What Were the Consequences of Decolonization?

RESEARCH NOTE

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Extensive research suggests that European rule negatively affected political and economic development in their colonies. But did outcomes improve after colonial rule ended? Studying post–World War II independence cases, we statistically examine consequences of postwar decolonization—which includes both colonial autonomy and independence—for democracy, internal conflict, government revenue growth, and economic growth using two-way fixed-effects models. We find that democracy levels increased sharply as colonies gained internal autonomy in the period immediately before their independence. However, conflict, revenue growth, and economic growth did not systematically differ before and after independence. Accounting for varieties of colonial institutions or for endogenous independence timing produces similar results. Except for democratic gains, the overall findings—juxtaposed with existing research—suggest that, although European colonial empires created deleterious long-term effects, decolonization exhibited less pronounced political consequences than sometimes thought.

Western European empires covered the globe for considerable portions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A vibrant literature examines the long-term effects of European colonialism by comparing postcolonial outcomes—often measured in recent decades—across countries with varied colonial experiences. Many examine effects of different colonial policies and institutions on economic development (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Banerjee and Iyer 2005; Engerman and Sokoloff 2011), democracy (Weiner 1987; Mamdani 1996; Lankina and Getachew 2012; Owolabi 2015; De Juan and Pierskalla 2017; Lee and Paine 2019), internal warfare (Reid 2012; Mukherjee 2017), and state capacity (Young 1994; Herbst 2014; Lee 2018). These scholars generally conclude that most types of colonial institutions and policies negatively affected long-term outcomes.

Most of this research overlooks the possible effects of a key intervening effect—gaining political independence—on political and economic outcomes. The majority of European colonies gained independence during a massive decolonization wave following World War II. Historians and policy organizations routinely emphasize its importance: "The sheer scope of imperial collapse and new-state formation has no precedent in history . . . Almost 40 percent of the world's population—2.2 billion people in the year 2000—inhabits states that made the transition from colonial to independent status between 1940 and 1980" (Abernethy 2000, 133). The United Nations (n.d.) proudly proclaims, "[t]he wave of decolonization, which changed the face of the planet . . . represents the world body's first great success," and many link decolonization with developing global human rights norms (Crawford 2002). Four of the twenty most influential political figures of the twentieth century led decolonization movements (Time 1999). Historians and political scientists analyze causes of the postwar decolonization wave, including weakened European powers, the rise of superpowers opposed to European colonization, and increased mobilization ability among colonial subjects (Burbank and Cooper 2011, 413–42; Gartzke and Rohner 2011; Pepinsky 2015; Paine 2018b).

However, researchers devote less systematic attention to whether decolonization during the 1940s and 1960s—which includes gaining independence and preindependence reforms that created autonomous internal rule—fundamentally changed political and economic outcomes. Existing theories and historical accounts provide conflicting expectations that require concerted statistical assessment. Contemporary anticolonial activists believed that independence would improve political freedom and economic development (Naoroji 1901; Furnivall 2014, 513–29). Later scholars emphasize the importance of democratic reforms leading up to independence (Young 1970, 463–69) and of local actors controlling their own investments in public goods after independence. By contrast, cost-conscious metropoles tended to underinvest in public goods despite their development benefits (Booth 2007; Huillery 2009; Donaldson 2018).

By contrast, defenders of colonialism such as Lugard (1922) predicted that losing the European connection would produce institutionally weak and politically unstable independent states devoid of bureaucratic expertise and pacifying capacity. Furthermore, even some scholars who do not sympathize with colonial rule highlight perverse incentives that postcolonial rulers faced given revenue shortfalls (Bates 1981, 14–8) and the risk of coups (Roessler 2011).

Yet another perspective anticipates minimal differences before and after independence. Herbst (2014) stresses broader impediments to state-building in Africa that independence did not fundamentally alter. Many argue that gaining independence did not change the dependent

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position of now-former colonies in the international economy (Cardoso and Faleto 1979) or in the broader international hierarchy of states (Lake 2009, 39), nor did independence fundamentally alter deeper institutions that affected prospects for economic development and democracy.

This research note advances knowledge about the consequences of decolonization. Using a cross-national panel dataset of outcomes and European colonial status between the end of World War II and the end of the Cold War, we examine variation within countries over time between the colonial and postcolonial eras. We focus on four key outcomes: democracy, internal conflict, government revenue growth, and economic growth.

Our statistical models account for confounding influences of heterogeneity across territories and of global historical changes by including both unit and year fixed effects. The main models implicitly assume that gaining independence exerted the same effect across colonial institutions, but additional models include interaction terms for varieties of colonial institutions studied in the existing literature: Africa and non-Africa, ex-British and non-British colonies, length of colonial rule, state antiquity, colonial European population size, and disrupted rule during World War II. Furthermore, despite inherent difficulties of addressing endogenous independence timing in an observational design, we also analyze subsets of colonies for which local considerations only minimally affected the timing of independence and of internal autonomy. These include French Sub-Saharan countries pushed out of the French empire simultaneously in 1960 and "minor" colonies for which events in neighboring "major" colonies largely determined independence timing, measured by comparing the size of colonies' populations (total and European). This setup provides an informative first cut for learning about several key political and economic consequences of decolonization.

The analysis yields two main findings. First, democracy levels increased sharply during the period of internal autonomy that preceded independence in most countries. Although the colonial era as a whole was authoritarian, colonizers—especially Britain—promoted elections and democratic rule in their colonies immediately before granting independence. This provides systematic evidence of an important but largely understudied contributing factor in the "Second Wave" of democracy that followed World War II.

