Autocratic Succession and Urban Regime Change

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Abstract: In research on autocratic regimes, successions are viewed as pivotal moments during which societal groups can bargain for political concessions. Using new data on urban regime change, lordly ownership, and lordly successions in 293 European cities between 1000 and 1400, this article shows that the death of rulers enabled townspeople to introduce self-governing institutions. Next, I examine under what conditions successions are more likely to lead to such political concessions. I find that the impact of successions hinges on the bargaining position of cities. More specifically, I show that city walls strengthened the hand of the townsmen and that multiple heirs weakened rulers whereas state capacity strengthened the hand of rulers.

Introduction

When do autocratic successions increase power-sharing? The death of an autocrat presents a potentially dire situation as succession disputes risk initiating coups, wars, or civil wars (Tullock 1987; Brownlee 2007; Kokkonen and Sundell 2014 & 2020; Acharya and Lee 2019). This momentarily alters the balance of power and sometimes enable societal groups to bargain for political concessions (e.g. Kokkonen and Møller 2020; Albertus and Gay 2016). In this article, I investigate under what conditions successions lead to concessions in the form of urban self-rule. Urban self-government can be defined as rule via a city assembly consisting of citizens who were selected by at least parts of the citizenry (Stasavage 2014). Politically autonomous cities played a key role in European state formation by curtailing royal and lordly power (e.g. Poggi 1978; Tilly 1990; Ertman 1997; Stasavage 2011; Dincecco and Wang 2018). Historians have observed that concessions of urban self-government sometimes followed in the wake of successions (Uytven and Blockmans 1969; Johanek 2000). However, the relationship has never been subject to systematic empirical test.

To remedy this, the article presents new data on urban regime change between 1000 and 1400 in 293 cities located in the so-called European north-south corridor, which stretches from the Netherlands in the north to Switzerland in the south. This data has several advantages over pre-existing datasets on urban political institutions (Bosker et al. 2013; Stasavage 2014; Wahl 2016). First, it matches each city to a lordly owner based on city histories rather than maps, which greatly improves precision at the local level in comparison with prior studies (see e.g. Acharya and Lee 2019; Abramson and Boix 2019). Second, it allows me to examine the timing of successions and regime change in more detail, as it contains data on regime change at the city-year unit of analysis rather than city-century (e.g. Bosker et al. 2013; Wahl 2016). Finally, it

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contains detailed information on city characteristics, such as walls, proto-industry, guilds, finance, and markets, which allows me to interrogate the conditions governing when cities can transition to self-government.

To better identify the impact of successions on transitions to urban self-rule, I exploit natural deaths as a source of variation in successions (inspired by Jones and Olken 2005; Kokkonen and Sundell 2020). In addition, I employ city, year, and lordship fixed effects. I document a strong positive relationship between successions and transitions into urban self-government. This result is robust to accounting for alternative explanations such as economic development, conflict, and tenure (e.g. Abramson and Boix 2019; Pirenne 1925; Dincecco and Onorato 2016; Abramson and Rivera 2016).

I also develop several arguments concerning the conditions that determine whether successions foster urban self-government. Using newly coded data, I show that the relationship between successions and urban regime change is stronger in walled cities and in lordships with a history of producing many heirs, and non-existent in cities with a resident lordly administrator. The wealth of a city and its access to finance does not alter the impact of successions. The same is true for the presence of lordly assemblies. Finally, I consider if cities that are exposed to self-government via either ecclesiastical institutions (e.g. Doucette 2021) or other autonomous cities, are more likely to transition following a succession. I find that this is the case. In addition, I provide evidence that the type of transition to self-government (succession versus non-succession) does not predict subsequent levels of political autonomy. However, if a lordship has historically produced many heirs, cities within the lordship have higher levels of post-transition autonomy.

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My results contribute to the literature on authoritarian power-sharing. Autocrats may agree to share power during moments of weakness, such as successions. However, they will quickly try to turn back on their promises unless opposing societal groups can credibly threaten a rebellion (Kokkonen and Møller 2020; Boix and Svolik 2013; Roessler and Ohls 2018). My findings point to several factors that make it more likely that societal groups can establish inclusive institutions in the wake of a succession: a high military cost of subjugation, succession rules that spread power among potential successors, and local rather than central appointment of administrators (in contrast to bishops).

The results also add to our understanding of European state formation and regime change. A large body of work has identified urban self-government as a key factor in explaining patterns of state building. Self-governing cities forced rulers to 1) call parliaments to finance their war-making efforts and 2) use cities as a basis for their local administration, two bottom-up dynamics that shaped crucial aspect of the European development of modern territorial states (Poggi 1978; Tilly 1990; Bartlett 1993; Ertman 1997; Spruyt 1994; Stasavage 2011; Dincecco and Wang 2018; Møller 2018; Dincecco et al. 2020). For instance, when Henry III, the duke of Brabant, died in 1261, the cities under his domain waited a few months and then organized an urban league to press their interests. Subsequently, their assent was sought for all important ducal decisions by Henry's successor (Uytven and Blockmans 1969, 403). My findings help shed light on where and especially when urban self-government appeared (Stasavage 2011; Belloc et al. 2016; Abramson and Boix 2019; Becker et al. 2020; Angelucci et al. 2020; Doucette 2021; Dincecco et al. 2020; Doucette and Møller 2021).

Many cities outside of Europe were also subject to frequent autocratic successions without introducing urban political autonomy. I also consider this empirical puzzle. In general,

events such as successions or economic crises alter the balance of power between rulers and societal groups, thus increasing the likelihood of regime change. Yet, the type and direction of regime change depends crucially on the supply of viable institutions that societal groups may conceivably demand. Corporate self-government had been developed by the Catholic Church and it had subsequently spread to medieval townspeople (see e.g. Doucette and Møller 2021; Doucette 2021), thus explaining its unique European presence. This answer is somewhat in contrast to contemporary theories of regime change that often emphasize factors, such as economic development and information asymmetries, which either makes elites more willing to accept changes to the regime or makes the populace more likely to demand such changes (e.g. Lipset 1959; Boix 2011; Inglehart and Welzel 2010; Ahmed and Stasavage 2020). This suggests that instances of modern regime change may be better understood by taking the underlying supply of institutional models and templates into account.

Historical background

Urban self-government

Self-governing cities are a ubiquitous part of European history. They began to emerge in the eleventh century, peaked in number and power during the twelfth and thirteenth century, and slowly and gradually disappeared in the period up until the French Revolution (Bosker et al. 2013). Self-government is considered present when a city is ruled via an assembly consisting of citizens who were selected by at least parts of the citizenry (Stasavage 2014). Non-autonomous cities were in contrast governed by either local lords, royal administrators, or clergy. For

instance, the French town of Vezelay was governed by a local abbot who had been appointed by the king (Dutallis 1978, 78).

Self-governing cities varied considerable in their degree of autonomy. Some cities, such as Venice, were fully politically autonomous. They issued taxes, mustered armies, held territory outside of the city, and engaged in foreign policy (Finer 1997, 985; Johanek 2000). Many self-governing cities, however, had a more modest degree of self-government. They had the right to decide some policy areas but were under the authority of a lord or bishop in other areas. A prominent example of this category is Cologne. During the later thirteenth century, its city council had the right to control financial affairs, but the council had to issue other charters jointly with the resident bishop (Nicholas 1997; 306). In this article, I focus on the transition from being governed by lords, clergy, or administrators to having a city council (chosen by the inhabitants of the city) with at least some policy influence, as such cities were able to press their interest vis-à-vis kings, local clergy, and lords.

Cities also had different ways of selecting council members. Sometimes members were chosen via elections or by drawing a lot. In other cases, different areas of the city or different urban organizations could send a representative. Consequently, there was significant variation in the share of a city's inhabitants that could participate in choosing their councilors. Unfortunately, sources are generally scarce regarding the extent of participation and the method of selection (see e.g. Wahl 2016; Prak 2018). Thus, I cannot empirically investigate this component of self-government.

Structures of rule

After the divisions of the Carolingian Empire in the ninth century, Western Europe experienced a collapse of public authority. This resulted in a mushrooming of autonomous lordships within the future French and German states. When royal power began to reassert itself during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it did not supplant these lordships but rather incorporated them (Wickham 2009, 444; 2016, 78-161). Thus, the individual lords were nominally under the authority of the king or emperor. However, in practice they often had comprehensive control in the lands they owned as long as they agreed to assist with tax collection and war. Moreover, lords and kings also acquired ownership over local ecclesiastical institutions, such as bishoprics and monasteries, which had been used to govern after the earlier collapse of public authority (Moore 2000, 87; Melville 2016, 48; Wickham 2016, 110-16). This resulted in a patchwork of governance where one lord controlled some cities, monasteries, and villages in an area, while another lord might control cities or monasteries located in-between the first lord's holdings (see Figure 2 later for an illustration). At the same time, both lords might nominally be subject to a king, who again directly owned some villages or cities in the area. Thus, one should not think of medieval lordships or kingdoms as clearly territorially defined unites.

