Colonial Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship

Alexander Lee   Jack Paine

Emory University

jackpaine@emory.edu

October 26, 2022

Question

- What explains patterns of democracy and dictatorship in the postcolonial world?

- Existing research focuses overwhelmingly on the **post** as opposed to the **colonial**

- Touchstone contributions focus on social classes, economic structure, elite pacts, international pressure, authoritarian institutions, etc.—but little on the colonial period

Problem #1: Origins

- Cannot explain the origins of democracy in the non-European world

- Origins of mass electoral competition for most contemporary countries occurred while under external rule

- 118 contemporary countries experienced at least one legislative or executive election under Western European colonial rule

- Lots of variation to explain: timing of first elections, who could participate, overall ability of colonists to influence policymaking

- Largely unexplored set of cases to test theories of democratization

Problem #2: Persistence

- Among contemporary countries, most with meaningful electoral competition trace their roots at least in part in the colonial era

- Not an apology for Western colonialism—postcolonial democracy was not the only, or even the most frequent, product of colonial elections

- Colonial elections, *because* of their various flaws, put countries on divergent trajectories at independence that have largely reinforced themselves over time

Contributions

- Put colonialism at the center of debates about the origins and persistence of democracy

- Develop a new theory to explain the emergence and evolution of elections under Western colonialism

- Compiled original data on elections spanning four centuries of Western European rule across all world regions

- Analyze how colonial electoral experiences affected post-colonial democratic trajectories

Summary of Findings

- Early elections (pre-1945) driven almost entirely by
  - White settlers
  - Non-European middle classes

- Elections and mass franchises spread across the colonial world only under the threat of revolt after 1945

- Common sources of resistance across the centuries
  - Authoritarian metropoles resisted any electoral competition
  - White settlers resisted franchise expansion to non-Europeans

- Differences in democracy levels at independence have persisted over time

THEORETICAL THEMES

Actors

- Metropolitan officials

- White settlers (colonial landed elite)

- Non-Europeans, including native residents and forced migrants (colonial masses)

Goals and Strategic Options

- Metropolitan officials wanted to extract rents from their colonies (economic, security, prestige)

- Also wanted to minimize costs of overseas governance

- Absent pressure, preferred to concentrate decisionmaking power in their own hands

- But colonists could exert any of three types of pressure (voice, exit, revolt) to induce metropolitan officials to allow political representation

- Colonists could use their position in an institutional body to influence colonial policy

1. Pluralism of Metropolitan Institutions

- When facing pressure from colonists, parliamentary/democratic colonizers often made electoral concessions for colonists who met metropolitan voting requirements

- Authoritarian metropolitan governments repressed rather than allowed elections

- Differences in transaction costs, audience costs, and governing coalition in the metropole

Existing Research

- One position: British colonialism benefitted democracy
  - Huntington 1984; Weiner 1987; de la Porta et al. 1998, 1999; Treisman 2000; Ferguson 2012; Narizny 2012

- Opposing position: metropolitan institutions didn't matter (factor endowments, disease environment, etc.)
  - Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Engerman and Sokoloff 2011; Hariri 2012; Woodberry 2012; Owolabi 2014; Gailmard 2017

- Cannot explain patterns of colonial elections without appealing to metropolitan institutions

- The distinctiveness of British colonialism depended on pluralism in the other major powers, the size of the white settlement, and pressure from non-white middle classes

- The evidence that authoritarian powers prevented colonial elections is overwhelming

2. Dual Legacies of European Settlers

- Advantaged on exit, voice, and (sometimes) revolt

- Pro-democratic effect: these privileges usually enabled sizable white settlements to create representative institutions (and the metropole had pluralistic institutions)

- Anti-democratic effect: landed economic elites created representative institutions exclusively for themselves and repressed non-Europeans who sought political rights

- Small white community $\implies$ anti-democratic effects more prominent; more repression needed to keep down the non-European majority

Existing Research

- Numerous arguments similar to the pro-democratic effect
  - Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Engerman and Sokoloff 2011; Hariri 2012, 2015; Easterly and Levine 2016; Gerring et al. 2022

- Less recognition of the anti-democratic effect and how that could reverse gains from early elections
  - Paine 2019a,b

3. Narrow Paths for Non-European Representation

- Generally discriminated against (subjugate non-Europeans to maximize economic rents, racist ideologies)

- But when were voice and revolt meaningful threats?