Second, the main models and numerous robustness checks show that gaining independence does not systematically correlate with internal war, revenue growth, or economic growth—contrary to many of the arguments previewed above. We stress, however, that our many null findings do not imply that colonial domination was inconsequential. We use within-country variation to compare postwar colonial rule to postindependence governance, which provides insight into some important questions about the consequences of ending colonial rule. However, we cannot compare colonial rule to noncolonial rule because we do not observe countries under a counterfactual world in which European colonization did not occur.[1] If the thrust of existing colonialism research is correct, then a natural interpretation of the present findings—although one we cannot directly verify—is that colonial rule in many countries altered social and institutional structures so funda-

mentally that simply eliminating the subordinate legal relationship to the metropole could not erase the deep (and, in many cases, negative) impact of external rule. Colonialism often created or reinforced social structures that impeded political and economic progress and fixed colonies into a dependent position in the world economy and hierarchy of states. The conclusion elaborates upon these takeaways and implications for broader international relations phenomena.

Consequences of Gaining Independence: Existing Arguments

Democracy

Almost axiomatically, European colonial rule inhibited democratic representation. Except in several self-governing settler colonies, European rulers lacked political accountability to the colonial population (Mamdani 1996; Furnivall 2014). Responding to low popular support for colonial policies, colonizers often created despotic local leaders (Mamdani 1996) and relied heavily on coercion (Young 1994, 77–140).

But these broad observations about colonial rule do not preclude the possibility that democracy levels increased leading up to independence. European colonizers expanded political representation for natives, and Britain in particular prioritized "honourable exit" from its colonies by promoting democracy (Young 1970, 482). For example, in India, Britain began introducing elections at increasingly higher levels of government between the 1920s and 1930s, partly reacting to local demands. Indians developed political parties, such as the Indian National Congress, to contest elections. France also introduced electoral reforms in its Sub-Saharan African colonies after World War II, culminating with full legal suffrage in 1956. If these arguments are correct and these examples generalize, then the late decolonization period should associate with democratic gains.

We lack clear theoretical expectations for whether postcolonial rulers should sustain any democratic gains. Although eliminating external rule should facilitate more extensive native representation in government, postindependent nations also faced difficulties sustaining foreign-imposed electoral institutions amid largely unfavorable international conditions (Lee and Paine 2019).

Alternatively, attempts to expand rights in the late colonial era may not have mattered. Recent scholarship on colonial causes of postindependence democracy focuses mostly on factors rooted deeper in the colonial period such as British legal institutions (Weiner 1987, 10–11), Protestant missionaries (Lankina and Getachew 2012; Woodberry 2012), and colonial-era European settlers (Engerman and Sokoloff 2011; Hariri 2012). These scholars anticipate minimal change in democracy levels near independence because the deeper cultural and political institutions predicting democracy—such as common law tradition and higher literacy rates from Protestant missionaries—did not change.

Economic Growth

Many scholars agree that variation in colonial policies exerted important long-term consequences for economic growth. Numerous colonial institutions should reduce economic production by weakening property rights and by increasing inequality, including forced labor institutions (Dell 2010), institutions regulating land tenure (Banerjee and Iyer 2005), and "extractive" institutions generally

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[1] Appendix Section A.8 examines more suggestive comparisons between postindependence years and the "high" colonial era (1919–1945), finding that, although this earlier colonial period exhibited greater peace than the postindependence period, it was also highly authoritarian and less fiscally effective.

(Acemoglu et al. 2001). Conversely, scholars show that areas with common law legal systems (La Porta, Lopez de Silanes and Schliefer 1998) and participatory institutions (Engerman and Sokoloff 2011, 94–120) exhibit stronger property rights protection and faster economic growth.

However, by focusing solely on long-term persistence, these accounts do not yield clear implications for decolonization consequences. If colonial institutions were rooted deeply enough, then perhaps decolonization would not change outcomes. This perspective mirrors dependency theories. Authors such as Cardoso and Faleto (1979) allege that colonial rule imposed harm, but they do not expect deleterious effects to fade away at independence because ex-colonies constituted a peripheral role in a global economy dominated by first world countries. Research on hierarchy in international relations implicitly echoes this perspective (Lake 2009, 39; Mattern and Zarakol 2016).

Alternatively, shifting power to local rulers could positively affect growth despite minimally altering institutions. Colonial economic investments often bolstered development (Booth 2007; Huillery 2009; Donaldson 2018). However, colonial governments suspicious of mass literacy often underinvested in human capital and related public goods (Chaudhary 2010). Therefore, postcolonial rulers' pursuit of policies more favorable toward the local economy may enable higher economic growth.

But, conversely, removing development benefits of external rule at the end of colonialism could negatively affect economic growth. For example, the introduction to Ferguson (2012) argues that "the British empire acted as an agency for imposing free markets, the rule of law, investor protection, and relatively incorrupt government." This view alleges that independence undermined the state as a neutral arbiter when combined with arguments that postcolonial rulers often favor coethnics in public good provision despite causing economic distortions (Bates 1981). Independence would also reduce protection for foreign investors—no longer investing in their own currency or under their own political and legal system—and perhaps cause capital and expertise outflows.