How did cities fit into this patchwork? Non-autonomous cities were at the mercy of the lord, abbot, or king that owned them. Either they were ruled by the abbot, lord or bishop that resided in the city itself, or the ruler had local representatives that governed. Ownership changed via inheritance or transactions. For instance, lords could be given control over a city as a reward for providing military service to the emperor. Fully autonomous cities acted much like a lordship – they were nominally under the authority of the king or emperor, but in practice they made most decisions themselves. However, kings, emperor and lords did not leave even autonomous cities

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entirely to their own devices. Like lords, self-governing cities were often expected to help raise taxes and troops for war. As a result, they often became the basis for local state-building efforts. In some cases, kings and emperors also called parliaments or assemblies with representatives from autonomous cities and local lords to facilitate coordination. A similar relationship existed between lordships and cities that had a more modest degree of self-government. Here rulers also called assemblies with city representatives to address important issues facing the lordship, such as war (Escher and Hirschmann 2005; Prak 2018). Thus, it was unlikely to see parliaments being called without self-governing cities existing first (Cox and Dincecco 2021). In the following section, I argue that autocratic successions facilitated transitions to urban self-government. Next, I discuss i) what factors within the city made this association plausible, ii) what factors in the lordship or kingdom that strengthened the relationship, and finally, iii) what contextual factors that played a role.

Succession and urban self-government

Urban localities had to time their attempt at gaining self-government, as seizing it without the consent of the overlord was a risky strategy for a city. Lords had incentive to punish such behavior harshly to deter other cities from following suit. Consequently, it was only the largest cities that could establish self-government by using this strategy. For example, after the assassination of the Archbishop of Mainz by some citizens, the city was razed by the emperor and lost all of its previous privileges (Arnold 2009, 171-174). Another example is the Staufen Emperor Frederick Barbarossa's ferocious campaign in the 1160s against the North Italian cities that had declared their independence and taken up arms against their former lord, including the razing to the ground of Milan in 1162 (Freed 2016, 276-293). Thus, cities were likely to seek out

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opportune moments of lordly weakness during which they could attain or bargain for self-government. Successions were just such moments.

The effect of successions on urban self-government works through two paths. First, via bargaining related to the establishment of new power-sharing arrangements under the successor. Second, via the absence of state power following an increase in political instability after the death of a lord. The first is what Blockmans (1989, 740) terms the *bargaining metropoles* path, and the second is what he terms the *autonomous metropoles* path. Both imply that it is more likely that a city transitions to self-government after a succession.

Unless the lord is strong enough to rule without the help of the elite, power-sharing was needed to ensure reliable support. Power-sharing also reassures the supporting elite that they will have access to the spoils of rule (Svolik 2012; de Mesquita et al. 2003). Thus, lords had to work out a power-sharing arrangement that guaranteed backing. In many cases, such arrangements were upset by the death of a lord. When the lord dies, the remaining elites have the potential for great ruin as well as great reward. In terms of risks, they can lose privileged positions or fiefs that they held under the previous ruler. If they end up supporting the wrong side, they could even lose their lives. On the other hand, if they support the right candidate, they may improve their access to rents. If the circumstances are right, one of them could become the new ruler (Kokkonen and Sundell 2020, 6; Kokkonen and Møller 2020, 7). For example, after the death of the Margrave Dietrich of Meissen in 1221, the only heir was his underage son. Consequently, his brother-in-law, Ludwig IV, hurried to secure the support of local notables and administrators for his designation as a guardian for the successor. He subsequently enjoyed the spoils of rule, while his sister, the mother of the successor, was sidelined (Lyon 2017, 208).

In general, a lord had no interest in conceding power-sharing unless other elites could credibly threaten a rebellion or a coup (Boix and Svolik 2013, 300). However, as the death of a lord calls previous power-sharing arrangements into question, the appointed successor could not be certain that previous supporters would stand behind his or her candidature (Kokkonen and Sundell 2020, 10; Kokkonen and Møller 2020, 7). Thus, successions made the threat of defection to another candidate more credible. This meant that successions provided good opportunities for cities to bargain for self-government, which could be used to protect their interests under the future lord (Johanek 2000, 308). Conversely, granting urban self-government reassured the lord that the cities would not try to revolt or defect to another potential successor.

The transfer of power from one lord to the next is generally associated with an increase in political instability. It makes coup attempts more likely, as potential rulers fear a civil war with other claimants. The absence of a ruler may also motivate other lordships to engage in war to seize additional territory. Finally, coup attempts or uncertainty about the most likely successor may set off a civil war among claimants (Tullock 1987; Brownlee 2007; Acharya and Lee 2019; Kokkonen and Sundell 2020; Blainey 1988; Holsti 1991). The resulting political instability made it easier for cities to establish self-government, as lords were preoccupied with keeping a hold on their newly gained power. Sometimes it also made it a necessity when lords failed to secure trade-routes and regulate transactions. For instance, at the close of the fifteenth century the region of Piedmont was suffering from endemic political instability, which impelled the city of Turin to increase its autonomy and impose its administration and laws on the surrounding countryside (Blockmans 1989, 740-743).

Based on the arguments above, I put forth the following empirical expectation:

Cities are more likely to achieve self-government following a succession

When can cities transition?

While successions are expected to generally increase the probability of cities attaining self-government, not all cities are able to take advantage of the situation. In the following I discuss the factors that decide how likely the above empirical expectation is.

City characteristics

Even if cities demand self-government, it is not evident that the lord will be willing to grant it. New rulers have an interest in appearing strong as it will benefit them in future negotiations (Kokkonen and Sundell 2020, 438; Tullock 1987). In the context under study, this implies that a city must be able to credibly threaten its ruler for him or her to acquiesce. Furthermore, periods of political instability may provide an opportune moment to introduce self-government. Yet, if a lord could simply march on a city and rescind its self-rule once he or she was secure in power, then it might not be prudent to do so.

The first factor I examine is therefore city walls. Walled cities had become common in large parts of the former Carolingian empire, as its dissolution was followed first by a series of Viking raids, and then by a number of internal power struggles beginning with the investiture dispute in 1075 (Keen 1999, 166-171). Walled cities could credibly threaten with defection to another ruler and introduce self-rule during times of state collapse, as a lord would have to invest considerable resources and time to besiege and conquer the city (Bachrach 1994, 119). Urban fortifications were generally hard to take by force, and they enabled a small number of citizens to

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repel much larger groups of attackers (Tracy 2000). Thus, walled cities had a much higher cost of subjugation.[1]

For example, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and his grandson and successor Frederick II spent much of their reign and resources trying, ultimately in vain, to regain control of the walled and independent cities of Northern Italy (Engel and Holtz 1989, 159-223). During the Albigensian Crusade, Simon de Montfort laid siege to the walled city of Toulouse. However, he did not have enough men to cover the city's expansive walls, and in the end, he had to retreat (Bradbury 1992, 135). As new lords often had a precarious grip on power, it is unlikely that they were willing to risk the resources. Conversely, unwalled cities were relatively easy to take via military means, should the need arise. Due to their low cost of subjugation, these cities were easy to threaten. *Thus, I expect that successions primarily lead to political concessions in walled cities.*

City walls were, however, expensive. The second factor I explore is therefore economic development. Wealthy cities could afford to build expansive walls, hire mercenaries, or finance a standing militia (Blockmans 1989, 740). As a result, lords would be much more hesitant to march on a wealthy city that has declared self-government compared to a poor one.

There are two additional reasons to suspect that richer cities can take advantage of successions even if they do not necessarily invest in walls or soldiers. First, rulers often had

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[1] As Sun Tzu (2007, Chp. 3) writes in the art of war: "Thus the highest form of generalship is to balk the enemy's plans; the next best is to prevent the junction of the enemy's forces; the next in order is to attack the enemy's army in the field; and the worst policy of all is to besiege walled cities."

