



Political conditions and life expectancy in Europe, 1900–2008

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ABSTRACT

The rise of life expectancy in Europe has been a very uneven process, both in time and space. This paper aims to identify instances in which major political conditions are likely to have influenced the rise of life expectancy, focusing on formation and dissolution of states and supranational blocs and on differences between political regimes (democratic vs. authoritarian non-communist and communist rule). Data on life expectancy, cause-specific mortality and political conditions were compiled from existing data sources. Possible relations between political conditions and life expectancy were studied by direct comparisons of changes in life expectancy in countries with different political conditions but similar starting levels of life expectancy. We found that formation and dissolution of states often went together with convergence and divergence of life expectancy, respectively, and that otherwise similar countries that did or did not become part of the Soviet bloc had distinctly different life expectancy trajectories. Democratically governed states had higher life expectancies than authoritarian states throughout the 20th century. The gap narrowed between 1920 and 1960 due to rapid catching up of infectious disease control in both non-communist and communist authoritarian states. It widened again after 1960 due to earlier and more rapid progress in democratic states against cardiovascular disease, breast cancer, motor vehicle accidents and other causes of death that have become amenable to intervention. We conclude that the history of life expectancy in Europe contains many instances in which political conditions are likely to have had a temporary or more lasting impact on population health. This suggests that there is scope for further in-depth studies of the impact of specific political determinants on the development of population health in Europe.

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Introduction

The idea that public health needs politics to improve population health is more popular than ever. Politics, loosely defined as the process of making and executing collective decisions (Hague & Harrop, 2010), may affect risks of mortality in various ways. It may have an impact on levels of prosperity, by fostering economic growth, and thereby influence living conditions that are essential for population health (e.g. nutrition). Political decisions on the collective provision of education, social security, housing etc. may influence population health by providing protection against health hazards and increasing resilience. Finally, politics may influence population health directly through decisions on public health measures (safe drinking water, vaccinations, road traffic safety, air pollution control, etc.) and on health care provision (Bambra, Fox, & Scott-Samuel, 2005). On the other hand, politics may also have negative impacts on population health, for example by creating major disruptions of social life, such as armed conflicts, or by oppression of certain population groups.

During the past decades, the idea that health needs to be brought into the political arena has become part of mainstream public health, often with a reference to famous antecedents like Virchow (“Politics is nothing but medicine at a larger scale”) (Mackenbach, 2009) and Rose (“Medicine and politics cannot and should not be kept apart”) (Rose, Khaw, & Marmot, 2008). Empirical evidence of the impact of politics on population health is, however, scarce, partly because it is difficult to find empirical data which are comparable and cover a sufficiently broad range of variation in political conditions. In this paper we will explore the role of major political conditions in moderating life expectancy growth in Europe during the 20th century. Europe, with its divisive political history and relatively good historical record of vital events, offers good opportunities for such an analysis.

Table 1 summarizes these conditions during the 20th century, and first of all shows that this was a period of emergence and dissolution of nation-states. In 1900, Finland was still part of the Russian Empire, Ireland of the United Kingdom, most of Central Europe of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and parts of the Western Balkans still belonged to the crumbling Ottoman Empire. Two World Wars and the rise and fall of the Soviet Union have

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Table 1
Political conditions in Europe, by country and period, 1900–2008.

