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‘Let them eat cake’: Drought and demand for democracy in the French Revolution

A long-standing tradition in political science and sociology considers demand for democracy to be a key driver in the emergence and consolidation of democratic systems (Lipset, 1959). This demand is shaped by previous experience with democracy at the individual, local, or national level (Fuchs-Schündeln and Schündeln, 2015; Giuliano and Nunn, 2013; Persson and Tabellini, 2009), state indoctrination through education (Cantoni et al., 2017), and socialization during childhood (Sapiro, 2004).

In this paper, I examine whether an adverse weather shock - a drought in the growing season of 1788 - impacted demand for democracy among the disenfranchised during the French revolution. This may be the case if - consistent with theories of retrospective political voting - the weather shock and its economic consequences provided additional information on the inadequacy of existing institutions to those who were especially affected (Ashworth et al., 2018).

Indeed, the drought of 1788 had severe economic consequences: It damaged the harvest and led to a steep rise in grain prices (Le Roy Ladurie, 1971; Lefebvre and White, 1973; Neumann, 1977; Neumann and Dettwiller, 1990, Da Silva et al., 2013). By spring 1789, common people spent almost 90 percent of their income on bread, instead of 50 percent (Neely, 2008: 72f.). Because of the deep political and financial crisis in France, the French King’s ability to reduce economic hardship by providing grain to the city population or to quell social unrest by deploying the military were limited.

Based on data from historical and paleoclimatological sources I construct a cross-sectional dataset for 3600 French cantons with information on local drought severity and three measures of demand for democracy: 1) Local demand for institutional change as expressed in the lists of grievances; 2) local outbreaks of peasant revolts in protest of existing institutions; and 3) the establishment of political clubs, one of the earliest forms of modern civil society in Europe, which allowed citizens to participate in the political discourse in an institutionalized, non-violent manner.

I demonstrate that the common population in areas more affected by the drought listed more demands for institutional political change in their local *cahiers de doléances* (lists of grievances); there were more outbreaks of peasant revolts directed against feudal institutions in these areas; and more *sociétés politiques* were established in the aftermath of the Revolution.

The paper contributes to the literature on the origins of demand for democracy (see above) by showing that short-run events, such as an adverse weather event, can affect demand for institutional change. It complements studies in political science showing that natural disasters may affect voting decisions (Abney et al., 1966; Ashworth, 2018; You et al., 2020)

Finally, it contributes to recent research on the economic history of France that applies state-of-the-art econometric techniques to the rich French historical data to shed new light on important questions in economics such as Franck (2016), Squicciarini and Voigtlaender (2016), Squicciarini (2019) and Franck and Michalopoulos (2017).