

A Report on “Missionary Activity,
Education, and Long-Run Political
Development: Evidence Across Regime
Types in Africa” by Henn et al. (2025)

Reviewer 2

February 07, 2026

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isitcredible.com

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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: Henn, S. J., Larreguy, H., & Schmidt-Padilla, C. (2025). Missionary Activity, Education, and Long-Run Political Development: Evidence Across Regime Types in Africa. *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 0(0), pp. 1–36.

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140251369335>

Abstract Summary: This study examines how historical Catholic missionary activity, proxied by proximity to diocese headquarters, shaped long-run education and political development in Africa, finding that the effects on political participation vary significantly across different regime types.

Key Methodology: Regression Discontinuity Design (*RDD*) exploiting plausibly exogenous variation in proximity to historical Catholic diocese headquarters circa 1928, using Afrobarometer survey data and Polity *IV* scores to disaggregate results by regime type.

Research Question: How did historical missionary activity shape long-run education and political development across different regime types in Africa?

Summary

Is It Credible?

This study investigates the long-term political legacy of Catholic missionary activity in Africa, positing that the effect of historical education on contemporary political participation is contingent on the regime type. The authors employ a regression discontinuity design (RDD) based on the 1917 Code of Canon Law, which restricted Catholic missionary activity to specific diocese boundaries. By comparing individuals living just inside a diocese (closer to the headquarters) to those just outside, the authors argue they can isolate the causal effect of missionary exposure. The article presents a compelling “first stage,” demonstrating that proximity to historical diocese headquarters circa 1928 significantly predicts both historical missionary presence and modern-day educational and religious outcomes (p. 20). This portion of the analysis is highly credible; the data strongly suggests that these historical institutions left a durable footprint on human capital and religious identity in the border regions studied.

However, the credibility of the headline political claims is complicated by challenges regarding mechanisms and robustness. The authors argue that the observed increase in political participation in “open anocracies”—and the lack thereof or decrease in other regimes—is driven by the human capital conferred by missionary education. Yet, the research design struggles to distinguish this historical educational legacy from the contemporary organizational power of the Catholic Church. Diocese headquarters are not merely historical markers; they often remain active administrative hubs providing social services and networks that facilitate political mobilization today. Consequently, it is difficult to determine whether increased participation is a result of educated citizens cognitively engaging with the political system, or simply a function of proximity to a powerful mobilizing institution. While the authors

demonstrate that the effects vary by regime type, which aligns with their incentive-based theory, the analysis does not decisively rule out the church-as-mobilizer alternative.

Furthermore, the specific claim regarding “closed anocracies”—that missionary education leads to political disengagement—appears fragile. The authors report a statistically significant negative effect of proximity on participation in these regimes in their main specifications (p. 22). However, robustness checks reveal that this result may be driven by confounding variables. When controlling for distance to the national capital and malaria suitability—covariates that were unbalanced in the initial tests—the negative effect in closed anocracies becomes statistically indistinguishable from zero (p. 63). This suggests that the narrative of “deliberate disengagement” in authoritarian settings may be an artifact of geography rather than a behavioral response to education.

Finally, the reliance on a border-based RDD limits the external validity of the findings. The estimates represent a Local Average Treatment Effect (LATE) specific to populations living in the immediate vicinity of historical diocese boundaries. These peripheral areas may differ systematically from the hinterlands or urban centers where much of the continent’s political life occurs. While the authors acknowledge the need for caution in extrapolation, the broad framing of the title and abstract implies a continent-wide applicability that the specific identification strategy cannot fully support (p. 29). The study is credible in establishing the persistence of missionary shocks on education, but the nuances of how that education translates into political action across different regime types remain open to interpretation.

The Bottom Line

The study provides convincing evidence that historical Catholic missionary activity in Africa generated lasting impacts on education and religious identity. However,

the claim that this educational legacy drives regime-specific patterns of political participation is less certain. The finding that education decreases participation in closed autocracies appears fragile and likely driven by confounding geographic factors, and the analysis cannot fully distinguish whether participation is driven by human capital or the contemporary organizational power of the Church.

