

# Late Colonial Antecedents of Modern Democracy

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**Abstract:** Some of the most contested questions in political science and political economy revolve around the conditions under which democratization is likely to happen and when democracy becomes a stable institutional choice. This paper revisits the particular claim in the democratization literature that the type of colonization, and particularly the degree to which Europeans settled in a colony, fundamentally affected the probability that democratic institutions developed and became stable. We revisit this and several other theories of democratization by using a unique source of information – the Statesman's Yearbook – on a large number of non-sovereign countries in the immediate aftermath of WWII. Analysis shows that neither the size of the European population nor the existence of institutions of higher education appear to be important for subsequent democratization while the existence of representative political bodies during the late colonial period clearly predicts the existence and stability of democracy in recent decades.

**Keywords:** Political regimes, Democratization, Colonialism

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## Introduction

The post-communist transition and parallel developments in Africa and Latin America after 1990 rekindled the academic interest in democratization. Since then, questions under which conditions democratization is likely to happen, and when democracy becomes a stable institutional choice, have become some of the most contested in political science and political economy. The recent resurgence of autocracy and the potential decline of established democracies are further attracting considerable research interest.

During the last 60 years, multiple studies have dealt with the question of when democratization happens: On the one hand, a prominent strand of the debate holds that stable democracy is predominantly the consequence of economic development. Lipset (1959) famously argued that economic development would bring democracy, as it entails better education and industrialization that would, among other things, result in a modern party system.<sup>1</sup> Przeworski (1991) conversely argues that democratization is not a result of economic development but tends to become a stable institutional choice the richer the country is.

On the other hand, Treisman (2017) and others argue that most democratizations are due to random chance and political miscalculation and only relatively few events are consciously planned regime transitions. Paldam and Gundlach (2018) contend that while events of democratization are almost impossible to predict and may well be random, the direction of institutional change once they occur is systematic. As such, Paldam and Gundlach take a middle position between Treisman's rejection of systematic trends and the Lipset / Przeworski argument.

Parallel to this ongoing debate on the development-democracy nexus, another strand of the literature finds the determinants of democracy in historical differences, rather than in current economic conditions. A large part of this research line has effectively focused on whether

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<sup>1</sup> Lipset's claim was that democracy requires sufficiently educated and informed citizens to persist and stable group or class interests to give rise to visible and stable party differences.

colonialism affects post-independence political institutions in a path-dependent manner, and if this effect can generally be evaluated as positive for democratic development. Most contributions here investigate the impact of colonial structures on comparative economic development (e.g. Acemoglu et al., 2001; La Porta et al., 2008), while a subset has more specifically analysed the importance of colonialism for the democratic development of former colonial dominions and the exact transmission mechanisms (e.g. Guardado, 2018; Lee and Paine, 2019). Notwithstanding, both strands find overwhelming evidence that colonial history matters a great deal for the development of formal institutions and economic prosperity after transition to independence. Questions on the persistence of these effects have only been raised very recently, with some authors emphasizing the declining impact of colonialism and the growing importance of pre-colonial institutions (Maseland, 2018).

In one of the most influential contributions to this literature, Acemoglu et al. (2001) argue that They thereby identify the determinants of modern democracy in deep historical factors. Their claim has since often been re-evaluated in the relevant literature, albeit with somewhat mixed results (e.g. Ketterer and Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), and with criticisms voiced regarding the accuracy of their data and strategy (e.g. Olsson, 2004). Hariri (2012, 471) also explores historical factors but argues that countries with established statehood *prior* to colonization were less likely to experience institutional transplants, as they had “enough state infrastructure that the colonial powers would rule to a considerable degree through existing institutions.” Some of these institutional transplants may have enabled the development of democracy while others have had the opposite effect.

In this paper, we return to the question of whether modern democracy in developing countries has colonial roots. Yet, contrary to the popular strand of research following Acemoglu et al. (2001), we focus on factors in the *late* colonial period instead of settlement patterns in early colonial expansion. We explore whether certain features, such as the size of the European population, institutions of higher education, and total population, affect the probability of having representative political institutions *prior* to independence, and whether the influence of those same

factors persist in the sense of affecting the choice of political institutions today. Employing unique and novel sources of information for a large number of non-sovereign countries in the immediate aftermath of WWII, our findings suggest that neither the size of the European population nor educational institutions appear to be important for subsequent democratization, while the existence of representative political bodies during the late colonial period clearly predicts the existence and stability of democracy in recent decades.

