Colonial Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship[1]

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Introduction

Between the late fifteenth and early twentieth centuries, Western European states colonized much of the world's territory. The consequences of colonial rule were profound. In some cases, Europeans transformed the domestic population and structure of the economy through coercion, diseases, and new technology. In other cases, European rule had less influence on the day-to-day lives of inhabitants. However, even in such cases, European powers drew territorial borders and created new states that form the basis of the modern international system.

A particularly important intervention was to create new national political institutions. Many colonies adopted a form of hybrid political institutions with some similarities to constitutional monarchies in historical Europe and to contemporary electoral authoritarian regimes. Europeans unelected by the local population served as the head of government, thus making the regime authoritarian. However, many colonies adopted elections for a national legislature. Among 151 non-European contemporary countries, 121 experienced at least one legislative or executive election under Western European rule. Although some experiences of colonial pluralism were brief and shallow, many were not. Forty-eight countries experienced their first election at least three decades before independence. Twelve countries gained a broad franchise (at least half the male population) before World War II. Among colonies that experienced any elections, nearly all gained a broad franchise before gaining independence. Nor did history always run in one direction: thirty-five colonies experienced at least one autocratic

reversion—the elimination of previously created electoral bodies. Thus, in the majority of the countries across the world, the origins of modern electoral competition occurred during the colonial period.

Examining post-colonial democracies suggests that we also cannot understand subsequent democratic trajectories without explaining colonial origins. In Figure 1, we summarize the sovereignty status at the time of the first election in the ninety-five countries that exhibited relatively high democracy scores in 2017. Outside of Europe, fifty-seven of sixty-five countries with high contemporary democracy scores held their first national election while under Western colonial rule. In another seventeen, mostly in Eastern Europe, the first election was held under some other form of external rule. Thus, in a majority of contemporary democracies (and an overwhelming majority when excluding European countries), the first election occurred under Western colonial rule.

Figure 1: **Contemporary Democracies: Sovereignty Status at First Election**
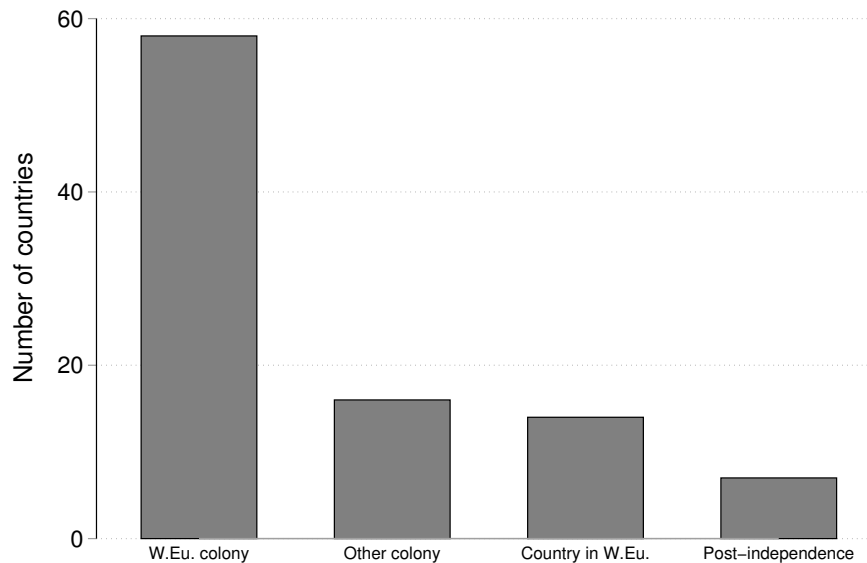
Sample: All countries with a polyarchy score above 0.5 in 2017 from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem; Coppedge 2018) data set.

Yet overall, countries exhibit enormous variation in the degree to which colonial pluralism

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engendered self-enforcing democratic contestation after independence. Countries such as Canada, Jamaica, and India translated colonial representative institutions into durable democracies. However, among countries that met minimal standards of democracy at independence, half reverted to authoritarianism within the next decade. Many other colonies gained electoral experience under colonialism yet had solidly authoritarian regimes at independence.

In this book, we provide a new theory and empirical evidence on two core questions. First, why did colonies vary in their experiences under Western rule? Second, did the colonial period matter for subsequent regime trajectories? In addressing these questions, we revisit perhaps the central question in comparative politics: why do countries vary in their levels of democracy? Most leading theories of democratization focus solely on domestic actors. Classic works analyze the interactions of various social groups such as landed aristocrats, capitalist elites, military generals, the middle class, the working class, peasants, and the masses.[1] Causal factors posited to empower certain social groups at the expense of others include income growth,[2] asset mobility,[3] oil wealth,[4] and income inequality.[5] Much recent research examines how partially democratic institutions within authoritarian regimes affect regime stability.[6]

These disparate theories all assume that democracy results from certain *post-colonial* conditions. Democracy results from contestation among the residents of the territory in question in the streets, on the battlefield, or in an authoritarian parliament. To the extent that these

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

[2]Lipset 1959, Przeworski 2000, Acemoglu et al. 2008.

[3]Bates and Donald Lien 1985, Boix 2003.

[4]Gause 1994, Ross 2001, 2012.

[5]Acemoglu and Robinson 2006, Ansell and Samuels 2014, Haggard and Kaufman 2012.

[6]Geddes 1999, Lust-Okar 2005, Gandhi 2008, Blaydes 2010, Wright and Escribà-Folch 2012, Jensen et al. 2014, Miller 2015, Meng 2020.

studies acknowledge colonialism, it is usually to explain divergence in structural conditions such as income inequality, which is then used to study post-colonial outcomes. These theories cannot explain how an external actor like a colonial ruler—with little interest in local distributional patterns, a technological advantage in coercion, and a high-value outside option to relinquishing control of the territory—affects prospects for democracy or dictatorship. The democratization literature does not overlook external actors entirely, as many recent studies analyze how the United States and Western Europe have attempted to promote democracy abroad.[7] However, these studies focus overwhelmingly on the post-Cold War period and do not extend their theoretical framework or empirical analysis back further.

The neglect of political institutions under colonialism extends to how scholars select their cases for quantitative or qualitative empirical tests. Most authors almost exclusively study post-colonial cases, and statistical tests use post-independence data. Most cross-national measures of democracy, such as the widely used Polity IV dataset, do not include colonized territories.[8] Although many countries enter a particular dataset with an elected body, we do not know how they acquired them.

Although many foundational studies on democratization overlook the colonial era, we are certainly not the first scholars to analyze colonial political institutions. Existing work analyzes

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[7]Dunning et al. 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.

[8]The more recent V-Dem dataset, which we discuss later, is an exception that contains colonial data.

various factors, such as British colonialism,[9] factor endowments,[10] settler colonialism,[11] and other colonial actors such as formerly enslaved persons and Protestant missionaries.[12] We incorporate some of these factors into our theory, and engage with existing theses from this literature at length in the concluding chapter.[13] Briefly, our more encompassing theory and time periods of our data analysis demonstrate that existing arguments about these factors can explain outcomes among specific colonies and times, but not elsewhere.

