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Bringing up the past: Political experience and the distribution of urban populations

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ABSTRACT

This article reexamines the effects of political determinants on urban population distributions by developing a series of longitudinal measures that proxy for a nation's political experiences. The cross-national analyses are derived from a new database that includes population figures for the five largest cities of 123 nations from 1960 to 2005. This coverage allows for the development of the 1–4 urban primacy ratio which is used to assess past findings and test four hypotheses related to the length of capital status as well as colonial, democratic, and communist experiences. The main findings suggest that the length of a nation's largest city's capital status is positively associated with urban primacy. Conversely, nations with longer democratic or communist experiences have lower levels of urban primacy. Finally, the results on colonial experience are curvilinear and lend strong support to modernization and central place theory.

Introduction

Since Jefferson (1939), social scientists have periodically examined the link between features related to development and the distribution of urban populations. Most of the cross-national research has focused on economic and demographic influences, with lesser attention given to political forces (Berry, 1961; De Cola, 1984; El-Shakhs, 1972; Henderson, 2002; Linsky, 1965; Mehta, 1964; Moomaw & Alwosabi, 2004; Moomaw & Shatter, 1996; Mutlu, 1989; Wheaton & Shishido, 1981). However, those who have addressed political determinants have looked at several relationships, including: Jefferson's (1939) assertion regarding the importance of a city's capital status (e.g. Ades & Glaeser, 1995; Berry, 1961; De Cola, 1984; Moomaw & Alwosabi, 2004; Mutlu, 1989); Stewart's (1958) assertion regarding the effects of colonial history (e.g. Berry, 1961; Linsky, 1965; Lyman, 1992; Mutlu, 1989); Mutlu's (1989) assertion concerning the importance of a communist history; and finally, the derivative political economy thesis which asserts that centralized/decentralized political systems have an impact on urban population distributions via administrative and economic policies (e.g. Ades & Glaeser, 1995; Davis & Henderson, 2003; Hansen, 1990; Moomaw & Alwosabi, 2004; Moomaw & Shatter, 1996; Mutlu, 1989; Wheaton & Shishido, 1981).

While the research cited above certainly provides valuable insights into the role that political forces play in dictating the distribution of urban populations, each fails to directly measure the *cumulative* effect that political experiences exert. In fact, most of the research cited above has deferred to simple proxies of polity.[1] Partial exceptions include the more recent work of Mutlu (1989), Davis and Henderson (2003), and Moomaw and Alwosabi (2004). Others have taken the cumulative effect of political experience more seriously (e.g. Clayton & Richardson, 1989; Sawers, 1989), but this research is based on case studies.

Given the above, the primary purpose of this article is to develop (and test) a series of cross-national longitudinal measures of political experience that are thought to have an impact on the distribution of urban populations within nations. A secondary purpose is to provide a comprehensive reassessment of the economic and demographic correlates of urban primacy that have remained largely inconclusive (e.g. FDI, primary commodity export dependence), or that have produced contradictory results due to limited samples or restricted data coverage (e.g. level of development, percent urban). As the developing world continues to face rapid urbanization (Cohen, 2006), understanding which of these social forces play an essential role in determining where urban populations live is important, not only for local governments seeking to optimize urban planning, but for policy makers seeking to protect citizens' rights and access to resources.

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[1] For example, De Cola (1984), Mutlu (1989), and Moomaw and Alwosabi (2004) all use a dummy variable to indicate that the largest city is the capital. Similarly, Ades and Glaeser (1995) use dummy variables to proxy for regime type, although they acknowledge the importance of cumulative political experience.

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The role of polity in urban population distributions

Since the purpose of this study is to assess the cumulative political experiences of nations as they relate to their urban population distributions, the sections to follow provide a detailed overview of the political determinants that have been linked to urban primacy/urban concentration. It is from this body of literature that several hypotheses are drawn and then tested, using newly proposed measures of political experiences appropriate for cross-national longitudinal analysis.

Capital status

The first and perhaps most often cited political determinant of urban primacy is the capital status of a nation's largest city. In Jefferson's (1939) original statement, urban primacy was conceptualized as a combination of a city's population size and the "size" of its cultural dominance. He argued that an important component of a city's cultural dominance was the longevity of its capital status. The longer a city held its status as the political center, the more it was regarded as the "jewel" of a nation (e.g. London, Paris, Rome, Cairo, etc.). In addition, he argued that when a city serves as the administrative center it ensures that a nation's resources, including its most talented people, will make their way to that city. Therefore, the gravity of holding a capital status not only contributes to a city's growth, but it also contributes to the city's long-term cultural primacy (Jefferson, 1939).