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limited access to credit, and one of the few places that could finance war or dynastic ambitions were wealthy cities (Stasavage 2011). Thus, rulers were more dependent on the goodwill of rich cities, which greatly improved their bargaining position following a succession. Second, in line with the literature on modernization and democratization (e.g. Lipset 1959; Inglehart and Welzel 2010), scholars have argued that the formation of proto-industries, such as textile and metal production, increased the demand for self-governing institutions, as the new economic actors called for institutions that could enforce contracts and protect against lordly abuse (Abramson and Boix 2019, 798; Pirenne 1925). Good examples are the trading and industrial cities in the lower Vistula Basin in Poland that established wide-reaching self-government and severely curtailed the power of Polish rulers (Blockmans 1989, 739). Lords were less keen on losing control over wealthy cities, as they were important sources of capital (Stasavage 2007). *Overall, however, I expect that successions have a larger impact in wealthier cities.*

The third and final city factor is access to finance. In medieval Europe merchants were the most important source of credit (Stasavage 2007, 498-499). Having financiers in the city made it easier to borrow for wall construction and outfitting soldiers. In addition, it gave cities that hosted merchants a better bargaining position vis-a-vis their lords. Merchants who lent money for construction or bargaining had good reasons to do so, as they often became the dominant political group on the resulting city council (Stasavage 2007, 499; Waley 1989; Kowaleski 1984; Fryde 1964). *As a result, I expect that successions have a larger impact in cities with access to finance.*

Lordship characteristics

However, rulers were not powerless in the face of demands for self-government. They often anticipated the weakened position of the regime after their death or resignation, and established

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rules of succession that attempted to curb the ability of other elites to leverage successions for gain. Clear succession rules also convince regime members that the lord's rule will persist, which discourages them from making their own plans for the succession (Herz 1952). Inheritance customs thus had implications for both the short- and long-term position of rulers during successions.

Medieval European inheritance customs contained a strong gender bias, as male heirs (or male relatives) were usually preferred over female heirs. This was especially true in the former Carolingian Empire, which I study in this article. As a result, when rulers died without any male heir there was often disagreement on who should inherit the throne. In many cases this led to protracted wars over the succession. For example, Henry Raspe, Landgrave of Thuringia, died childless in 1247. Several claimants to his possessions appeared as there was no clear rule for who should inherit, which resulted in a 17-year long war. Thus, the absence of a male heir when a ruler dies greatly increases the probability of unrest. This weakens the bargaining position of whoever managed to attain control after a succession without a male heir (Acharya and Lee 2019, 2176; Kokkonen and Sundell 2014). *I therefore expect that successions that occur in the absence of a male heir are more likely to foster urban self-government.*

In the long run, too many heirs could also prove a problem for a lordship. The primary succession rule in the period and region under study was partible inheritance, i.e., the division of properties among a lord's sons. Partible inheritance meant that power-sharing arrangements were most seriously threatened in lordly families that successively had produced many heirs. The repeated division of property that followed each succession meant that the family's power would be diluted over time unless one family member turned on the others and attempted to gain control over his siblings' properties (Sharma 2015, 164). The fate of the Duchy of Silesia

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illustrates this. In 1178 it was divided in two, into four by 1261, and into seventeen by 1316 (Arnold 2009, 241). These problems were not easily solved; if a ruler had too many heirs there was not enough property go around; if a ruler had no heirs, the family line risked dying out (Hurwich 1993).

The alternative succession rule of primogeniture (the right of the eldest son to inherit the patrimony) left the ruler in a comparatively stronger position (see Kokkonen and Sundell 2014). However, German nobles did generally not see the practice as fair and would not widely adopt primogeniture before the seventeenth century (Hurwich 1993, 699). In lordships where the designated heir is in a weakened economic and territorial position due to a large historical supply of heirs, it can be expected that successions create additional uncertainty that might trigger coups or wars. Moreover, as the territorial holdings of the designated heir has dwindled, they also become more dependent on support from cities. An example of this dynamic can be seen in Poland after King Boleslaw divided his lands between his five sons in 1138. Later kings had to extend judicial and financial prerogatives to several cities to secure their succession and ward of competitors for the throne (Blockmans 1989, 742-743). *Thus, it can be expected that successions are more likely to produce urban self-government in lordships with a history of producing many heirs.*

Rulers had other tools besides inheritance customs. They could also develop local administration that obtained information on the wealth and intentions of cities, thus giving rulers the upper hand in tax negotiations (Ahmed and Stasavage 2020). The presence of administrators consequently resulted in higher revenue, which allowed rulers to build stronger militaries, consolidate their territory, and obtain better strategic marriages. This allowed rulers to ignore the

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demand of assemblies and cities (Cantoni et al. 2021). *Therefore, I expect that successions do not lead to urban self-government in lordships with high state capacity.*

The final lordship characteristic I consider are proto-parliamentary institutions. Although assemblies were usually the consequence of autonomous cities (Dincecco and Onorato 2020, 19-20; van Zanden et al. 2012, 838), they could also prove beneficial for the transition chances of other non-autonomous cities. Assemblies allowed cities, clergy, and magnates who opposed the ruler to coordinate, which might lead to additional regime instability during a succession. In addition, once an assembly had been called to settle a succession, concessions would be expected to accept the new heir at future succession-related assemblies. *Consequently, it can be expected that urban self-government is more likely in the wake of successions where an assembly was called.*

Institutional supply

City and lordship characteristics thus seem well-poised to explain transitions into urban self-government. However, many polities in the Middle East or Eastern Asia also suffered from disputed successions without cities acquiring self-government. The same can be said for many modern autocracies. This was not because medieval European cities were more economically powerful or more affected by conflict (see e.g. Goldewijk et al. 2010; Bosker et al. 2013). Why then were successions related to urban political autonomy in medieval Europe and not elsewhere? I argue that this empirical puzzle might be explained by looking at differences in the supply of viable institutions.

Explanations of contemporary regime transitions often focus on factors that either change the costs associated with transitions for rulers or alter the likelihood that their subjects make

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noticeable demands for new institutions. For instance, increasing levels of economic development may empower the population to call for democracy and reduce the cost of introducing democracy for rulers (e.g. Lipset 1959; Boix 2011). Thus, the balance of power between ruler and societal groups determines when regime transitions take place. However, this does not tell us why institutions, such as democracy or in this case urban self-government, are in demand in some periods and places and not in others. The specific demand for self-government was contingent on a supply of viable institutions that was present in medieval Europe but have been absent in many other places.

When do institutions enter the supply? First, they must be conceived of. Think, for instance, of modern representative democracy which require competitive elections, political representation, and broad suffrage. For many centuries, agitators of change had not thought of combining these elements, and thus democracy was never in demand. However, soon after the French Revolutions, democratization attempts were widespread in Europe (Weyland 2010). Second, they must be visible and have demonstrated their success recently. When instigators of transitions are dissatisfied with the current institutions and seek to introduce new ones, they do not evaluate the entire universe of conceivable institutions. Rather, they examine external organizations for institutional solutions that promise an easy solve to current challenges. As a result, instigators focus on institutions that are near, easy to see, and have proven successful in recent times (Weyland 2008, 291-292; Gilovich et al. 2002).

Self-government entered the institutional supply of European townspeople in two phases. The first phase began with the Catholic Cluniac reform movement of the eleventh century. The goal of the reform movement, which originated in the French city of Cluny, was to curtail unreformed clerical government by attaining ecclesiastical autonomy. The movement quickly

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gathered followers and associated self-governing monasteries spread across Western Europe. The idea that self-government secured responsible office-holding was subsequently taken up by townspeople who, in the first instance, wanted to reform their local churches (Doucette and Møller 2021; Wilson 2016, 513). As a result, self-government entered the minds of urban reformers and it became possible to demand when the balance of power between ruler and townspeople shifted.

The second phase began with the emergence of representation and consent within the Catholic Church around 1200 (Møller 2018). These new practices were quickly spread by the Dominican monastic order. The order was created in 1216 to better combat heresy and during the next hundred years it spread across urban Europe. While the order was not the first Church institution to employ representation, it had the most pervasive practices of representative self-government in medieval Europe.[2] From the most remote monastery to its general chapter, the order was governed by elected representatives. The organizational success of the order was noticed across Europe, and townspeople and rulers brought in Dominican monks to rewrite constitutions and improve government (Doucette 2021; Lawrence 1994, 166-181; Casagrande 2013, 195; Prudlo 2010, 1278). Thus, self-government based on representatives became part of the institutional supply of townspeople.

The widespread and quick success of the Cluniac and Dominican monastic movements ensured that their institutional innovations were visible to European townspeople. Cities that were located near monasteries could observe their organizational practices and be inspired by their ideas (Doucette 2021). This has implications for the relationship between successions and urban

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[2] In addition, the Dominicans and the Cluniacs were very active in city politics, which greatly increased the exposure of townspeople to their institutions (see Doucette 2021; Doucette and Møller 2021).

regime change. *I expect that townspeople in the proximity of Cluniac or Dominican monasteries were more likely to observe and be inspired by self-governing (representative) institutions, and thus that it would be demanded during successions.*

An additional implication of the above argument is that other self-governing cities could serve as inspiration. Therefore, a similar stronger relationship between successions and transitions to self-government should be visible in cities that are located in the vicinity of another politically autonomous city.

Data and empirical strategy

Cities are more likely to attempt to gain self-government when they perceive their ruler as weak. However, weak rulers are also more likely to be deposed. Thus, a simple regression of self-government on succession would most likely produce biased results. I therefore follow Kokkonen and Sundell (2020), who use deaths due to old age, disease, and accidents as variation in succession to study its impact on war. I argue that such deaths are less likely to be dependent on prior city development as well. While an attempt to achieve self-government may increase the risk that a ruler dies in battle trying to retake the city, it is unlikely to be related with death due to disease or accident.