- A non-white middle class educated in the colonizer's language, often concentrated in economically important port cities, had an advantage in voice

- Post-1945: structural changes in the international system created a legitimate threat of mass revolts

Existing Research

- British colonialism, factor endowments, and European settlers are the most widely studied explanatory variables in the colonialism literature

- Some arguments explain the rise of non-white middle classes: mass education after emancipation (West Indies) and Protestant missionaries
    - Ledgister 1998; Lankina and Getachew 2012; Woodberry 2012; Owolabi 2015, 2022

- West Indian democracies are one instantiation of non-Europeans forming a middle class educated in the colonizer's language that pushed for early electoral representation
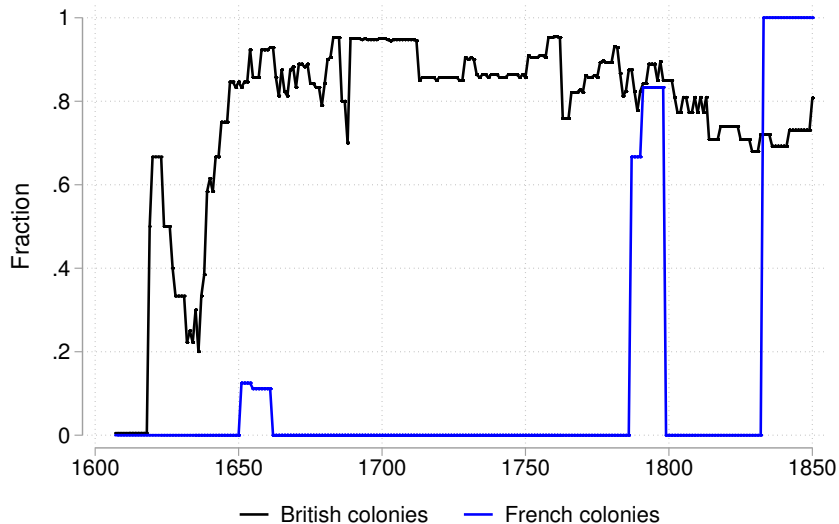
PRE−1850

Colonial Setting

- Sample: 77 colonies in the Western Hemisphere and Oceania

    - 18 U.S. colonies
    - 15 other neo-Britains
    - 16 British West Indies
    - 6 Dutch
    - 12 Spanish
    - 1 Portuguese
    - 9 French

- White settlers were the most politically influential group in the colonies; non-Europeans were universally subjugated

- Metropolitan political institutions varied between parliamentary and absolutist (cross-sectional and temporal variation)

Big Themes

	Pre-1850	1850-1945	Post-1945
Authoritarian resistance	✓		
Within-democracy institutional similarity			
White settlers $\implies$ early elections	✓		
Settlers resist expansion to non-Europeans			
Non-Euro middle class $\implies$ early elections			
Post-1945 threat of mass revolt			

Electoral Institutions in the British and French Empires: 1607–1850

French Metropolitan and Colonial Institutions: 1789–1875
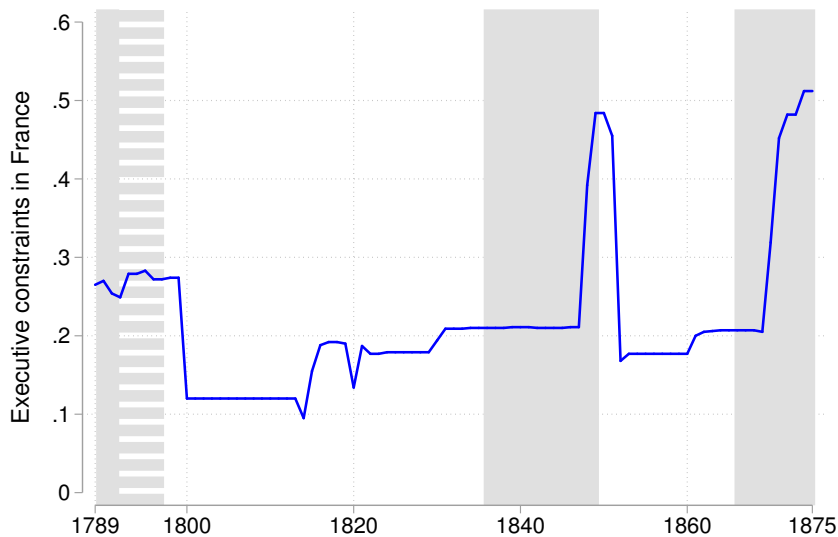
Summary

- Before 1850, elections occurred only in colonies with pluralistic metropoles and sizable white settler populations

- Before the French Revolution, this meant only British (and a few Dutch) colonies