## **Data**

In the following, we rely mainly on two data sources: First, the recently developed database in Bjørnskov and Rode (2019), which conducts an update and expansion of the Democracy-Dictatorship data by Cheibub et al. (2010), providing information on regime types and political institutions dating back to 1950. Among other innovations, Bjørnskov and Rode (2019) provide new institutional data for periods under colonial rule covering more than ninety entities at present, thereby offering substantially wider coverage of non-sovereign countries than comparable alternatives, such as the Varieties of Democracy project by Coppedge et al. (2016).

As part of the post-1990 wave has been the rise of illiberal democracy, where most states have introduced multi-party elections but often implemented in a way that de facto implies little electoral risk for the incumbent (Zakaria, 1997), it might sometimes be difficult to distinguish between these two concepts. For that reason, Bjørnskov and Rode (2019) provide a variable that captures whether colonies have no regular elections, hold elections in one-party states, elections with opposition parties but without an actual chance of government change, or full democracy. For the present analysis, this allows us to separate colonies into three groups: Those with a functioning democracy, territories in which the colonial power still ‘directed’ the elections, and colonies without any representative institutions. Of 94 former colonies in the dataset, 58 are currently categorized as democracies, 34 as electoral autocracies, and only two do not have multi-

party institutions: Equatorial Guinea is essentially a single-party military dictatorship and Somalia, as the quintessential failed state, is unable to even hold elections.

Second, we combine this data with hand-collected information from early 1950's editions of *The Statesman's Yearbook*. This publication is an annually published reference book since 1864, providing general information on the countries of the world, among it, reliable data on educational institutions and population structure at the time. To the best of our knowledge, the only other recent use of this source in political science or economics is Bjørnskov and Rode (2019).

In particular, we hand collect data on the relative size of the European (or White) population at the end of the 1940s, the total population, the total land area covered by the colony, and whether colonies presented institutions of secondary or tertiary education at the time (Statesman's Yearbook, vd). Combining data on colonial and current democracy with information on the share of European population can be thought of as a direct test of Acemoglu and Robinson's (2001) claim that colonial and post-independence democracy was much more likely to develop where Europeans settled permanently. In turn, employing data on urbanization, population density, and the presence of educational institutions at the time is somewhat more inspired by the hypotheses of Lipset (1959).

With a cross-sectional dataset of 65 former colonies that are all observed before and after their transition to independence, we attempt to empirically establish the determinants of countries political institutions at the moment of independence, and for the present day, in the following section. Apart from an application by Bjørnskov and Rode (2019) and Lee and Paine (2019), we are also unaware of any further study that directly associates pre-independence political institutions of colonies with the democratic outcomes of post-independence.

## **Results**

Before going into a more formalized econometric investigation of our cross-sectional dataset, we present a descriptive analysis of transitions between colonial autocracy or democracy and present-

day/modern autocracy or democracy in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 categorizes colonial institutions just before formal independence, while Table 2 does so at the last election before formal independence. Numbers in parenthesis refer to colonies that were self-governing immediately prior to independence.

Both tables clearly suggest that political institutions are highly persistent. Only one in five former colonies have not retained the basic type of institutions that were in place in the late colonial period: of 36 that were autocratic in the year prior to independence 29 are still autocratic, and of 39 that were democratic in the last year of being a colony, 30 have been democratic during the last ten years. With respect to the institutional persistence of democracy, the high share of territories with a self-governing status is also notable in both tables. In fact, there are only three democracies in non-self-governing colonies, namely one election in the *Assemblée Territoriale* of French Moyen Congo (the present Republic of Congo) from May 1957, the May 1962 elections in the Gambia (which gained home rule the year after), and elections in the UN trust territory of the Pacific Islands from 1966.

**Table 1.** Colonial institutions and modern institutions, immediately prior to independence

	Colonial autocracy	Colonial democracy
Modern autocracy	29 (18)	9 (6)
Modern democracy	7 (6)	30 (27)

Note: numbers in parenthesis refer to colonies that were self-governing immediately prior to independence.

**Table 2.** Colonial institutions and modern institutions, one election prior to independence

	Colonial autocracy	Colonial democracy
Modern autocracy	28 (7)	14 (2)
Modern democracy	8 (5)	25 (22)

Note: numbers in parenthesis refer to colonies that were self-governing already an election prior to independence.

