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Abstract

Why do some leaders invest in significant nation-building policies and others do not? Why does nation-building occur at certain junctures in time and not others? In our research, we investigate what motivates leaders to nation build. We argue that threats to their regime motivate rulers to invest in significant nation-building and that the type of threats that provoke nation-building have largely materialized since the 19th century.

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What Motivates Leaders to Invest in Nation-Building?

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1. Introduction

There is an abundance of evidence of significant investment in nation-building by national leaders across time and space. From mass education and language policies to compulsory military service for all young men; from elites in 19th century France who aimed to “form French citizens” (Weber, 1979) to recent education reforms in China designed to shape citizens’ ideology (Cantoni et al., 2017).

Why do some leaders invest in significant nation-building policies and others do not? Why does nation-building occur at certain junctures in time and not others? In our research, we investigate what motivates leaders to nation build. We argue that threats to their regime motivate rulers to invest in significant nation-building and that the type of threats that provoke nation-building have largely materialized since the 19th century.

Both internal and external threats to regimes have induced nation-building by leaders, and we examine both in our research. In Alesina et al. (2021), we study internal threats and argue that the threat of democratization drives significant nation-building by elites. Democratic transitions, which have occurred from the 19th century, have been associated with large investments in nation-building. In particular, democratic transitions have been associated with a major nation-building policy: the introduction of mass education of children. In Alesina et al. (2020), we examine external threats and argue that threats of war prompt nation-building when warfare is large-scale. Improvements in war technologies since the 19th century changed warfare to require much larger armies. Nation-building then became important as a tool of warfare to motivate large numbers of citizens to fight.

We define nation-building as a process leading to a commonality of preferences, goals, and identity of citizens within a country, such that they do not wish to separate. We model “homogenization” as a technology that can be used by the ruler (democratic or not) to shift the preferences, ideology, language, or culture of the population closer to the preferences, ideology, language, or culture of the ruler. A predominant tool that rulers use to homogenize their populations is mass education. Education has been used to indoctrinate and teach citizens that the ruling regime is not so bad.

Cantoni et al. (2017) examine a Chinese education reform that aimed to shift the ideological position of students towards that of the government in terms of their view of free markets and political systems. Education has been used to create national languages. In France and Italy, for example, the language of the elites became the national language via mass education. Mass education has also facilitated the creation of a national culture and shared identity (Weber, 1979).

We will first discuss the role of the democratic transition in driving homogenization and nation-building and then the role of wars.

2. Nation Building and the Democratic Transition

In Alesina et al. (2021), we argue that the type of leader and how “secure” that leader feels, determines how much she invests in nation-building. We show that autocratic rulers or ruling elites who are threatened by democracy invest in significant nation-building. In contrast, democratic leaders as well as autocratic rulers who are at little risk of overthrow, undertake less, if any, nation-building.

We identify two motives for rulers to nation build when threatened by democratic overthrow. First, homogenization helps to indoctrinate the population to better reflect the ruler’s preferences, so that the population will be more likely to choose to maintain the ruler’s preferred status quo under a future democracy. Second, to the extent that it reduces distaste towards the regime, homogenization can lower the threat of overthrow and help a ruler hold onto power.

We will focus our empirical discussion on mass primary education, a predominant homogenization tool used by rulers. Our argument suggests that leaders should implement mass education to homogenize their citizens before democratization and in response to the rise of that very threat to power.

In Alesina et al. (2021), we delve into the timing of mass education reforms and examine whether they occur at the same time (or just after) an increased threat of overthrow. We show that when non-democratic regimes are threatened by protests and other uprisings, they are more likely to implement education reforms, such as introducing primary compulsory education or to oversee large increases in primary enrollment.

We next illustrate some historical examples of threats of democracy and the mass education reforms that result from those threats. These historical examples also allow us to provide insight into the nation-building motives of rulers to implement those reforms.

