Colonial Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the early twentieth century, the only democracies in the world were located in Western Europe and its settler colonies. The picture is more varied now. Non-Western countries such as India and Jamaica have been democracies for more than half a century, despite lacking many factors often cited as prerequisites for democracy. But stable democratic experiences are exceptional. In countries such as Uganda and Malaysia, democratic competition at independence gave way shortly afterwards to military coups or autogolpes. Many other countries, such as Angola, Kuwait, and Niger, were authoritarian at independence and did not establish democratic institutions until decades after independence, if ever.

Why some countries are democracies is a foundational question in comparative politics. In the enormous literature on this topic, scholars almost exclusively examine variation in democracy levels *after independence*. However, these theories overlook the profound institutional restructuring that occurred under Western colonialism. Although the overall practice of colonial governance was unmistakably authoritarian, by the mid-twentieth century most colonies adopted hybrid political institutions with pluralist elements. The origins of mass electoral competition for most contemporary countries thus occurred while they were under external

rule.

In this book, we provide a new theory and new empirical evidence to answer two questions. First, why did colonies vary in their electoral experiences under Western rule? Most Western colonies had elections of some kind. Among the 124 countries that gained independence from a Western power, all but six experienced at least one national election under colonial rule.[1] Yet there is much variation to explain among these elections, including the timing of the first election, why early electoral bodies were sometimes eliminated, who could participate, the role of elected versus appointed officials, and the legislative power of colonial bodies.

Second, did the colonial period matter for subsequent regime trajectories? We show that it is impossible to explain postcolonial democracies without understanding colonial origins. Most contemporary pluralistic regimes trace their roots at least in part in the colonial era. In 2020, 121 non-European countries were democracies or electoral autocracies. Of these, 107 experienced their first election under Western colonial rule, and almost all the exceptions were not colonized at all.

Yet postcolonial democracy was not the only, or even the most frequent, product of colonial elections. Countries with lengthy episodes of colonial pluralism, such as Canada, Jamaica, and India, usually became durable democracies. However, the most common sequel to shorter episodes of colonial pluralism was a military coup and decades of authoritarianism. Overall, electoral institutions during colonial rule and after independence are so highly correlated that we cannot understand contemporary levels of democracy outside Europe without understanding the colonial past. Colonial elections, *because*of their various flaws, put countries on divergent trajectories at independence that have largely reinforced themselves over time.

In addressing these two questions, we revisit perhaps the central question in comparative politics: the origins of democracy. Most leading theories of democratization focus solely on actors

[1]The number of distinct *colonies* that experienced elections is even higher, 166.

in sovereign states. Classic works analyze the interactions of various domestic social groups such as landed aristocrats, capitalist elites, military generals, the middle class, the working class, peasants, and the masses.[2] Causal factors posited to empower certain social groups at the expense of others include income growth,[3] asset mobility,[4] oil wealth,[5] and income inequality.[6] Many recent studies examine the role of elections within authoritarian regimes and the predictors of authoritarian stability.[7] These studies mention colonialism only as a source of divergence in structural conditions such as income inequality, which are then used to study postcolonial outcomes. These theories cannot explain how an external actor like a colonial ruler affects prospects for democracy or dictatorship differently than domestic actors, nor whether institutions constructed under external rule should persist afterwards. The democratization literature does not overlook external actors entirely, as some recent studies analyze attempts by the United States and Western Europe to promote democracy abroad.[8] However, these studies focus overwhelmingly on the post-Cold War period, when most of the world had already experienced elections of some kind.[9]

[2]Moore 1966; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992; Collier 1999; Mahoney and Snyder 1999; Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Ansell and Samuels 2014.

[3]Lipset 1959; Przeworski 2000; Acemoglu et al. 2008.

[4]Bates and Donald Lien 1985; Boix 2003.

[5]Gause 1994; Ross 2001, 2012.

[6]Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Ansell and Samuels 2014; Haggard and Kaufman 2012.

[7]Geddes 1999; Lust-Okar 2005; Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008; Blaydes 2010; Wright and Escribà-Folch 2012; Jensen, Malesky and Weymouth 2014; Miller 2015; Arriola, DeVaro and Meng 2021.

[8]Dunning 2004; Pevehouse 2005; Levitsky and Way 2010; Boix 2011; Gunitsky 2014; Hyde and Marinov 2014; Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015; Bush 2016; Haggard and Kaufman 2016.

