

A Review of “The Consolidation of Royal
Control: Evidence from Northern Castile,
1352–1787” by Figueroa (2020)

Reviewer 2

January 14, 2026

v1



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I am wiser than this person; for it is likely that neither of us knows anything fine and good, but he thinks he knows something when he does not know it, whereas I, just as I do not know, do not think I know, either. I seem, then, to be wiser than him in this small way, at least: that what I do not know, I do not think I know, either.

Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, 21d

To err is human. All human knowledge is fallible and therefore uncertain. It follows that we must distinguish sharply between truth and certainty. That to err is human means not only that we must constantly struggle against error, but also that, even when we have taken the greatest care, we cannot be completely certain that we have not made a mistake.

Karl Popper, 'Knowledge and the Shaping of Reality'

Overview

Citation: Figueroa, V. (2020). The Consolidation of Royal Control: Evidence from Northern Castile, 1352–1787. *European Review of Economic History*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 447–466.

Abstract Summary: This article analyzes village-level transition paths between royal, seigneurial, and ecclesiastical jurisdictions in northern Castile between 1352 and 1787, quantifying how much power different types of lords preserved or lost to the Crown in the long run. It also estimates that exposure to commercial opportunities led to more resilient and larger royal domains at the expense of secular lords, but not the Catholic Church.

Key Methodology: Panel data analysis (1,500 villages, 1352 and 1787), transition probability matrix, and difference-in-differences estimates using proximity to the Atlantic coastline/ports as a proxy for commercial opportunities.

Research Question: Which local potentates lost power, how much power did they lose before the French Revolution, and whom did they lose it to? What role, if any, did changes in opportunities for economic exchange play in the consolidation of royal power at the local level?

Summary

Is It Credible?

This article represents a substantial and impressive effort to quantify the long-term evolution of state capacity in Northern Castile. By linking the *Libro Becerro de las Behetrías* (1352) with the *Censo de Floridablanca* (1787), Figueroa constructs a dataset that spans over four centuries, offering a rare, granular view of how power shifted from local potentates to the Crown. The descriptive contribution is robust; the transition probability matrix provides concrete evidence that the Crown's expansion was not a linear absorption of all power, but a complex dynamic where the monarchy gained significantly from peasant corporations and the Church while struggling to retain its own villages against resilient secular lords. As a descriptive account of *what* happened to jurisdictional authority in this region, the article is highly credible and valuable.

However, the credibility of the article strains when it moves from description to causal explanation. The central claim—that exposure to commercial opportunities drove the consolidation of royal power—relies on a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) framework applied to two cross-sections separated by 435 years. This structure renders the crucial parallel trends assumption untestable. We must assume that, absent the commercial shift, coastal and inland villages would have evolved identically over four centuries. Given the massive span of time and the “black box” of unobserved intermediate events, this is a heavy burden for the data to bear. While the author honestly labels these estimates as “conjectural,” the narrative weight placed upon them suggests a level of certainty that the methodology cannot fully support. The correlation is clear, but the causal pathway remains obscured by the centuries of missing data between the two observation points.

Furthermore, the article exhibits a tendency to streamline the narrative by relegating inconvenient findings to the supplementary material. In the robustness checks, the author finds that exposure to military conflict is negatively and significantly associated with royal jurisdiction. This finding directly contradicts the dominant “bellicist” theories of state formation (e.g., Tilly), which posit that warfare drives centralization. This fascinating counter-intuitive

result is presented in the appendix rather than the main text, allowing the main narrative to focus exclusively on the positive impact of commerce. Similarly, the null result regarding urbanization is excluded from the primary discussion. While researchers must focus their arguments, placing significant results that complicate the theoretical landscape in the supplementary material diminishes the article's role as a neutral arbiter of historical reality.

Finally, there are data quality issues that, while acknowledged, introduce uncertainty. The analysis suffers from a 26.5 percent attrition rate between the initial sample and the final geo-located dataset. While the author is transparent about the linkage rate, there is no formal analysis to ensure that the dropped villages did not differ systematically from those analyzed. If the "lost" villages were disproportionately small, remote, or non-royal, the resulting picture of state consolidation could be biased. Combined with minor clerical inconsistencies in statistical reporting, these issues suggest that while the article's descriptive core is sound, its causal conclusions should be read with significant caution.

The Bottom Line

Figuerola provides a rigorous and illuminating descriptive quantification of state formation in Northern Castile, successfully documenting the decline of peasant corporations and the resilience of secular lords. However, the attempt to causally link this process to commercial opportunities is weakened by the use of data points separated by four centuries, which makes verifying the timing and cause of these shifts impossible. The article is a reliable map of political change, but a speculative guide to its causes.