City self-government and lordly ownership

To measure self-government, I rely on a systematic survey of 459 cities in Western Germany, Eastern France, Southern Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Northern Switzerland: *Die Urbanen Zentren des Hohen und Späteren Mittelalters* (Escher and Hirschmann 2005). It covers the period 1000 to 1400. For each city, the survey details when the city first established a self-governing body. In practice, I search for the first mention of a council or assembly comprised of

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citizens that are tasked with governing the city. I measure urban autonomy using a dummy that is equal to 1 if such a body is present, and 0 otherwise. For many small cities data is too sparse to code when self-government was terminated (see discussion in Stasavage 2014, 343; Bosker et al. 2013). However, I was able to code information on the degree of post-transition political autonomy across cities. Specifically, I code an indicator that distinguishes between three levels of self-government. The most autonomous are the so-called *reichsstadt* or *freie stadt,* which are only subject to the Emperor and thus in practice almost entirely self-government (see Johanek 2000). The least autonomous are the cities that introduce a citizen assembly but later is either acquired by a new lord, becomes the host of a lord, or hosts a new lordly castle. Finally, there are cities in between, which are neither entirely self-governing nor subject to extensive lordly control. I later employ these distinctions to examine whether different transitions (e.g. cities with walls or without) matter for the degree of subsequent political control. As discussed earlier, it was not possible to code the method of selecting council members and the share of the citizenry that could participate in the selection process.

Furthermore, the systematic survey describes the lordly ownership of each city over time. Unfortunately, for several cities, it was not possible to reliably determine who owned it.[3] These cities are excluded from the sample. Data on ownership is primarily missing in smaller towns and villages. However, even with the missing data my dataset still has better coverage of smaller cities than pre-existing datasets (see Stasavage 2014; Bosker et al. 2013). One might still worry that their exclusion might bias my findings. I therefore conduct a robustness check where I assign ownership to the remaining cities based on spatial interpolation and rerun my main

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[3] For example, for some cities, multiple lords claimed ownership during the same period. Other cities simply had not information on ownership.

models using the full sample. Reassuringly, my results do not change (see Table A9 in the Online Appendix). I end up with 293 cities for which reliable data were available on city government, lordly ownership, and successions. 234 of these cities establish self-government before 1400. Below, Figure 1 plots the location and timing of self-government of the cities in my sample.

Does this dataset provide a more precise measure of lordly ownership? To check if this is the case, I compare the commonly used Euratlas (Nüssli and Nüssli 2008, see, for instance, Dittmar and Meisenzahl 2020) to my own coding of lordly ownership in 1300. The black borders in Figure 2 demarcate sovereign political units according to the Euratlas. Each symbol represents a city in the dataset. The symbol and the coloring of the symbol represent which lord had nominal control in 1300 (according to Escher and Hirschman 2005). There is a general overlap between political units in the Euratlas and similar colored symbols. However, the shortcomings of map-based ownership assignment are also clear, as many cities, especially near the borders, have a different lordly owner than the surrounding cities. Thus, my data provides an improved measure of lordly ownership.

Figure 1: Cities and self-government
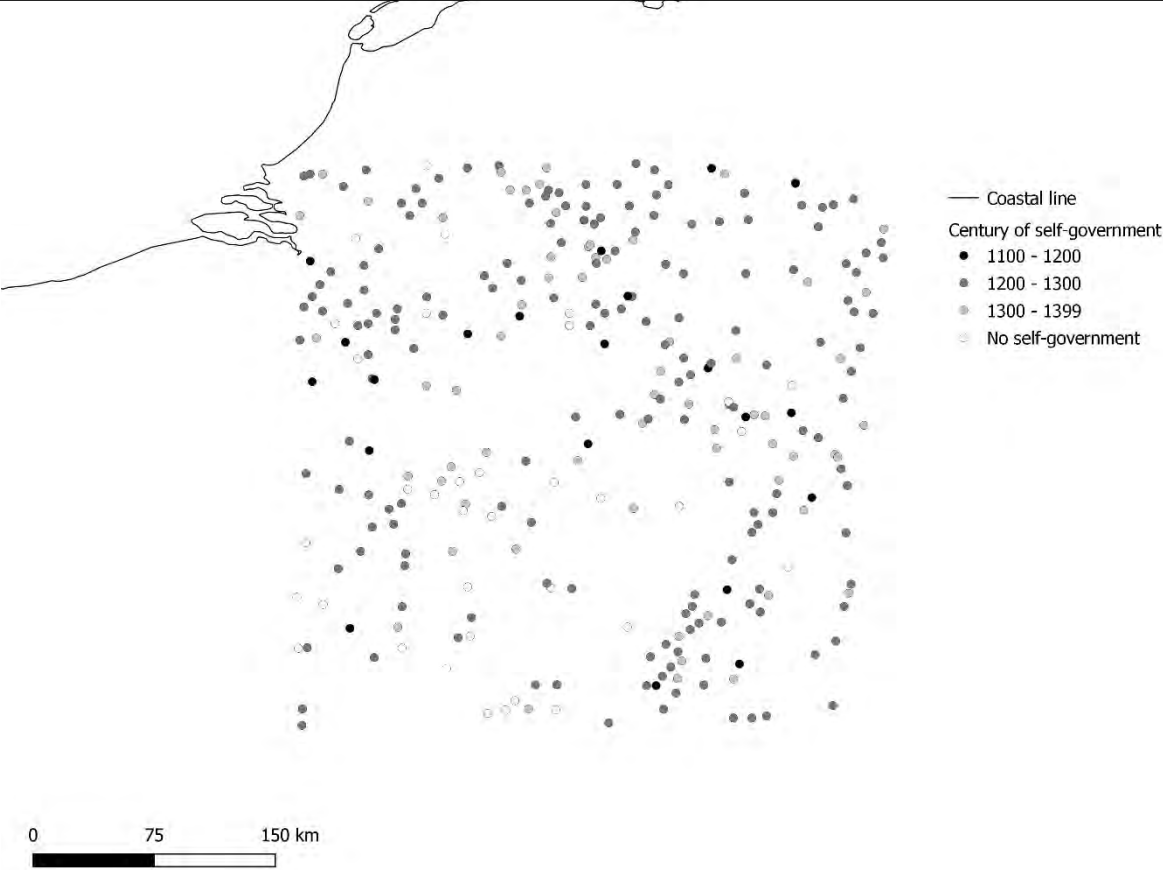
Figure 2: Cities and lordly ownership in 1300
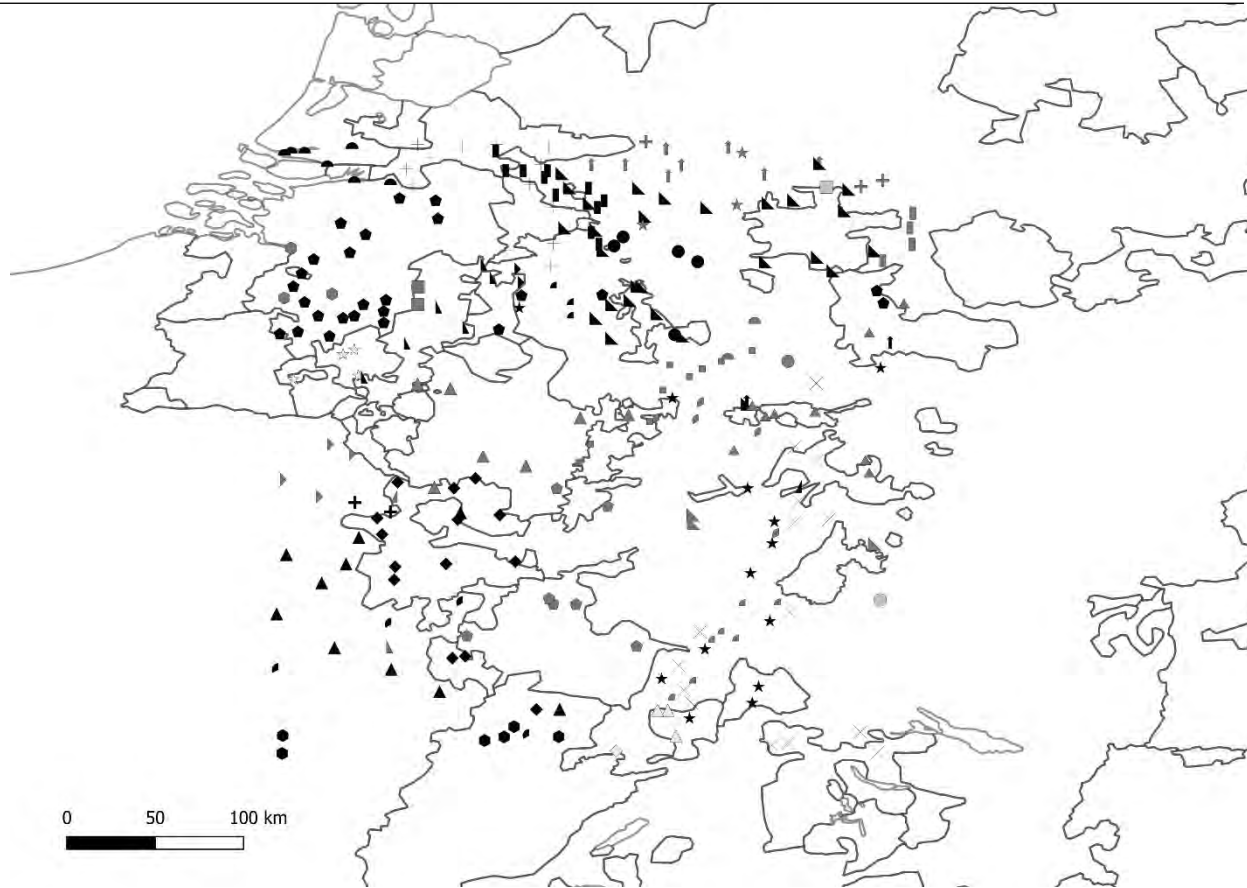
Note: Gray lines are different lordships in 1300 according to the Euratlas. Lordly ownership is denoted using both symbol and hue. Thus, for instance, black circles are cities owned by a different lord than gray circles.

