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Priests and Postmen: Historical Origins of National Identity

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[\(This paper also appears as CAGE Discussion Paper No: 496\)](#)

July 2020

No: 1291

Warwick Economics Research Papers

ISSN 2059-4283 (online)

ISSN 0083-7350 (print)

Priests and Postmen: Historical Origins of National Identity

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January 5, 2020

Abstract

The rise of the modern state in Western Europe, saw the emergence of national identities in the nineteenth century. This paper evaluates the association between historical religious and state capacity in Portugal proxied by priests and postmen in 1875, and current measures of national identity proxied by voter turnout in democratic elections from 1975 to 2017. I find that places with a stronger historical presence of postmen vote more in any election, but they vote less in local elections relative to national elections. This result suggests a persistent association of historical state presence with national identity. Historical religious presence is also positively associated with voter turnout but in smaller magnitude. There is however no negative association with local elections: in contrast with historical state capacity, historical religious capacity is connected with the local rather than the national unit.

*I thank Ruben Durante, James Fenske, and Giacomo Ponzetto for helpful suggestions and seminar participants at the University of Warwick and Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

1 Introduction

In the nineteenth century, Western Europe underwent notable economic and social change. Transportation improvements contributed to the integration of markets with increasing trade flows, as well as the movement of goods and people (Bogart 2018). The timing of the take-off to sustained economic growth, coincided with the emergence of modern nation states and the adoption of constitutional law after the fall of absolutist regimes in various Western European countries.¹ This new institutional setting brought in the notion of national identity, loyal to a constitution rather than a monarch or a local lord. This paper traces the historical origins of this rise in national identity (as opposed to local identity) back to nineteenth century Portugal, which became a constitutional monarchy in 1822. In particular I study the association of historical state and church presence with current measures of national versus local identity.

Facilitated by the transport revolution and by faster economic growth, the consolidation of historical state capacity can be measured by the central government's public good provision, for example, through the density of postal services across the territory in the nineteenth century (Acemoglu, Moscona and Robinson 2016). This particular form of infrastructural state capacity can also be understood as an effort by governments to assert control over wider swathes of land within their borders as well as the channels through which information reached individuals. Thus, postal services, and postmen in particular, became a very visible element of public good provision showing communities that the central government mattered in their daily lives. Such state presence at the local level provided a sense of national entity even for communities located far away from the seat of the central government in Lisbon.

Parallel to the newly implemented postal network, Portugal had a long standing and well-established network of parishes. The church network was older and denser than the newly expanding state network of the nineteenth century, and was therefore closer to individuals, especially in remote areas where communities had gathered for centuries in the local chapel at least once a week. Priests were the visible face of the church in a deeply religious country, arguably providing a moral compass and a sense of belonging to the local community composed of individuals that met regularly.

¹Before the nineteenth century this institutional change occurred only in a handful of countries: England in 1688, Corsica in 1655, Sweden in 1772, the Poland-Lithuania Commonwealth in 1791, and France in 1792.

The objective of this paper is to investigate how the historical presence of the state and the church relate to current measures of national and local identity proxied by voter turnout in democratic elections from 1975 to the present. Portugal’s late industrialization and institutional transition, as well as its eventful political history into the twentieth century –from monarchy, to unstable republic, to dictatorship, and finally full democracy– provide a rare opportunity to evaluate the long-term persistence of the state capacity transformations of the late nineteenth century.

Using historical data from Portugal’s statistical yearbook I find a positive and statistically significant association between municipalities with more postmen and more parishes in 1875, and voter turnout on any election during Portugal’s democratic history. This positive relationship is stronger for postmen than for parishes, suggesting historical state capacity is associated with a greater sense of national identity. Having more postmen historically however, is associated with relatively lower turnout on local elections when compared to turnout in national elections suggesting that municipalities that have been exposed to state capacity for longer have a stronger sense of national than local identity. Parishes in 1875 do not exhibit this negative relationship suggesting a stronger sense of local community.

This paper contributes to the literature on the historical presence of the post, which in the United States that has been linked to innovation measured by the raising number of patents (Acemoglu, Moscona and Robinson 2016), to the resolution of violent disputes (Jensen and Ramey 2019) in the nineteenth century (Perlman and Schuster 2016). More broadly, the paper also contributes to the literature on historical state capacity that has been associated with contemporary development and reduced conflict in Africa (Michalopoulos and Papaioannou 2013 and Depetris-Chauvin 2017), as well as long run economic performance in Europe (Dincecco and Katz 2016).

