**Introduction**

Why do some democracies fail, while others survive? We argue that when individuals lack democratic experience a society’s traditional elites may provide crucial outside and backing in times of discontent and political adversity. In support of this theory we present empirical evidence from Weimar Germany.

Few historical events have been more consequential than the failure of the Weimar Democracy and Adolf Hitler’s ensuing rise to power. In 1928 the Nazi Party (NSDAP) gained only 2.6% of the popular vote. But shortly after the onset of the Great Depression its vote share increased by a factor of seven, only to double again by 1932. At the end of the Weimar Republic the NSDAP obtained 43.9% of the popular vote and was by far the largest faction in parliament.

With one important exception Germany’s old elites either condemned the new democracy and supported parties that sought to abolish it, or they remained politically uninvolved. The Catholic Church, however, took a public stance against the Nazi party, even forbidding Catholics to vote for it. Instead, the Church promoted the democratic Zentrum as the “natural” traditional political ally.

As one would expect if the Church’s position afforded individuals’ voting decisions, support for the Nazis was by no means uniform. While majority Catholic regions remained strongholds of relatively low Nazi support, voters in predominantly Protestant areas flocked toward the NSDAP (cf. Figures 1 and 2).

Although the link between religion and NSDAP vote shares may be surprising, we are not the first to recognize it. In fact, the rise of the Nazis is one of the most studied topics in modern history. However, as pointed out by King et al. (2008), the literature draws very rarely on adequate econometric techniques, and the quantitative evidence that does exist remains purely correlational.

**Empirical Approach**

To determine whether the Church’s position did, indeed, have a causal impact we rely on official election results as well as socio-economic characteristics of Germany’s counties compiled by Falter and Hänsch (1990), and estimate the models of the following form:

\[ \ln \frac{v_{c}}{1-v_{c}} = \beta_{c} + \beta_{\text{Catholic}} \frac{c}{c+X} + \epsilon_{c} \]

where \( v_{c} \) denotes NSDAP vote shares (among all eligible voters) in the November election of 1932. Catholics measures the share of Catholics in county \( c \), \( X \) is a comprehensive vector of controls, and \( \epsilon_{c} \) marks a district fixed effect.

Since the religious composition of counties is likely correlated with unobserved variables and, therefore, endogenous we also instrument for Catholicism with an area’s official religion before the Thirty Years War (Z).

More specifically, we explain that a stipulation in the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 shaped the geographic distribution of Protestants and Catholics in Weimar Germany. Ending decades of religious conflict, the Peace of Augsburg gave the territorial states the right to determine states’ official religion and, therefore, the religion of all their subjects. The historical record shows that scores of local rulers made extensive use of this privilege.

Although plausible, there is no guarantee that the exclusion restriction required for a valid instrument is exactly satisfied. We therefore use econometric techniques developed by Colyer et al. (2012) to show that our main estimates are qualitatively robust to possibly small violations. More specifically, we estimate the following econometric model:

\[ \ln \frac{v_{c}}{1-v_{c}} = \beta_{c} + \beta_{\text{Catholic}} \frac{c}{c+X} + \gamma z + \epsilon_{c} \]

where \( y \) parameterizes the extent to which the exclusion restriction is violated. By imposing different, unambiguously skewed priors on the distribution of \( \delta \) we then gauge the robustness of our results.

**Table 1: Religion and Nazi Vote Shares, November 1932**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>(6)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent Catholic</td>
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<td>-.214</td>
<td>-.217</td>
<td>-.226</td>
<td>-.230</td>
<td>-.276</td>
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**Table 2: Instrumental Variable Estimates**

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<th>Independent Variable</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent Catholic</td>
<td>-.196</td>
<td>-.218</td>
<td>-.228</td>
<td>-.231</td>
<td>-.268</td>
<td>-.309</td>
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**Figure 1: NSDAP Vote Shares, November 1932**

**Figure 2: Religion in Weimar Germany**

**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 priests openly sympathized with the NSDAP. Moreover, there are no religious differences in regions where the Church was initially uncompromisingly opposed to the Nazis’ seizure of power to vote for the Zentrum. This suggests that the influence of the Catholic Church on the rise of the Nazis, though it did not prevent the demise of the German first democracy.

**References**


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