



Colonial Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship

Why are some countries more democratic than others? For most non-European countries, elections began under Western colonial rule. However, existing research largely overlooks these democratic origins. Analyzing a global sample of colonies across four centuries, this book explains the emergence of colonial electoral institutions and their lasting impact. The degree of democracy in the metropole, the size of the white settler population, and pressure from non-Europeans all shaped the timing and form of colonial elections. White settlers and non-white middle classes educated in the colonizer's language usually gained early elections but settler minorities resisted subsequent franchise expansion. Authoritarian metropolises blocked elections entirely. Countries with lengthy exposure to competitive colonial institutions tended to consolidate democracies after independence. By contrast, countries with shorter electoral episodes usually shed democratic institutions and countries that were denied colonial elections consolidated stable dictatorships. Regime trajectories shaped by colonial rule persist to the present day.

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PROOFS

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Acknowledgments

The research culminating in this book project began with a straightforward premise: the period of Western colonial rule must have affected subsequent democratic trajectories. This critical juncture, which created new states and political institutions across the globe, was too widespread and disruptive to not matter. But how?

Academics routinely emphasize the benefits of collegiality, of which this project is a direct result. Informal conversations during office white-board sessions, holiday parties, and dinners established a baseline set of characteristics that required further analysis. In our initial research projects on how Western colonial rule affected subsequent regime trajectories, we examined individual colonial actors, namely, metropolitan officials (Lee and Paine 2019, *Journal of Comparative Economics*; Lee and Paine 2019 *International Studies Quarterly*), white settlers (Paine 2019, *Journal of Politics*), or both (Paine 2019, *World Politics*).

Carving off smaller slices enabled us to think about which pieces mattered and how they fit together to affect the big picture. Our varied interests on colonialism congealed into a book almost without us realizing it. We thank our friends and colleagues at the University of Rochester political science department both for their constant support and advice, and for creating the intellectual atmosphere that made this project possible. We particularly thank Gretchen Helmke, who encouraged us and provided excited feedback throughout the process while also serving as an invaluable mentor.

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PROOFS

1 | Introduction

A century ago, every democratic regime was in Western Europe or in a country settled by Western Europeans. The picture is now more varied. Non-Western countries such as India and Jamaica have been democracies for more than half a century, despite lacking many factors often cited as prerequisites for democracy. But stable democratic experiences are exceptional. In countries such as Uganda and Malaysia, democratic competition at independence gave way shortly afterward to military coups or autocratic consolidation by the incumbent. Many other countries, such as Angola, Kuwait, and Niger, were authoritarian at independence and did not establish democratic institutions until decades after independence, if ever.

Why some countries are democracies has long intrigued political scientists. The enormous literature on this topic almost exclusively examines variation in democracy levels *after independence*. However, these theories overlook the profound institutional restructuring that occurred under Western colonialism. The overall practice of colonial governance was unmistakably authoritarian. However, by the mid-twentieth century, most colonies had adopted hybrid political institutions with electoral elements. For *most* contemporary countries, mass electoral competition originated under external rule.

In this book, we provide a new theory and empirical evidence to answer two questions. First, why did colonies vary in their electoral experiences under Western rule? Electoral competition under colonialism was very common. Among 107 countries that gained independence from a Western power, all but eight experienced at least one national election under colonial rule.¹ However, colonial electoral institutions varied in many ways, including the timing of the first election, the scope

¹ Sample is all countries in the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data set. Count of elections is based on our colonial elections data, both described later.

of the electorate, the role of elected versus appointed officials, and the powers of the legislature.

Second, did the colonial period matter for subsequent regime trajectories? Most contemporary regimes with electoral competition trace their roots at least in part to the colonial era. In 2022, ninety-nine non-European countries were democracies or electoral autocracies.² Of these, eighty-seven experienced their first election under Western colonial rule, and almost all the exceptions were not colonized by a Western power. We simply cannot explain postcolonial democracies or the broader importance of electoral competition in the non-European world without examining colonial origins.

Yet postcolonial democracy was not the only, or even the most frequent, product of colonial elections. Countries with lengthy episodes of colonial pluralism usually became durable democracies. However, the most common sequel to shorter episodes of colonial pluralism was military coups or electoral authoritarian regimes. Different facets of colonial electoral experiences are, as we demonstrate, highly correlated with democracy levels after independence. Colonial elections, *because* of their various flaws, put countries on divergent trajectories at independence that have largely reinforced themselves over time.

In contrast to our focus on colonialism, most leading theories of democratization focus solely on actors in sovereign states. Classic works analyze the interactions of various domestic social groups such as landed aristocrats, capitalist elites, military generals, the middle class, the working class, peasants, or the masses more broadly.³ Causal factors posited to empower certain social groups at the expense of others include income growth,⁴ asset mobility,⁵ oil wealth,⁶ and income inequality.⁷ Many recent studies examine the role of elections within

² Calculated by authors using data from V-Dem and the Regimes of the World data sets.

³ Moore 1966a; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992; Collier 1999; Mahoney and Snyder 1999; Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Ansell and Samuels 2014; Miller 2021.

⁴ Lipset 1959; Przeworski et al. 2000; Acemoglu et al. 2008.

⁵ Bates and Donald Lien 1985; Boix 2003.

⁶ Gause 1994; Ross 2001, 2012.