Successions

The 293 cities are linked to 43 lordly houses and 7 episcopal seats.[4] To determine the year of succession, the year of death, and the reason for dying, I use the *Medieval Lands* database, which is based on a number of primary and secondary sources (Cawley 2006). If there was no indication that a ruler abdicated, died in battle, or was deposed, I code the ruler as having died

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[4] Note that due to a lack of heirs the title of some houses was transferred to other houses. Thus, the ruler of one house may in fact have been ruler of multiple houses for some periods.

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from natural causes. For episcopal seats, I used the *Catholic-Hierarchy* website (Cheney 2013), which has information on the ascension and descension of all bishops in my sample. In the few instances where information was missing from either the Medieval Lands or the Catholic-Hierarchy database, it was supplemented with information from additional sources, which are described in Table A0 in the Online Appendix.

In total, there are 315 lordly successions due to natural causes and 64 lordly successions due to other reasons such as battles and depositions. There are 158 episcopal successions resulting from natural deaths and 20 episcopal successions can be attributed to other reasons. In Table A1 in the Online Appendix, I present the various lay and episcopal lordships, including the first and last year they appear in the sample. In my main analyses I look at secular lordships, as episcopal successions differed fundamentally from secular ones (see the "Placebo test using episcopal successions" section of the Online Appendix).

Conditional factors

I have formulated several empirical expectations concerning what city characteristics determine the impact of successions on self-government. First, I construct an indicator for the presence of defensive walls. It is equal to 1 in city-years where a wall exists, and 0 in years where the city was unwalled. Second, I need a measure of city wealth. Cantoni and Yuchtman (2014) have shown that the number of markets in a city is a strong predictor of population size and future population growth. The first wealth indicator is therefore the number of markets established in a city-year. The presence of guilds suggest that a city has well-organized artisans (Ogilvie 2019). Therefore, I construct a measure of the number of guilds present in a city-year, which serves as my second wealth indicator. Abramson and Boix (2019) contend that the development of proto-industries in the form of metal and textile production was particularly important for later urban

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development. Thus, my third wealth indicator is equal to 1 if a city has either a cloth or a metal production site in a year, and 0 otherwise. For some analyses I use a wealth index based on standardized versions of the three variables. Finally, I proxy access to finance using an indicator for the presence of a money lender or bank in a city-year. The above variables are coded based on Escher and Hirschmann (2005).

Using Cawley (2006), I also construct measures for the current and prior supply of male heirs. I focus on male heirs as most lordships only allowed sons to inherit (Lyon 2017, 33, 49). To capture if a lordship currently has an available heir, I use an indicator that is equal to 1 in ruler-years where a male heir is present, and 0 otherwise. To capture the historical heir supply, I use the log of the sum of the number of sons alive at the death of all previous rulers within a lordship plus one.[5] This variable is used to test whether prior partitions of lordly properties condition the effect of successions.[6] Escher and Hirschmann (2005) provide an overview of all assemblies in each lordship wherein a city was represented. Based on this, I construct an indicator that is equal to 1 in all years between the first and last recorded assembly in each lordship, and 0 otherwise. The book also has information on the presence of lordly administrators in each town, which is meant to capture state building. I use this to construct an indicator that is equal to 1 in years where an administrator appointed by a lord is present in a city, and 0 otherwise.

To test the empirical expectation concerning the supply of institutions, I construct a measure of proximity to a Cluniac or Dominican monastery based on data for their spread over time (from Doucette and Møller 2021; Doucette 2021). The indicator measures the distance (in

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[5] The log is used as the distribution is skewed.
[6] Due to missing data, I cannot code whether some lordships used other inheritance customs, such as primogeniture.

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km) from the city center to the nearest monastery in each year.[7] Finally, I use data on what cities are self-governing to construct a similar measure of proximity to other self-governing cities.

Control variables

Although natural deaths are expected to be unrelated to prior city self-government, I still employ a battery of control variables. First, as the quality of data is generally correlated with time, I use year fixed effects. This also controls for common shocks that might impact both cities and lords, such as the Black Death. I also employ city fixed effects as lordly control and city development may be related to location-specific characteristics such as access to trade routes.

Due to the coding procedure used to score a succession as a natural death, it is conceivable that some politically motivated deaths are included as natural. To adjust for this possibility, I include a series of controls that are related to the stability and durability of a lord's rule. This can also be seen as a way of getting at whether natural deaths capture variation in succession that is not dependent on prior lordly strength. If the estimate for the impact of succession on city self-government changes notably with the inclusion of these controls, it would suggest that the measure for natural death is correlated with ruler strength.

Specifically, I control for the age of the ruler, the length of his or her tenure, and the age at ascension. All variables are based on Cawley (2006), which was described above. If natural death is related to longevity, it is likely that the offspring and potential heirs of elder rulers are older when they assume power, which might temper their proclivity for conflict. Similarly, rulers with longer tenures accumulate power over time, which could be passed on to their offspring (Abramson and Rivera 2016). Lords that ascend to power as children or at a very young age may

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[7] The variable is equal to the maximum observed distance for all cities prior to the emergence of the first monastery.

have to fight the relative, who have been ruling in their stead, for power. Finally, different lordly houses might have differing traditions that could affect their longevity and their willingness to grant liberties to their holdings. Thus, I include a dummy for each house.

As a further test of my assumption that natural deaths are unrelated to prior city development, I include controls for city characteristics in an additional model. As before, my assumption would be suspect if their inclusion substantially alters the succession estimate.

Like rulers, cities may accumulate power over time. Thus, I control for the number of centuries since the city was first settled. It has also been argued that wealthier and more trade-prone cities are more likely to achieve self-government (Pirenne 1925; Abramson and Boix 2019). I therefore include controls for the three wealth indicators presented above. Castles served as basis for lordly territorial claims and their exercise of authority over cities (Lyon 2017, 17,20). Consequently, I control for the presence of a castle in a city-year. All these variables are based on Escher and Hirschman (2005). Finally, I include lordship-specific time trends, which account for possible unmeasured slow-moving social or cultural factors that are specific for each lordship. I present descriptive statistics for all variables in Table 1. See Table A0 in the Online Appendix, for additional information on the sources of all variables presented in the article.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation
Outcome		
Transition	0.007	0.081
Main independent variable		
Natural death	0.028	0.166
City characteristics		
Wall [(c)]	0.384	0.486
Markets [(c)]	0.691	0.844
Guilds [(c)]	0.050	0.379
Industry [(c)]	0.086	0.280
Wealth index	-0.105	0.455
Access to finance	0.038	0.190
Lordship characteristics		
Male heir	0.812	0.391
Prior heir supply	2.094	0.818
Assembly	0.095	0.293
Local state capacity	0.243	0.429
Institutional supply		
Dist. Cluniac/Dominican monastery	101.5	108.1
Dist. nearest autonomous city	59.49	90.85
Controls		
Ruler age	38.50	15.34
Ruler age at ascension	21.87	11.46
Ruler tenure	16.61	13.13
Centuries since city settlement	5.545	4.390
Castle	0.593	0.491

Note: Based on sample from specification used in Table 2 model 5. 21826 observations.
[(c)] indicates that the variable is also in the control set. Distance is in km.