By expanding the historical focus and taking a more encompassing view of colonial-era variables, we demonstrate that the period of Western colonial rule is foundational for explaining democracy and dictatorship. We cannot understand contemporary electoral institutions without explaining the processes that created and sustained representative institutions under colonial rule, and maintained them afterwards. We take a broad historical and comparative focus by analyzing a global sample of Western European colonies over the entire period of European overseas rule. Rather than evaluating a snapshot of political institutions at a particular time, we take a dynamic approach to studying electoral institutions by analyzing their origins and evolution both during and after colonial rule. We highlight some, albeit historically rare, con-

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[9]Weiner 1987; de Silanes et al. 1998; La Porta et al. 1999; Abernethy 2000, 406; Treisman 2000, 418–27; Lange 2004, 2009; Lange et al. 2006; Mahoney 2010; Ferguson 2012; Narizny 2012, 362.

[10]Sokoloff and Engerman 2000; Engerman and Sokoloff 2011; Acemoglu et al. 2002; Frankema 2009; Gailmard 2017.

[11]Acemoglu et al. 2001; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Acemoglu and Robinson 2020; Hariri 2012, 2015; Easterly and Levine 2016; Gerring et al. 2020.

[12]Ledgister 1998; Lankina and Getachew 2012, Woodberry 2012; Owolabi 2015, 2020; Nikolova and Polansky 2021.

[13]Related research on how these factors affected economic development is too numerous to cite comprehensively. For examples of recent innovative work as well as review articles, see Nunn 2014, De Juan and Pierskalla 2017, Guardado 2018, Sellars and Alix-Garcia 2018.

ditions under which external rule promoted democracy. However, this finding neither requires nor supports a positive normative assessment of colonialism. In most cases, the contradictions between authoritarian foreign rule and democracy promotion were too much to overcome, and colonial rule instead yielded authoritarian regimes.

To explain variation in colonial representation, in Chapter 1 we develop a theory of democratic reform that incorporates unique aspects of the colonial context. We consider a strategic interaction among three sets of colonial actors: metropolitan officials; white settlers; and colonists of color, which includes native inhabitants and forcibly migrated groups. Given the conflicting goals of these actors, and variation across time and space in the strategic options they had available to achieve their goals, we derive three main theoretical implications.

First, metropolitan political institutions shaped the calculus of colonial officials and engendered a *non-democratic ceiling effect*. Autocratic colonizers would not tolerate colonial elections, and parliamentary colonizers would limit the colonial franchise to those who could vote in the metropole.

Second, the pro-democratic impulse of white settlers was to establish representative institutions, if their metropole had parliamentary constraints. However, white settlers created these institutions for themselves. They faced incentives to jealously guard their monopoly over voting rights and privileged economic position. This created *dual effects of white settlers*.

Third, colonizers engaged in widespread *discrimination against colonists of color*. Colonizers would allow non-white colonists to contest for political power only if confident of their loyalty, as with a small set of urban elites before 1945; or if they believed an anti-colonial revolt was imminent and would receive global support, as in most colonies after 1945. However, colonists of color expected to face resistance if governed by an authoritarian metropole or if residing in a colony with an influential white settler population.

We provide empirical support for each theoretical implication using original data on colonial

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elections across four centuries. In early European colonies in the Western hemisphere, only colonizers with parliamentary institutions permitted elections, which we discuss in Chapter 2. Until the French Revolution, Britain was the main colonizer with constitutional institutions at home, and representative institutions were both widespread in and nearly exclusive to the British empire. Across North America and the West Indies, property-owning Englishmen were usually successful in pressing their claims that they deserved the same rights of representation they would enjoy at home. Yet this initial democratic advantage for the British Empire eroded during the nineteenth century. Periodic democratization in France led to representation in its major colonies during its liberal periods. Conversely, Britain denied representative bodies for many new colonies with large populations of people that lacked voting rights at home, such Catholics, enslaved persons, and convicts.

Colonists of color more directly influenced political institutions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as we analyze in Chapter 3. Their interaction with white settlers yielded four possible outcomes. First, where both were relevant actors, the aspirations of non-white colonists conflicted with the goals of white elites to monopolize power. Even after emancipation in the British West Indies, white settlers sought to deny representation to Black freedmen. Actions by white planters to protect their privileges produced a wave of legislative reversals across the region—thus relinquishing representation entirely rather than sharing it. Second, representation for colonists of color was possible where they formed a small, professional, and Western-assimilated middle class *and* white settlers were unimportant. This helps to explain why South Asians and Africans in select port cities gained electoral representation by the early twentieth century. Similarly, Black men gained voting rights across the British West Indies in the 1920s, where the influence of white planters had waned over time. Third, cases such as Cape, Southern Rhodesia, Kenya, and Algeria resembled the early ones because new European settlements were able to press for exclusive voting rights for themselves. Finally, most cases lacked either notable white settler populations or an educated middle class of non-

whites (or had an authoritarian metropole), and did not gain representative institutions until after 1945.

World War II was a watershed for Western colonialism, the theme of Chapter 4. Weakened European powers confronted social movements led by colonists of color and conceded voting rights under the threat of rebellion. In a span of two decades, the political franchise became universal in most cases, and was typically followed by independence. In some cases, these reforms deepened longer-standing electoral institutions, whereas in others they reflected hasty concessions in the lead-up to independence. The main exceptions were authoritarian Portugal and white settlers in parts of Africa, who refused to grant concessions that would diminish their monopoly on political power and economic rents. Authoritarian intransigence typically engendered decolonization wars in which rebel movements gained control of the post-colonial state.

We advance two main arguments about post-colonial legacies in Chapter 5: colonial experiences yielded institutional persistence, and the paths to post-colonial democracy were narrow. Heterogeneous experiences with elections under colonialism yielded three types of decolonization episodes. In *authoritarian* cases, the colonial regime handed power, willingly or unwillingly, to an authoritarian regime. In *long-term electoral* cases, the colonial government handed power to an elected government after an extended period of competitive elections. In *contingent electoral* cases, the colonial government handed power to an elected regime after a short period of pluralism sometimes measured in months rather than years.

Long-term electoral cases have been, on average, quite democratic after independence. They exhibited higher levels of democracy at independence than other colonies, and these differences have persisted over many decades. Early electoral institutions facilitated the emergence of strong legislatures or mass parties that participated in repeated elected contests. By elevating political actors that sank capital in electoral contestation, these institutions subsequently

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created a bulwark against forces that could erode or overthrow democracy, such as power-hungry incumbents, military generals, traditional elites, and radical revolutionaries.

By contrast, other decolonization paths tended to yield authoritarian rule after independence. This is obvious for the authoritarian decolonization cases, when guerrilla leaders won control of the post-colonial state or the colonizer transferred power to a local dictator (typically a monarch) believed to be sympathetic. These countries were significantly less democratic than others at independence, and these differences have persisted over time.

Democracy levels for the intermediate category of contingent electoral cases have persisted in between these two extremes. Some of these countries were quite democratic at independence because of late electoral reforms. However, these institutions usually proved vulnerable to incumbent entrenchment and to military removal of elected officials after gaining independence.

