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‘Priests and postmen: Historical origins of national identity’

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. 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.

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).