Specification

In my analyses I estimate variants of the following specification:

$$transition_{ilt} = \beta_1 natural_{lt-1} + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \epsilon_{ilt}$$

where $transition_{ilt}$ is an indicator equal to 1 in years where a city gains self-government, and equal to 0 in years where it is under autocratic control. After a city achieves self-government, it drops out of the sample. β_1 is the quantity of interest as it gives the impact of a natural death in year t-1 on the likelihood that a city gains self-government in year t. Succession is lagged one year as a new successor must be appointed before a privilege, such as self-government, can be officially confirmed[8]. α_i and γ_t are city fixed effects, and year fixed effects, respectively. Additional models include controls for lordly characteristics and lordship fixed effects ($\theta X_{l,t-1}$ + δ_l), city characteristics ($\pi X_{i,t-1}$), and lordship-specific time trends ($\delta_l * t$). My strategy relies on the assumption that natural deaths are unrelated to prior changes in city development. To examine whether this is plausible, I test if within-lordship-changes in city characteristics can predict when lords die a natural death. If city characteristics predict natural deaths, then my assumption in unlikely to hold. Reassuringly, I find no evidence that this is the case. For these results, see Table A8 in the Online Appendix. Models that test what factors condition the impact of successions also include the constituent term for the conditional factor ($\beta_2 X_{ilt-1}$) and its interaction with natural deaths ($\beta_3(natural_{lt-1} \text{ x } X_{ilt-1})$).

Given the number of fixed effects (and for interpret-ability), all models are fitted with OLS, based on a linear probability model. Farbmacher and Tauchmann (2021) show that the use

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[8] The coding criteria for transitions to self-government focus on the first mention of a city council. In most cases, these are based on charters from the lordship or emperor, which are only issued after the bargaining over the new successor has taken place. Thus, the one-year lag.

of OLS with unit fixed effects can sometimes be problematic when examining non-repeated outcomes. Thus, I do two things. First, I estimate logit models without city fixed effects. Second, I follow Cantoni et al. (2021) and estimate OLS models that exclude city fixed effects and include a control for the first observed value of each explanatory variable. None of these approaches change my results substantively (see Table A2 and A3 in the Online Appendix). Standard errors are clustered at the city level (clustering on lordship does not alter the standard errors markedly, see Table A5 in the Online Appendix).

Results

To provide a systematic test of my argument, I estimate the likelihood of transitioning to city self-government using OLS. The results are in presented in Table 2. Looking across the models, I find support for my contention that successions increase the likelihood that cities achieve self-government. Specifically, cities are around 1.1 percentage points more likely to achieve self-government in the year after the natural death of a ruler. This result is substantively unaltered by the inclusion of city and year fixed effects in Model 2. Furthermore, employing lordship fixed effects, controls for lordly and city characteristics, and lordship specific time trends in Model 3, 4, and 5 does not change this estimate substantially. This indicates that the natural death of a ruler does not seem to be related to the stability of the lordship or the economic and political situation of the city. Is the impact qualitatively important? The average likelihood of transitioning to self-government in a city-years is 0.7 percentage points. This increases to 1.9 percentage points in the year after the natural death of a ruler: The probability more than doubles following a death. Overall, there is thus strong support for my hypothesis.

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Table 2: Succession and city self-government

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Natural death$_{t-1}$	0.011*	0.012*	0.012*	0.012*	0.012*
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
City and year FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lordship FE	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lordly characteristics	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
City characteristics	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Lordship time trends	No	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	26143	26143	25933	25909	25909

Note: Estimated using OLS. Standard errors clustered by city in parenthesis: $^+ p<0.1$, $^* p<0.05$, $^{**} p<0.01$, $^{***} p<0.001$

One might worry that townsmen anticipate lordly deaths, for instance, due to prolonged periods of illness. Alternatively, one could worry that my measure of natural deaths includes more endogenous deaths related to battle or assassinations. To investigate whether this could be the case, I rerun Model 4 using different lags and leads of the natural death of a ruler. These estimates are shown in Figure 3. If the natural death of a ruler was preceded by regime instability, either because the ruler was sick for a long time leading up to his or her death, or because the measure includes instability-driven deaths, I would expect to see an increase in the likelihood of transitioning to self-government before a natural death. Figure 3 clearly shows that the future natural deaths of rulers have no discernible relationship with city self-government. A slight increase can be observed in the year the ruler died, and this is followed by a larger increase in the year after.

Figure 3: Leads and lags of natural death
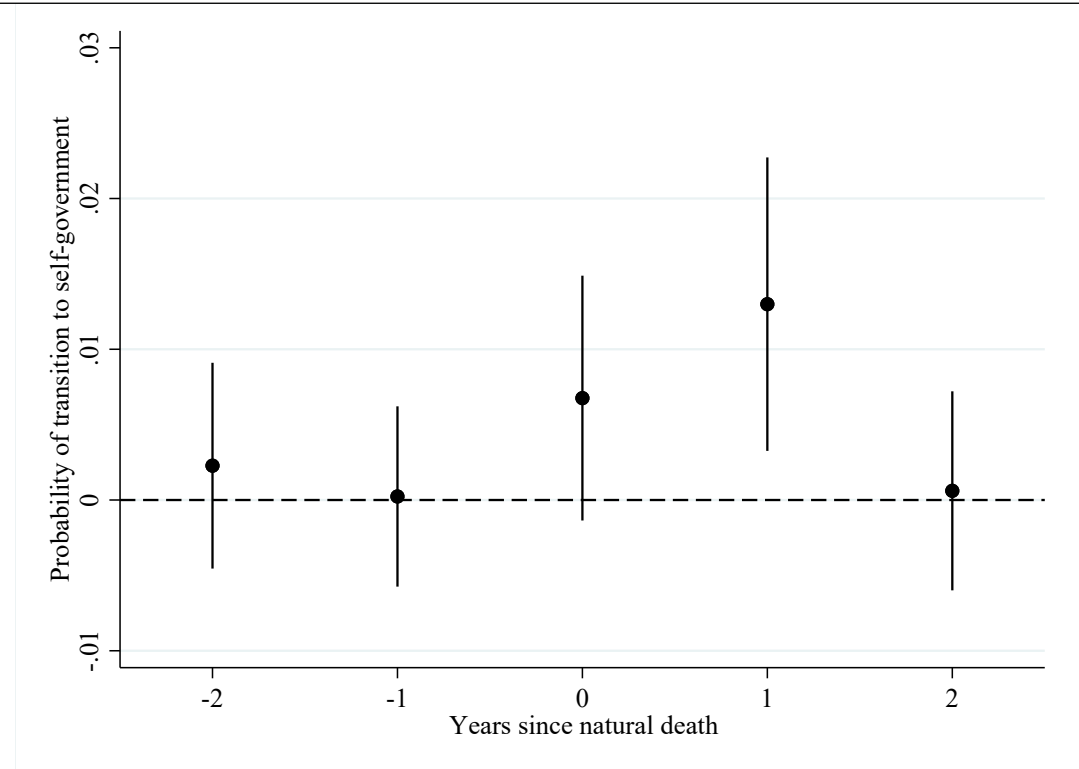
Note: Based on Model 4 from Table 4. 95% confidence intervals.

I also consider if the findings are specific for this dataset. I therefore replicate my

findings across a broader (but smaller) sample of Western European cities. Stasavage (2014) has

annualized data on the presence of self-government in 169 cities across Western Europe.[9] This I

combine with data from Acharya and Lee (2019), who has data on natural deaths in lordships

across NUTS2 regions between 1000 and 1500. I assign each city to a lord based on its location

within NUTS2 regions. This is not as precise as the data used for the main analysis. Yet, it serves

as a fair proxy for lordly ownership. Table 3 presents the results. I find a positive and significant

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[9] Note that Stasavage (2014) uses harsher criteria for coding self-government. The cities in his sample are thus only coded as self-governing if a city council (chosen by the citizens themselves) have political control over a major policy areas such as defense, economics and judicial affairs.

impact of natural deaths across all models. The average probability of transitioning to self-government in a city-year in this sample is 0.1%. This increases to around 0.5% following the natural death of a ruler, echoing the size of the impact in my main sample. Thus, my findings do not appear to be specific for the area I study.

**Table 3:** Succession and city self-government using a Western European sample

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Natural death$_{t-1}$	0.0033*	0.0038*	0.0037*	0.0037*	0.0033*
	(0.0016)	(0.0017)	(0.0017)	(0.0017)	(0.0016)
City and year FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lordship FE	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lordly characteristics	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
City characteristics	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Lordship time trends	No	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	26143	26143	25933	25909	25909

Note: Estimated using OLS. Standard errors clustered by city in parenthesis: $^+$ $p<0.1$, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$. Controls: (city) lagged population size and (lordship) tenure.