These divergent experiences also underscore the generic difficulties to establishing stable democratic regimes. The colonial context may seem auspicious in some sense for promoting democracy. In empires governed by metropoles with democratic (or at least constitutional) political institutions, we should expect these institutions to be transplanted to some extent in the colonies.

Two main contradictions prevented successful democracy promotion in most cases. First, the actors best-positioned to set up representative institutions—white settlers—simultaneously comprised an elite landed class that sought to preserve their political and socioeconomic privileges. Using Dahl's terminology, such cases had favorable conditions for establishing high contestation, but not high participation.[14]

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[14]Dahl 1971. However, these cases tended not to confirm Dahl's hypothesis that cases with high contestation and low participation gradually and peacefully expand the franchise over time (e.g., the canonical British path to democracy).

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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 democracy would enable them to make an "honourable" exit. However, reflecting the low priority of this goal, in most cases British officials acted to establish representative institutions and to broaden the franchise only in the shadow of withdrawal. And in the context of the Cold War, Britain and France often preferred a stable dictatorship over an unstable democracy.

These contradictions yielded two narrow paths to post-colonial democracy, which collectively culminated in our category of long-term electoral episodes. First, early representation for white settlers did indeed promote durable democracy in some cases. In the historically unique "neo-Britains" (United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), the white population was so large that these settlers and their descendants could usually preserve their privileges without destabilizing representative institutions. In other cases, such as South Africa, violent struggles for majority rule did not dismantle extant democratic institutions. By contrast, in many other cases, resistance by white settlers proved fatal for democracy. These included violent liberation wars in Algeria and Zimbabwe, and legislative reversals in the British West Indies in the 1860s that at least temporarily eliminated political representation in most of the region.

The second path to post-colonial democracy was when colonists of color formed an early middle class. In such cases, colonists could press for representative institutions, and there was not entrenched resistance to franchise expansion. Because these institutional concessions did not occur when withdrawal was imminent, national-level political parties and a political class of elected politicians had time to adapt to and shape democratic institutions before gaining independence.

Yet these two paths were empirically rare. Consequently, the colonial period did indeed establish elections across the globe and shaped post-colonial trajectories. However, the new

national-level political institutions established under colonial rule typically failed to yield durable post-colonial democracy.

Our empirical results are based on two data sets on colonial elections across four centuries. The first is originally collected data on (1) the presence (or absence) of elections to a territory-wide electoral body, (2) whether the territory has high internal autonomy, and (3) legal restrictions on the franchise. We include elections to both colonial legislatures and to metropolitan parliaments, the latter of which is relevant for capturing variation among French, Spanish, and Portuguese colonies. However, we exclude elections to bodies that governed only particular localities, such as elections to municipal councils in British colonies or town councils (*cabildos*) in Spanish America. In most cases, regular elections occurred between the first year in which an election occurred and the year the country gained independence. However, our dataset also captures many notable exceptions in which autocratic reversions occurred, such as those in the British West Indies and the French Empire during the nineteenth century.

The main advantage of our data is its broad spatial and temporal coverage. For our early Western hemisphere sample (pre–1782), we code the variables at the level of the contemporaneous colony, rather than modern countries, which yields 64 colonies for this region and time period alone. This is crucial for accurate empirical analysis because the farther back in time we go, the less closely the colonial units align with post-independence countries. For example, 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 to another European power, such as New Netherland and New France. We also include colonies that never gained independence, such as Bermuda and Martinique. Among later territories, we take a broad view of what constitutes a Western European colony, and include polities where the role of the colonial power was always limited to external affairs. These units are often excluded from datasets on colonialism,

which can create bias. For example, the more standard practice of excluding the British Persian Gulf states selects on the dependent variable because the exceptional level of autonomy in these colonies reflected conscious decisions by metropolitan officials. We do, however, exclude cases such as China in which foreign powers did not establish formal sovereignty.

Overall, across four centuries of overseas rule, we document that 166 Western European colonies encompassing 121 modern-day countries held at least one election. Indicators of high internal autonomy vary across empires and across time, including the Old Representative System, responsible government or dominion status within the British Commonwealth, monarchies with control over domestic policy, and membership in the French Community. By contrast, many British colonies lacked representative government (elected unofficials were a minority of the legislative council) at various points in the twentieth century. Such legislative councils established a forum for expressing grievances, but colonists had minimal internal policy autonomy. Similarly, the *Délégations Financières* in Algeria was initially established to discuss finances but not broader political issues. We also compiled considerable information about which social groups had the franchise at various points in time, although we lack a complete panel of colony-years for this variable.

To complement our original data, we also use the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset.[15] This impressive dataset not only measures thousands of attributes of democracy, it also improves on earlier democracy datasets such as Polity IV by including data for non-sovereign territories. For colonies that gained independence after 1945, these data go back to 1900. Therefore, for most post-1945 decolonization cases, 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, whenever using V-Dem, our sample is smaller because V-Dem uses a more stringent population threshold and

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[15]Coppedge 2018.

excludes most territories that never gained independence.

The plan for the book is as follows. Chapter 1 develops the theoretical framework for why and when colonizers granted electoral concessions. It describes the basic actors in shaping colonial democratization, their goals, and the structure of their interaction. We derive our three main theoretical implications: metropolitan institutions and the non-democratic ceiling effect, the dual effects of white settlers, and discrimination against colonists of color and their narrow paths for gaining representation.

The next three chapters provide empirical evidence on colonial elections in different times and places. Chapter 2 examines the emergence of elections in the New World through the mid-nineteenth century, a process dominated by European settlers and influenced by metropolitan political institutions. Chapter 3 examines how the rise of elites of color influenced patterns of representation, in some cases gaining electoral rights and in other cases triggering authoritarian reactions by white settlers. Chapter 4 discusses mass franchise expansion after 1945, when changed international conditions made the revolt option viable in many colonies.

Chapter 5 analyzes post-colonial legacies. We explain how colonial pluralism could become self-enforcing. We also present evidence for how colonial pluralism influenced post-independence democracy levels, focusing primarily on countries that decolonized after 1945.

Chapter 6 concludes by summarizing our core empirical patterns and discussing the implications of our findings for existing research on political institutions and colonialism as well as contemporary political regimes.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

We revisited a central question in comparative politics: why do countries vary in democracy levels? Existing theories and empirical evidence focus almost exclusively on post-independence factors and cases. However, this approach overlooks the origins of democratic institutions in the non-European world. Among contemporary countries, 121 experienced at least one legislative or executive election under Western European colonial rule. If we disaggregate modern countries into their colonial components, the number is even larger: 166 different colonies held at least one election for a national assembly.

Developing a deeper understanding of political institutions under colonialism is also necessary to comprehend the evolution and persistence of democratic institutions over the longer term. Colonies varied the timing of their first election and the extent of electoral competition and participation. Some colonies experienced gradual and uniform paths to greater levels of democracy, that is, more competitive elections and broader franchises. By contrast, others experienced autocratic reversals. At independence, some new countries met minimalist standards of democracy. Many fell prey to military coups or incumbent consolidation within a decade of independence, but others persisted for longer periods. Other colonies experienced

elections but never achieved fully democratic competition, or had no elections at all.