2 Data and Background

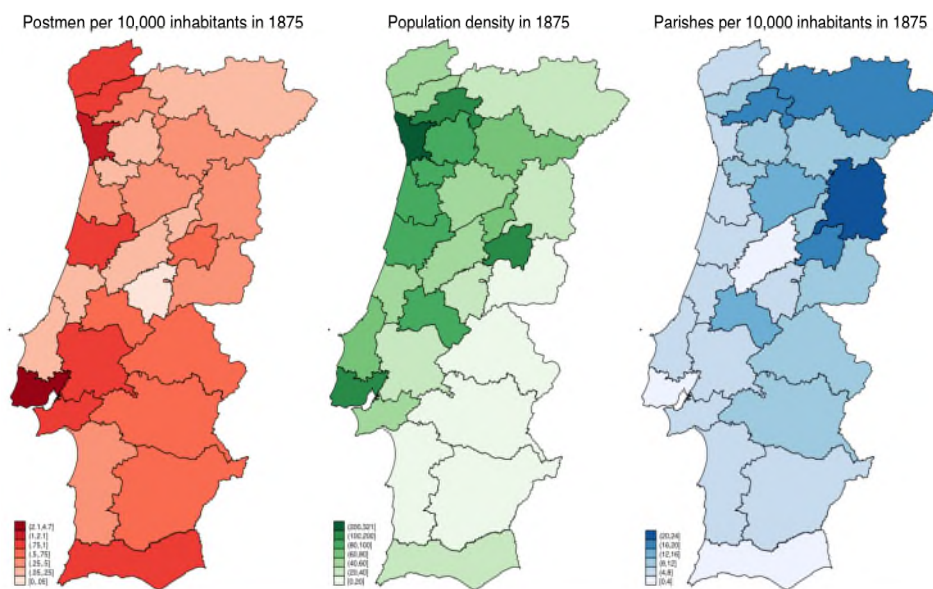
Data on historical state and church presence come from the first publication of the Statistical Yearbook of the Kingdom of Portugal in 1875. This volume provides detailed information at various levels of state capacity, in varying geographic detail. At the municipality level the document provides information on number of postmen and number of parishes. Municipalities with at least one postman in 1875 had home delivery in the urban centre, but not in the surrounding rural areas. The Rural Post was established only in 1893, albeit without

home delivery. Rather, mail bags would be dropped and picked up in a local store (typically a tavern) where individual citizens could pick up or drop their correspondence.²

Home delivery started in Lisbon in 1821 and gradually expanded throughout the country. In 1852 there were regular post lines from Lisbon to the sixteen district capitals of the mainland, each of which had home delivery in the urban centre of the corresponding municipality. By 1875, the year of the data, the postal network covered a third of the municipalities in the mainland with one or more postmen. Municipalities with no postmen in 1875 were more isolated, even in the urban centre, as they were less connected to the national unit and were possibly less informed about the news coming from Lisbon where the government was located but whose services were never seen or experienced.

Unlike the postal network, the ecclesiastical structure existed well before the emergence of Portugal as an independent country in 1143. By 1875 there were 3,806 parishes present in all municipalities of the mainland and ultimately responding to the Holy See in Rome through the Catholic hierarchy in Portugal. The number of parishes is a lower bound for the number of priests in the municipality in 1875, plausibly assuming that each parish had at least one priest. As such, priests were more uniformly present throughout the territory than postmen and thus, the Church was more visible to the population than the State was in 1875 Portugal.

Figure 1 : Postmen, Population, and Priest density in 1875



²Home delivery in remote rural areas only occurred in the second half of the twentieth century.

Figure 1 shows postmen, population, and priest density in 1875 by NUTS III. While more postmen existed in higher population density areas (correlation +0.40) suggesting an effort from the state to provide services where more people were located, parishes show a negative correlation with population density (-0.16), potentially showing the inertia of the older institution that had been present throughout the territory for various centuries. The centuries old ecclesiastical structure probably changed little with the passage of time and the historical events that eventually moved population across the mainland. Nevertheless, the Church was an institution present universally across the territory for a very long time, which affected the sense of belonging in local communities. Data on Portuguese democratic elections from 1975 and 2017 was collected from PORDATA, a database combining contemporaneous Portuguese official statistics from Portugal's National Statistics Institute and Eurostat.³ I proxy national/local identity, i.e. how much citizens care for national/local issues by voter turnout in legislative and presidential elections that are national, and local elections.⁴ I also extract from PORDATA information on observable municipality characteristics on geographic, population, education, and economic controls in the same period.

Portugal's political system is semi-presidential. The prime minister is the head of the central government elected as the main figure of the party with the most parliamentary support in legislative elections every four years (political instability may shorten the legislature) to the national assembly, and appointed by the president. The latter is the head of state who is elected by popular vote every five years, is non-partisan in nature and can be elected for a maximum of two consecutive terms. The president has no immediate executive power but can force the cabinet to resign.