Table 3 presents a simple linear estimation with Ordinary Least Squares (OLS), where we take a look at potential structural predictors of the existence of colonial democracy or representative institutions in a cross-sectional dataset of 65 former colonies. Both of these variables are observed five years before formal independence of the colony and immediately before the transition to independence. Most control variables refer to the data collected from the 1950-54 editions of the Statesman's Yearbook, as described in the preceding section, where we only do a simple log conversion of the total population and the total area covered by the colony. Following the literature, we further introduce a dummy for colonies of the British Commonwealth, and another one for French colonies. In addition, we introduce a dummy for colonies that are self-governing, which is derived from the Bjørnskov and Rode (2019) dataset. Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses.

The findings in Table 3 clearly show that none of these variables can be considered robust predictors of colonial democracy or representation. Only for the dependent variable 'democratic at independence', we find some indications that having an institution of tertiary education and being a British colony are both significantly and positively associated. In turn, a comparatively larger population and being self-governing both present a negative and significant association with this same dependent variable. Still, these variables are insignificant in the other four estimations, which is why we cannot consider them to be robust predictors of colonial democracy. Only for the case of explaining representative institutions at independence, we also find a significant and positive effect of having been a being a British colony, which is very much in line with large parts of the relevant literature (cf. Fails and Krieckhaus 2010; La Porta et al., 2008).

Notably, the share of the European population is always insignificant in Table 3. This sheds some doubt on the hypothesis that colonial powers were more likely to grant their colonies democratic (or representative) institutions during colonial rule, nor does it seem to be a factor for having been able to create democratic institutions at the moment of formal independence. If this factor cannot be proven to be relevant at this crucial moment for the political development of a

new country, one wonders how it is supposed to have a more long-run causal effect on the establishment of democratic political institutions.

**Table 3.** Predicting colonial democracy

	Democratic five years before independence	Democratic at independence	Representative institutions five years prior	Representative institutions at independence
European population	.084 (.143)	.043 (.033)	-.004 (.021)	-.009 (.028)
Log area	-.117 (.234)	.359 (.369)	-.477* (.245)	-.266 (.349)
Log population	-.422 (.464)	-1.271* (.711)	.123 (.426)	.126 (.667)
Secondary education	-1.179 (1.189)	2.251 (1.543)	1.107 (.849)	-.287 (1.028)
Higher education	.432 (1.369)	3.299** (1.633)	.007 (1.055)	-.996 (1.279)
British	1.390 (.856)	2.470*** (.918)	-.197 (.909)	2.076* (1.137)
French	-	-1.697 (1.545)	2.427* (1.361)	.323 (.939)
Self-governing	.266 (1.266)	-3.692* (1.969)	-.439 (1.188)	-1.236 (1.987)
Countries	65	65	65	65
Wald chi square	9.06	16.77	15.65	14.66
R squared	.304	.413	.224	.146

Note: \*\*\* (\*\*) [\*] denote significance at  $p < .01$  ( $p < .05$ ) [ $p < .10$ ]. All regressions include a constant term; numbers in parentheses are robust standard errors.

In the following, Table 4 presents results from a linear estimation with OLS, where we take a look at potential predictors of current democracy in the same cross-sectional dataset of 65 former colonies. The dependent variable is whether the country is classified as democratic in 2018, or the share of time it has been democratic for the last 25 years. We employ the same basic control variables as in Table 3, further introducing a series of dummy variables to capture political institutions of colonies at independence or five years prior. These are also from the data by Bjørnskov and Rode (2019), described in the preceding section.

The findings from Table 4 again show that none of the structural colonial variables that we collected from the Statesman's Yearbook can be considered robust predictors of current democracy. In fact, this time none of them show up as significant in all four regressions, which



again also includes the share of the European population. Similar to the findings above, this sheds some doubt on the hypothesis that settler colonies are substantially more likely to be democratic at the present moment, nor does it seem to be a significant factor for determining whether the former colony has been mostly democratic since formal independence.

In turn, the existence of a colonial democracy, either at the moment of independence, or five years before, is a statistically highly significant predictor of former colonies being an institutional democracy in Table 4. This is also true for both our dependent variables, the classification as democratic in 2018, and the share of time the respective country has been democratic for the last 25 years. Notably, at five years before a transition to independence, even having been a multiparty autocracy as a colony is positive and statistically highly significant for both dependent variables under independence.