In our book, we put colonialism at the center of the conversation about the origins and persistence of democracy. We developed a new theory to explain the emergence and evolution of elections under colonialism. Our theory highlighted three types of colonial actors: metropolitan officials, white settlers, and colonists of color (native residents, forced migrants). We then tested our theoretical implications using original data on elections spanning four centuries of Western Europe rule across all world regions. Finally, we analyzed how colonial electoral experiences affected post-colonial democratic trajectories.

In this concluding chapter, we first recap the main themes of our theory and empirical findings. In contrast to the preceding chapters, where we organized the material chronologically, here we organize the material thematically. We then discuss implications for various factors that scholars have analyzed in existing research on political institutions under colonialism: British colonialism, factor endowments, settler colonialism, and other colonial actors such as formerly enslaved persons and Protestant missionaries. Finally, we discuss broader implications for research on contemporary political regimes.

1 Summary of Main Findings

1.1 Theory: Actors, Goals, and Strategic Options

Metropolitan actors sought to extract rents, broadly defined, from their colonies. Sources of rents included economic exploitation and trade, securing strategic bases around the globe, and enhancing national prestige. To achieve these benefits at minimal cost, leaders in the metropole preferred to confine decision-making power to imperial officials. However, colonial rule did not occur in a vacuum. Colonists could pressure officials using voice or threaten-

ing to either exit or revolt. Often, colonists were unsatisfied with temporary expedients from the colonial government because officials retained leeway to take back these concessions in the future. Instead, colonists often sought to gain representation in territory-wide representative institutions. One important difference among colonists was between white settlers and colonists of color.

The magnitude of these constraints and the colonizers' willingness to satisfy demands for political representation varied over time. Given the goals and strategic options of metropolitan officials, white settlers, and colonists of color, we derived three main theoretical implications.

1.2 Metropolitan Institutions and the Non-Democratic Ceiling Effect

The first theoretical implication concerns metropolitan institutions. Colonizers should not permit institutions that are more democratic than those in the metropole, a *non-democratic ceiling effect*. For autocratic colonizers, this yields a blunt prediction: no electoral representation. By contrast, hybrid regimes that combined some electoral competition with a small franchise should permit some representation if pressured. However, they should limit the colonial franchise to those who could vote in the metropole. Only fully democratic regimes should permit electoral competition under a universal franchise. Yet even among such regimes, we still anticipate variation. A corollary of the non-democratic ceiling effect is the principle of *institutional homophily*: colonizers prefer institutions that are similar to their own.

We proposed various mechanisms to account for these implications. First, transaction costs were lower when metropolitan officials were asked to administer institutions with which they were familiar. Second, autocratic colonizers feared that representation would spark rather than quell revolt by providing colonists with a centralized forum in which they could coordinate their grievances. Third, colonizers would create audience costs at home if they permitted

more liberal institutions overseas than in the metropole. Fourth, the preferences of the ruling coalition tended to reproduce home institutions. For example, more authoritarian metropoles tended to be governed by more narrowly concentrated economic interests who wanted to preserve a privileged position in colonial markets.

We provided evidence for the non-democratic ceiling effect across multiple centuries. Britain had a long-standing constitutional regime with an established tradition of parliamentary representation. By contrast, the other major powers had more absolutist regimes prior to the French Revolution. Institutions in the colonies reflected those at home. Whereas nearly every British colony in North America and the West Indies had an elected legislature, such institutions were almost entirely absent in the French empire (Figure 6.1); as well as the Spanish and Portuguese empires. Although autocratic-inclined monarchs such as James II engineered temporary autocratic reversions, white settlers in British colonies were generally able to gain representation for themselves.

The conditions in other metropoles changed after the French Revolution. As shown in Figure 6.2, France fluctuated between democratic and autocratic institutions at home between 1789 and 1870. Patterns in their colonies closely tracked these changes in the metropole. Similarly, Spain hastily introduced elections throughout its colonies when Napoleonic occupation of Iberia ushered in a brief constitutional regime at home.

By the twentieth century, Portugal was the main anti-democratic holdout among the major colonizers. Once again, consistent with the non-democratic ceiling effect, Portugal refused to follow the "wind of change" that induced the other major empires to grant concessions of elections or independence (Figure 6.3). The handful of large firms upon which António Salazar's regime depended for survival profited massively from colonial protection, and Portugal fought to retain its African colonies.

Figure 6.1: **Representative Institutions Through the Mid-19th Century**

Notes: The lines depict the fraction of colonies in each empire with elected representative institutions. Data compiled by authors.

Figure 6.2: **Representative Institutions in France and its Empire**

Notes: The black line is the V-Dem polyarchy score in France. The gray blocs indicate periods in which France's major colonies elected representatives to the French parliament or had local assemblies (data compiled by authors). V-Dem codes the onset of the July monarchy (1830–48) as only minimally increasing France's democracy score, although many historians (as well as the Polity IV dataset) code this regime as exhibiting higher constitutional constraints than the preceding Bourbon dynasty.

Figure 6.3: **Franchise Size in the 20th Century: Portuguese vs. Other Colonies**
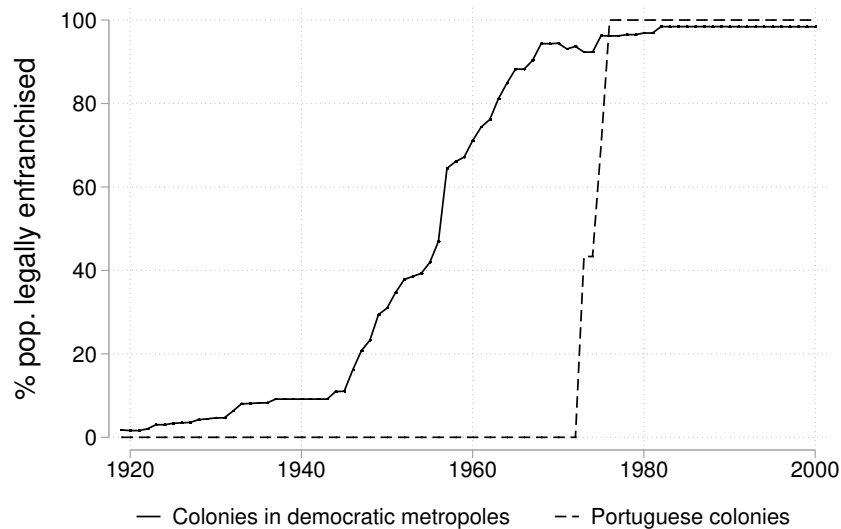
Notes: The lines depict the average percentage of the population with the legal franchise in each group of countries (we include observations both during and after colonial rule). Data from V-Dem.