Specific Issues

Structural limitations of the causal methodology: The article's primary causal argument relies on a Difference-in-Differences strategy using only two time periods separated by 435 years (1352 and 1787). As the author acknowledges, this makes the parallel trends assumption—that coastal and inland villages would have evolved identically without the commercial shock—fundamentally untestable (p. 459). The author attempts to mitigate this by showing baseline balance in 1352, but this does not confirm that the two groups were on parallel trajectories over the subsequent four centuries. Consequently, the estimates capture a long-run correlation but cannot definitively isolate the causal impact of commerce from other time-varying factors that may have diverged between coastal and inland areas over such a long period.

Narrative placement of contradictory findings: The article places significant findings that complicate the standard theories of state formation in the online appendix. Specifically, the analysis shows that exposure to military conflict is negatively and significantly associated with royal jurisdiction (Supplement, p. 7), a result that challenges bellicist theories of state building. Additionally, the variable for “urban potential” yields a null result (Supplement, p. 7), despite urbanization often being cited as a driver of state capacity. Placing these results outside the main text streamlines the narrative around commerce but deprives the reader of a more nuanced understanding of the forces at play.

Data attrition and lack of bias analysis: The study begins with 2,094 settlements but relies on a final sample of 1,540 villages for the causal analysis, representing a loss of 26.5 percent of the original observations (p. 453). While the author reports the linkage rate, there is no formal analysis of attrition bias to determine if the unmatched or non-geo-located villages differ systematically from the final sample. If the likelihood of a village surviving in the record or being successfully matched is correlated with its jurisdictional status (e.g., if royal villages are better documented), this could bias the aggregate trends and regression estimates.

Presentation and clerical inconsistencies: There are several minor issues regarding data presentation and labeling. The notation for statistical significance is inconsistent across ta-

bles; for example, a single asterisk denotes the 10 percent level in Table 3 (p. 462) but the 5 percent level in Table 2 (p. 460) and the 1 percent level in Appendix Table 1 (Supplement, p. 7). Additionally, the fixed effects in the appendix tables are labeled as “Town FE” (Supplement, pp. 7–9), whereas the text specifies “village-specific intercepts” (p. 459), creating confusion about the unit of analysis. Finally, the article lists five jurisdictional types in the introduction (p. 448) but introduces a sixth “Mixed” category for the analysis (p. 455), which is a minor inconsistency in definition.

Statistical weakness of specific mechanism tests: The author argues that commerce “cemented the durability of the royal jurisdiction” (p. 464), but the evidence for this specific mechanism is mixed. In the multinomial logit analysis, the proxy for commerce using proximity to Bilbao yields results for royal resilience that are not statistically significant (p. 463; Table 3, Panel C). While the broader “Atlantic” measure is significant, the weakness of the Bilbao robustness check suggests that the link between specific commercial hubs and the retention of royal power is less robust than the article implies.

Unexplained sample discrepancies: The multinomial logit analysis reports a total sample size of 1,310 observations (Table 3, p. 462). Given the main sample of 1,540 and the stated exclusion of approximately 11 percent of villages with “mixed” jurisdiction (p. 461), there remains an unexplained discrepancy of roughly 60 villages (about 4 percent of the sample). This suggests undocumented attrition or missing data in the covariates used for this specific analysis.

Measurement and proxy limitations: The study relies on institutional proxies that may not perfectly capture the historical reality. The measure of “jurisdiction” is strictly institutional and does not account for *de facto* power, such as the economic dominance of a lord over the peasantry (p. 453). Furthermore, the “Urban Potential” control variable for the 1352 period is constructed using population data from 1400 (Supplement, p. 5). While data availability is a valid constraint, using post-Black Death data from 1400 to proxy conditions in 1352 introduces a look-ahead bias of nearly half a century.

Future Research

Incorporation of intermediate data points: To validate the parallel trends assumption and better understand the timing of jurisdictional shifts, future research must incorporate intermediate data sources between 1352 and 1787. Sources such as the *Censo de Pecheros* (1528) or the *Catastro de Ensenada* (mid-18th century) could provide the necessary snapshots to observe whether the divergence between coastal and inland villages occurred in tandem with the rise of Atlantic trade, or if it was driven by other events. This would transform the “conjectural” causal estimates into a robust time-series analysis.

Investigation of the negative impact of warfare: The negative correlation between military conflict and royal jurisdiction identified in the robustness checks warrants a dedicated investigation. Future work should explicitly test why exposure to warfare in Northern Castile appears to have eroded rather than strengthened royal authority. This could involve analyzing whether the Crown alienated jurisdiction to pay for wars (selling towns to lords) or if conflict zones were simply harder for the Crown to administer directly.

Analysis of attrition bias: Future iterations of this dataset should include a formal balance test comparing the observable characteristics (in 1352) of the villages that were successfully linked to 1787 against those that were lost to attrition. Determining whether the “lost” villages were predominantly *behetría*, royal, or seigneurial is essential to confirm that the aggregate trends reported are not artifacts of selective data survival.

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