Government Revenue

Herbst's (2014) influential scholarship on governance in Africa associates colonial rule with weak states. Colonizers faced few incentives to invest in public goods or to collect difficult sources of tax revenue. Instead, they usually constructed bureaucratically minimal states that sought enough revenue intake simply to balance the budget, and local elites provided many core functions (Berry 1992; Mamdani 1996; Gardner 2012). Conversely, indigenously ruled parts of empires, such as princely states in India, tended to accrue larger tax revenues (Iyer 2010). After independence, positive demand-side consequences of decolonization caused by broader political participation provided rulers with greater need to provide goods like education. However, perhaps the expertise of European empires with lengthy histories of bureaucratic government (Bockstette, Chanda and Putterman 2002) combined with the raw coercive power of *bula mutari* (Young 1994) more effectively raised revenue, indicating that decolonization should negatively affect the supply of bureaucratic institutions.

Alternatively, decolonization may have minimally affected fiscal capacity. Despite highlighting many shortcomings of colonial rule, Herbst (2014) and Mamdani (1996) consider the colonial and postcolonial periods in Africa as two episodes in a region in which deeper structural factors impede projecting political power. This suggests that low fis-

cal capacity should persist after independence, which statistical evidence from Africa supports (Thies 2009). Similarly, Chaudhary (2013, 15) notes, "[b]y underinvesting . . . colonial rule did constrain the development of primary education in India. But, this does not imply India would have enjoyed better outcomes as an independent state."

Conflict

Although many emphasize that establishing colonial rule caused social disruption and violence (Wimmer and Min 2006), once consolidated, colonial rule did not necessarily exhibit heightened conflict levels. On the one hand, contemporary Europeans characterized colonial governments as disinterested yet militarily strong regimes that eliminated endemic local violence, such as conflicts during Africa's nineteenth-century military revolution (Reid 2012, 107–46). In these accounts, colonial militaries' superior ability to maintain internal peace engendered a *Pax Colonia*, perhaps because European militaries exhibited superior force capabilities or because European generals' staunch loyalty eliminated coup fears. By contrast, in the postcolonial world, rulers fearful of insider takeover often exclude rival ethnic groups from government—increasing civil war likelihood (Roessler 2011).

On the other hand, colonial rule also created conflict-inducing conditions such as light European presence on the ground, unpopular foreign rule, and coercion-intensive policies. After World War II, enhanced mobilization ability by subject populations exacerbated these vulnerabilities (Young 1970). Regarding decolonization, although European powers usually expanded political rights and then granted independence to avoid facing armed rebel groups, power vacuums created by transitioning state authority could trigger war before or shortly after independence (Fearon and Laitin 2003, 81). Combining these conflict-enhancing and conflict-suppressing effects also yields the possibility of net null consequences from gaining independence.

Data and Models

This section describes the main variables and models, and Appendix Table A.1 provides summary statistics.

Sample

The unit of analysis is territory-years, including years under colonization and after independence. The main results compare independent years to post–World War II colonialism. By only analyzing countries that gained independence from Western European colonial rule between 1945 and 1989, we observe outcomes both before and after independence for every territory in the sample (which models with unit fixed effects require). The panel includes annual data between 1941 and 1989. The starting year allows five years before independence for the earliest independent countries in our sample. We are agnostic regarding when any systematic effects should emerge, which motivates evaluating all outcomes along the same time horizon.

Dependent Variables

V-Dem's electoral democracy index measures democracy level (Coppedge et al. 2018). Unlike other commonly used democracy measures, V-Dem extensively covers territories even under colonial rule. We coded *internal war* onset by combining Correlates of War's intrastate and extrastate war

data (Sarkees and Wayman 2010) and use additional sources for smaller territories. The onset variable equals 1 in the first year of a war and 0 in all subsequent years, and these models also include lagged war incidence. Most extrastate wars involve a colony fighting against a European power, and we match these wars to the colony where fighting occurred. We measure government revenue growth using growth in logged per capita central government revenue in ounces of gold, taken from Mitchell (1998) and converted to gold by Lee and Paine (2018), who omit territory-years with inconvertible currencies. Maddison (2008) provides data from which we compute growth in logged income per capita. His data exhibit broad global coverage starting in 1950 and scattered prior coverage. Correspondingly, the income growth regressions begin in 1951, as opposed to 1941 for the other dependent variables.

Democracy and income exhibit broad coverage: sixty-six and sixty-two countries, respectively, in the main regression table (Table 2). Despite available internal war data for every territory, these regressions exhibit smaller sample sizes (thirty-one countries) because logit models with unit fixed effects drop territories that experienced no conflicts during the sample time period. The revenue variable covers fewer countries (thirty-seven countries). However, this still improves considerably over existing datasets with poor spatial and/or temporal coverage before 1970, when the widely used International Monetary Fund's (2017) dataset begins.

Appendix Tables A.2 through A.5 present the average value of each dependent variable by territory during the nonautonomous colonial, colonial autonomy, and postindependent periods. These tables therefore also list the sample for each dependent variable.

Independence and Autonomous Colonial Rule

A country gained political independence when the European colonizer granted complete formal sovereignty to a local government, including full control over domestic and foreign policy. Gleditsch and Ward (1999) provide the independence year for our dataset. In many colonies, formal independence culminated a gradual decolonization process.

