Figure 1. NSDAP Vote Shares, November 1932

Figure 2. Religion in Weimar Germany.

Table 1. Religion and Nazi Vote Shares, November 1932

Table 2. Instrumental Variable Estimates

Figure 3. Inference for Violations of the Exclusion Restriction.

Religion and Nazi Vote Shares

Table 1 presents results from estimating equation (1) by OLS. To allow for spatial correlation in the residuals standard errors are clustered by electoral district. Moving from the left to the right, the set of controls grows steadily. The most inclusive specification controls for geographically constant, unobserved variables by including district fixed effects.

Column (1) demonstrates the strong correlation between religion and NSDAP vote shares. In fact, a constituencies religion alone explains over 42% of the variation in the dependent variable. All other controls combined explain less than an additional 40%. The share of Catholics among a county’s population is, therefore, the single most important predictor of Nazi vote shares.

Also, note that the estimated effect does not diminish with the addition of more controls. If anything, the estimated difference in the voting behavior of Catholics and Protestants grows. Taking the estimate in column (6) at face value suggests that comparing exclusively Protestant counties with exclusively Catholic ones the Nazis received a 27.6 percentage points lower vote share in the latter. Given a nationwide result of 26.4%, this difference is not only statistically highly significant but also economically very large.

Table 2 presents 2SLS estimates as well as the corresponding reduced form and first stage results. According to the first stage F-statistic, the instrument is extremely strong, even after accounting for electoral district fixed effects. More importantly, the instrumental variables estimates are extremely close to their least squares counterparts, which suggests that the effect of Catholicism on Nazi vote shares is, indeed, causal.

To assess the robustness of this assessment consider Figure 3. Assuming that \( y \) in equation (2) is uniformly distributed on the interval \([−1, 1]\), the solid line depicts the 2SLs point estimate for the effect of Catholicism on vote share. The dashed lines show the corresponding confidence intervals. As long as one believes that rulers’ choices in the aftermath of 1918 had an independent effect on NSDAP vote shares no larger than 14 percentage points, one can always reject the null hypothesis that Catholicism had no causal effect. Ancillary results show that the conclusions above are qualitatively and quantitatively robust to using municipality level data and controlling for county fixed effects.

Conclusion & Next Steps

Our results show that Catholics were substantially less likely to vote for the Nazis than Protestants, and that this difference is unlikely due to omitted variable bias. Instead, the available evidence points toward a causal effect.

In ongoing work we try to determine the underlying mechanisms. Preliminary results indicate that the difference between Catholics and Protestants is significantly smaller in villages where Catholics were openly sympathized with the NSDAP. Moreover, there are no religious differences in regions where the church was in effect either less or more pro-Nazi than the church. We plan to use the voter’s vote share in the 1928 elections as an instrument for his party’s vote share in November 1932. In the meantime, however, we do not test this hypothesis in our analysis, but we leave it for future research.

Our results do not address the question of what might explain the relatively small differences in the vote share of Catholics and Protestants. However, we note that the Catholic vote share remained stable throughout the Weimar period, whereas the Nazi vote share grew continuously. This suggests that the influence of religious differences in the outcome of the elections is limited, and that the Nazis did not prevent the demise of the German first democracy.

References