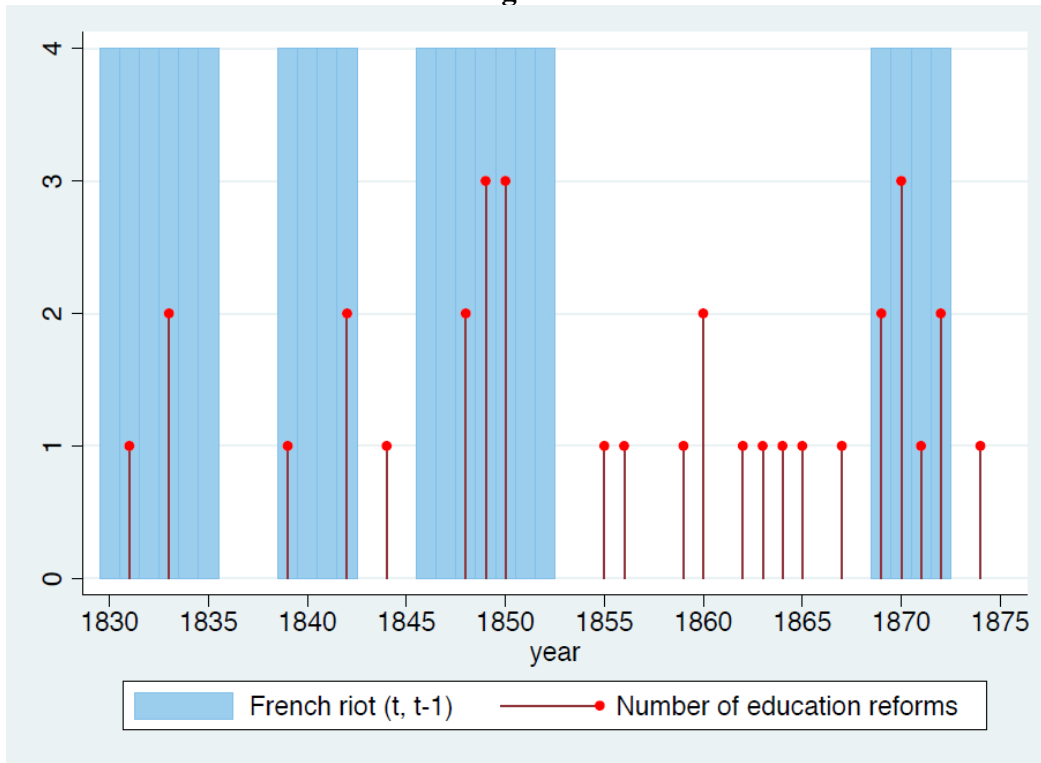
During the 19th century, European countries moved from little to no government intervention in schooling to centralized full-time primary schooling which was compulsory for all children within the nation. This change was all the more surprising because it was unpopular with the masses and occurred decades before similar welfare intervention. In Germany, for example, most children attended public primary schooling by 1870, whereas the first compulsory insurance system was not introduced until 1883. These education reforms during the 19th and early 20th centuries typically followed periods of unrest and were implemented with the stated aim of mitigating the effects of democratization.

In 1860 French was still a foreign language to half of all French children. Outside major cities, France was a country of different languages, dialects and diverse currencies. Travel far outside one's own village was rare, and indifference or hostility to the French state common. Before the French Revolution, there was little homogenization of the wider population (Weber, 1979). The first serious attempt to implement mass schooling was made in 1833 following a period of major rebellion (the "July Revolution", 1830-32). What was perhaps the most intense period of schooling reform followed the establishment of the Third Republic in 1870. Hobsbawm (1990) describes this period as one in which the inevitability of a shift of power to the wider population became clear. Weber (1979) details how schooling during this period was regarded by the rulers of France as a key tool in moving the values and way of life of the population towards those of the rulers and making "the French people French" (p.303).