- Afterwards, French colonies gained elections (local assembly or to French Parliament) during pluralistic periods in the metropole

- British empire became less democratic as the demographic composition changed in its colonies

PRE−WWII

Colonial Setting

- Sample: 89 colonies across the world

- Loss of Spanish America, United States; other neo-Britains gain dominion status; expansion across Asia, Africa, Pacific

- White settlements were much smaller overall, but settlers remained prominent in some colonies

- In some early port cities, a non-European middle class emerged that could exercise voice

Big Themes

	Pre-1850	1850-1945	Post-1945
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Within-democracy institutional similarity			
White settlers $\implies$ early elections	✓	✓	
Settlers resist expansion to non-Europeans		✓	
Non-Euro middle class $\implies$ early elections		✓	
Post-1945 threat of mass revolt			

Colonial Elections: 1860–1945
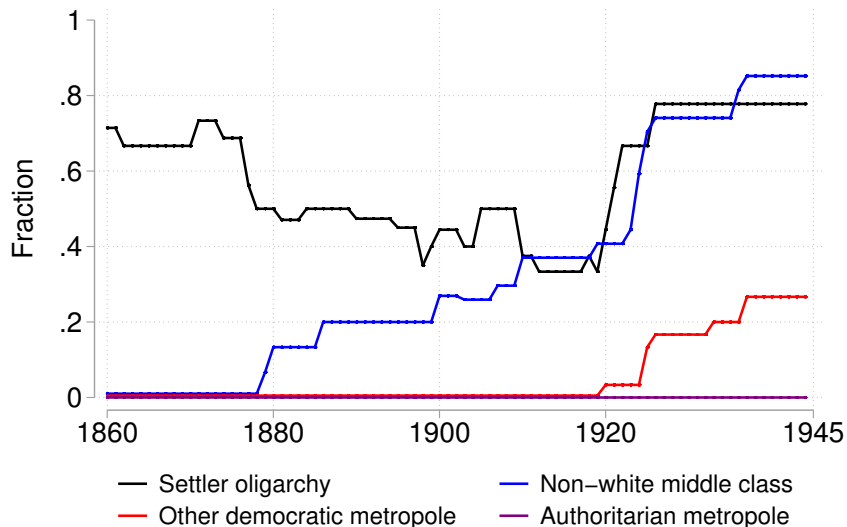
Franchise Size: 1900–1945
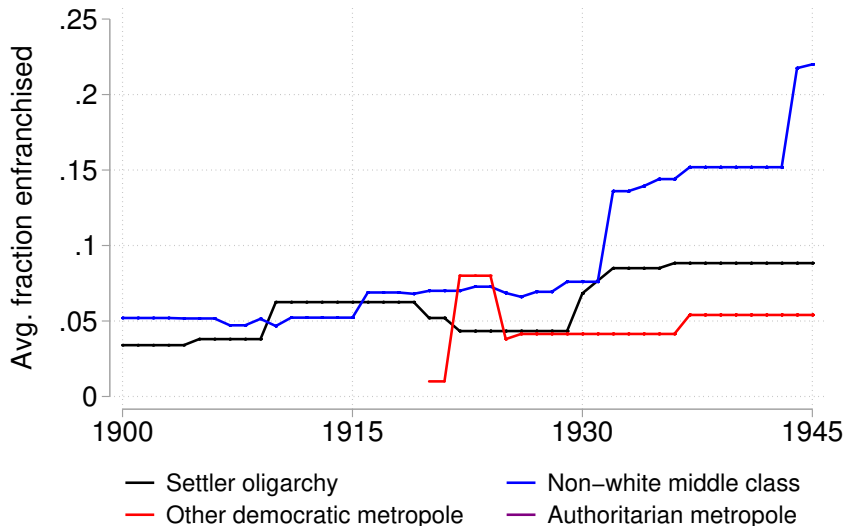
Summary

- Many colonies held their first elections before 1945 despite the absence of the main pressures discussed for earlier periods (large white settlements) or later periods (threat of mass revolt)

- Small white settlements were sometimes able to gain outsized political power (Africa)

- But in the British West Indies, the white community had lost power over time and engineered autocratic reversals to prevent Black political participation

- Non-white middle classes often gained early, albeit limited, electoral representation