[9]An important recent exception is Gerring et al. 2022, who examine European influence

The neglect of political institutions under colonialism extends to how scholars select their cases for quantitative or qualitative empirical tests. Most authors postcolonial cases, and most statistical tests use postindependence data. Many widely used cross-national measures of democracy, such as the Polity IV and Freedom House data sets, do not include colonized territories.[10] Thus, scholars of democratization usually study countries that have already established some kind of elections, but do not know how they acquired them.

To comprehend contemporary electoral institutions and democracy levels, we must understand the processes that created representative institutions under colonial rule. Colonial electoral institutions also offer a largely unexplored set of cases to test big ideas about causes of democracy.

Our book takes a broad historical and comparative focus. We collected a new global data set on colonial electoral institutions over the entire period of Western overseas rule. This approach enables us to study the origins and evolution of electoral, as opposed to focusing on a snapshot of political institutions at a particular time.

Our analysis highlights specific, albeit historically rare, conditions under which external rule promoted democracy. However, this finding neither requires nor supports a positive normative assessment of European colonialism overall. In most cases, colonial rule instead yielded postcolonial authoritarian regimes. Moreover, when stable democracy did emerge, it was almost always due to sustained pressure from non-European actors.

To explain the timing, form, and rationale for electoral institutions across Western colonies, in Chapter 2 we develop a theory of institutional reform that incorporates actors and motivations unique to the colonial context. We analyze the behavior of three policy-interested groups:

throughout the world during the second millennium.

[10]Marshall and Gurr 2014; Freedom House 2022. The more recent V-Dem data, which we discuss later, is an exception; see Coppedge 2018.

metropolitan officials; white settlers; and non-Europeans (both native inhabitants and forcibly migrated people). Metropolitan officials made the final decisions about constitutional form, but both types of colonists could exert pressure through various options: exit (threatening to leave the colony or not migrate there), voice (imposing political or social costs on European officials), and revolt. All three groups wanted economic and other policies favorable to their group, and thus wanted as much institutional control as possible.

Metropolitan institutions created a "democratic ceiling" for institutional reforms in their colonies. Metropolitan officials preferred institutions similar in form to those at home, and would not permit colonial institutions more democratic than those in the metropole. Since pressure from colonists, in the form of exit, voice, or revolt made it costly to perpetuate an authoritarian status quo, colonizers with more pluralistic metropolitan institutions usually made electoral concessions to powerful groups of colonists who met metropolitan voting requirements. By contrast, authoritarian metropolitan governments were categorically opposed to granting electoral concessions and would fight wars to avoid doing so.

The effect of white settlers depended on their numbers. Settlers had superior opportunities for voice and exit, and sometimes revolt as well. These privileges usually enabled white settlers to create representative institutions wherever they formed a sizable minority and the metropole had pluralistic institutions. However, white settlers were not unambiguously good for democracy. They created representative institutions exclusively for themselves and repressed non-whites who sought political rights. How these conflicting forces played out in practice depended on the size of the white settlement. When the white settlement was very large, the colonizer was willing to grant high levels of policymaking autonomy to settlers and the franchise became universal. However, when the white settlement was smaller, settlers gained representation for themselves but eventually had to turn to repression and other authoritarian stratagems to retain their monopoly of political power. These actions could undermine

the democratic foundations created by early elections.

Non-Europeans usually were less able to pressure the colonial state. They could gain electoral representation only when an influential non-white middle class emerged or the non-white masses posed a viable threat of rebellion. Emergent non-white middle classes in major port cities educated in the colonizer's language had opportunities to influence the metropole. It was difficult for colonizers to justify excluding the franchise from those who would have been eligible to vote at home and who could lobby the colonial state using its own language and cultural idiom. Since only a small segment of the non-white population exerted pressure, this usually yielded elections with limited franchises. As a last resort, non-Europeans could revolt, although this threat was only viable when the structure of the international system made colonizers believe that mass anti-colonial revolts would receive external support. Yet even in this context, metropolitan officials sometimes sought nondemocratic alternatives. Colonizers with a monarchy at home often handed off power to local monarchies with broad national legitimacy.

These broad theoretical themes explain variation in colonial electoral institutions across time and space, which we summarize in Table 1.1. In Chapter 3, we analyze early European colonies in the "New World," where British colonies were more democratic than others early on but not later. We explain this puzzle by through differences in the pluralism of metropolitan institutions and the perceived loyalty of white settlers. Until the French Revolution, Britain was the main colonizer with constitutional institutions at home. Across British North America and the West Indies, property-owning white men usually succeeded in pressing their claims that they deserved the same rights of representation as at home and gained high levels of policymaking autonomy. By contrast, British officials delayed electoral reforms in newer colonies whose white populations were predominantly Catholic—a group disenfranchised at home. Similarly, as Britain became less unique in its parliamentary constitution, elections emerged

elsewhere as well.