⁷ Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Ansell and Samuels 2014; Haggard and Kaufman 2012.

authoritarian regimes and the correlates of authoritarian stability.⁸ These theories cannot explain how an external actor like a colonial ruler would affect prospects for democracy or dictatorship, nor whether institutions constructed under external rule should persist afterward. The democratization literature does not overlook external actors entirely, as some recent studies analyze attempts by the United States and Western Europe to promote democracy abroad.⁹ However, these studies focus overwhelmingly on the post-Cold War period, when most of the world had already experienced some form of electoral competition.¹⁰

Scholars also neglect colonial political institutions when selecting cases for quantitative or qualitative empirical tests. Most authors sample postcolonial cases and most statistical tests use postindependence data. Many widely used cross-national measures of democracy, such as the Polity IV and Freedom House data sets, do not include colonized territories.¹¹ Thus, scholarship on democratization and electoral authoritarian regimes usually examines countries that had previously developed electoral institutions. However, because electoral institutions in most non-European countries date back to the colonial era, the standard approach overlooks the origins of these institutions.

Our book takes a broad historical and comparative approach to this problem. We collected a new global data set on colonial electoral institutions over the entire period of Western overseas rule. This wide scope enables us to study the origins and evolution of electoral bodies, as opposed to analyzing a snapshot of political institutions at a particular time or region. Colonialism was a critical juncture that resulted in most non-European countries gaining some form of Western-style elections, sometimes resulting in full-blown democracy. However, this finding neither requires nor supports a positive normative assessment

⁸ Geddes 1999; Lust-Okar 2005; Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008; Blaydes 2010; Wright and Escribà-Folch 2012; Jensen, Malesky and Weymouth 2014; Miller 2015; Arriola, DeVaro and Meng 2021.

⁹ Dunning 2004; Pevehouse 2005; Levitsky and Way 2010; Boix 2011; Gunitsky 2014; Hyde and Marinov 2014; Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015; Bush 2016; Haggard and Kaufman 2016; Miller 2020.

¹⁰ Later, we engage in depth with the smaller number of studies that examine the effects of colonialism on democracy.

¹¹ Marshall and Gurr 2014; Freedom House 2022. The more recent V-Dem data, which we discuss later, is an exception.

of European colonialism overall. We demonstrate that the conditions under which external rule promoted democracy were historically rare and explain instead why colonial rule usually yielded postcolonial authoritarian regimes.

1.1 Overview of the Argument and Evidence

1.1.1 *Origins of Colonial Electoral Institutions*

To explain the timing, form, and rationale for electoral institutions across Western colonies, we develop a theory of electoral institutions that incorporates actors and motivations unique to the colonial context. We analyze the behavior of three policy-interested groups: metropolitan officials, white settlers, and non-Europeans (both native inhabitants and forced migrants). Metropolitan officials made the final decisions about constitutional form. However, both types of colonists could exert pressure through various options: lobbying and agitation, nonparticipation (e.g., withholding taxes, migration), and revolt. All three groups sought economic and other policies favorable to their group, which created a general preference for as much institutional control as possible. We explain how attributes of each actor structured key facets of colonial electoral institutions: the presence of any electoral body, its degree of policymaking autonomy, franchise restrictions, and democracy levels more broadly.

Competitive electoral institutions in the metropole were a permissive condition for colonial electoral bodies to emerge. Colonizers with pluralistic institutions (e.g., a strong parliament or a full-blown democratic regime) faced lower transaction costs to creating electoral institutions in their colonies. Officials and colonists alike from pluralistic metropolises had experience with such institutions, and these metropolitan institutions created a focal point for colonists' demands. By contrast, authoritarian powers feared that electoral institutions would stimulate rather than alleviate pressures for greater autonomy and would create damaging precedents for the metropolitan opposition. Additionally, elite groups who benefited from direct colonial rule were usually more influential in authoritarian metropolitan regimes. The influence of elite groups often led authoritarian colonizers to resist electoral concessions, even if the alternative was a colonial revolt.

Even metropolises with pluralistic electoral institutions resisted electoral concessions unless pushed. Who pressured the metropole, and

how much pressure they exerted, should affect our outcomes: the degree of policymaking autonomy granted to colonists and who gained the franchise. This yields the general implication that the basic rules of colonial electoral competition and suffrage would usually be less democratic (often, much less so) than constitutional laws in the metropole.

White settlers, where they settled in large-enough numbers, were better able than non-white groups to push for electoral representation. Europeans with ties to the metropole had stronger lobbies, could cripple the economic productivity of the colony through non-participation, and sometimes posed a strong revolt threat. However, the actions of white settlers did not unambiguously promote democracy, especially in the long run. Settlers created representative institutions exclusively for themselves and repressed non-whites who sought political rights. How the dual effects of European settlers played out in practice depended on the size of the white settlement. Areas with a very large share of settlers could enfranchise most of the population without granting much political power to non-whites. However, white settler minorities eventually had to choose between non-white rule and continued mass disenfranchisement. Their predilection for the second alternative often weakened democratic institutions.

Although non-Europeans were usually less able to pressure the colonial state, they nonetheless could gain concessions in three distinct circumstances. First, a non-white middle class educated in the colonizer's language emerged in some major port cities and plantation islands. Campaigns by these groups often succeeded because they could lobby the colonial state using its own language and cultural idiom. It was normatively difficult for colonizers to justify excluding from voting those who met metropolitan voting criteria. However, because only a small segment of the non-white population exerted pressure, these efforts usually yielded small franchises and limited policymaking autonomy.

Second, non-Europeans sometimes had a credible threat to revolt. When the international system favored mass revolts in which anticolonial rebels could viably gain external support, as it generally did after 1945, mass franchise expansion became very costly to resist. However, the resulting elections often had shallow institutional roots.

Third, in some colonies (usually geographically small), a monarch had a plausible claim to national legitimacy. This created an option to

perpetuate subnational policies of indirect rule by handing off power to a national monarch. Metropolises with a monarch at home were more willing to follow this decolonization path, which enabled traditional non-white elites to gain substantial autonomy under authoritarian rather than electoral institutions.