1.3 Dual Effects of White Settlers

The second main theoretical implication concerns the *dual effects of white settlers*. Europeans who emigrated from a democratic metropole could draw from their experiences at home to push for representation institutions. They enjoyed advantages over non-white colonists on the exit and voice options. Regarding exit, Europeans needed inducements to migrate overseas, which would provide the empire with a source of loyal colonists who were endowed with knowledge of production techniques from home. Regarding voice, white settlers were often effective lobbyists because they enjoyed ties to metropolitan politicians, who were more receptive to demands from individuals who met the qualifications for voting at home. Home institutions also created a focal point for colonists' demands. Finally, early on, white colonists were also advantaged in their ability to revolt.

In the early imperial period, the interaction of white settlers and constitutional metropoles explains nearly all variance in the presence and deepening of representative institutions. As shown above in Figure 6.1, representation was nearly exclusive to the British empire before

1789. Britain not only had constitutional institutions at home, but all its major colonies in North America and the West Indies had influential settlements of Englishmen. Many of these colonies gained high levels of internal autonomy. In the U.S. colonies and some West Indies islands, this came in the form of the Old Representative System in the eighteenth century. In Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the achievement of responsible government or dominion status in the nineteenth century yielded significant self-governance privileges. Later, smaller white settlements in parts of Africa, including Cape, Southern Rhodesia, Kenya, and French Algeria, gained representation for themselves.

Conversely, the pro-democratic influences of white settlers also help to explain why Britain resisted the introduction of electoral institutions in colonies acquired in the late eighteenth century. Although Britain retained its parliamentary institutions at home, it gained territories that differed from its original colonies settled by Englishmen. Following conquests during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars as well as the settlement of Australia, Britain possessed colonies where a large majority of the white population were Catholics or convicts who lacked voting rights in Britain. Most of these colonies eventually gained some form of representative institutions, but these developments occurred more slowly than in earlier British colonies where Englishmen were considered more loyal to the metropole.

Yet white settlers created these institutions for themselves and jealously guarded their monopoly over voting rights. They formed an entrenched oligarchy (or, in some cases, a majority) that sought to protect their privileged economic position, which depended on owning the best land and controlling plantations. In normal times, the consequence of this behavior was straightforward: white settlers were politically represented but other colonists were not. However, when this oligarchy confronted a threat from below, the response often was to engineer autocratic reversals. In the British West Indies in the mid-nineteenth century, white oligarchs feared that Black freedmen would soon gain mass inclusion in their elected legislatures. Settlers through-

out the region agreed to abandon their long-standing electoral institutions and, in consultation with the British government, moved to Crown rule with fully nominated legislative councils (Figure 6.4). Later, in Africa after World War II, colonies with large white settler populations (along with Portuguese colonies) were the main holdouts in terms of expanding the franchise to Africans (Figure 6.5).

Figure 6.4: **Representative Institutions in the British West Indies**
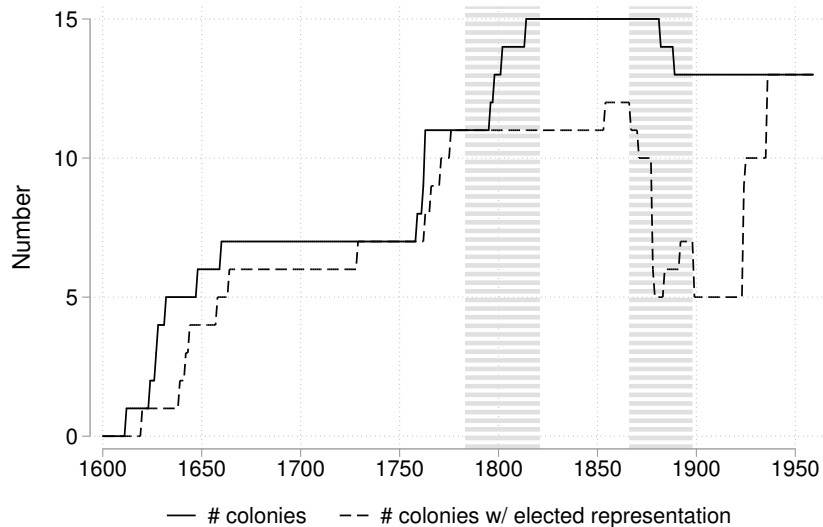
Notes: The solid line depicts the number of British West Indies colonies in the sample in each year. The dashed line depicts the number of these colonies with elected representative institutions. Data compiled by authors. The gray regions indicate two authoritarian periods. The first (1789–1815) corresponds with the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in which Britain gained numerous territories from France and Spain, and delayed the introduction of electoral representation. The second (1865–98) corresponds with legislative reversals throughout the region.

1.4   Discrimination Against Colonists of Color

The third main theoretical implication is *discrimination against colonists of color*. Imperial powers benefited from subjugating the masses to maximize economic rents, and racist theories provided a convenient excuse for exploitative policies. In colonies with large white settler populations, these preferences were reinforced by an intense lobbying effort to prevent the empowerment of non-white colonists.

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Figure 6.5: **Franchise Size in 20th Century Africa: Settler vs. Other Colonies**

Notes: The lines depict the average percentage of the population with the legal franchise in each group of countries (we include observations both during and after colonial rule). Data from V-Dem. The sample consists of African countries only. Settler colonies are those in which Europeans composed at least 5% of the colony's population.

Yet despite these generic impediments, in specific circumstances, colonists of color could gain representation. One path was the emergence of a middle class that was educated in the colonizer's language and engaged in professions such as law, trade, or the bureaucracy in the colonial capital or major port cities. Such colonists had more effective voice for a similar reason as white settlers: it was difficult to justify exclusion for colonists that would have met the franchise requirements at home and were otherwise like Europeans except for the color of their skin. This stimulus accounts for most colonies that lacked a notable non-white population but nonetheless gained (or, in some cases, regained) electoral representation by the 1920s: British West Indies, South Asia, and some African towns.

The second, and blunter, path for non-white colonists to gain representation was through the threat of revolt. Various factors that had made widespread revolts difficult to organize changed after World War II. The balance of power shifted away from the main colonial powers, and

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rising nationalism helped non-white leaders to organize opposition movements against op-
pressive rule. This explains the general shift toward elections and franchise expansion in
the following decades, albeit with the exceptions in Portuguese and white settler colonies (as
shown in the preceding figures).

Despite these broad trends, later colonial electoral experiences still varied in consequential
ways because of differences in metropolitan political institutions. The differences between
British and French colonies (particularly after the onset of the Fifth Republic) are striking.
Franchise size grew somewhat faster in French colonies, and nearly all these territories gained
universal suffrage in 1956. However, Francophone African colonies usually combined strong
presidencies with weak legislatures, courts, and parties; and unfair election procedures resem-
bled those in Gaullist France. By contrast, British, Dutch, and American colonies tended to
feature higher levels of institutionalization and fairer elections. Across these empires, colonies
were more likely to experience their first election and more rapid franchise expansion when
left-wing governments were in power. Finally, institutional homophily can account for the
puzzle of monarchies that emerged from British rule. Despite an overall democratic regime,
Britain's constitutional monarchy was more tolerant of monarchical institutions in its colonies
compared to other powers.