These findings only point in one direction: the path dependent element that is present in formalized democratic institutions is indeed strong and highly persistent over time. As reviewed above, this finding is not specifically new, and we are merely able to verify this finding with new and somewhat more detailed cross-country data. Yet, contrary to some of the notable contributions in this area though, our findings do not point towards an influence of geography on settlement patterns, which thereby significantly condition the underlying post-independence institutional environment. Our findings rather point in the direction that once even rather rudimentary formal democratic institutions had been set up by the colonial power, for whatever reason that might be, these act as a powerful conditioning factor for future political development of former colonies. Whether these are of settler origin or of a more extractive nature, to use the terminology by Acemoglu et al. (2001), seems to be quite irrelevant for political development, although it is probably different for economic development.

**Table 4.** Predicting modern democracy

	Democratic 2018	Democratic 2018	Democracy share last 25 years	Democracy share last 25 years
European population	.002 (.026)	.001 (.019)	-.013 (.054)	.019 (.061)
Log area	-.225 (.212)	.112 (.205)	-.577 (.729)	.362 (.818)
Log population	-.047 (.362)	-.481 (.386)	-.280 (1.448)	-1.398 (1.533)
Secondary education	-1.189 (.953)	-.433 (.860)	-6.168* (3.632)	-2.943 (3.411)
Higher education	-.550 (1.129)	.357 (1.212)	-.926 (4.644)	1.891 (4.4809)
British	.031 (.940)	1.404 (.816)	-1.867 (3.162)	3.534 (3.123)
French	1.088 (1.198)	.034 (1.014)	1.723 (3.769)	-1.698 (3.711)
Self-governing	1.193 (1.229)	-.651 (1.404)	4.228 (4.285)	-3.197 (4.976)
<i>Institutions at independence</i>				
Single-party autocracy	-		6.483 (4.939)	
Multi-party autocracy	1.401 (1.355)		4.648 (3.182)	
Democracy	3.702** (1.527)		17.421*** (3.566)	
<i>Institutions five years prior</i>				
Multi-party autocracy		2.818** (1.393)		8.924*** (3.196)
Democracy		4.830*** (1.609)		19.344*** (3.609)
Countries	63	65	65	65
Wald / F stat	25.56	34.07	16.13	17.42
R squared	.266	.328	.463	.489

Note: \*\*\* (\*\*) [\*] denote significance at  $p < .01$  ( $p < .05$ ) [ $p < .10$ ]. All regressions include a constant term; numbers in parentheses are robust standard errors.

## Discussion

Employing a unique source of information for a large number of non-sovereign countries in the immediate aftermath of WWII, the *Statesman's Yearbook*, we explore some critical claims in the institutional democracy literature. Namely, whether certain features such as the size of the European population or the presence of institutions of higher education affect the probability of having representative political institutions prior to independence, and whether the influence of those same factors persist in the sense of affecting the choice of political institutions today.

Notably, we find absolutely no evidence that the size of the European population in the late colonial period matters for whether the country subsequently became democratic or, indeed,

whether the colonial institutions were representative or fully democratic. This sheds some doubt on the hypothesis that colonial powers were more likely to grant their colonies democratic (or representative) institutions during colonial rule, nor does it seem to be a factor for having been able to create democratic institutions at the moment of formal independence.

Our findings point in another direction: the path dependent element that is present in formalized democratic institutions is indeed strong and highly persistent over time. It seems that once even rather rudimentary formal democratic institutions had been set up by the colonial power, these acted as a powerful conditioning factor for future political development of former colonies. Probably, this is also what Acemoglu et al. (2001) were picking up with their historical data, but our more recent historical statistics put us in a position to be able to numerically distinguish between both concepts.

A separate question, nevertheless, is if the political institutions inherited from colonial times proved to be stable. Occasionally, coups lead to democratization although it remains the exception more than the rule (Derpanopoulos et al., 2016). If colonial history systematically affects the likelihood to experience coups, this could pose a potential problem for an analysis such as the one presented above. However, Bjørnskov and Rode (2019) find no evidence that colonial democracy affected the subsequent coup risk.

The hopeful message contained in our findings is that the promise of democracy is not necessarily one that has to be achieved over hundreds of years via systematic changes in informal institutions in order to be able to work properly. Within one generation, profound changes to formal institutions can potentially condition future decisions on political development and turn political democracy into a viable and stable choice. The crucial questions that arise from these findings are: First, whether formal path-dependent conditioning also exists for the renewed establishment of more authoritarian political institutions? And second, what factors exactly make these *special* moments in time possible, where profound institutional changes are made possible that conditions future political decisions to such a large degree?

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