Table 1.1: **Theoretical Themes by Chapter**

	Chapter 3 (Pre–1850)	Chapter 4 (1850–1945)	Chapter 5 (Post–1945)
Authoritarian resistance	✓		✓
White settlers $\Longrightarrow$ early elections	✓	✓	
Settlers resist expansion to non-Europeans		✓	✓
Non-Euro middle class $\Longrightarrow$ early elections		✓	
Post–1945 threat of mass revolt			✓

In Chapter 4, we analyze the entire colonial world from the mid-nineteenth century through 1945. Nearly half of these colonies had some form of election before 1945. We explain this puzzle by expounding the enduring influence of white settlers and the rise of non-white middle classes. In some parts of Africa, whites settled in large enough numbers to become politically ascendant. Like their eighteenth-century predecessors, they gained whites-only elections. Elsewhere, the white population was too weak to maintain hegemony without external assistance. Rather than share power, white oligarchs in the British West Indies allied with metropolitan officials to disband electoral assemblies when they thought Blacks would gain a majority. Non-Europeans achieved representation only where they were part of a Western-assimilated middle class *and* white settlers were unimportant. South Asians and Africans in select port cities gained electoral representation in the 1920s or earlier, as did Blacks after the influence of white planters had waned in the British West Indies.

World War II was a watershed for Western colonialism, as we examine in Chapter 5. Weakened European powers confronted mass social movements that challenged colonial rule. To avoid costly rebellions, colonizers usually conceded elections and, eventually, independence to the non-European masses. Yet despite this common pressure, the pace of reform and ap-

proaches to decolonization varied greatly across colonies due to variation in all three factors in our theory. Britain's stably democratic institutions facilitated a more measured approach to decolonization, in contrast to hasty concessions implemented by most other metropolitan democracies. Yet Britain's constitutional monarchy also increased its tolerance for handing off power to unelected local monarchs. Although most colonizers preferred reform over confronting a rebellion, in Portugal (the major authoritarian colonizer) and white settler colonies in Africa, Europeans refused to grant concessions that would diminish their economic and political power. Their intransigence fostered decolonization wars in which rebel movements gained control of the postcolonial state.

This new theoretical understanding and empirical documentation of colonial elections explains postcolonial democracy levels, which we analyze in Chapter 6. Experiences with colonial pluralism and democracy levels at independence are strongly positively correlated with democracy levels afterwards.

The rare cases with long periods of elections and a high degree of colonial pluralism tended to remain stable democracies afterwards. Most frequently, a non-white middle class speaking the colonizer's language emerged in the nineteenth century and pressed for representative institutions by lobbying the metropole. Because these institutional concessions did not occur when withdrawal was imminent, these colonies gained extensive electoral experience. Political parties and a political class of elected politicians gained experience and sunk costs within a democratic system before gaining independence, as in India and Jamaica. After independence, institutionalized parties acted as a buffer against possible military intervention.

In a small number of cases when Europeans were a majority of the colonial population, early representation for white settlers promoted durable democracy. In the historically unique "neo-Britains" (United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), the white population was so large that, after independence, the white political elite could preserve broad suffrage despite promot-

ing the their community above others. But these settler cases were exceptional. In cases like Zimbabwe with smaller white communities, the intransigent stance of settlers led to war, military defeat, and postcolonial rebel regimes that dismantled earlier electoral institutions.

Countries with late electoral reforms tended to be much less democratic at independence. Often, elections became nationalized and suffrage became broad less than a decade, and sometimes only months, before gaining independence. Parties tended to be weaker in these cases as well, and elections were not perceived as the exclusive means of gaining and retaining power. The democratic institutions that existed after independence were often quickly swept away by military coups (e.g., Uganda) or incumbent consolidation (e.g., Ivory Coast).

Finally, some colonial states forbade any (meaningful) elections. The result was usually durable authoritarian regimes led by a rebel group that gained power at independence after winning a war against the intransigent colonizer (e.g., Angola) or by a local monarch to whom the colonizer had delegated power (e.g., Qatar). Despite their very distinct institutional arrangements, these two types of authoritarian regimes were able to survive for long periods, often until the present day.