Prior to granting complete independence, the metropole often delegated control over internal affairs to local leaders (elected or not) while the colonial power dictated foreign and defense policy. Colonial autonomy is theoretically relevant for understanding the consequences of decolonization. Whether or not local actors participated in elections and controlled tax policy could produce divergent outcomes from regular colonial rule. In most cases, actors anticipated that they would eventually gain independence, but usually could not predict its exact timing. In colonies such as Bhutan, subjects enjoyed autonomy throughout the colonial period but Britain did not develop concrete plans for independence until after World War II. When internal autonomy began in French Sub-Saharan Africa in 1958, neither French nor African leaders anticipated France liquidating its empire in 1960. For other colonies, such as Gold Coast/Ghana between 1954 and 1957, colonial autonomy represented a transitional phase with concrete plans for independence.

We capture this important historical consideration by coding an indicator variable for years of colonial autonomy, the first quantitative data we are aware of on this topic.[2] In autonomous colonies, the colony-level government re-

cruited residents from the colony and fully controlled internal affairs. In most cases, the metropole retained emergency powers and controlled defense and foreign affairs. By contrast, arrangements that delegated control only to local governments or only to particular policy areas (for example, education but not the police) do not meet our autonomy criterion. The specific constitutional terminology for colonial autonomy varied across empires: British dominions and self-governing colonies, nonindependent states within the French community, and US commonwealths. Elsewhere, although many protectorates and trusteeship arrangements exhibited some degree of autonomy, only territories in which the colonial power played no domestic role meet our autonomy criteria.

Statistical Models

Various possible confounders complicate identifying decolonization effects. Cross-country differences related to the different outcomes could affect independence timing. Each model addresses this issue by including territory fixed effects. Furthermore, secular trends in the outcomes imply that changes in the international environment and other time effects may confound identifying decolonization effects, which we address by including year fixed effects in almost every model. Below we detail policy choices that affected the decolonization process, and address concerns about country-specific time trends affecting countries' independence year.

Every model contains a postindependence indicator, lagged one year. For the three continuous outcome variables, we estimate linear models with a lagged dependent variable (Beck and Katz 2011), and for internal war onset we estimate logit models with lagged internal war incidence, peace-years, and cubic splines (Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998; McGrath 2015). The equation is as follows:

$$Y_{i,t} = \alpha Y_{i,t-1} + \beta \text{ Independent}_{i,t-1} + \gamma_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{i,t}, \qquad (1)$$

where $Y_{i,t}$ is the outcome variable, β is the coefficient estimate for independent governance, γ_i is a vector of territory fixed effects, and δ_t is a vector of year fixed effects. Some models add a colonial autonomy indicator to assess effects of internal self-rule (as distinct from full independence):

$$Y_{i,t} = \alpha Y_{i,t-1} + \beta_1 \text{ Autonomy}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{ Independent}_{i,t-1}$$
$$+ \gamma_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{i,t}, \qquad (2)$$

which leaves colonized years without internal autonomy as the omitted basis category. Later, we add interactions for various colonial institutions to the models. Every model clusters standard errors by territory.

Finally, we assess our dependent variables for nonstationarity by running a series of unreported Fisher-type unit-root tests based on augmented Dickey-Fuller tests. For each dependent variable, we calculate residuals from auxiliary regressions that include the unit and year fixed effects, and for all four residualized variables these tests reject at the 1 percent significance level the null hypothesis that all panels contain unit roots.

Robustness Checks

Table 1 lists every robustness check for Table 2 discussed in the appendix.

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[2] Our coding sources include Brownlie and Burns (1979), Page and Sonnenburg (2003), and Encyclopedia Britannica articles.

Table 1. Additional appendix robustness checks for Table 2

Table	Description
	Alternative time periods and measures
A.6	Truncates the time sample to ten years before and ten years after independence
A.7	Expands the time sample back to 1919
A.8	Disaggregates the last five years of colonial rule and first five years of independence
A.9	Uses available alternative measures for the dependent variables
A.10	Uses an independence indicator lagged by ten years
A.25	Compares postindependence years to the high colonial period (1919–1945)
	Alternative specifications for statistical models
A.11	Uses the other dependent variables as control variables
A.12	Controls for percentage of independent neighboring countries
A.13	Includes second-order lags for the dependent and explanatory variables
A.14	Aggregates within-treatment time units to address concerns about biased standard-error estimates with serially correlated data
A.15	Uses a weighted fixed-effects estimator to eliminate possible bias from heterogeneous treatment effects in two-way fixed-effects models
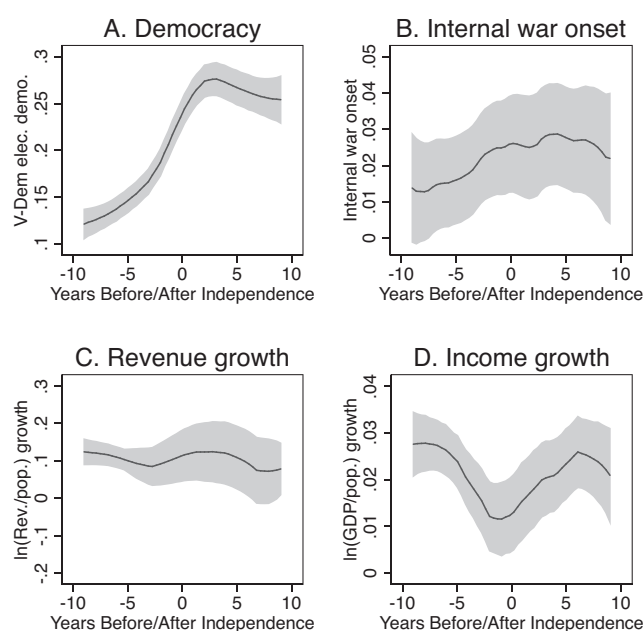
Figure 1. Outcomes before and after independence
Notes: Figure 1 plots a local polynomial function and 95 percent confidence interval for each outcome in the decades preceding and following independence.