Following the unification of Italy in 1861, a process led by a Northern elite, Massimo d'Azeglio (one of the founders of unified Italy) famously remarked: "Italy has been made; now it remains to make Italians." This was a time of increasing pressure for more democracy and the motive to introduce compulsory schooling as a result of the threat of democratization can be read directly from statements of Italian politicians of the time. Francesco Crispi, the Italian Prime Minister from 1887-1891 and 1893-1896 wrote "I do not know if we should feel regret at having broadened the popular suffrage before having educated the masses" (Duggan, 2002, p.340). Politician Nicola Marselli claimed that Italy had introduced freedom before educating the masses, omitting to learn lessons from countries like Britain which had educated first. Michele Coppino, the author of the 1877 Italian compulsory education reform, declared that primary schooling should ensure the masses were "content to remain in the condition that nature had assigned to them" and that the aim of elementary education should be to "create a population ...devoted to the fatherland and the king" (Duggan, 2007, p.289-290). Enough education to homogenize, but not too much to create rebellious masses.

The French Revolution and recurring uprisings in France scared ruling elites that populations could and were willing to overthrow the existing order. They also sparked uprising in other countries. The relationship between the perceived threat of democracy and mass education in Europe can be seen from Figure 1. We take the years of major uprisings in France, defined as major episodes of collective violence involving a large number of people engaging in "seizing and damaging persons", between 1830 and 1875 from Tilly et al. (1975). Figure 1 shows that major education reforms across Europe (from Flora (1983)) were largely concentrated in periods of insurrections in France, a proxy for democratic threats in Europe in this period. In Alesina et al. (2021), we provide consistent evidence on the relationship between fear of democracy and nation building in a large sample of 172 countries for the period between 1925 and 2014, finding that more unstable autocracies are likely to implement education reforms. We also show that nation-building policies helped the leader to stay in power.

Figure 1



Paglayan (2021) also examines the introduction of compulsory primary schooling and primary enrollment rates across the world. Consistent with our argument, Paglayan shows that states implemented mass education before democratization and mass education typically occurred in the decades immediately preceding democracy. Using a dataset of more than 30 countries in Europe and Latin America, Paglayan (2021) finds that compulsory primary schooling laws were introduced on average 52 years before democracy and 36 years before male suffrage. Analyzing enrollment in more than 100 countries, she finds that in 75% of countries that democratized, a majority of children were already enrolled in primary education before democratization occurred. That is, rulers made sure to educate the bulk of their population on their own terms before democratization.

In Alesina et al. (2021), we also provide historical evidence about educational policies from colonizers. Colonizers are different from domestic rulers. If overthrown, they can simply leave the country. Since their incentive to homogenize are lower, one would expect lower propensity to implement educational reforms. This is what we find. Contrary to Britain, which introduced compulsory education in 1870, education in the Caribbean British territories came much later, in 1915 in Honduras and in 1921 in Trinidad. In African countries, education was mostly provided by missionaries. Colonizers did not make an effort to build cohesive nation state, as building a national identity would even be counter-productive to a colonizer if it served to increase support for nationalist movements and independence.

3. Nation Building and Mass Armies

In Alesina et al. (2020), we argue that whether the threat of war motivates leaders to nation-build or not is determined by the conduct of war, whether it is small or large-scale. Due to changes in weapons, communications, and transport technologies, the size of armies increased gradually over time, with a sharp increase during the 19th century and reaching a peak at WWII (Scheve and Stasavage (2016) and Finer (1975)). As the size of armies increased, states switched from paying small armies of mercenaries using the spoils of war to instead using mass conscript armies. As Clausewitz (1832) put it, “War became the business of the people.”

To motivate large, conscripted armies, as well as citizens, to comply with the heavy demands of war, leaders started to provide public goods and invested in nation-building. We argue that nation-building policies and public good provision are complementary policies. Governments invest in public goods that match the population's preferences to provide soldiers and citizens with “something to lose” should they be defeated by an external power. At the same time, governments complement public good provision by investing in what we call “positive” nation-building: they homogenize the population and convince citizens that their national public goods are worth fighting to preserve.