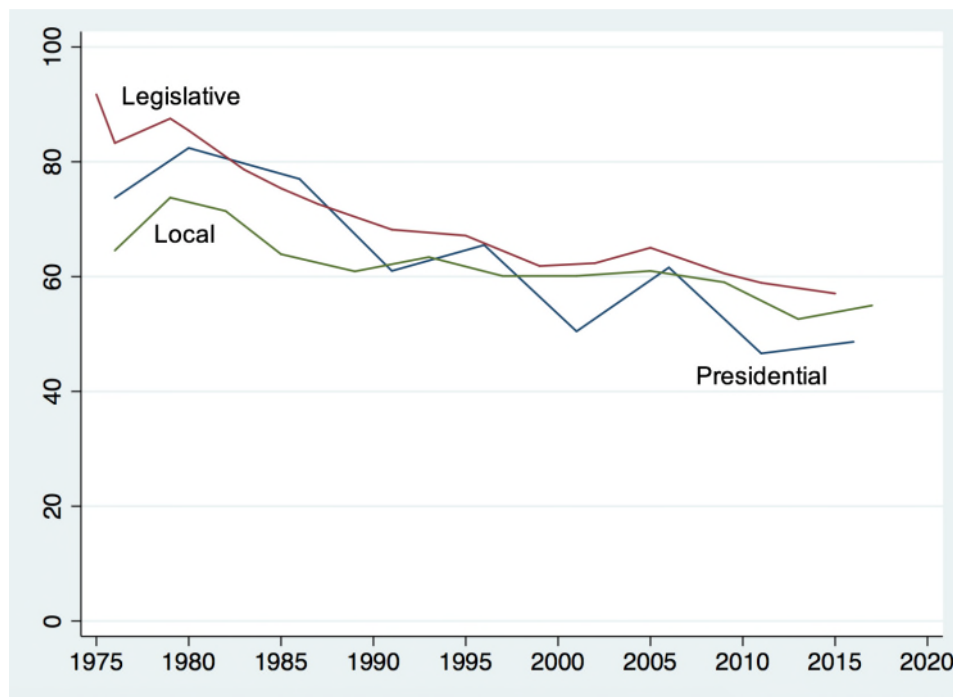
The central government, headed by the prime minister, decides matters of general governance of the country, with policy priorities on matters such as tax rates or educational curricula, and controls the vast majority of tax revenue (income and value added taxes, as well as excise taxes, for example on tobacco or fuels). Elected every four years, local governments administer and manage resources at the municipal level, with the bulk of revenue coming from transfers by the central budget to complement locally raised revenue mostly from commercial and industrial licensing as well as property taxes.

³For details see <https://www.pordata.pt/en/Municipalities>

⁴I exclude European elections, which proxy supranational identity. I also exclude the regional elections for the autonomous governments of the Azores and the Madeira islands, which proxy an intermediate notion of identity between the national and the local level. Neither of these is captured by the expanding state capacity of the nineteenth century.

Figure 2 shows a secular decline in voter for all election types in line with other western democracies. Legislative elections gathered a larger share of the vote (except for the very disputed presidential election of 1986), whereas local and presidential elections have switched places in turnout volume, with local elections starting at a lower level in 1975 but reflecting overall a smaller decline than presidential turnout. Turnout in presidential elections shows more volatility than legislative or local elections possibly due to the nature of these elections when the same candidate can run for a total of two mandates. Excluding the current incumbent of the presidency who is still in the first mandate, every Portuguese president to date has been re-elected. Excluding the very first president, every other one has been elected with less turnout in the second mandate than the first.

Figure 2: Voter turnout in all elections from 1975 to 2017



Presidents and municipal governments have always been elected on a 5 or 3-4 year cycle respectively, but there were many instances when the national government has not finished its 4-year term. There have been a total of 36 electoral events in Portugal's democratic history since 1975: one election for the constituent assembly (1975); twelve municipal elections (1976, 1979, 1982, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, and 2017); nine presidential elections (1976, 1980, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011, and 2016); and fourteen

legislative elections (1976, 1979, 1980, 1983, 1985, 1991, 1995, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2011, and 2015).

3 Estimation Strategy and Results

The estimation strategy is as follows:

$$Y_{iet} = \alpha + \beta_1 Post_{i,1875} + \beta_2 Parish_{i,1875} + \theta_1 Post_{i,1875} \times local + \theta_2 Parish_{i,1875} \times local + \delta_r + \varphi_e + \mu_m + \lambda_t + \gamma X_{it} + \varepsilon_{iet} \quad (1)$$

where Y is voter turnout in municipality i election e and year t , $Post_{i,1875}$ is postmen density (per 10,000 inhabitants) in municipality i in 1875, $Parish_{i,1875}$ is the parish density in municipality i in 1875, $local$ is a dummy for local elections, δ , φ , μ , and λ are region, election, month, and year fixed effects, X_{it} are observable municipality i 's geographic, population, education, and economic characteristics in year t , and ε_{iet} is the error term.