Independent states	ca. 1900	ca. '10	ca. '20	ca. '30	ca. '39	ca. '50	ca. '60	ca. '70	ca. '80	ca. '90	ca. 2000	ca. '08
Nordic												
Finland	Russ	Russ	Indep ('17)	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('95)	EU
Sweden	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('95)	EU
Norway	Sweden	Indep (1905)	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep
Iceland	Denmark	Denmark	Indep ('18)	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep
Denmark	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('73)	EU	EU	EU
Britain & Ireland												
England and Wales	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	EU ('73)	EU	EU	EU
Scotland	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	EU ('73)	EU	EU	EU
Northern Ireland	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	EU ('73)	EU	EU	EU
Ireland	UK	UK	UK	Indep ('21)	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('73)	EU	EU	EU
Continental												
Netherlands	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('57)	EU	EU	EU	EU	EU
Belgium	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('57)	EU	EU	EU	EU	EU
Luxembourg	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('57)	EU	EU	EU	EU	EU
Germany	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('57)	EU	EU	EU	EU	EU
							(FRG)					
Switzerland	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep
Austria	A-H	A-H	Indep ('18)	Indep	Germ	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('95)	EU
Mediterranean												
France	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('57)	EU	EU	EU	EU	EU
Spain	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('86)	EU	EU
Portugal	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('86)	EU	EU
Italy	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('57)	EU	EU	EU	EU	EU
Malta	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	Indep ('64)	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('04)
Greece	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('81)	EU	EU
Cyprus	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	Indep ('60)	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	EU ('04)
Western Balkans												
Slovenia	A-H	A-H	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Indep ('90)	Indep	EU ('04)
Croatia	A-H	A-H	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Indep ('91)	Indep
Bosnia-Herzegovina	A-H	A-H	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Indep ('92)	Indep
Serbia	Indep	Indep	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Indep ('91)	Indep
Montenegro	Indep	Indep	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	with Serbia	Indep ('06)
TFYR Macedonia	Turk	Turk	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Yugo	Indep ('91)	Indep
Albania	Turk	Turk	Indep ('12)	Indep	Indep	CoBl	CoBl	CoBl	CoBl	Indep ('89)	Indep	Indep
Centre & East												
Germany (DDR)	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	CoBl	CoBl	CoBl	CoBl	Germ/EU	Germ/EU	Germ/EU
Poland	Russ, A-H, Germ	Russ, A-H, Germ	Indep ('18)	Indep	Indep	CoBl	CoBl	CoBl	CoBl	Indep ('89)	Indep	EU ('04)
Czech Republic	A-H	A-H	CzSl ('18)	CzSl	CzSl	CzSl/CoBl	CzSl/CoBl	CzSl/CoBl	CzSl/CoBl	CzSl/Indep	Indep ('93)	EU ('04)
Slovakia	A-H	A-H	CzSl ('18)	CzSl	CzSl	CzSl/CoBl	CzSl/CoBl	CzSl/CoBl	CzSl/CoBl	CzSl/Indep	Indep ('93)	EU ('04)
Hungary	A-H	A-H	Indep ('18)	Indep	Indep	CoBl	CoBl	CoBl	CoBl	Indep ('89)	Indep	EU ('04)
Romania	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	CoBl	CoBl	CoBl	CoBl	Indep ('89)	Indep	EU ('07)
Bulgaria	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	Indep	CoBl	CoBl	CoBl	CoBl	Indep ('89)	Indep	EU ('07)
(f) Soviet Union												
Estonia	Russ	Russ	Indep ('18)	Indep	Indep	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	Indep ('89)	Indep	EU ('04)
Latvia	Russ	Russ	Indep ('18)	Indep	Indep	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	Indep ('89)	Indep	EU ('04)
Lithuania	Russ	Russ	Indep ('18)	Indep	Indep	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	Indep ('89)	Indep	EU ('04)
Belarus	Russ	Russ	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	Indep ('90)	Indep	Indep
Ukraine	Russ, A-H	Russ, A-H	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	Indep ('91)	Indep
Republic of Moldova	Russ	Russ	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	Indep ('91)	Indep
Russian Federation	Indep	Indep	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	Indep ('91)	Indep
Georgia	Russ	Russ	Indep ('17)	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	Indep ('91)	Indep
Armenia	Turk	Turk	Indep ('18)	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	Indep ('90)	Indep	Indep
Azerbaijan	Russ	Russ	Indep ('18)	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	USSR	Indep ('91)	Indep

Notes: A-H, Part of Austro-Hungarian empire; CzSl, Part of Czechoslovakia; Germ, Part of Germany; Russ, Part of Russian empire; UK, Part of United Kingdom; USSR, Part of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; Yugo, Part of Yugoslavia; Indep, Independent (with year of independence if during 20th century); CoBl, Independent, but part of Communist bloc; EU, Independent, but member of European Union (with year of accession); Normal, Democratic political regime (in 1930 or later only); **Bold**, Autocratic non-communist political regime (in 1930 or later only); **Bold, italics**, Autocratic communist political regime (in 1930 or later only).

completely changed the political map of Europe, and the net effect has been a substantial rise in the number of independent nation-states. In the process, some countries have merged but many more have split up. Recently, this fragmentation was partly balanced by a slow process of European integration within an expanding European Union (Daniels, 1996). Because the state is the main unit of political decision-making, if politics make a difference at all one would expect dissolution of supranational or national entities to increase disparities in life expectancy, and unification to reduce them, as happened when the German Democratic Republic merged with the German Federal Republic in 1991 (Nolte, Shkolnikov, & McKee, 2000a, 2000b).

The 20th century has also been a period of struggle between democracy and autocracy. Most countries in the North and West of Europe have long democratic traditions, but as indicated in Table 1, during the 20th century many countries in Continental Europe, the Mediterranean, the Western Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have had shorter or longer periods of autocratic government, either communist or non-communist (often fascism in inspiration) (Daniels, 1996; Judt, 2005). It is still an open question whether democracy as such is good for population health. Elected representatives are accountable to voters and vulnerable to public criticism, so that health resources may reach larger sections of the population in democratically than in autocratically governed

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