Potential Issues

Alternative mechanism: The study's core claim is that historical missionary education drives contemporary political participation, but the research design does not adequately distinguish this historical mechanism from a plausible contemporary alternative: the organizational capacity of the modern Catholic Church. The main proxy for historical missionary activity is proximity to a diocese headquarters established circa 1928. These locations often remain administrative and organizational hubs for the Church today, providing social services, civil society networks, and a platform for political mobilization. Proximity to such a contemporary hub could increase political participation through access to these resources, independent of any educational legacy from the colonial era. While the study shows that the effects on participation vary by regime type—which supports the authors' incentive-based argument—it does not provide direct evidence to rule out the possibility that the observed effects are at least partially driven by the contemporary organizational presence of the Church, rather than solely by the long-run persistence of human capital.

Robustness of a core finding: A key part of the article's narrative is that the effect of missionary-induced education on political participation varies by regime type, with a particularly notable finding of a negative effect in closed anocracies. The main results show a statistically significant negative coefficient on the political participation index for this regime type (p. 22). However, the robustness of this specific finding is questionable. The study's initial balance checks reveal that proximity to a diocese headquarters is significantly correlated with proximity to the national capital and with malaria suitability (pp. 17–18). When the authors conduct a robustness check that controls for these two unbalanced covariates, the negative and significant effect on political participation in closed anocracies disappears, with the coefficient becoming statistically indistinguishable from zero (p. 63). While the broader pattern of a differential effect between open anocracies and other regimes may hold across

various specifications, the specific claim that education leads to politically significant disengagement in closed anocracies appears to be an artifact of confounding variables, weakening a central component of the study's narrative.

External validity: The study employs a regression discontinuity design, which estimates a Local Average Treatment Effect. The findings are therefore, strictly speaking, only valid for the specific population living near the historical Catholic diocese borders used in the analysis. While these borders are spread across many African countries, these borderland populations may not be representative of the countries as a whole. The article's title and conclusions make broad claims about political development "across regime types in Africa," but there is a potential disconnect between the highly localized nature of the evidence and the continent-wide scope of the claims. The authors acknowledge this limitation in their conclusion, stating that their individual-level findings should be "cautiously extrapolated to draw macro conclusions" (p. 29). Nonetheless, the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific border areas studied remains an open question.

Presentation and transparency issues: Several minor issues related to the presentation of data and methods affect the article's clarity and replicability. First, the sample sizes vary across tables without explicit justification for the attrition; for example, the sample for the main balance check is 10,070, but it drops to 8,991 for the analysis of "Satisfied with democracy," a loss of over 10% of the observations (pp. 17, 25). Second, the authors state that they calculate Cronbach's alpha to assess the reliability of their composite indices, but the values for this key metric are not reported in the text or appendix, preventing readers from evaluating the internal consistency of the main dependent variables (p. 16). Finally, there is a typographical error in the main text's definition of closed anocracies, which are described as having Polity IV scores "from 0 to 0-5," when the correct range is 0 to -5 (p. 13).

Future Research

Disentangling mechanisms: Future work should aim to isolate the effect of human capital from the organizational capacity of religious institutions. Researchers could investigate areas where the Catholic Church's administrative presence was removed or significantly diminished post-independence, yet the educational infrastructure remained (e.g., through nationalization of schools). Alternatively, comparing the long-run political effects of Catholic missions (which were geographically restricted) against Protestant missions (which were less restricted and may have different organizational legacies) within the same regime types could help clarify whether the mobilization effect is specific to the hierarchical structure of the Catholic diocese or a general property of missionary education.

Expanding external validity: To address the limitations of the border-based design, future research could employ instrumental variable strategies that apply to the interior of these countries. For example, exploiting climatic or geographic features that specifically favored missionary settlement (e.g., specific micro-climates favorable to European health) as an instrument for historical education could allow for an analysis of political participation across the entire population, rather than just border communities. This would help determine if the regime-dependent effects observed in this study hold for the broader electorate in African democracies and anocracies.

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