These theoretical implications explain much variation in colonial electoral institutions. In Chapter 3, we analyze early European colonies in the New World. In the eighteenth century, electoral assemblies were nearly universal in British colonies but almost entirely absent in other empires. However, by the nineteenth century, electoral representation was intermittently present in all colonial empires. Britain developed early parliamentary institutions at home and possessed an empire in which upper-class white men had strong options for lobbying and nonparticipation. These sources of pressure frequently yielded highly autonomous local assemblies, albeit with stringent economic, racial, and gender exclusions. By contrast, British officials delayed electoral reforms in later colonies whose white populations were predominantly Catholic – a disenfranchised group at home. Elsewhere, reforms across the continent stemming from the French Revolution made Britain less unique in its parliamentary constitution and led to electoral institutions in other colonial empires.

In Chapter 4, we analyze the entire colonial world from the mid-nineteenth century through 1945. Despite much smaller white settler populations and minimal threats of mass revolt, nearly half these colonies gained a national-level electoral body before 1945. The enduring influence of white settler minorities and the rise of non-white middle classes explain why. In some parts of Africa, whites settled in large-enough numbers to become politically ascendant. Like their eighteenth-century predecessors, they gained European-only elections. Where the white population was too weak to maintain hegemony, as in the British West Indies, elections were abolished before Blacks could gain a majority. Non-Europeans achieved representation only where they were part of a Western-assimilated middle class *and* white settlers were unimportant. Small groups of South Asian and African elites in the major colonial port cities gained electoral representation in the 1920s or earlier, as did Blacks in the British West Indies after the influence of white planters had waned.

World War II was a watershed for Western colonialism. Chapter 5 explains how weakened European powers confronted mass social

movements that challenged colonial rule. To avoid costly rebellions, colonizers usually conceded mass-franchise elections and, eventually, independence to non-Europeans. However, the pace of reform and approaches to decolonization varied greatly because of differences in metropolitan institutions and the size of the white settler community. Although most colonizers preferred reform over confronting a rebellion, white settlers in Africa as well as Portugal refused to grant concessions that would diminish their economic and political power. Their intransigence fostered decolonization wars in which rebel movements gained control of the postcolonial state. Alternatively, colonial officials (often in the British empire) sometimes chose to grant power to unelected national monarchs.

1.1.2 Legacies of Colonial Electoral Institutions

This new theoretical understanding and empirical documentation of electoral competition under colonial rule helps to explain postcolonial democracy levels, as we show in Chapter 6. Experiences with nationally elected legislatures, which we refer to as colonial pluralism, and democracy levels at independence are each strongly positively correlated with democracy levels afterward.

Two types of countries had lengthy exposure to colonial elections, and consequently tended to remain stable democracies afterward. First, cases such as India and Jamaica in which a non-white middle class speaking the colonizer's language emerged in the nineteenth century and lobbied the metropole for electoral representation. Early concessions enabled non-European elites to form institutionalized parties with extensive electoral experience prior to gaining independence. Afterward, institutionalized parties acted as a buffer against possible military intervention. Second, Europeans developed early elections and comprised a majority of the colonial population in the historically unique neo-Britains (US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). In these countries, broad suffrage did not threaten the white political elite's hold on power, as it did in many other cases with smaller settler minorities.

However, relatively few colonies experienced lengthy periods of colonial pluralism. In most colonies, the first election occurred less than a decade (sometimes, only months) before independence; or, if elections occurred earlier, they were geographically circumscribed or

the assemblies were virtually powerless. Parties tended to be weaker in these cases and elections were not perceived as the exclusive means of gaining and retaining power. Electoral institutions that existed at independence were often quickly swept away by military coups (e.g., Uganda) or incumbent consolidation (e.g., Ivory Coast), or used as an electoral authoritarian institution (e.g., Malaysia). Other colonial regimes forbade any (meaningful) elections. This usually yielded durable authoritarian regimes after independence governed by either a rebel group who fought the colonizer (e.g., Angola) or a national monarch (e.g., Kuwait).

Varying postcolonial experiences underscore the generic difficulties to establishing stable democratic regimes from above, even when the external power is democratic and exerts significant control over the institutional form. Two main contradictions prevented successful democracy promotion in most cases. First, the actors best positioned to set up representative institutions – white settlers – were also an elite landed class who sought to preserve their socioeconomic privileges. Thus, some cases with early colonial elections endured significant struggles to gain majority rule and to institutionalize non-European-led parties within the electoral system. Second, for metropolitan officials, establishing democratic institutions in their colonies was at best secondary to their goals, even if the home regime was a democracy. Manipulating elections to secure power for colonially aligned politicians or handing off power to a national monarch were often viable alternatives that would prevent conflict.

1.2 Sample, Concepts, and Data

To establish these claims, we use a multi-method approach. We collected an original data set of elections under colonialism that spans essentially all Western overseas colonies between the late fifteenth and early twentieth centuries, plus information on policymaking autonomy and franchise restrictions. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) provides additional democracy data for the twentieth century. We examine patterns and correlations through figures and tables of cases presented in the book, plus regressions analyzed in the Appendix. To provide more direct evidence of mechanisms, we consulted hundreds of primary and secondary historical sources that yield insight into how sources of

colonist pressure such as lobbying, nonparticipation, and revolt influenced the decisions of metropolitan officials. Here we detail our sample of colonies as well as our conceptual and operational scheme for studying electoral institutions under colonialism.

1.2.1 Sample of Colonies

The ability of Western powers to establish noncontiguous, overseas empires was a product of improvements in maritime and military technology within Western Europe that had manifested by the late fifteenth century, which justifies our temporal focus. The three main scope conditions for our core sample are all colonies in which a *Western* power established *formal sovereignty* over an *overseas* dependency.

Western Colonies Only

European colonial rule was marked by violence, genocide, and (mostly) authoritarian rule. Early democratic institutions, in the sense of checks on the executive and popular forms of leadership selection and policy influence, were widespread across the precolonial non-European world.¹² In many cases, the initial European onslaught dismantled existing local participatory institutions by either decimating the population or coercively occupying territory. In that sense, looking to Western colonialism as an epoch that shaped contemporary democratic experiences may appear odd.