1.5 Paths of Decolonization

Heterogeneous experiences with elections under colonialism yielded three types of decolo-
nization episodes. In *authoritarian* cases, the colonial regime handed power, willingly or
unwillingly, to an authoritarian regime. In *long-term electoral* cases, the colonial government
handed power to an elected government after an extended period of competitive elections. In
contingent electoral cases, the colonial government handed power to an elected regime after a
short period of pluralism sometimes measured in months rather than years.

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Our theoretical framework explains why colonies experienced divergent decolonization paths. In some cases, authoritarian decolonization resulted from a failed attempt by Portuguese officials or white settlers to perpetuate colonial rule by military force. This resulted in decolonization wars that, eventually, enabled rebels to control the post-colonial state. Other authoritarian decolonization cases stemmed from the colonizer wishing to hand power to a sympathetic authoritarian ruler in the hope of retaining influence after decolonization. In some cases, these choices reflected the logic of institutional homophily, including French colonies with overly strong executives and British colonies with monarchies.

Long-term electoral cases experienced more than three decades of at least minimally fair elections before independence with a territory-wide franchise. Typically, internal autonomy was initially circumscribed and the franchise was small, as in South Asia in the 1910s and the British West Indies in the 1920s. Initially, these institutions reflected lobbying by non-white elites. Over time, the number of elected representatives and the number of people eligible to vote expanded as colonizers sought to head off riots and rebellions by using existing institutions. Consequently, these institutions often evolved to become more powerful and more democratic. Importantly, simply holding early elections is not sufficient for inclusion in this category. Requiring that the franchise was national in scope excludes cases like Nigeria and Senegal in which only in several port cities did inhabitants elect their representatives to the territory-wide representative body. Representatives from other areas were nominated or excluded entirely despite the body legislating for the entire colony.

The contingent electoral decolonizers stood somewhere between these two extremes. These cases lacked the factors that propelled authoritarian decolonization—autocratic metropoles, local monarchs, or notable white settler populations—but also lacked educated elites of color that could push for early elections. Given the rising threat of revolt after World War II, the metropole granted reforms, but these typically were contingent responses to changing circum-

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stances. Consequently, their experience with elections was shallower than in the long-term electoral cases. For example, the first elections in the Belgian Congo were an emergency reaction immediately before independence, and many French colonies experienced rapid franchise expansion in the 1950s as the metropole sped up its timeline for granting independence. Reforms in British colonies tended to occur more gradually, although also in the shadow of withdrawal.

1.6 Post-Independence Persistence

Disparate colonial experiences with elections help to explain post-independence trends in democracy levels. In Figure 6.6, we plot patterns for countries that gained independence after 1945. At independence, countries in each decolonization category differed starkly in their democracy levels. On the V-Dem polyarchy index, long-term electoral cases had an average score of 0.50, which is half of the highest possible score on this index. The average score for contingent electoral cases is 40% lower, at 0.30. Finally, the average V-Dem score for authoritarian decolonization cases is 65% lower than that for the contingent electoral cases, at 0.11.

These differences have largely persisted over the past six decades. Although the Cold War was generally harmful for democracy and the 1990s unleashed pro-democratic reforms, the main effect of changes over time in the international environment was to shift the *levels* rather than to affect the *differences* across categories. By 2018, the average polyarchy scores had shifted up in each category: 0.64 for long-term electoral cases, 0.45 for contingent electoral cases, and 0.34 for authoritarian cases. As in the immediate post-independence period, each category of cases is statistically distinguishable from the others.

The overall trend for long-term electoral cases has been the preservation or improvement of democracy over time. This supports our core theoretical contention about persistence. A

Figure 6.6: **Democracy Scores: Modes of Decolonization**
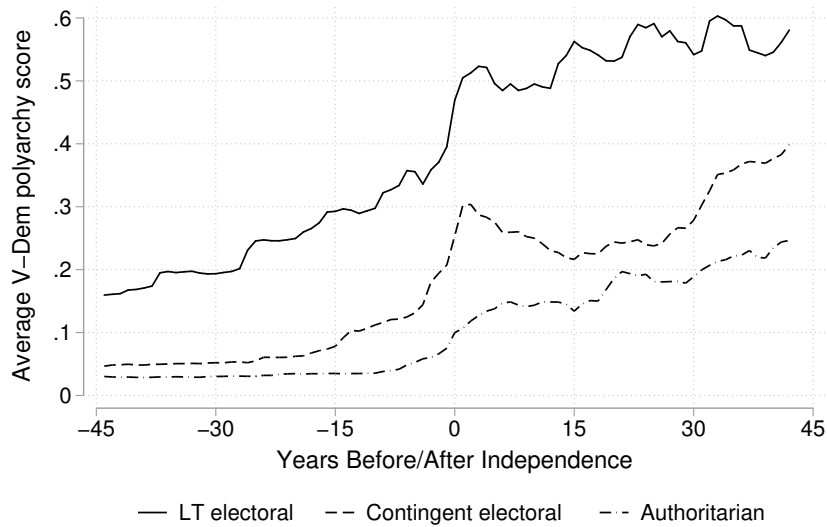
Notes: The lines depict the average V-Dem polyarchy score for each group of colonies. Data from V-Dem. The x-axis is the number of years before/after independence, with negative values indicating periods of colonial rule and positive values indicating post-independence.

strategic interaction among self-interested actors can sometimes produce beneficial outcomes, even when key actors lack any direct interest in promoting democracy. Early electoral institutions facilitated the emergence of strong legislatures or mass parties that participated in repeated elected contests. By elevating political actors that had sunk capital in electoral contestation, these institutions subsequently created a bulwark against forces that could erode or overthrow democracy, such as power-hungry incumbents, military generals, traditional elites, and radical revolutionaries.

By contrast, contingent electoral cases exhibited a significant drop in their democracy scores in their first fifteen years of independence. Some of these countries had short-lived democratic regimes in the years immediately after independence, but these swiftly collapsed. In contrast to the long-term electoral cases, the conditions for self-enforcing democracy were inauspicious. Given weakly rooted democratic institutions from the colonial era, these regimes were vulnerable to military removal of elected officials and to incumbent executive entrenchment. Authoritarian pressure amid Cold War superpower competition further contributed to

democratic collapses. Even when the colonizer retained significant interests in the new state, they often perceived a friendly dictator as better serving their interests than a tenuous democracy.

Colonies that gained independence before World War II also exhibited persistence over time. In the four "neo-Britains" —the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—Europeans constituted the overwhelming majority of the population and each experienced either decades or centuries of electoral competition prior to gaining independence. These countries have all exhibited high democracy scores since independence, with older countries like the United States experiencing notable increases over time because of franchise expansion.

The main exception to this generalization is the U.S. South, where the negative side of the dual effects of white settlers played a role. In these states, the white population was smaller than any other constituent unit within the neo-Britains. Repression and undemocratic electoral rules prevented Black political participation for a century after the emancipation of enslaved persons in the 1860s. New state constitutions that ushered in authoritarian regimes in the "Solid South" became prevalent in the 1890s. These democratic reversals reflected a similar strategic calculus as the earlier autocratic reversions to appointed assemblies in the British West Indies in the 1860s.

