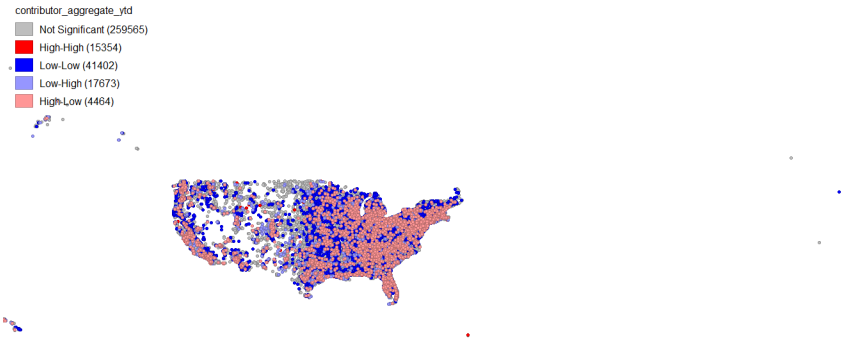


Table 4. 2016 Trump LISA Value



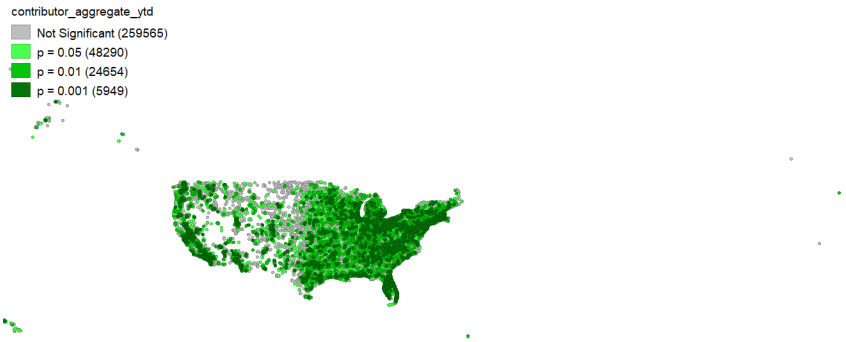


Table 5. 2024 Trump Global

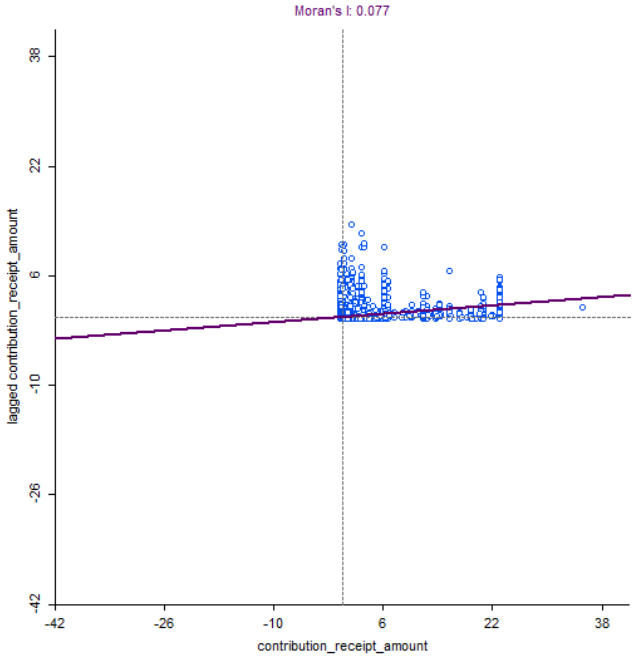
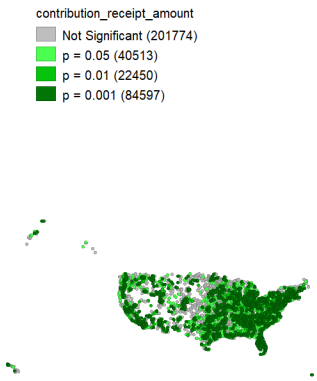


Table 6. 2024 Trump Local Values


contribution_receipt_amount
Not Significant (201774)
High-High (11505)
Low-Low (110883)
Low-High (16347)
High-Low (8825)


contribution_receipt_amount
Not Significant (201774)
p = 0.05 (40513)
p = 0.01 (22450)
p = 0.001 (84597)