Nonetheless, institutions of “modern” democracy are undoubtedly European in their roots. Western Europe was unique in the development of institutions of *indirect* democracy, in particular parliaments with elected members and some formal prerogatives over levying taxes. Later developments of elected executives, responsible parliaments, political parties, and mass franchises within larger territorial states were also uniquely Western.¹³ Western European powers, in large part

¹² Social scientists have only recently begun to scrutinize the democratic attributes of non-Western societies prior to colonization. For recent, primarily quantitative research, see Giuliano and Nunn 2013; Baldwin 2015; Bentzen, Hariri and Robinson 2019; Acemoglu and Robinson 2020; Ahmed and Stasavage 2020; Stasavage 2020; Bolt et al. 2023. All these contributions are indebted to the wealth of earlier historical and anthropological research on non-Western societies.

¹³ Manin 1997; Stasavage 2020; Gerring et al. 2022, 27–35.

because they conquered much of the non-European world, were able to impose their institutional vision – regardless of the generic pros and cons of these institutions for promoting good governance relative to earlier institutions of direct democracy. Thus, there was indeed something distinctive about colonization by a Western power that should influence variation in “modern” democratic institutions. “Western” includes all countries in Western Europe and the neo-British offshoots. By contrast, we exclude all cases of colonization by non-Western powers, such as Russia, Japan, or China.¹⁴

Overseas Colonies Only

Separation between the rulers and the ruled is, implicitly, a crucial scope condition of our theory. Spatial separation usually created distinct interests between the metropolitan government and residents of the colony. This prompted demands for autonomous elected legislatures – a key outcome of interest in our theory. Consequently, we exclude all territories within Europe (e.g., Ireland) and all states/provinces in the four neo-Britains that were never under the formal colonial jurisdiction of a European power (e.g., the US state of Ohio).¹⁵ We would need a distinct theory to explain why territorially contiguous dependencies were, usually, governed as integral parts of the imperial metropole; why some gained political rights commensurate to those of core residents; and why certain dependencies eventually broke away.

All Cases of Colonial Suzerainty

Among non-European territories colonized by a Western power, we take an expansive view of which to include in our sample. Western metropolises adopted varied administrative strategies in their overseas dependencies. These ranged from formal incorporation into the metropole (as in Algeria) to almost complete autonomy with the colonial power handling foreign policy only (as in Nepal or the Persian Gulf states).¹⁶

¹⁴ All Russian and Chinese dependencies are also excluded by the *overseas* condition, discussed next.

¹⁵ However, the original US states are in our sample because they were at one point governed as overseas colonies by a Western European power.

¹⁶ Wight 1952 discusses legal distinctions among British dependencies.

Although it is commonplace to include cases such as Algeria, cases such as the British Gulf states are more controversial. Our justification for inclusion is that the choice over how much internal autonomy to concede was endogenous and strategic. Analyzing the effects of colonialism while excluding cases based on juridical relationships or degrees of administrative intervention will yield biased results. Colonial rule was significant not only because it invented certain new institutions, but also because colonizers strategically chose what to preserve. Many of the original protectorate treaties that Britain (and other powers) signed with local rulers throughout Africa were very similar in form to those signed with rulers in the Persian Gulf. Yet the powers decided to annex their African territories, thereby ignoring treaty stipulations that their sovereignty concerned external relations only,¹⁷ whereas Britain continually permitted high internal autonomy in the Persian Gulf. The preservation of the Kuwaiti monarchy was, in this sense, as much a product of British colonialism as was the Indian parliament. The different approaches across European metropolises imply that France or Portugal, had they colonized Kuwait, likely would have abolished the monarchy. For this reason, we contend that the standard practice of excluding the Persian Gulf states from analyses of British colonialism tends to yield overly optimistic conclusions about the effect of British colonialism on democracy. However, we exclude cases in which Western powers did not establish formal suzerainty, such as in Iran, and concession cities with a built-in time limit, as in China.

Throughout the book, we mainly consider two distinct samples. For our analysis of colonies in the New World before 1850, our new measure of electoral institutions (see below) is coded at the level of the contemporaneous colony rather than modern country. This yields seventy-eight colonies for this region and period alone, a much larger number than we would obtain by anachronistically using the boundaries of modern countries. In the current US, we include not only the colonies that declared independence in 1776 but also earlier colonies such as Plymouth, New Haven, and West Jersey; temporary colonies such as East/West Florida; and colonies relinquished by another European power, such as New Netherland and New France. We also include colonies that never gained independence, such as Bermuda and

¹⁷ Anene 1966; Alexandrowicz 1973.

Martinique. For later periods, we mostly use the sample of countries included in the V-Dem data set, which uses a more stringent population threshold and almost exclusively includes cases that eventually gained independence. We refer to later microstates only when they follow qualitatively distinct patterns from larger states.

To assess the robustness of our postcolonial results, we also conduct analyses with a full sample of non-European countries, including those colonized by a non-Western power (e.g., Taiwan) or uncolonized (e.g., Afghanistan). We have strong theoretical expectations that these cases should tend to be authoritarian. Non-Western colonizers were authoritarian and did not implant electoral institutions in their colonies. Most countries that avoided colonization entirely were historical empires with strong monarchies and militaries.¹⁸ Even in cases that engaged in defensive modernization efforts that included the introduction of Western-style parliaments, electoral institutions were usually weak relative to authoritarian forces. The relatively low democracy levels in non-Western countries excluded from our core sample support our overarching claim that Western colonialism was a critical juncture for facilitating competitive political institutions, at least in the select colonies that gained lengthy exposure to electoral institutions.