One could object that the associations I present above are a consequence of ruler tenure, which is not related to successions per se. If, for instance, cities had an easier time taking advantage of newly ascended rulers, a higher likelihood of transitioning would also be observed after a succession. To take this alternative explanation into account, I conduct a placebo test. The appointment of episcopal successors was notably less dependent on the candidates' relations to cities but rather to the clergy itself, the Emperor, or nearby lords (de Mesquita 2000; Edelstein 1975; Bouchard 1977; Feine 1964, 380-84; Reuter 1995; Jaeger 1983). Thus, episcopal successions are 1) less likely to provide a favorable bargaining position for cities under their domain, and 2) less likely to foster local political instability. As a result, urban self-government should be unrelated to the natural deaths of rulers in cities under episcopal control. Supporting this, Table A10 in the Online Appendix shows that episcopal deaths are not correlated with urban self-government.

In the analyses presented above I have treated self-government as an either-or category. Historically, however, citizen assemblies varied both with regards to their inclusiveness and with regards to their degree of autonomy vis-a-vis their overlord (Wahl 2016; Stasavage 2014). Using my measure of autonomy, I predict the degree of self-government after a transition using each covariate. Figure 4 presents the findings. Cities that transitioned after a natural death does not appear to have a higher or lower degree of self-government. In fact, the primary predictors seem to be heir stock and state capacity.

Figure 4: What determines the post-transition degree of self-government?

Predicting the degree of self-government
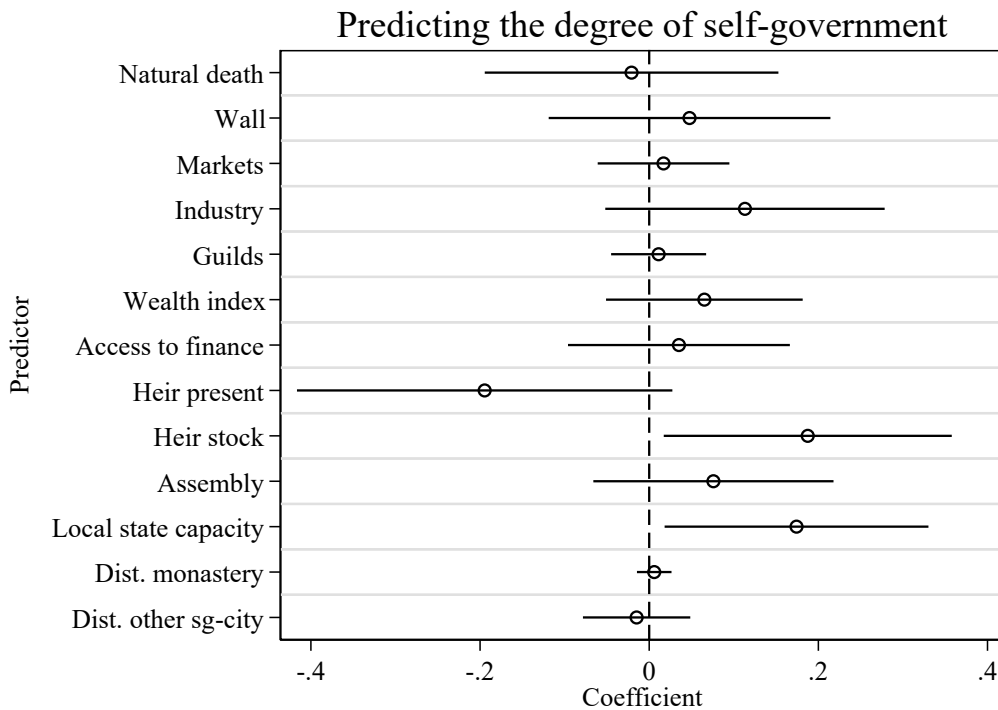
Note: Estimated using OLS. Control for latitude and longitude of city and century fixed effects. 95% confidence intervals.

An alternative explanation for my finding might be that conflict drove both succession (if the natural death indicator miscodes battle-related deaths) and transitions to self-government (see

e.g. Becker et al. 2020). Including a control for conflict exposure might introduce post-treatment bias (because successions have been shown to increase the likelihood of civil wars, see Kokkonen and Sundell 2020), I therefore leave it out of my main models. However, in Table A6 in the Online Appendix, I provide evidence that controlling for conflict exposure does not change my findings. I do not account for all the conditional factors later included in my analysis in Table 2. However, including these as controls do not change the impact of natural deaths (in fact it is strengthened, see Table A7 in the Online Appendix).

There is a risk of measurement error due to the historical nature of the data. As a robustness check, I therefore rerun my main model using a five-year panel. The outcome is a dummy equal to 1 if a city gains self-government within a five-year period, while the main explanatory variable is an indicator for the natural death of a ruler within a five-year period. The results are shown in Table A4 in the Online Appendix. Across all models, I find a positive significant impact of natural ruler death on city self-government. The estimates are comparable to the findings from Table 2.

Are the results sensitive to the inclusion of a specific lordship or time period? To answer this, I rerun Model 4 excluding each lordship or decade in turn. In the resulting 43 and 41 regressions, the estimate for the natural death of a ruler remains significant at the 0.05 level in all except one regression (which is significant at the 0.1 level). Thus, my results do not seem to be driven by a specific lordship or time period. In Figure A1 in the Online Appendix, I present the distribution of t-statistics for the coefficient of natural ruler death.

Finally, I consider if self-government really had positive implications for, among other things, urban development (e.g. Bosker et al. 2013). In the "Consequences of urban self-government" section of the Online Appendix, I discuss and test whether cities with political

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autonomy exhibited more economic activity and provided better public services than non-autonomous cities. I find empirical support for both propositions. However, I also show that successions did not directly lead to additional increased economic activity beyond their impact on transitions.

The conditional relationship between successions and self-government

As hinted at in Figure 4, not all cities had the same opportunity to attain self-government following a succession. In this subsection I test my expectations concerning the factors that decide whether the above empirical expectation is likely.
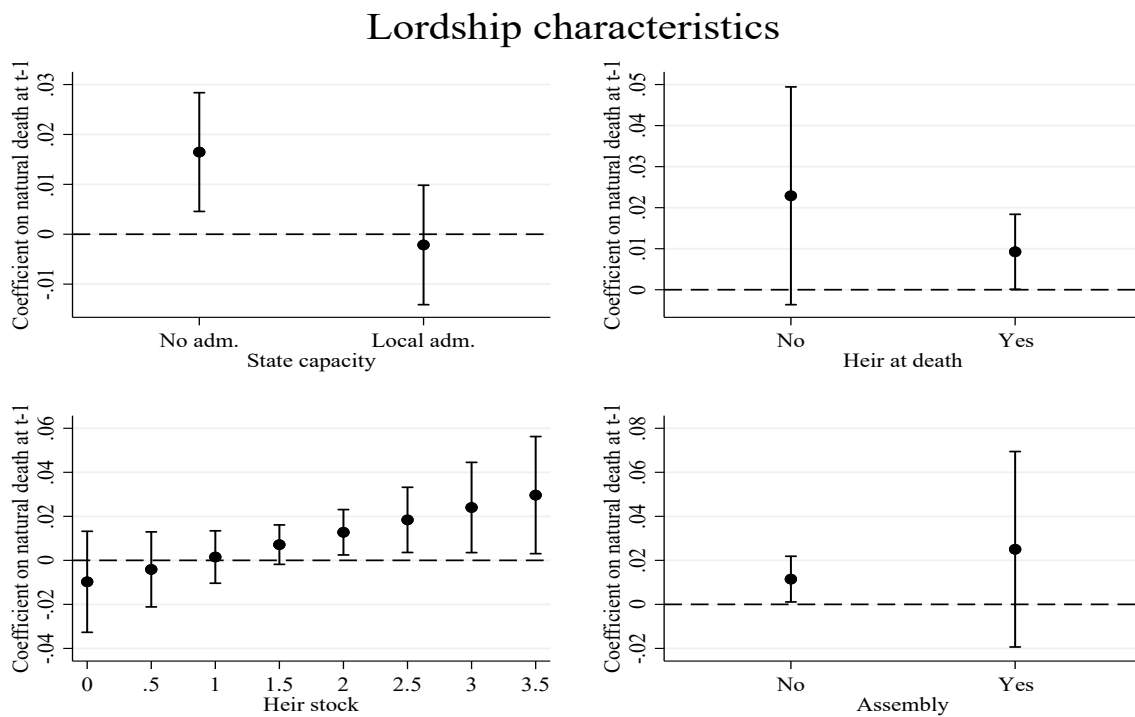
Figure 5: Differences between cities
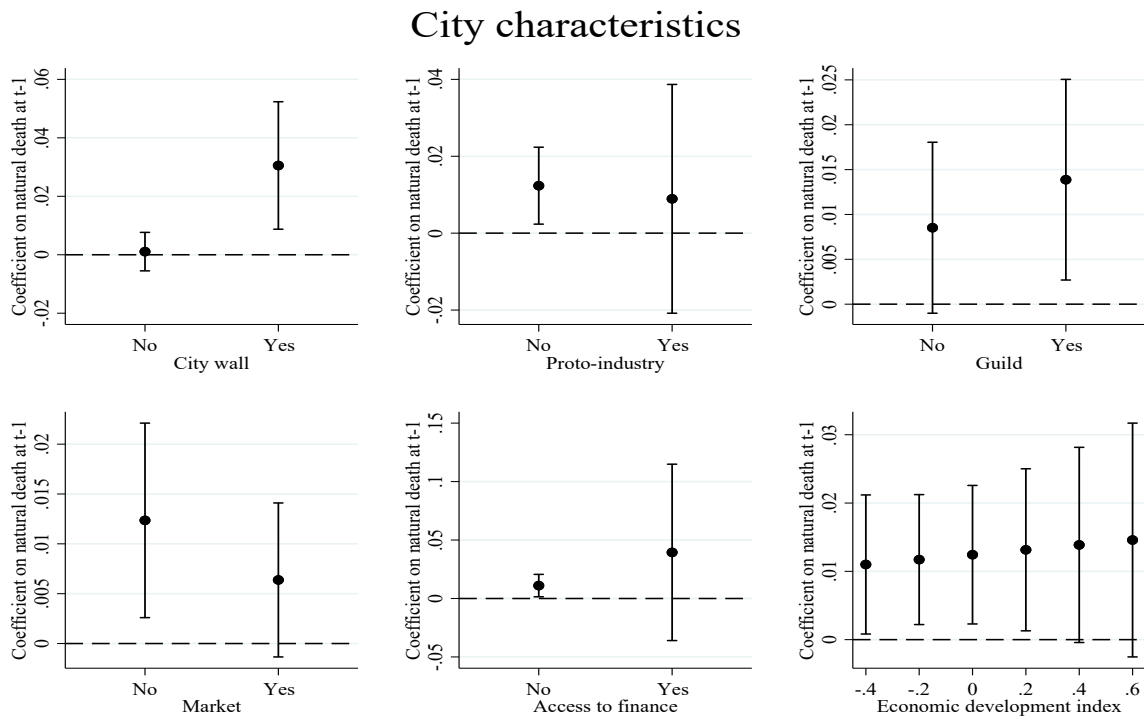
City characteristics