POST–WWII

Colonial Setting

- Same sample of colonies as previous chapter

- Starting in the 1940s, several changes made mass anti-colonial revolts more viable: weakened European powers, rise of anti-colonial superpowers, spread of nationalism
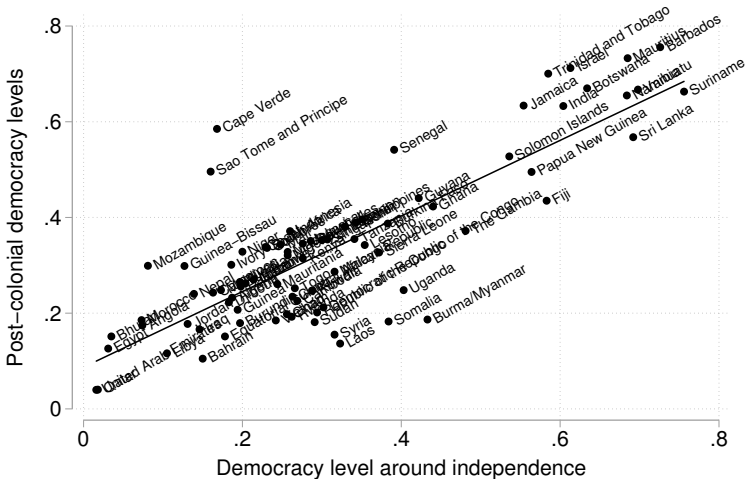
Big Themes

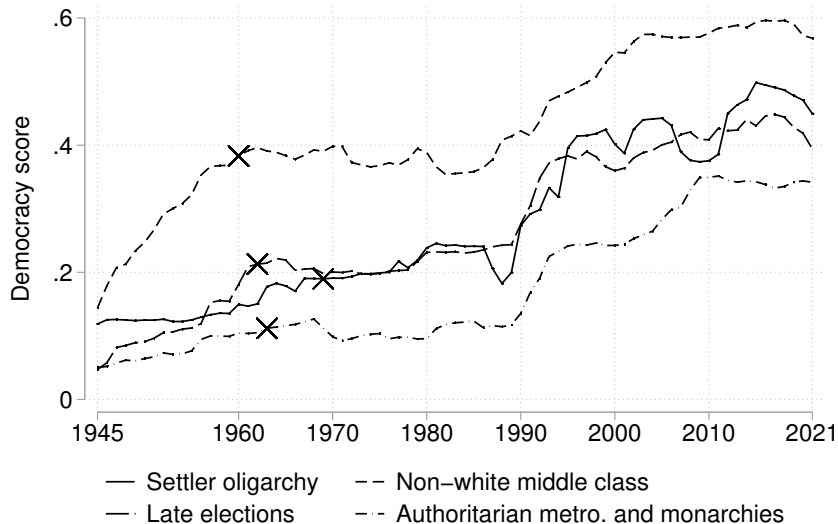|	Pre-1850	1850-1945	Post-1945
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Settlers resist expansion to non-Europeans		✓	✓
Non-Euro middle class $\implies$ early elections		✓	
Post-1945 threat of mass revolt			✓

Franchise Size: 1919–2000
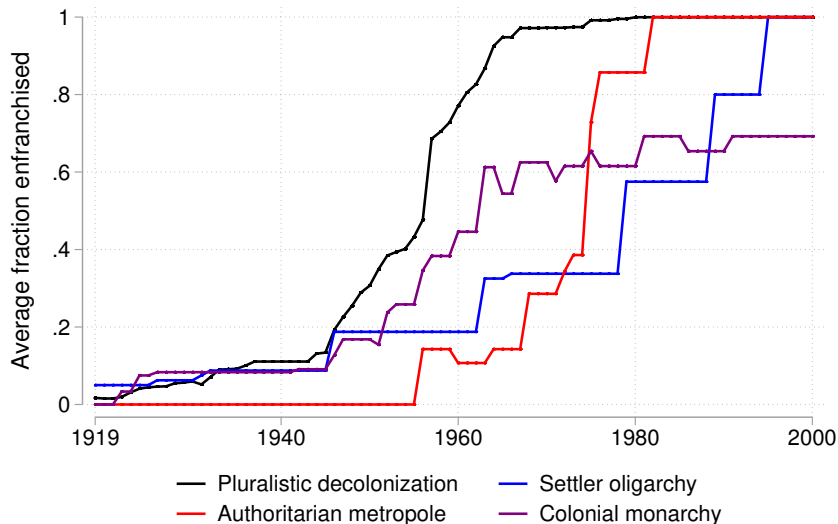
POSTCOLONIAL PERSISTENCE

Persistent Democratic Differences

Democracy Levels over Time by Colonial Type

Legend:
— Settler oligarchy
-- Non−white middle class
— Late elections
-·- Authoritarian metro. and monarchies

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- Differences in democracy levels at independence have persisted over time