1.2.2 *Conceptualizing and Measuring Democratic Attributes*

Conceptualization

Our ultimate outcome of interest is democracy. We follow Dahl's classic formulation, which stipulates that democracy requires competitive elections for the executive and legislature and a broad degree of participation among the populace.¹⁹ Throughout history, sovereign countries and dependencies alike have often had some democratic pieces despite not meeting the standards for full democracy.²⁰ Countries that lack elections for the executive or to a national assembly, or that lack a national assembly entirely, are unambiguously *closed authoritarian* regimes. However, other regimes have a hybrid structure. The United Kingdom before the nineteenth century had an elected lower parliamentary house with strong powers; but a small franchise and corrupt

¹⁸ Hariri 2012; Ertan, Fiszbein and Putterman 2016.

¹⁹ Dahl 1971.

²⁰ Miller 2015.

and malapportioned elections. We refer to such regimes as *parliamentary* or *pluralist* to denote meaningful constraints on the executive despite small franchises, in contrast to closed authoritarian (or absolutist) regimes such as pre-Revolutionary France. More recently, many countries have become *competitive* or *electoral authoritarian* regimes with universal suffrage, but elections are highly tilted in favor of the incumbent.²¹

We apply this conceptual scheme to colonies, albeit with some notable alterations to match the colonial setting. Policymaking powers were always shared at least in part with metropolitan officials, in contrast to sovereign countries. Thus, the degree to which elections conveyed meaningful levels of policymaking autonomy to colonists was a key consideration in the colonial setting. We provide an operational scheme that enables us to systematically track key elements of Dahlian democracy across a broad temporal and spatial sample under Western colonial rule.

Existence of Electoral Institutions

Holding some form of election is the most basic element of democratic competition. Consequently, our core measure throughout the book is an indicator for whether colonists elect any seats to a territory-wide assembly or to the metropolitan parliament, the latter of which enables us to capture variation among French and Spanish colonies.²² These electoral institutions varied in numerous ways and could be afflicted by a myriad of restrictions: a majority of seats on a council were appointed rather than elected, suffrage was limited, the elected assembly had advisory rather than legislative powers over finances, or only select localities elected representatives for the national assembly.

Our original data on colonial electoral institutions, supported by extensive qualitative historical sources, span a global sample from the first elections in Virginia's General Assembly in 1619 through the

²¹ For operationalizations of related conceptual schemes, see Levitsky and Way 2010; Miller 2015; Lührmann, Tannenberg and Lindberg 2018.

²² Electoral bodies were not the sole source of constraints on metropolitan crowns or colonial governors. Unelected bodies such as fully appointed councils or courts could also serve this purpose; see, for example, Franco-Vivanco 2021; Gailmard 2024. However, given our interest in electoral representation for colonists, we do not engage with nonelectoral sources of executive constraints.

twentieth century.²³ In most cases, periodic elections occurred between the first year in which an election occurred and the year in which the country gained independence. However, because our variable is measured annually, we also capture reversals, such as the creation of the Dominion of New England in the 1680s and the transition to direct crown rule across the British West Indies starting in the 1860s.

A practical advantage is that we can reliably track this variable across an expansive spatial and temporal sample. Given the objectivity of the operational criterion (“was there an electoral institution?”) and our extensive sourcing, there are few concerns about measurement error, at least of a magnitude that would qualitatively alter any of the main patterns we highlight. Moreover, at least prior to 1945, colonies varied substantially simply in terms of whether any electoral institution existed.

We count only elections to national-level assemblies, not institutional bodies that governed specific localities such as municipalities or towns. We justify our focus on national-level institutions on two grounds, in addition to the difficulties of systematically collecting data on local institutions.²⁴ First, the disjuncture between the competitiveness of local and national institutions was small in many cases. The same developments that either restricted or expanded participation at the national level usually applied to the local level as well. Spanish *cabildos*, or town councils, were initially somewhat competitive institutions of local governance, in contrast to the absence of elections for higher-level political units such as *audiencias* or viceroyalties. However, by the seventeenth century, *cabildos* had become sites of venal office seeking, as opposed to a forum for popular participation.²⁵ The port cities in South Asia and Africa that became the earliest sites of popular participation in municipal councils were also the first localities that elected officials to territory-wide legislative councils or *conseils générales*.²⁶ Across British and French Africa, local elections were typically introduced at the same time as territory-wide elections.²⁷ In

²³ This builds on and expands an earlier data collection project in Paine 2019a.

²⁴ Collier 1982, 34–35, and Russell-Wood 1999, xxiv–xxvi, discuss limitations to compiling systematic data for local and municipal elections.

²⁵ See Chapter 3.

²⁶ See Chapter 4.

²⁷ Collier 1982, 34.

British North America and the West Indies, each distinct colony was geographically small enough that local and national institutions largely coincided.

Second, after independence, the national-level institutions of primary interest descended directly from territory-wide, rather than local, colonial institutions.²⁸ In most cases, the colonizer formally handed off power to the political party that won the final national-level election. These parties, even if regionally circumscribed in their electoral strongholds, usually formed for the purpose of competing in elections at the national level. In all cases, national-level competition eventually became the primary aim of the major political parties. The most relevant authoritarian institutions (victorious rebel groups, postcolonial monarchies, and militaries) also operated at the national level.

Policymaking Autonomy

The presence of any elected seats to a local or metropolitan assembly is but the most minimal aspect of democracy. Addressing the extent of colonists' policymaking autonomy is crucial for two reasons. First, colonial elections would not be a worthwhile outcome to study if they were always mere democratic "window dressing." We instead demonstrate that electoral representation constituted a concession that colonists usually considered to be meaningful.²⁹ Second, our theory carries expectations for the degree of autonomy that should accompany electoral concessions, depending on the identity and size of the pressure group. Therefore, capturing differences in autonomy is important for testing our theory.