Main Patterns

We show that colonial autonomy covaries with large and robust democratic gains, but all other relationships between the decolonization indicators and outcomes are null. Figure 1 depicts democracy levels, internal war onset, revenue growth, and income growth. The figure maintains a constant basket of countries by including the first decade before and the first decade after independence, although the regression models include all available data. Appendix Figure A.1 shows trends in democracy and in conflict for the eighty-year window around independence. The panels present local polynomial regressions with 95 percent confidence intervals and demonstrate heterogeneous patterns. Most striking, democracy levels increased dramatically in the few years before independence before stabilizing and slightly declining after independence. In the first full year of independence, average democracy scores are 89 percent higher than five years before, but drop by 15 percent in the decade following independence. Albeit less pronounced, internal warfare onset and revenue growth both increase prior to independence before dropping afterward. Income growth exhibits the opposite pattern, dropping before independence and rising afterward.

Table 2 presents the main regression estimates. Panel A estimates Equation 1 to provide initial insight into the differences between pre- and postindependence. Despite null correlations between the independence indicator and each outcome, the models are fairly tightly estimated. The estimated standard errors for independence are small relative to the standard deviation of the outcome variable: 3 percent for democracy, 8 percent for conflict, 13 percent for revenue growth, and 10 percent for income growth. Unreported models that do not cluster the standard error estimates—therefore assuming independence among the hundreds or thousands of observations in each specification—produce qualitatively similar results, further suggesting that low statistical power does not drive the null correlations.

The figures and some theories suggest that disaggregating the immediate preindependence period may produce additional insights. Panel B of Table 2 estimates Equation 2, which distinguishes autonomous colonial rule from other colonial years. The main finding shows that autonomous rule exhibited considerable democratic gains. The estimated long-run effect of the gains during this period relative to the rest of the colonial era equals 0.19.[3] This estimate exceeds mean democracy level in the sample in 1945 by 1.4 standard deviations and slightly exceeds the difference in democracy levels between Jamaica and Ghana in 1970. Appendix Table A.16 demonstrates robustness to alternative democracy measures by showing that all ten of V-Dem's aggregate democracy indices besides the electoral democracy index yield similar results as Table 2.

Two potential confounding concerns seem unlikely to drive this finding. First, is democracy linked by definition to decolonization? Although it may seem axiomatic that decolonization should coincide with electoral reforms, this was a historically contingent aspect of post–World War II Western European decolonization. Referencing earlier decolonization periods, Spain did not create meaningful representative electoral institutions within its American colonies in the early nineteenth century, and South Africa retained a very restrictive franchise at independence in 1910. The Soviet Union did not promote electoral representation in its

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[3] The long-run effect equals the coefficient estimate for independence divided by 1 minus the coefficient estimates for the lagged dependent variable: $\frac{\hat{\beta}}{1-\hat{\alpha}}$.

Table 2. Decolonization consequences: panel data from 1941 to 1989

	Panel A. Postindependence vs. colonial rule			
DV:	Democracy level (1)	Internal war onset (2)	ln(Rev./pop.) growth (3)	ln(Income/pop.) growth (4)
Independent fi$_{t-1}$	−0.00327	−0.0438	0.0245	0.00441
	(0.00471)	(0.640)	(0.0400)	(0.00602)
Democracy level$_{t-1}$	0.928***			
	(0.0177)			
Internal war incidence$_{t-1}$		−1.534**		
		(0.775)		
ln(Rev./pop.) growth$_{t-1}$			0.0885	
			(0.0590)	
ln(Income/pop.) growth$_{t-1}$				0.106*
				(0.0541)
Territory-years	3,116	1,023	830	2,365
R-squared	0.962		0.371	0.116
Territory FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Year FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Peace-years and cubic splines	NO	YES	NO	NO
	Panel B. Distinguishing autonomous colonial rule			
DV:	Democracy level (5)	Internal war onset (6)	ln(Rev./pop.) growth (7)	ln(Income/pop.) growth (8)
Colonial autonomy$_{t-1}$	0.0151***	−2.104*	0.0509	0.00997
	(0.00481)	(1.159)	(0.0446)	(0.00702)
Independent$_{t-1}$	0.00303	−0.590	0.0410	0.00814
	(0.00555)	(0.703)	(0.0464)	(0.00633)
Democracy level$_{t-1}$	0.919***			
	(0.0190)			
Internal war incidence$_{t-1}$		−1.606**		
		(0.806)		
ln(Rev./pop.) growth$_{t-1}$			−0.0889	
			(0.0600)	
ln(Income/pop.) growth$_{t-1}$				0.106*
				(0.0541)
Territory-years	3,116	1,023	830	2,365
R-squared	0.962		0.372	0.117
Territory FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Year FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Peace-years and cubic splines	NO	YES	NO	NO

Notes: (1) Panel A of Table 2 estimates Equation 1 and Panel B estimates Equation 2. (2) Every model contains territory and year fixed effects and clusters standard errors by territory. (3) Columns 1, 3, and 4 use a linear link and include a lagged dependent variable, and Column 2 uses a logit link and contains a lagged internal war incidence variable, peace-years, and cubic splines. (4) Statistical significance: ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

constituent states before dissolving in 1991. Furthermore, if native rule inevitably increases democracy scores, then democratic gains should persist after independence—contrary to the null postindependence findings in Model 5.