The historical evidence is consistent with the implications of our framework. With relatively small armies, the “anciens régimes” of Europe motivated soldiers by simply paying them (more) in victory, without investing in nation-building, and without providing public goods to the national population as a whole. With the advent of mass armies, to create strong incentives for so many soldiers the elites would have had to spend too many resources. The provision of public goods, which are (at least partially) non-rival, became a better “technology” for motivating a large army than providing private goods. As a result, in the 19th century and early 20th century, elites increased spending on public services, such as transport and infrastructure, and mass public goods, such as education and health (Aidt et al., 2006). As argued by Titmuss (1958, p. 49) : “[wars] could not be won unless millions of ordinary people, in Britain and overseas, were convinced that we had something better to offer than had our enemies—not only during but after the war.” In addition, governments complemented public good provision with nation-building policies. Besides mass public instruction, military conscription itself was a powerful instrument in unifying the population. Conscripts were purposefully sent to regions away from home, and regiments formed of soldiers from diverse parts of the country. In Italy, for instance, military service aimed to mould “Italians” in the shape of those who established the new state in 1861. Giuseppe Guerzoni, a friend of Garibaldi, explained in 1879 that “having made Italy the army is making Italians.” Nicola Marselli expressed in 1871 “I know, too, that Italy has been reunited for only ten years and is not yet established [...] I have always said that even if it had no other purpose, the army would always be a great school of Italian-ness.” (Duggan, 2007, p.274)

General evidence that external threats lead to investment in nation-building has been found by Aghion et al (2019), who investigate education policies in a historical panel data from 19th century Europe and a very broad set of countries in the 20th century. Their work shows empirically that military threats are associated with large enrolments in primary education. They also find that the positive relationship between military threat and primary enrolment is higher in democracies than in autocratic regimes. One potential explanation is that in a democracy, citizens need to be persuaded to fight by more public goods and nation-building, whereas in an autocracy, harsher

methods can be used. In line with this interpretation, Caprettini and Voth (forthcoming), show that areas that received more support under the New Deal during the 1930s were associated with a higher level of patriotism during WW2. These areas purchased more war bonds, had more military volunteering, and soldiers performed more heroic actions recognized with citations and medals.

In Alesina et al. (2020), we also consider more negative forms of nation-building. Besides instilling positive national sentiment, in the sense of fostering the value of a nation state, we show that governments may sometimes instil negative sentiment in terms of aggressive propaganda against the opponent. In this case, national identity is based on fear and stigmatization of the opponent, not on the material or cultural benefits of one's own nation. For instance, Tilly (1994) argues that "Anti-German sentiment reinforced the desirability of becoming very French, as anti-French, anti-Polish, or anti-Russian feeling reinforced the desirability of becoming very German."

The negative and positive forms of nation-building have different implications in terms of public policies. When indoctrination takes the positive form, nation-building accompanies public-good provision. Conversely, public good provision and anti-foreign propaganda are substitutes and no longer complements. This suggests the possibility of two types of nation-building: nations that invest in mass public goods and positive nationalism and nations that do not provide public goods and invest in anti-foreign nationalism. In Alesina et al. (2020), we show that states with low fiscal capacity will motivate the population with anti-foreign propaganda rather than with positive nation-building. This result is consistent with Wimmer (2013, 2019, p. 18), who argues that whether nationalism develops in a more inclusive or exclusive direction is related to a country's state capacity: "Inclusive ruling coalitions—and a correspondingly encompassing nationalism—have tended to arise in countries with a long history of centralized, bureaucratic statehood [...] Where state elites were weaker vis-a-vis other elites and the population at large, they were not able to offer sufficient public goods and political participation to make the nation an attractive enough category to identify with."

4. Conclusions

Our work contributes to the literature on nation building. While previous studies have investigated to what extent specific nation-building policies are successful at homogenizing the population, our work focus on motives of leaders to nation build. Both papers establish theoretically and confirm empirically that threats to a regime motivate nation building.

In the early 1990s, many predicted the decline of nationalism (e.g., Hobsbawm, 1990). Since then, however, nationalism has been on the rise. Our work provides a possible explanation for this increase: the rise of autocracies worldwide and the intensification of interstate tensions are two factors that might contribute to this revival. The heyday of nationalism may be yet to come.

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