Policymaking autonomy can range from no elections to highly circumscribed elections (e.g., minority of seats, indirect elections, lack of legislative powers) to representative government (majority of elected seats to a legislative body) to full autonomy over domestic affairs. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 on the colonial period, we use distinct but related measures of autonomy, each of which correspond to the most important differences within the epoch.

²⁸ Local-level institutions were typically more important earlier in the colonial period. In other work, one of the authors casts doubt on accounts of postcolonial authoritarianism focused entirely on local-level colonial institutions; see Bolt et al. 2023.

²⁹ This complements Gandhi's 2008 argument about elections and legislatures in contemporary electoral authoritarian regimes.

Before 1850, we compiled original data on whether colonists had a fully elected lower chamber. Appointed governors and upper houses could, in principle, constrain the lower chamber. However, in practice, fully elected lower chambers in British North America and the West Indies amassed substantial legislative powers starting in the seventeenth century. After the Glorious Revolution, most of these colonies achieved a de facto equivalent to full autonomy over domestic policies, at least until the 1760s. Into the nineteenth century, we also track concessions of responsible government in British colonies, which corresponded with an elected executive council and full autonomy over domestic policies.³⁰

Between 1850 and 1945, we collected original information on three restrictions on policymaking autonomy: (1) indirect elections, (2) non-representative government (i.e., a minority of seats were elected by colonists), and (3) a lack of power over finances. Any of these restrictions severely impeded the autonomy of colonists. By contrast, electoral institutions without any of these impediments, at minimum, constituted a form of representative government. We continue to track which cases had fully elected legislative councils or responsible government, although each was rare during this period.

After 1945, our main quantitative measure for autonomy is the timing of independence. By this point, representative government, full domestic autonomy, and jurisdictional sovereignty had become closely intertwined. Often, these events occurred consecutively (and sometimes simultaneously) in the span of less than a decade. Pressure from non-European colonists and the stance of the metropole and white settlers varied in ways that help to explain variation in the highest-possible level of autonomy, full independence.

Franchise Restrictions

Access to the franchise is another crucial element of the Dahlian conceptualization of democracy. We are interested both in who had the right to vote at different times and places and in the overall size of the franchise. Before 1850, we lack a systematic measure across cases.

³⁰ For all intents and purposes, we consider the achievement of dominion status to correspond with independence. The only exception is South Africa because colonialism persisted in the sense of local white settlers ruling over the African majority.

Instead, we draw from a large historical literature that documents aspects of the franchise qualitatively (who could vote) and quantitatively (rough estimates of the percentage of adults that could participate in elections). Although we lack information for each individual colony, similar franchise restrictions across groups of British colonies imply minimal loss of precision.

For 1850 to 1945, we collected original information on three types of franchise restrictions: (1) economic and educational restrictions, (2) racial restrictions, or distinctions based on communal rolls, and (3) geographic restrictions such that only a handful of areas of the colony elected representatives to a territory-wide assembly. Disaggregating the type of restriction is more directly meaningful for theory testing than measuring the size of the franchise because our core theoretical expectations pertain to *who* has the right to vote. Nonetheless, we also incorporate data from the V-Dem data set on the percentage of adults with the legal right to vote. This provides our primary measure of the franchise for the post-1945 period, when older voting restrictions were largely eliminated and the most theoretically relevant consideration became the timing of universal suffrage (both men and women).

Democracy Levels

The final outcome we examine is overall democracy levels, measured using V-Dem.³¹ This data set measures thousands of attributes of democracy and covers a broad global sample of countries, in some cases going back to 1789. A key advantage for our purposes is that V-Dem improves upon earlier democracy data sets such as Polity IV by including information about nonsovereign territories. For colonies that gained independence after 1945, these data go back to 1900. Thus, the V-Dem data set enables us to track democracy levels during and after colonial rule. We analyze the Electoral Democracy Index, which combines five lower-level indices into an aggregate index that explicitly aims to capture the core elements of Dahl's conceptualization of polyarchy.³² This index provides information about the quality of colonial elections, in particular elements such as the freeness and fairness of

³¹ Coppedge et al. 2023a; Pemstein et al. 2023.

³² Dahl 1971. The lower-level V-Dem indices are the size of the franchise, the presence of elected offices, the cleanliness of elections, freedom of association, and freedom of expression; see Coppedge et al. 2023b, 44, for details.

elections that are difficult to observe directly. Throughout the book, we discuss raw V-Dem democracy scores in relation to discrete regime types (closed authoritarian, electoral authoritarian, electoral democracy) to ease the interpretation of the scores. The Regimes of the World data set, a corollary of the V-Dem project, codes these discrete types.³³

The temporal and spatial coverage of V-Dem is more circumscribed than our core measure of electoral institutions. V-Dem's colonial data starts centuries later, uses a more stringent population threshold that eliminates many smaller colonies, and excludes most territories that never gained independence. However, combining our data with theirs enables characterizing quantitative patterns for colonial electoral institutions that were not possible until now.

Colonial Pluralism

To connect colonial-era experiences with electoral institutions to postcolonial democracy levels, we measure the number of years of colonial pluralism for each colony, using our data and V-Dem. We code institutions as plural in any year a colony has electoral institutions with at least minimal legislative powers (i.e., not advisory) and national scope (i.e., elections are not restricted to a handful of specific areas). We additionally require a minimal V-Dem democracy score to rule out colony-years with very low levels of electoral autonomy or grossly distorted elections. Electoral institutions that meet this relatively low bar for pluralism should, if our theory is correct, meaningfully affect policy outcomes and create incentives for institutionalized national-level parties to emerge.