Jefferson's early assessment of capital status has remained the cornerstone of urban primacy research. For instance, in his global atlas of economic development, Ginsburg (1961) pointed out that "in almost all cases the Primate City [was] a national capital..." (36). Similarly, De Cola (1984) noted that 83% of the largest cities in his dataset were capital cities and that holding a capital status resulted in a nation's largest city being 48% larger. In fact, a multitude of empirical analyses have looked at the statistical importance of a city's capital status, with all of the research unanimously finding a significant and positive relationship (e.g. Ades & Glaeser, 1995; Davis & Henderson, 2003; Moomaw & Alwosabi, 2004; Moomaw & Shatter, 1996; Mutlu, 1989).

Political centralization and decentralization

In addition to capital status, scholars have looked into the argument that the dispersion of political power impacts the locational preferences of production and labor. Plainly stated, in nations where political elites are decentralized so too are its economic activities. Thus, it has been argued that the degree of administrative concentration is associated with the distribution of urban populations (e.g. Berry & Kasarda, 1977; Kowalewski, 1982; Wheaton & Shishido, 1981).

Several cross-national studies have offered empirical tests of this assertion: Wheaton and Shishido (1981) used a measure of government shares of nonagricultural GNP per capita to proxy for the degree of political centralization within a nation's economy. They found modest support for a linear effect and strong support for an inverted U-shaped curvilinear relationship (26). In contrast, Mutlu (1989) used a dichotomous measure of federalism (centralized vs. federal) and found strong support for the linear relationship. More recent research has taken these ideas even further.

For instance, Ades and Glaeser (1995) found that autocratic nations have main cities that are 50% larger, and those without any democratic experience prior to 1970 have central cities that are 40% larger. In a similar study, Davis and Henderson (2003) reasoned that under democratic governance rural populations and smaller cities are more likely to have various forms of political representation. As a result, there is an increased probability that secondary cities and rural areas will acquire a more equal share of national resources under federalist governance. Using cross-national data from 1960 to 1995, they found strong evidence to support their hypothesis: Democratic nations with strong forms of federalism have significantly lower levels of urban concentration in the largest city.

Colonial history

Another important political determinant that has been identified in past research is colonial experience. Originally, Jefferson (1939) noted that each of the British dominions (during his time) did not exhibit urban primacy. He suggested that London served as the primate capital for the entire British Empire. This kept urban primacy from forming within British colonies. Stewart (1958) echoed this logic when assessing the size and spacing of cities. And so, it has been argued that a negative association exists.

However, Berry (1961) and Ginsburg (1961) have both noted that developing nations with prior colonial experience are positively associated with primate cities. Linsky (1965) tested these competing hypotheses and found support for Fryer (1953), "who pointed out that colonial systems facilitated the growth of primate cities by centralizing the administration of these countries and improving the communication and transportation networks that focus upon them..." (508).[2] More recently, Mutlu (1989) echoed Fryer's (1953) assertions by suggesting that urban primacy persists among formerly colonized nations because colonial capitals have accumulated advantages that reinforce their centrality (1989:618). In short, the "colonial effect" can be explained as an extension of economic development and modernization (more on this below).

Other scholars, following the world-system and dependency tradition, have argued against the modernization thesis. They suggest that colonial legacies distort economic development and displace native populations. As a result, urban transitions, as described by modernization theory, cannot unfold in these regions because colonial powers have permanently disrupted the "normal" course of development. Thus, instead of experiencing an urban transition that generates a log-normal city system (Smith, 1985, chap. 6), formerly colonized regions are faced with urban primacy and overurbanization (Castells, 1977; Firebaugh, 1979; Timberlake, 1985, chap. 1).

Finally, Lyman (1992) has argued that the colonial effect has more to do with the historical impact of different styles of colonization. In short, he discovered a relationship between the "direct rule" of the French and Spanish (associated with urban primacy) and the "indirect rule" of the British (associated with decentralized urban systems).

Communist experience

A final political determinant that has been linked to urban population distributions is a nation's experience with communism. Richardson (1981) noted that regulation of urban growth (especially when it is used to advert urban primacy) is very difficult to implement in democratic nations since free-markets and open migration tend to be preserved (281–282). However, communist nations have developed and implemented urban policies that are intended to control city size and urban patterns (e.g. China). Such policies date back to the tsarist regimes of the USSR (e.g. the satellite cities surrounding Moscow) (Clayton & Richardson, 1989). In fact, communism's restrictions on urban populations can be traced to *The Communist Manifesto* which expresses a clear desire for spatial

[2] Sheppard (1982) and Junius (1999) offer empirical evidence to support this claim.