Spanish American countries had brief experiences with elections just prior to independence. This cases thus resembled the contingent electoral cases from a century and-a-half later. As in those cases, brief experiences with colonial elections were minimally impactful, and most Spanish American countries experienced long periods of authoritarian rule after independence.

This evidence supports our overarching contention that although arrangements under external rule can facilitate democracy, the scope conditions are narrow. Relatively free elections must occur uninterrupted for a long period of time prior to independence in order for leading polit-

ical actors to invest in the creation of democratic political parties. Yet these conditions were historically rare. White settlers were often able to pressure their metropole for representative institutions. In some cases, these persisted to form the basis for post-colonial democracy. However, resistance by white settlers to broader political participation often eroded the quality of these institutions or eliminated them entirely. In non-settler colonies, metropolitan officials usually lacked the pressure to implement elections until withdrawal was imminent, or local or metropolitan actors benefited from authoritarian rule and refused to grant electoral concessions. In non-settler colonies, only where non-white elites could push for early representative institutions were condition favorable to consolidate post-colonial democracy.

Overall, most contemporary countries can date their initial national-level political institutions and first elections to the colonial period. Yet the quality of and experience with elections varied widely across colonies. Colonial elections sometimes facilitated durable post-colonial democracy. However, in most cases, Western rule usually bequeathed weakly democratic or solidly authoritarian legacies.

2   Assessing Existing Explanations for Colonial Institutions

Our findings yield new insights for various factors that scholars have linked to colonial political institutions in prior work. Topics include British colonialism, factor endowments, settler colonialism, and other colonial actors such as formerly enslaved persons and Protestant missionaries. We have discussed many of these factors throughout in the book, while stressing their fundamentally conditional effects. Our more encompassing theory and time periods of our data analysis demonstrate that existing theses about these factors can explain outcomes among specific colonies and times, but not elsewhere.

2.1 British Colonialism and Factor Endowments

An early and influential argument about colonial legacies was that British colonialism was beneficial for democracy.[1] In contrast to this broad argument, we contend that the British empire was simply too heterogeneous to reach an unconditional conclusion about the consequences of British rule. At certain times, British colonies were more democratic than their peers, whereas British colonies were unremarkable at other periods of time. As our theory anticipates, the effect depends on whether other major colonizers were authoritarian, the distribution of the English settler population, and the influence of colonists of color.[2]

Here we highlight two waves and subsequent reversals of British colonial democracy. As summarized in Figure 6.1, British colonies gained an early advantage in representative institutions. Britain's home institutions were more democratic than its peers, and its colonies were populated with sizable contingents of Englishmen. However, as Figure 6.2 shows, British colonies lost this early advantage after France democratized. Furthermore, Britain was reluctant to allow electoral representation in newly acquired colonies (many of which were in the West Indies) in the early nineteenth century. Later, the wave of legislative reversals in the British West Indies in the second half of the nineteenth century eliminated many early representative institutions (Figure 6.4).

Post-1945 decolonization cases exhibit another wave and subsequent reversal. Figure 6.7 resembles Figure 6.6 except here we disaggregate territories by whether they were colonized by Britain. In Panel A, we include all post-1945 decolonization cases. In Panel B, we limit

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[1]Weiner 1987; de Silanes et al. 1998; La Porta et al. 1999; Abernethy 2000, 406; Treisman 2000, 418–27; Ferguson 2012; Narizny 2012, 362.

[2]Lange 2004, 2009 analyzes a distinct source of heterogeneity within the British empire: the directness of rule. Lange et al. 2006 and Mahoney 2010 study how the directness of rule affected development trajectories within the British and Spanish empires.

Figure 6.7: **Democracy Scores: British vs. Other Colonies**
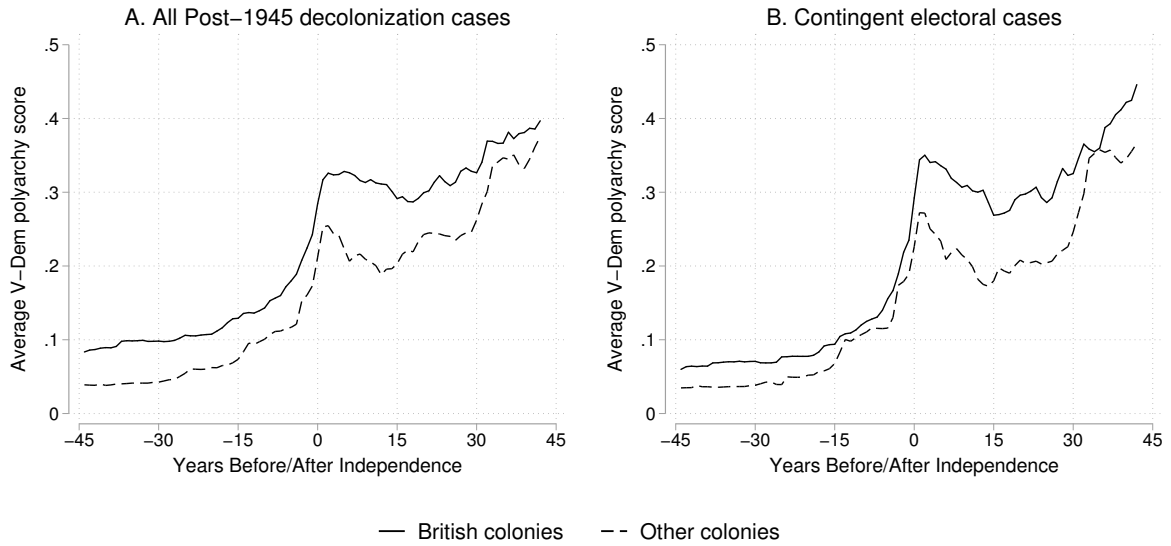
Notes: The lines depict the average V-Dem polyarchy score for each group of colonies. Data from V-Dem. The x-axis is the number of years before/after independence, with negative values indicating periods of colonial rule and positive values indicating post-independence.

the sample to contingent electoral decolonization cases. Both figures demonstrate the same basic pattern: British colonies were more democratic than others at independence, but this advantage dissipated over time.[3] Britain fared better than France and other empires at promoting relatively fair competition and constraints on the executive in the lead-up to independence. Yet for the reasons discussed for contingent electoral cases, many of these gains proved ephemeral.

Beyond the contingent electoral cases, the long-term electoral and authoritarian decolonization cases did tend to persist at high and low levels of democracy, respectively, over time (see

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[3]In the full sample, the difference in means on the V-Dem polyarchy score is 0.06 at independence (p-value 0.11), 0.02 for 35 years after independence (p-value 0.70), and 0.03 in 1995 (p-value 0.53). In the sample of contingent electoral decolonizers, the difference in means on the V-Dem polyarchy score is 0.07 at independence (p-value 0.03), 0.00 for 35 years after independence (p-value 0.97), and 0.02 in 1995 (p-value 0.68).