Appendix Table A.17 demonstrates that the terminal colonial period in our sample associates with broad democratic gains by disaggregating the V-Dem electoral democracy index into its five subcomponents: freedom of association, clean elections, freedom of expression, elected officials, and suffrage. The last five colonial years positively and significantly associate with all five measures, and colonial autonomy does for three of the five. The findings provide supportive evidence that decolonization enabled important contestation reforms (freedom of expression, clean elections, freedom of association), although participation aspects of democracy (elected officials, suffrage) generate the largest estimates. However, compared to other decoloniza-

tion episodes, even this seemingly limited achievement merits note.

Second, did democratic gains result simply from global trends toward increased democratization during the mid-twentieth century? The changed international climate following World War II—in particular the anticolonial attitude of the new global superpower (the United States) and growing intellectual distaste for colonialism among first world elites (Young 1970; Strang 1991)—influenced imperial powers' decisions to deepen colonial self-rule. However, including year fixed effects in the model ensures that such global trends do not drive the findings. Furthermore, although global trends contributed to decolonization and to the broader Second Wave of democratization, this observation does not preclude decolonization itself from affecting democratization. Instead, colonial powers' decolonization decisions provide a plausible mechanism through which global trends altered local institutions across the world.

Global pressure did not suffice for democratization, as colonial powers such as Portugal that attempted to perpetuate colonial rule thwarted decolonization and electoral reforms. Existing research on Second Wave democratization supports this argument (Huntington 1993, 40).

Model 6 in Table 2 also demonstrates a statistically significant negative relationship between colonial autonomy and internal war onset. Unfortunately, we do not believe that any research design would permit interpreting this estimate as causal. Decolonization-related wars disabled the colonizer from granting autonomous non-European control over domestic affairs. Instead, these wars either spurred counterinsurgency campaigns by the colonizer or yielded independence. Furthermore, our subsample of "exogenous" autonomy cases (see below) demonstrates a null relationship between autonomy and internal wars.

Varieties of Colonialism

Does a subset of colonies drive the findings? The ways in which colonial rule varied across territories may alter the relationship between gaining independence and the outcomes. Furthermore, much existing colonialism research assesses effects of heterogeneous colonial institutions. We analyze six widely debated varieties of colonial rule and show that adding interaction terms to the core regression models yields similar findings across most varieties of colonial institutions. The two exceptions correspond with theoretical intuition: ex-British colonies exhibited greater democratic gains during colonial autonomy than non-British colonies, and countries with disrupted rule during World War II did not exhibit democratic gains during colonial autonomy. Appendix Section A.5 describes the data.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Many important contributions in the colonialism literature focus mainly on Sub-Saharan Africa (Young 1994; Mamdani 1996; Herbst 2014). Europe colonized most of Sub-Saharan Africa relatively late and usually ruled indirectly. Low population density, few navigable rivers, and tsetse fly prevalence in much of the continent pose stark development challenges that could engender distinct decolonization effects.

British Colonial Rule

Many analyze how British colonialism affected all four outcomes: democracy (Weiner 1987; Lee and Paine 2019), development (Lee and Schultz 2012), internal warfare (Wucherpfennig, Hunziker, and Cederman 2016; Paine 2018a), and revenue collection (Gardner 2012). Distinct attributes of British colonialism include indirect rule through local leaders and following a more coherent policy than other European powers during post–World War II decolonization.

Length of Colonial Rule

The amount of time for which Western Europe ruled a territory could also condition the effect of gaining independence (Olsson 2009). Often, metropolitan centers more directly governed longer-ruled territories and considered them integral to the country. Furthermore, among the longest-ruled colonies in the present sample, colonial rule began during a mercantilist global era, which could affect long-term development and democracy trajectories.

Precolonial Political Development

Colonies differed in their extent of political development before colonial rule began, which scholars commonly measure by the presence of government above the local level. Existing arguments link precolonial political development to economic development (Bockstette et al. 2002), democracy (Hariri 2012), and internal warfare (Paine 2018a). Territories with precolonial states also provided extant bureaucratic infrastructure through which colonizers could implement indirect rule and perhaps facilitated organizing for anticolonial rebellions.

Colonial European Population Share

Many analyze European settlers and development (Acemoglu et al. 2001), democracy (Hariri 2012), and internal warfare (Paine 2018b). European settlers often gained greater degrees of self-governance and democratic representation, which created frictions between Europeans and non-Europeans leading up to independence and/or majority rule.

Disrupted Colonial Rule During World War II

The strength of the independence movement could also affect the postcolonial state. Tensions created by European settlers affected the organization of decolonization movements, and therefore European population share offers one proxy for this concept. Colonies in which Axis powers disrupted colonial rule during World War II also experienced an opening to organize nationalist movements (Lawrence 2013). Japan occupied European colonies in Asia, and Germany invaded several colonies in Africa, before the prior European colonizer attempted to regain control in 1945.

Results

The specifications in Appendix Tables A.18 through A.23 rerun Equation 2 while adding interaction terms that correspond with these conditioning factors (see Appendix Equation A.3). Similar to Table 2, most subsets of colonies exhibit null correlations with internal wars, revenue growth, and economic growth. Most varieties of colonial rule also exhibit statistically significant democratic gains during the colonial autonomy period. The interaction term achieves statistical significance in the democracy regression in only two of the six tables, British colonialism and disrupted rule during World War II.