These varying postcolonial experiences underscore the generic difficulties to establishing stable democratic regimes from above, even when the external power is democratic and exerts significant control over the institutional form. Two main contradictions prevented successful democracy promotion in most cases. First, the actors best positioned to set up representative institutions—white settlers—were also an elite landed class that sought to preserve their socioeconomic privileges. Thus, some of the most pluralistic regimes in earlier colonial years faced significant obstacles to gaining majority rule and to institutionalizing non-European-led parties within the electoral system. Second, for metropolitan officials, establishing democratic institutions in their colonies was either antithetical to their goals or at best secondary—even if the home regime was a democracy. British officials often discussed how promoting democ-

racy would enable them to make an "honourable" exit without a war or scandal.[11] However, this was only one of several goals that sometimes clashed. British, and especially French, officials often acted to establish representative institutions and to broaden the franchise only in the shadow of withdrawal. Sometimes, they preferred a stable dictatorship over an unstable democracy.

Our original data on colonial elections spans a global sample across four centuries. We code (a) the presence (or absence) of elections to a territory-wide electoral body, (b) whether local politicians have high autonomy over colonial policies, and (c) legal restrictions on the franchise. We include elections to both colonial legislatures and metropolitan parliaments, the latter of which is relevant for capturing variation among French and Spanish colonies. However, we exclude elections to bodies that governed only particular localities. Municipal councils in British colonies and town councils (*cabildos*) in Spanish America more closely resembled the very local and largely unimportant elections in contemporary closed dictatorships such as China. In most cases, regular elections occurred between the first year in which an election occurred and the year the country gained independence, although our data set also captures exceptions in which autocratic reversions occurred.

The main advantage of our data is its broad spatial and temporal coverage. For our analysis of colonies in the New World before 1850, we code the variables at the level of the contemporaneous colony rather than modern countries. This yields seventy-seven colonies for this region and time period alone, a much larger number than if we would obtain by anachronistically using the boundaries of modern countries. In the current United States, we include not only the colonies that declared independence in 1776 but also earlier colonies such as Plymouth, New Haven, and West Jersey; temporary colonies such as East/West Florida; and colonies relinquished by another European power, such as New Netherland and New France. We also

[11] Young 1970, 482.

include colonies that never gained independence, such as Bermuda and Martinique.

We take a broad view of what constitutes a Western European colony, and include polities in which the role of the colonial power relatively limited to external affairs. These units are often excluded from data sets on colonialism, which can create bias. For example, the more standard practice of excluding the British Persian Gulf states from analyses of British colonialism tends to lead to erroneous conclusions about democracy levels in British colonies. We only exclude cases in which foreign powers did not establish formal sovereignty, such as China.

Using our data, we document elections across four centuries of overseas rule over 166 Western European colonies encompassing 118 modern-day countries. We compiled information about which social groups had the franchise at various points in time, the proportion of elected members in the legislature, and the autonomy of elected officials relative to the metropole.

We complement our original data with the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data set.[12] This data set measures thousands of attributes of democracy and improves on earlier democracy data sets such as Polity IV by including information about non-sovereign territories. For colonies that gained independence after 1945, these data go back to 1900. Therefore, for most cases outside Latin America, we have information on a range of institutions for over a half century before independence, including measures of the competitiveness of elections and a full panel on the size of the legal franchise. However, the temporal and spatial coverage of V-Dem is more circumscribed than our core data set because V-Dem starts centuries later, uses a more stringent population threshold, and excludes most territories that never gained independence.

Although many foundational studies on democratization overlook the colonial era, we are certainly not the first scholars to analyze colonial political institutions. Yet we contend that we provide the first comprehensive social scientific analysis of electoral institutions across all

[12] Coppedge 2018.

of Western colonialism. Existing work focuses on specific time periods or regions and, usually, a single causal factor. By analyzing the entire period of Western colonialism, we demonstrate that monocausal explanations can at best explain only part of the bigger picture.

An early and influential argument about colonial legacies was that British colonialism promoted democracy.[13] We instead demonstrate that the British empire was too heterogeneous to make unconditional statements about the consequences of British rule. In the mid-eighteenth century, more British colonies had elections than others because the other imperial metropoles were absolutist. As France democratized and Britain conquered more territory, this advantage dissipated. Later, after 1945, British colonies with non-white middle classes and early elections were the most democratic colonies in our sample.[14] Yet British-sponsored monarchies were wholly undemocratic and British colonies with late electoral reforms were not notably more democratic than French colonies.[15]

[13]Huntington 1984, 206, Weiner 1987; de Silanes et al. 1998; La Porta et al. 1999; Abernethy 2000, 406; Treisman 2000, 418–27; Ferguson 2012; Narizny 2012, 362. Lange 2004, 2009 analyzes a distinct source of heterogeneity within the British empire: the directness of rule. Lange, Mahoney and vom Hau 2006 and Mahoney 2010 study how the directness of rule affected development trajectories within the British and Spanish empires.