Figure 6.6). However, the British Empire featured many cases in each category. Discussions of pro-British effects often select on the dependent variable and expound that most cases of successful post-colonial democratization were British.[4] Yet the British Empire also handed off power to monarchs in the Persian Gulf, Swaziland, and Brunei.[5] Thus, the aggregate pattern in Panel B of Figure 6.7 is very similar to that in Panel A after lopping off the most and least democratic cases in the British Empire.

Other scholars take the opposite extreme position that colonizer identity is not relevant for explaining variation in political institutions. For example, 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.[6]

Although we agree that factor endowments affected colonial demographics, we disagree with the contention that metropolitan institutions are irrelevant. We demonstrate the importance of metropolitan institutions using evidence across four centuries. Even within the earlier period on which Engerman and Sokoloff and other scholars in this literature focus, distinguishing metropolitan political institutions can explain many anomalous cases. Representative insti-

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[4]Weiner 1987.

[5]In Lee and Paine 2019, we analyze the pattern of divergent inheritances and diminishing legacies of British colonialism in more depth.

[6]Engerman and Sokoloff 2011, 44-46, 218. For other examples of authors that reject the importance of British colonialism, see Acemoglu et al. 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 et al. 2002; Frankema 2009; Bruhn and Gallego 2012; Arias and Girod 2014; Gailmard 2017.

tutions 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, Southern Cone colonies and French Canada did not gain representative institutions despite factor endowments that made family farms economically viable.

2.2 Settler Colonialism

Existing theories about white settlers tend to be sanguine about their democratic effects.[7] Certainly, white settlers were a positive force for democratic institutions at certain times and places. However, we posit that white settlers exerted dual effects. When confronted with rising threats from the non-white masses, we demonstrate that European settlers typically exerted anti-democratic influences. Nor did white settlers operate independently of the empire in which they resided, as early Iberian colonists failed to gain representation for themselves even in colonies in which the European (and mixed) population was large.

Table 6.1 summarizes evidence for the dual effects of white settlers. Here we list every colony in the present sample with a European population share of at least 5% at any point during colonial rule, disaggregated by British and non-British settler colonies. Two columns provide information relevant for the positive and negative effects: whether the colony had elected representation at some point before 1919, which relates to early elected representation; and, conditional on meeting the first condition, whether the colony experienced large-scale settler

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[7]Hariri 2012, 2015 and Gerring et al. 2020 provide evidence for positive post-colonial democratic legacies. Many studies on how colonial European settlers positively affected economic development discuss colonial political institutions as a key intervening mechanism; see Acemoglu et al. 2001; Engerman and Sokoloff 2011; Easterly and Levine 2016. Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, 2020 discuss the conflicting legacies of colonial settlers from establishing exclusive property rights institutions.

resistance to franchise expansion during colonial rule. This could entail disbanding an elected assembly or fighting a major war to try to prevent liberation of non-whites. It also summarizes the country's democracy score in its first decade of independence, with "YES" implying democratic in all 10 years, "NO" capturing 0 years, and "MIXED" in between.

Table 6.1: **Colonial European Settlers and Democratic Legacies**

Country	Independence year	Elected representation before 1919?	Large-scale settler resistance to franchise expansion?	Democratic in first post-independence decade?
British colonies with sizable European population				
Neo-Britains*	Various	YES	NO	YES
Jamaica	1962	YES	YES	YES
Trinidad & Tobago	1962	YES	YES	YES
Barbados	1966	YES	NO	YES
Mauritius	1968	YES	NO	YES
Bahamas	1973	YES	NO	YES
Grenada	1974	YES	YES	MIXED
Dominica	1978	YES	YES	YES
St. Lucia	1979	NO	-	YES
St. Vincent & G.	1979	YES	YES	YES
Zimbabwe**	1967/1980	YES	YES	NO
Antigua & Barbuda	1981	YES	YES	NO
Belize	1981	YES	YES	YES
St. Kitts & Nevis	1983	YES	YES	YES
South Africa**	1910/1994	YES	YES	YES
Non-British colonies with sizable European population				
Iberian America*	Various	NO	-	NO
Haiti	1804	NO	-	NO
Tunisia	1956	NO	-	NO
Algeria	1962	YES	YES	NO
Angola	1975	NO	-	NO
Cape Verde	1975	NO	-	NO
Sao Tome & Principe	1975	NO	-	NO
Suriname	1975	YES	NO	MIXED
Seychelles	1976	NO	-	NO
Namibia	1990	NO	-	NO

*The neo-Britains are Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. Postcolonial Iberian American countries are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

**South Africa gained independence in 1910 but did not gain African majority rule until 1994. Rhodesia declared independence in 1965 but did not gain internationally recognized independence until 1980.

Only seven of the 34 settler countries exhibit (1) early representation, (2) no large-scale settler resistance to franchise expansion during colonial rule, and (3) democracy after independence:

the four neo-Britains and three British islands. Two additional cases exhibit mixed evidence by having elected representation before 1919 and post-colonial democracy, but also experienced large-scale settler resistance to franchise expansion: Jamaica and South Africa. The other settler colonies lacked elected representation before 1919 and/or stable democratic rule in the first decade of independence. Consistent with the anti-democratic effect of white settlers, 11 of 19 settler colonies that experienced elective representation at any point prior to World War I also exhibited large-scale settler resistance to franchise expansion. This table also underscores the importance of metropolitan institutions. Dutch Suriname is the only case that meets all three conditions outside the British empire.

2.3   Other Colonial Actors

British colonialism, factor endowments, and European settlers are the most widely studied factors in the literature. However, more recent research emphasizes the importance of other colonial actors. Some scholars highlight the role of slavery in shaping colonial political institutions.[8] Paradoxically, colonies with large slave plantations enjoyed favorable conditions for gaining political representation. In many such cases, enslaved persons gained metropolitan legal rights after emancipation and they had access to improve education and literacy. We concur with the evidence that supports this premise. Our contribution on this front is to situate such cases among the broader set of colonies (including parts of South Asia and Africa) in which colonists of color came to comprise a professional and Western-assimilated class in the nineteenth century. These developments facilitated the early emergence of representative institutions, which put many of these countries on the path to post-colonial democracy.

Other scholars argue that Protestant missionaries tended to bequeath pro-democratic legacies.[9]

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[8]Ledgister 1998; Owolabi 2015, 2020.
[9]Lankina and Getachew 2012, Woodberry 2012.

This argument relates to the contention in our theory that the early emergence of a non-white middle class was propitious for democracy. In many cases, Protestant missionaries helped to spread educational access among non-whites and create such middle classes. However, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of Protestant missionaries independent of the factors we expound in our theory. Large Protestant missions were mostly confined within the British empire. And in colonies where Protestant missionaries failed to contribute to a middle class in important cities, whatever positive effects they had on promoting education and literacy were largely unimportant for influencing representative institutions, as in many African countries. More recently, some have called into doubt the aggregate statistical relationship between Protestant missionaries and post-colonial democracy.[10]

3 Broader Implications for Contemporary Political Regimes

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[10]Nikolova and Polansky 2021.