1.3 Colonialism and Democracy: Existing Research

Although many foundational studies on democracy overlook the colonial era, we are certainly not the first scholars to analyze political institutions under colonialism and their legacies. Our theory isolates the strategic interaction among specific actors by analyzing institutional constellations in the metropole and the relative power of each of white settlers and non-Europeans. The main explanatory variables are determined by deeper historical processes and nonpolitical causes,

³³ Lührmann, Tannenberg and Lindberg 2018 describe these data. The associated variable in the V-Dem data set is *v2x_regime*.

which make them endogenous. Some existing theories help to explain why the variables in our theory took certain values at certain times and places – for example, why white settlements varied in size. Such accounts are mostly *complementary* to our analysis. Other accounts are strictly *rival* to our theory because they address the same actors but propose opposing implications about their effects.

Overall, our core findings challenge many important existing ideas. (1) Unconditional arguments that Britain was better for democracy promotion have circumscribed empirical applicability. (2) Factor endowments offer minimal explanatory power for colonial-era electoral institutions. (3) European settlers were neither uniformly beneficial nor the only relevant colonial actor. We contribute to other, more complementary findings by characterizing big themes that affected colonial democratic institutions, hence broadening beyond monocausal explanations and individual regions or time periods.

Our findings also inform theories of democratization developed outside the colonial setting. Previous scholarship addresses the prodemocratic biases of middle-class groups, the antidemocratic biases of landed elites, the importance of sequencing democratic reforms, and the institutions of external powers. We engage with these ideas in Chapter 7.

1.3.1 Metropolitan Institutions

Many scholars claim that British colonialism left more beneficial democratic legacies than colonization by other European powers.³⁴ These arguments in part complement, and in part rival, our theory. We instead posit a conditional effect of British colonialism that depends on the size of the white settlement, the influence of a non-European middle class, and whether Britain is compared to less democratic colonizers.

Scholars posit various possible mechanisms for the thesis that Britain was better at democracy promotion. These include more competitive metropolitan institutions (our focus), promoting a political culture more consistent with democratic values, the use of common law rather than civil law, and capitalist rather than mercantilist economic

³⁴ As examples, see Huntington 1984, 206, Weiner 1987; La Porta et al. 1998, 1999; Abernethy 2000, 406; Treisman 2000, 418–427; Ferguson 2012; Narizny 2012, 362.

institutions. Some ex-British colonies did, indeed, consolidate long-lasting democratic rule after gaining independence, and these are the cases on which scholars often focus; for example, “Every country with a population of at least 1 million (and almost all the smaller countries as well) that has emerged from colonial rule since World War II and has had a continuous democratic experience is a former British colony.”³⁵ Observations such as this, however, mask the extreme heterogeneity within the British empire by selecting on the dependent variable.

The empirical record supports our claim that the British empire was too heterogeneous across time and space and to make unconditional statements about the consequences of British rule. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British colonies in North America and the West Indies indeed developed electoral institutions more frequently than their peers governed by absolutist metropolises.³⁶ However, this initial British advantage largely disappeared during the nineteenth century. Later, in the twentieth century, British colonies had somewhat more competitive institutions in the years immediately preceding independence. However, much of this difference stemmed from more recent and superficial institutional reforms. The ex-British advantage largely dissipated in the decades following independence.³⁷ Whereas some British colonies gained lengthy experiences with elections during colonialism, many others did not.

Nor are we the only scholars to propose a conditional effect of British colonialism. One argument in this vein is that the impact of British colonialism depended on the directness of rule.³⁸ These theories in some ways complement ours, although they primarily focus on explaining economic development rather than democracy. We agree that only limited exposure to colonial elections would not produce post-colonial democracy. However, the presence of national-level elections

³⁵ Weiner 1987, 20.

³⁶ Gailmard 2024 complements our approach to this set of colonies by explaining the strategic incentives that induced the Crown to allow early assemblies as counterweights against exploitative colonial governors.

³⁷ In Lee and Paine 2019, we provide statistical evidence that the aggregate British advantage was stronger at independence than afterward. We also discuss why existing research reaches varying conclusions about the importance of British colonialism: it depends on which cases the researcher counts as a British colony and on the period analyzed.

³⁸ Lange 2004, 2009. See also Mamdani 1996; Lange, Mahoney and vom Hau 2006; Mahoney 2010.

(our focus) could coincide with practices of indirect rule (the predominant existing focus). Singapore, for example, was governed directly with minimal electoral participation, whereas India experienced more indirect rule but with a relatively long history of national elections.

1.3.2 White Settlers

Existing accounts of white settlers focus either on the settlers themselves (or other European actors such as Protestant missionaries) or on the geographical conditions that affected the size of white settlements. Certain aspects of these theories complement ours, in particular the claim that white settlers (could) promote democracy. But two other claims rival ours: (1) white settlers are unconditionally beneficial for democracy and (2) white settlers, Protestant missionaries, or factor endowments explain away the causal importance of metropolitan institutions.

Our pivot away from mainly highlighting the prodemocratic impulses of settlers yields conclusions in line with the relatively small body of social-scientific research on how emancipated persons spurred democratic reforms in many plantation colonies.³⁹ We build upon this idea by showing how the more general phenomenon of non-white middle classes – whether comprised of emancipated persons or European-educated elites in port cities – often promoted early electoral representation.⁴⁰

European Cultural Diffusion

Many studies develop what we term the prodemocratic effect of settlers. Gerring et al. provide the most comprehensive theoretical discussion and empirical test of this thesis.⁴¹ They argue that Europeans formed a democratic club; as Europeans conquered the world, they brought their ideas about political organization with them.⁴² A core

³⁹ Ledgister 1998; Owolabi 2015, 2023.

⁴⁰ Wilkinson and Onorato 2013 also discuss the importance of early elections in a general sense for subsequent democratic legacies.

⁴¹ Gerring et al. 2022. See Hariri 2012, 2015 for related statistical evidence on positive postcolonial democratic legacies. Many studies demonstrating positive development legacies of colonial European settlers posit colonial political institutions as a key intervening mechanism; see Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2001; Engerman and Sokoloff 2011; Easterly and Levine 2016.