The coefficient estimates from Table A.19 show that the long-term multiplier for the estimated effect of colonial autonomy on democracy is 2.8 times larger among British than among non-British colonies, and the p-value between colonial autonomy and democracy in the latter subsample equals 0.12. Although this estimate indicates reasonable confidence that non-British colonies also exhibited democratic gains under autonomy, the larger British coefficient estimate supports arguments that Britain more coherently promoted electoral competition before independence (Young 1970; Lee and Paine 2019).

Additionally, colonial autonomy and democracy are uncorrelated among colonies that experienced disrupted rule during World War II (Appendix Table A.23). In cases such as Vietnam and Indonesia, the colonizer faced difficulties regaining control after the war. Subsequent chaos—and in some cases mass violence—implied that decolonization more closely resembled an exercise in surrendering than

in constitutional negotiation, which the null coefficient estimate among guerrilla regimes in Appendix Table A.24 further substantiates. Overall, the findings from Tables A.18 through A.23 show that pooling together colonies indeed reveals meaningful trends, despite some exceptions that correspond with existing theories.

These tables primarily assess whether different institutions engendered distinct decolonization effects. However, showing that the relationship between colonial autonomy and democracy holds across various colonial institutions also addresses confounding concerns. The disaggregated results show that no single subsample that might exhibit particularly acute confounding concerns determines the aggregate finding.

Endogenous Independence Timing

The exact timing of decolonization and of gaining independence depended on political processes and concerted policy choices. Such "treatment" effects pose notorious inferential difficulties. Omitted factors that influenced these policy choices may have also independently affected the outcomes.[4] Every model discussed above addresses these concerns by controlling for unit and year fixed effects, but we still worry about time-varying country-specific factors that correlate with both independence timing and political outcomes. Colonizers often calibrated independence timing to colonies' economic and political development levels or to within-colony military and political pressure.

Table 3 presents additional results from samples that only contain colonies for which the metropole did not tailor independence timing to within-colony factors. Analyzing these "exogenous" independence cases yields similar findings as the core sample. Appendix Section A.6 lists the countries included in these samples, and Appendix Section A.7 addresses countries that gained independence via guerrilla movements.

We identify two sets of colonies for which internal events did not strongly affect the timing of internal autonomy or of independence. France, like all European powers, emerged from World War II in a weaker structural position to maintain colonial rule. It also faced better-organized populations that rejected colonial rule, most importantly in Vietnam and Algeria. France, therefore, began to implement political reforms in most colonies throughout the 1940s and 1950s, including uniform electoral reforms in Sub-Saharan Africa (except Djibouti and smaller islands). France sped up this process in the mid-1950s while facing repeated setbacks in Vietnam and Algeria. These events not only forced France to rethink its colonial policies, but also fundamentally destabilized its Fourth Republic. In 1958, France granted internal autonomy to fourteen Sub-Saharan African colonies that voted to remain within the French empire (only Guinea voted for secession). French domestic politics continued to destabilize, which engendered its decision to grant independence to all fourteen colonies in 1960—regardless of colony-specific considerations such as economic development levels and despite their willingness to remain as colonies only two years prior.

The second set of exogenous decolonization cases contains colonies situated nearby larger colonies governed by the same European power. "Minor" colonies usually gained independence (and, before independence, autonomy) because the colonizer reacted to events in the "major" colony, rather than to local conditions in the minor colony. For example, internal politics within Southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe caused the Central African Federation to break up, which yielded Zambia's and Malawi's resulting independence. Similarly, Britain faced severe geographical impediments to retaining Bhutan after withdrawing from India in 1947. If a colony's population (either total or European) equaled less than half that of another colony in the same geographic region colonized by the same European power, then we code it as minor.

Whether pooling both sets of colonies (Panel A of Table 3) or analyzing them separately (Panels B and C), the findings largely resemble those in Table 2. A time-trend variable that counts the number of years since 1941 replaces the year fixed effects because of small sample sizes and because every colony in Panel B gained independence in the same year (however, unreported results with year fixed effects are similar). The colonial autonomy period exhibits more robust democratic gains than the colonial period, whereas the other outcomes do not systematically differ before and after decolonization.

Conclusion and Broader Implications

This research note provides new insights into the political and economic consequences of decolonization by examining four key political and economic outcomes in a panel design. Our findings for democratic improvement in the terminal colonial period provide, we believe, new information about the timing of democratic gains, as only recently have scholars compiled democracy data that enable systematic comparisons involving the colonial era (Coppedge et al. 2018). This result helps to explain the timing of the Second Wave of democracy after World War II. A likely theoretical explanation for this pattern is that most colonizers reacted to changing international trends by pushing to expand political representation in their colonies, which produced meaningful gains in electoral competition—especially in the British empire (Young 1970, 482; Spruyt 2005, 117–45). However, because foreign powers imposed these elections at the end of the colonial period, postindependent actors faced difficulties in consolidating and sustaining these gains (Lee and Paine 2019)—explaining why there is no postindependence effect.

Additionally, our null results for the other possible effects of decolonization support arguments that stress continuities between colonial and postcolonial rule (Mamdani 1996; Herbst 2014) and that discount the importance of "flag independence" by itself (Smith and Jeppesen 2017, 12–14). For most countries, gaining independence did not fundamentally alter ex-imperial powers' dominant role relative to their dependent ex-colonies (Lake 2009). However, this does not imply that colonial domination and decolonization were inconsequential. We can only compare colonial rule to postcolonial rule, as opposed to noncolonial rule, and therefore cannot assess a counterfactual in which European powers did not colonize much of the globe. Furthermore, Appendix Section A.8 demonstrates some systematic differences between postindependence and the "high" colonial era (1919–1945). But these results remain more speculative than findings premised on post-1945 colonial rule as we cannot control for time-varying sources of heterogeneity.

