



Workers of the world, unite! Franchise extensions and the threat of revolution in Europe, 1820–1938



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ABSTRACT

We test the hypothesis that the extension of the voting franchise in Europe was related to the threat of revolution. We contend that international diffusion of regime contention and information about revolutionary events happening in neighboring countries generate the necessary variation in the perceived threat of revolution. Using two samples of European countries covering the period from 1820 to 1938, we find robust evidence which is consistent with the 'threat of revolution hypothesis'. We also find some evidence that war triggered suffrage reform.

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1. Introduction

Variations in the rules that govern who can vote have a fundamental impact on policy choices and on the longer term development prospect of a society. Historically, the power to elect or appoint leaders – Kings or Parliaments – was the privilege of small elites who derived substantial benefits from this privilege. Today in modern democracies, political power is more evenly spread and elections are governed by the principle of one (adult) person one vote. A major puzzle in political economics is why a powerful incumbent elite would want to share power with broader segments of the population. After all, by doing so, it dilutes its own political base and stands to lose significant economic rents. The 'threat of revolution hypothesis' suggests that the elite offers voting rights to avoid revolution (see, e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000, 2006).¹ They do so whenever they perceive the risk to be sufficiently real. Seen in this perspective, democratization is *preemptive* democratization triggered by threat perceptions.

The historical record provides many suggestive examples consistent with this hypothesis² as does the wave of democratic reform that swept across North Africa during the Arab Spring. Beyond such examples, however, there exists surprisingly little systematic, statistical evidence. The reason is that it, unlike for civil war and actual revolution, is hard to

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¹ For alternative economic theories of franchise extension, see Falkinger (1999), Justman and Gradstein (1999), Conley and Temini (2001), Boix (2003), Lizzeri and Persico (2004), Llavador and Oxoby (2005), Jack and Lagunoff (2006), Congleton (2007), Congleton (2011), Aidt et al. (2010), Engerman and Sokoloff (2012, chapter 4) or Aidt and Albornoz (2011).

² See, e.g., Tilly (1995) and Weyland (2010).

quantify the *threat* of a revolution. In this paper, we develop a measure of the threat of a revolution and conduct a new test of the ‘threat of revolution hypothesis’. We argue that international diffusion of information related to regime contention—in particular actual large-scale revolutionary activities in other countries—may influence regime dynamics abroad through two channels. Firstly, those seeking a regime change through revolution might take inspiration from events in other countries. Secondly, the defenders of the old autocratic regime may update their assessment of how threatening the domestic situation is, and reevaluate the likely consequences of a revolution or the scope for repression. Based on this, they then decide whether to relinquish power and extend voting rights preemptively. In short, we use international diffusion of information about actual revolutions to quantify the perceived threat of revolution.

This approach has two major advantages that sets it apart from previous tests. The first advantage is that we can quantify the threat of revolution for the critical period in the 19th and early 20th centuries during which the franchise was in fact extended in Europe. Previous research has been unable to do so. [Przeworski \(2009\)](#), for example, tests the ‘threat of revolution hypothesis’ on a world sample after World War I and [Kim \(2007\)](#) studies the link between strike activity and franchise reform in a sample of 12 Western European countries between 1880 and World War II. Our data allow us to start the analysis in 1820. The second advantage is that we provide a direct test of the theory. Previous work by [Brückner and Ciccone \(2011\)](#) and [Burke and Leigh \(2010\)](#) establish causal links between *economic shocks* and democratic change which are consistent with the theory. [Chaney \(2013\)](#) uses deep historical data on deviant Nile floods to show that the political power of religious leaders increased during periods of economic downturn and interprets this as evidence that these leaders could coordinate a revolt. We go beyond this literature by assessing the link between the *threat of revolution* and democratic change directly.

We implement our test on two samples of European countries between 1820 and 1938. The focus on Europe is justified for at least two reasons. Firstly, [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2000\)](#) motivate their theory with detailed examples from Britain, Germany, Sweden, and France. Accordingly, although the theory of preemptive democratization is generally applicable, it is arguably particularly relevant for understanding regime dynamics in 19th and early 20th century Europe. Secondly, (modern) democratic institutions originated in Europe and spread to other parts of the world, first through colonization ([Hall and Jones, 1999](#); [Acemoglu et al., 2001](#)) and in more recent times by providing a blueprint for the design of democratic constitutions. Seen in this perspective, gaining a better understanding of how democracy came about in Europe is an important stepping stone for understanding the spread of democracy across the world and, therefore, ultimately for understanding the influence of institutions on long-run economic development.

Our results, based on two very different research designs, show that the threat of revolution had a major effect, not only on franchise extension as measured by the fraction of the adult population with the right to vote but also on the timing of major suffrage reforms. The baseline result is that one extra revolutionary event somewhere in Europe is associated with a two percentage point expansion of the fraction of the male population with the right to vote in neighboring countries and with a 75 percent increase in the odds of a suffrage reform.

There are two ways to read these results. The first is to give them a causal interpretation. This requires that revolutionary events in other countries are uncorrelated with unobserved country and time specific causes of democratization and that these events only affect democratization in a particular country through the effect on the perceived probability of revolution in that country. We control for many potential determinants of democratization, such as national income, urbanization, education, war, trade integration, inequality, enlightenment shocks, etc. and for unobserved country specific fixed factors and common time shocks. Yet, it is possible that countries which were ‘ready’ to democratize happened to be more exposed to revolutionary shocks from abroad for reasons we do not observe. Using the method proposed by [Altonji et al. \(2005\)](#), we find that selection on ‘unobservables’ must be 2.5–5.9 times stronger than selection on ‘observables’ for our baseline result to be entirely explained by selection bias. While perhaps not impossible, we find this highly implausible. Taken together, this gives us reason to believe that there is a causal link. The second way to read the results is as suggestive conditional correlations which are consistent with the ‘threat of revolution hypothesis’. The value of uncovering these correlations is two-fold. Firstly, our data allow us to establish a strong positive correlation between the threat of revolution and democratization for the entire first wave of democratization. Previous research has focussed mostly on later waves or on part of the first wave only. Moreover, the correlation that we uncover is extremely robust to estimation method and different sets of variables capturing other theories of franchise reform.³ Secondly, we emphasize international diffusion of information on regime contention as one possible mechanism through which the threat of revolution might have induced preemptive democratization.⁴ This provides a new perspective on the theory.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In [Section 2](#), we present a two-country model of (preemptive) franchise reform which motivates our empirical investigation. In [Section 3](#), we present data on revolutionary threats and suffrage reform. In [Section 4](#), we present our two research designs. In [Sections 5 and 6](#), we report the results and discuss confounding factors. In [Section 7](#), we discuss other theories of franchise reform. In [Section 8](#), we conclude. The supplementary material

³ The correlations uncovered by [Kim \(2007\)](#) for the period 1880 to 1938 are, for example, not robust to controlling for unobserved country or time fixed effects. [Przeworski \(2009\)](#) focuses on bivariate correlations between his measure of the threat (based on data on riots and strikes) and his measure of democratization in order to maximize the number of cases.

⁴ The literature on civil war also emphasizes international diffusion ([Sambanis and Hegre, 2006](#)). We focus on the diffusion of the *threat* of revolution rather than full-blown civil war. Revolution and conflict have many causes including economic shocks ([Berger and Spoerer, 2001](#)) and ethnical conflict ([Esteban et al., 2012](#)).

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