Note: Estimated using OLS. Based on Model 4 in Table 2. 95% confidence intervals. Controls: castle, centuries since settlement, markets, proto-industry, guilds, ruler age and ascension age, and ruler tenure. Other wealth controls are excluded when examining the impact of one wealth indicator. When natural death is interacted with a continuous conditional factor, the impact of deaths is depicted across the 10th to the 90th percentile of the continuous factor.

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First, I examine what characteristics that might improve a city's bargaining position vis-à-vis its ruler. Figure 5 reports the empirical results. There is a clear conditional impact of walls. Successions have no impact in unwalled cities, whereas the impact of successions is strengthened in walled cities. In addition, it appears that the wealth of a city and access to finance only plays a minor role in determining the impact of successions.
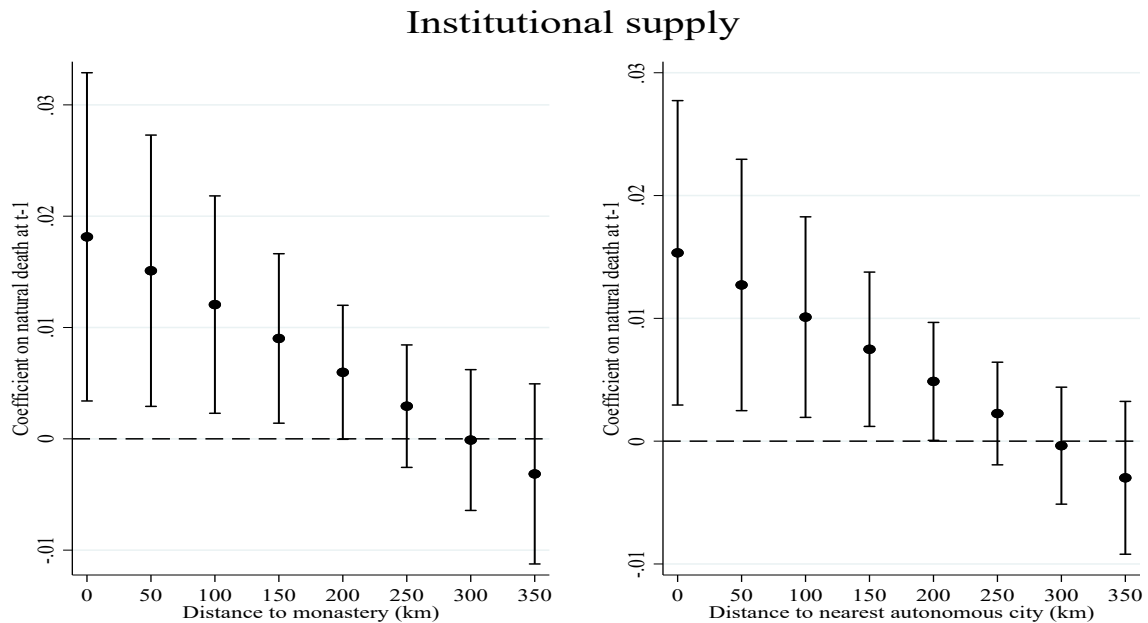
Figure 6: Differences between lordships

Note: Estimated using OLS. Based on Model 4 in Table 2. 95% confidence intervals. Controls: castle, centuries since settlement, markets, proto-industry, guilds, ruler age and ascension age, and ruler tenure. When natural death is interacted with a continuous conditional factor, the impact of deaths is depicted across the 10th to the 90th percentile of the continuous factor.

Second, I consider the opposite (i.e., that differences between lordships determine the bargaining position of cities). Figure 6 shows the findings. As expected, lordships with higher state capacity are better at blocking transitions to self-government. There is thus no relationship between

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natural deaths and self-government if a ruler has a local administrator in a city. Successions appear to play a lesser role in lordships with an heir, although the difference is not significant. Looking at heir stock, the expected positive relationship is visible: natural deaths have a stronger impact in lordships with a history of producing many heirs (and thus, a history of partitions and diluted ownership). In addition, the existence of an assembly increases the impact of successions. Again, however, the difference is not significant.

Figure 7: Differences in institutional supply

Note: Estimated using OLS. Based on Model 4 in Table 2. 95% confidence intervals. Controls: castle, centuries since settlement, markets, proto-industry, guilds, ruler age and ascension age, and ruler tenure. When natural death is interacted with a continuous conditional factor, the impact of deaths is depicted across the 10th to the 90th percentile of the continuous factor.

Finally, I explore if differences in institutional supply affects the impact of successions in Figure 7. The impact of natural deaths decrease as the distance to the nearest Cluniac or Dominican monastery increases. The death of a ruler increases the likelihood of transitioning to self-government by 1.8 percentage points in cities with a monastery. Conversely, once cities are

around 200 km or more from a monastery there is no impact of successions. This indicates that exposure to Cluniac or Dominican self-governing institutions determine whether successions affect urban regime change, thus helping to explain the uniquely European relationship between the two. The relationship is similar for the distance to other self-governing cities.

The relationship between successions and urban political autonomy varies across several characteristics. However, it might also change over time, as, for instance, new military technologies make it harder for lords to defeat cities (e.g. Boix 2015). In Figure A2 in the Online Appendix, I find that the relationship grows stronger over time.

Conclusion

Among others, Ertman (1997) and Tilly (1990) have argued that the presence of urban self-governing units prior to the onset of geopolitical pressure was crucial for its effects on state building and regime development. Specifically, in areas that had a medieval legacy of urban self-government, conflict forced local rulers to bargain in their state and war making efforts, which in turn paved the way for non-patrimonial state apparatuses and constitutional government. Conversely, in areas that lacked this medieval legacy, conflict fostered patrimonialism and absolutism. In this article, I document that autocratic successions have a positive relationship with transitions to urban self-government.

The positive impact of successions is, however, conditional on the strength of societal groups vis-a-vis rulers: when cities can defend themselves with walls, or when rulers have low state capacity, or when rulers are constrained by a prior history of splitting the lordship, it is more likely that successions lead to urban self-government. In addition, the relationship between

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the death of a ruler and urban political autonomy is also dependent on the presence of similar

institutions from which to be inspired. These results speak to the likelihood of seeing a similar

relationship between successions and local political autonomy in contemporary autocracies.

Modern autocrats, generally, do not split their territory among their offspring. Advances in

military technology have made it harder for localities to resist an offensive by the state. Thus, a

weaker relationship should be expected. However, mismanaged successions can still provide an

opening for the opposition to democratize (e.g. Treisman 2020).

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