The colonial era provides a useful large-N laboratory for understanding consequences of external rule beyond the European colonial project and carries implications for recent policy debates over the efficacy or desirability of "state-building" (Marten 2007) or "neotrusteeship"

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[4] However, authors such as Strang (1991) minimize the importance of internal factors in decolonization decisions relative to external ones.

Table 3. "Exogenous" independence colonies

	Panel A. Pooled sample			
DV:	Democracy level (9)	Internal war onset (10)	ln(rev./pop.) growth (11)	ln(income/pop.) growth (12)
Colonial autonomy$_{t-1}$	0.0250**	−0.438	0.0843	0.00912
	(0.00916)	(0.941)	(0.0802)	(0.00760)
Independent$_{t-1}$	−0.00593	−0.434	0.0359	0.0119
	(0.00662)	(1.060)	(0.0583)	(0.00728)
Democracy level$_{t-1}$	0.953***			
	(0.0182)			
Internal war incidence$_{t-1}$		0.237		
		(1.330)		
ln(rev./pop.) growth$_{t-1}$			0.172	
			(0.0991)	
ln(income/pop.) growth$_{t-1}$				0.0395
				(0.0467)
Territory-years	1,442	539	228	1,104
R-squared	0.960		0.067	0.071
Territory FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Time trend	YES	YES	YES	YES
Peace-years and cubic splines	NO	YES	NO	NO

	Panel B. French African colonies with 1960 independence			
DV:	Democracy level (13)	Internal war onset (14)	ln(rev./pop.) growth (15)	ln(income/pop.) growth (16)
Colonial autonomy$_{t-1}$	0.0143**		0.0557	0.00666
	(0.00628)		(0.0414)	(0.00529)
Independent$_{t-1}$	−0.0122**	−2.329	0.0485	0.0108
	(0.00527)	(1.430)	(0.0524)	(0.00883)
Democracy level$_{t-1}$	0.939***			
	(0.0119)			
ln(rev./pop.) growth$_{t-1}$			0.321**	
			(0.0956)	
ln(income/pop.) growth$_{t-1}$				0.102
				(0.0613)
Territory-years	658	127	120	532
R-squared	0.931		0.146	0.070
Territory FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Time trend	YES	YES	YES	YES
Peace-years and cubic splines	NO	YES	NO	NO

	Panel C. Minor colonies			
DV:	Democracy level (17)	Internal war onset (18)	ln(rev./pop.) growth (19)	ln(income/pop.) growth (20)
Colonial autonomy$_{t-1}$	0.0366**	−0.160	0.125	0.00732
	(0.0169)	(0.997)	(0.181)	(0.0183)
Independent$_{t-1}$	1.14e-05	−0.294	−0.0590	0.0141
	(0.0104)	(1.183)	(0.0923)	(0.0117)
Democracy level$_{t-1}$	0.953***			
	(0.0236)			
Internal war incidence$_{t-1}$		0.393		
		(1.582)		
ln(rev./pop.) growth$_{t-1}$			0.0191	
			(0.181)	
ln(income/pop.) growth$_{t-1}$				−0.0250
				(0.0617)
Territory-years	784	392	108	572
R-squared	0.966		0.038	0.066
Territory FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Time trend	YES	YES	YES	YES
Peace-years and cubic splines	NO	YES	NO	NO

Notes: (1) Every panel of Table 3 estimates Equation 2 on a restricted sample consisting of either French Sub-Saharan African countries that gained independence in 1960 (Panel B), minor colonies (Panel C), or both (Panel A). (2) Every model contains territory fixed effects, a time-trend variable that counts the number of years since 1941, and clusters standard errors by territory. (3) Columns 1, 3, and 4 use a linear link and include a lagged dependent variable, and Column 2 uses a logit link and contains a lagged internal war incidence variable, peace-years, and cubic splines. (4) The model in Column 2 of Panel B does not estimate a coefficient for colonial autonomy because no new wars began during those years in the French Sub-Saharan Africa sample, and separation drops lagged war incidence. (5) Statistical significance: ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

([Fearon and Laitin 2004](#)) by rich countries in failed states. However, instances of foreign rule such as US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq also differ considerably from European colonialism. Long-term occupations face considerable hurdles including an unfavorable international environment and cheap arms options that diminish great powers' coercive advantages.

Finally, the results inform debates about conceptualizing world politics in terms of hierarchy rather than anarchy ([Lake 2009](#); [Towns 2010](#); [Mattern and Zarakol 2016](#)) and about historical-institutional approaches to international relations ([Fioretos 2011](#)). In traditional international relations research, as [McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon (2018)](#) discuss, scholars scrutinize territorial units as objects of analysis only after gaining independence. This approach implicitly assumes that gaining juridical sovereignty generates a critical juncture. Our approach unpacks this assumption by explicitly comparing countries before and after independence. Changing the formal relationship with the metropole correlates with democratic gains, but ex-colonies' continued status as lower entities in the international hierarchy of states may help to explain persistent problems with promoting economic growth and fiscal development. Therefore, by entrenching a dependent relationship, European colonization of the world likely constituted a more fundamental critical juncture than decolonization.

Supplementary Information

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