The interaction terms of the historical variables with the local election dummy capture the differential effect on turnout of historical state and church presence on local elections with respect to national elections. The idea is to pick up different attitudes of voters towards local and national matters, which are proxies of local and national identity presently.

Table 1: Voter turnout and historical state/church presence

	all municips.	all municips.	no district capitals	no presidential	no islands	no d. caps., pres., isles
$Post_{1875}$	.0066*** (.0023)	.0058*** (.0021)	.0053** (.0022)	.0078*** (.0025)	.0040** (.0016)	.0057*** (.0020)
$Post_{1875} \times local$	-.0171*** (.0043)	-.0171*** (.0043)	-.0155*** (.0045)	-.0172*** (.0044)	-.0142*** (.0033)	-.0131*** (.0036)
$Parish_{1875}$	.0015** (.0006)	.0016*** (.0005)	.0017*** (.0005)	.0009*** (.0005)	.0011** (.0005)	.0006 (.0005)
$Parish_{1875} \times local$	.0046*** (.0005)	.0046*** (.0005)	.0046*** (.0005)	.0047*** (.0005)	.0054*** (.0005)	.0054*** (.0005)
controls	none	all	all	all	all	all
all FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
clusters	308	308	286	308	278	260
average dep. var.	.6629	.6629	.6634	.6775	.6675	.6817
N	11,021	11,021	10,229	8,265	9,941	6,969
R ²	.78	.80	.79	.79	.80	.78

Note: robust standard errors in brackets; */**/** refer to statistical significance at the 10, 5 and 1% levels; errors clustered at the municipality level.

Table 1 shows essentially two findings. First, in Portugal historical state and church presence are both associated with higher voter turnout in any election since 1975 as coefficients on *Post* and *Parish* are always positive and generally statistically significant. The magnitude of the coefficients suggests a stronger influence of historical state than church presence on national identity.

The second finding in Table 1 indicates that places with a longer historical presence of postmen tend to vote less in local elections relative national elections, suggesting a stronger sense of national identity. There is no such drop in turnout for the cross product of parish presence and local elections, which remains positive and statistically significant: increased historical presence of the church at the municipal level is associated with stronger sense of local community though at a lower magnitude than state presence. These results are robust to the inclusion of municipality characteristics, as well as the exclusion of district capitals, presidential elections, and municipalities outside of the mainland, either individually or jointly.

Since parishes were present in every municipality and postmen were not, I now focus on historical state presence only. To get a clearer comparison of the drop in voter turnout on local versus national elections I code municipalities binarily where 1 indicates whether the municipality has at least one postman in 1875, and 0 for municipalities with no postmen. Table 2 shows these results.

Table 2: Voter turnout and historical state presence

	all municips.	all municips.	no district capitals	no presidential	no islands	no d. caps., pres., isles
Had Post ₁₈₇₅	.0131*** (.0046)	.0204*** (.0052)	.0181*** (.0054)	.0245*** (.0054)	.0173*** (.0050)	.0186*** (.0052)
Had Post ₁₈₇₅ × local	-.0449*** (.0066)	-.0449*** (.0066)	-.0384*** (.0073)	-.0451*** (.0065)	-.0404*** (.0068)	-.0336*** (.0073)
controls	none	all	all	all	all	all
all FE	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
clusters	308	308	286	308	278	260
average dep. var.	.6629	.6629	.6634	.6775	.6675	.6817
N	11,021	11,021	10,229	8,265	9,941	6,969
R ²	.76	.78	.78	.76	.79	.76

Note: robust standard errors in brackets; */**/** refer to statistical significance at the 10, 5 and 1% levels; errors clustered at the municipality level.

The coefficient on historical state capacity remains significant but the magnitudes are now more substantial. Having at least one postman in the municipality in 1875 is associated

with a decline in turnout of local elections relative to national elections between 3.36 and 4.49 percentage points. Again, this result is not driven by district capitals which had been part of the national postal network for longer than other municipalities.

4 Conclusion

The preliminary results indicate that places with postal home delivery in 1875 have been integrated in the national market for longer, which reflects a stronger national identity today. On the contrary places with stronger historical church presence have a relatively more local outlook today. While 1875 postmen seem to foster a sense of nationality, 1875 priests seem to be associated with a stronger interest in local when compared to national matters, which is rather intuitive: more parishes per municipality suggest a stronger connection of local communities to the church where they potentially meet regularly and thus care more about the people who manage resources locally, whom they may even know personally.

The association of 1875 measures of state and church presence and current voter turnout is pretty robust. The next challenge is to understand the long-term persistence of these patterns between 1875 and 1975.

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