[14]These are the cases on which scholars, such as Weiner 1987, usually focus when proclaiming the beneficial effects of British colonialism: "every single country in the third world that emerged from colonial rule since the second world war with a population of at least one million (and almost all the smaller countries as well) with a continuous democratic experience is a former British colony."

[15]In earlier work, we find that the aggregate British advantage was stronger at independence than afterwards; see Lee and Paine 2019. We also discussed why existing research comes to varying conclusions about the importance of British colonialism: it depends on which cases the researcher counts as a British colony and on the time period analyzed.

Other scholars take the opposite position, that colonizer identity cannot explain variation in political institutions. Engerman and Sokoloff argue that early British North American colonies gained representative institutions not because they were British, but instead because factor endowments in North America were more conducive to family farms and local democracy. By contrast, larger indigenous populations in New Spain (Mexico) and Peru facilitated coercive labor institutions and authoritarian governance.[16] However, factor endowments cannot explain the ubiquity of representative institutions among early English-settled colonies compared to their near absence elsewhere. Representative institutions became widespread across the British West Indies in the seventeenth century despite factor endowments that encouraged coercive labor institutions to produce sugar on plantations. Conversely, Spanish Southern Cone colonies and French Canada did not gain representative institutions despite factor endowments that made family farms economically viable. In these areas, the smaller population of Spanish and French settlers (compared to their British counterparts) reflected a conscious decision by an authoritarian metropole to limit the groups of people permitted to migrate to the colonies.

Another thesis proposed in the literature is that white settlements benefited democracy.[17] This

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[16]Engerman and Sokoloff 2011, 44–46, 218. For other examples of authors that reject the importance of British colonialism, see Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2001, 1388; Hariri 2012, 474; Woodberry 2012, 254. Owolabi 2014 describes the broader turn away from colonizer identity in recent research. For related research on factor endowments, see Sokoloff and Engerman 2000; Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2002*a*; Frankema 2009*a*; Bruhn and Gallego 2012; Arias and Girod 2014; Gailmard 2017.

[17]Hariri 2012, 2015 and Gerring et al. 2022 provide evidence for positive postcolonial democratic legacies. Many studies on how colonial European settlers positively affected economic development discuss colonial political institutions as a key intervening mechanism; see Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2001; Engerman and Sokoloff 2011; Easterly and Levine

research focuses on what we have termed the pro-democratic effect of settlers. However, we also demonstrate an anti-democratic effect of white settlers stemming from their motives to resist the expansion of political participation beyond the white community, with examples from the British West Indies, settler regions of Africa, Spanish America, and the U.S. South.[18] Overall, besides the four historically exceptional neo-Britains, white settlers rarely bequeathed beneficial democratic legacies.[19]

British colonialism, factor endowments, and European settlers are the most widely studied explanatory variables in the colonialism literature. However, more recent research emphasizes the importance of other colonial institutions and actors that help to explain *why* non-white middle classes arose in some cases but not others. Some scholars highlight how slavery shaped the evolution of colonial political institutions, in particular in the West Indies.[20] Paradoxically, colonies with large enslaved populations eventually enjoyed favorable conditions for developing democratic political institutions. After emancipation, previously enslaved persons usually gained metropolitan legal rights and mass access to Western education. We build on these insights by situating West Indian democracies among the broader set of colonies (including parts of South Asia and Africa) in which non-Europeans formed a middle class educated in the colonizer's language and pushed for early electoral representation. Other scholars focus on the role of Protestant missionaries in spreading educational access among non-Europeans, which fostered pro-democratic legacies.[21]

2016. Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, 2020 discuss how colonial settlers created conflicting legacies from their establishment of exclusive property rights institutions.

[18]This part of the argument builds on our earlier work; see Paine 2019*a*,*b*.

[19]Fails and Krieckhaus 2010 offer a similar conclusion about white settlers and economic development legacies.

[20]Ledgister 1998; Owolabi 2015, 2022.

[21]Lankina and Getachew 2012; Woodberry 2012; although see Nikolova and Polansky 2021 for evidence to the contrary.

In sum, we establish that political representation emerged and was sustained by the interaction among metropolitan political institutions, the size of the white settlement, and the pressure exerted by non-Europeans. These factors varied across time and space, which yielded varying patterns of political institutions and divergent inheritances that continue to heavily influence regime trajectories to the present day.