⁴² Gerring et al. 2022, Ch. 8.

element of these ideas was the institutions of indirect democracy that Europeans had pioneered, which often displaced existing institutions of small-scale direct democracy. More Europeans meant more members of the club, which should yield higher democracy levels. Although the mechanism proposed in Gerring et al. is primarily one of cultural diffusion, the broad idea largely complements our focus on the advantages that settlers had at pressuring the metropole for political reforms. Gerring et al. support their thesis with empirical evidence that a higher fraction of the population with European ancestry is positively correlated with democratic institutions during the colonial era and afterward.⁴³

Despite this point of agreement, our approach differs in two main ways. First, Gerring et al. stress the inherent similarity in core democratic ideas among all Europeans, regardless of metropolitan institutions. Throughout the book, we provide evidence that colonial elections occurred only within empires of pluralistic or democratic metropolises.

Second, Gerring et al. propose that the relationship between the fraction of the population with European ancestry and democracy should be positive and monotonic.⁴⁴ We instead demonstrate that settlers who made up a substantial minority (5 to 25 percent) of the population often dismantled earlier representative gains by accepting authoritarian British crown rule (West Indies) or provoking guerrilla wars (e.g., Rhodesia/Zimbabwe).⁴⁵ Besides the four historically exceptional neo-Britains, white settlers bequeathed clearly beneficial democratic legacies in relatively few cases.⁴⁶

⁴³ Gerring et al. 2022, Chs. 10 and 11. In earlier chapters, they emphasize the importance of ports for facilitating European diffusion. As we discuss in Chapter 4, this idea helps to explain the rise of early non-white middle classes in select port cities.

⁴⁴ Although they discuss how small settler communities sought to restrict political rights to their group, they nonetheless suggest that the prodemocratic effects should tend to outweigh the antidemocratic effects (at least in comparison to cases with minuscule or no white settlements).

⁴⁵ Highlighting the countervailing, antidemocratic effects of settlers builds on our earlier work; see Paine 2019*a,b*. See also the discussion in Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, 2020 of how colonial settlers created conflicting legacies by establishing exclusive property-rights institutions.

⁴⁶ Fails and Krieckhaus 2010 offer a similar conclusion about white settlers and economic development legacies. The British West Indies, with intermediate-

Some scholars argue that the diffusion of Europe's democratic culture occurred through Protestant missionaries rather than settlers.⁴⁷ This idea in part complements our theory because, by promoting European-language education, Protestant missionaries help to explain the rise of non-European middle classes in some cases. However, we disagree with the stronger claim that Protestant missionaries explain away the importance of colonizer identity, in particular British colonialism.⁴⁸ In earlier work, we show that controlling for Protestant missionaries minimally affects the relationship between British colonialism and postcolonial democracy,⁴⁹ and we also use Protestant missionaries as a control variable throughout the present analysis. Others have established that the aggregate cross-national correlation between colonial Protestant missionaries and postcolonial democracy is in fact quite weak.⁵⁰

Geographic and Precolonial Political Endowments

Another line of research complements ours by discussing which types of geographic and precolonial political endowments explain where European colonial settlements formed. Europeans settled en masse in areas where the disease environment was favorable to them and the native population had trouble resisting the European onslaught through a combination of low population density, the absence of states, and susceptibility to European diseases.⁵¹ These theses help to explain why large white settlements arose in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and the Southern Cone of South America; as well as smaller white minorities in the West Indies and parts of Africa.

sized white settler populations that declined over time, did indeed become highly democratic after independence. However, a closer evaluation of these cases highlights the primary role of the *non-European* middle class in this outcome, rather than positive legacies of white settlers.

⁴⁷ Lankina and Getachew 2012; Woodberry 2012.

⁴⁸ Woodberry 2012, 254; Hadenius 1992, 133.

⁴⁹ Lee and Paine 2019.

⁵⁰ Nikolova and Polansky 2021.

⁵¹ For statistical evidence, see Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2001, 2002*b*; Sokoloff and Engerman 2000; Engerman and Sokoloff 2011; Hariri 2012; Easterly and Levine 2016; Paine 2019*b*. For related research on colonial factor endowments, see Frankema 2009*a*; Bruhn and Gallego 2012; Arias and Girod 2014.

Some scholars go farther and contend that variance in local economic factor endowments can fully account for any differences across European empires. This argument is incompatible with our theory because it implies that metropolitan institutions did not matter. Engerman and Sokoloff argue that the 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, climates and geologies favorable to mining and sugar plantations in Cuba and Peru facilitated coercive labor institutions and authoritarian governance.⁵² However, even in the historical context for which this argument was developed, factor endowments do not help to explain variation in political institutions. Representative institutions became widespread across the British West Indies in the seventeenth century despite factor endowments that encouraged coercive labor institutions to produce sugar on plantations. Conversely, Spanish Southern Cone colonies and French Canada did not gain representative institutions despite factor endowments that made family farms economically viable.

1.4 The Road Ahead

In this book, we establish that political representation under colonialism emerged and was sustained by the interaction among metropolitan political institutions, the size of the white settlement, and the pressure exerted by non-Europeans. The ways in which these factors varied across time and space yielded varying patterns of political institutions and divergent inheritances that continue to heavily influence regime trajectories to the present day. After presenting a theoretical framework for electoral competition under colonial rule in Chapter 2, Chapters 3 to 5 provide empirical evidence for different colonial time periods. Chapter 6 discusses postcolonial legacies. Chapter 7 summarizes the arguments thematically and discusses our contributions to broader research on democratization.

⁵² Engerman and Sokoloff 2011, 44–46, 218. For similar arguments, see Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2001, 1388, and Hariri 2012, 474. Owolabi 2014 describes the broader turn away from colonizer identity in recent research.