

The Persistence of Female Political Power in Africa*

Siwan Anderson[†] Sophia Du Plessis[‡] Sahar Parsa[§] James A. Robinson[¶]

May 8, 2025

Abstract

Research on female political representation has tended to overlook the traditional role of women as leaders across many societies. Our study aims to address this gap by investigating the enduring influence of historical female political leadership on contemporary formal political representation in Africa. We test for this persistence by compiling two original datasets: one detailing female political leadership in precolonial societies and another on current female representation in local elections. Our findings indicate that ethnic groups historically allowing women in leadership roles in politics do tend to have a higher proportion of elected female representatives in today's formal local political institutions. We also observe that institutional, rather than economic, factors significantly shape the traditional political influence of women. Moreover, in accordance with historical accounts, we uncover evidence of a reversal of female political power due to institutional changes enforced by colonial powers.

*For exceptional research assistance in collecting and analysing the data we would like to thank: Daniel Jaramillo, Carlos Perez-Cavero, Carlos Molina, Sam Boysel, Jesse McDevitt-Irwin, Kara Chyung, Eliza Dillaway, Evan Fantozzi, Muhammet Gulec, Claire Haldeman, Brandon Katz, Adam Montenegro, Will Norris, Rachel Walhert, Lauren Witt, Cameron Bing, Maarten Mantel, Hellen Venganai, and Robert Nyakuwa. We are grateful for comments from seminar participants at the University of Southern California, University of Maryland, Paris School of Economics, American University, SDSU, University of Namur, UT Austin, UC Santa Barbara, Geneva Graduate Institute, Monash University, and CEPR. This project was funded by the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) initiative of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

[†]University of British Columbia: siwan.anderson@ubc.ca

[‡]Stellenbosch University: sophia@sun.ac.za

[§]New York University: sahar.parsa@nyu.edu

[¶]University of Chicago: jamesrobinson@uchicago.edu

1 Introduction

There is an ongoing international commitment to increasing women's political representation.¹ The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) upholds women's right to participate in public life, while the Beijing Platform for Action calls for the removal of barriers to equal representation. The Millennium Development Goals measure progress towards gender equality in part by the proportion of women in parliamentary seats.

Often, the problem of the lack of female political representation is discussed as if it were uniform in the world. But this is obviously not the case. In contemporary times, Africa, in particular, stands out. Women have served as president, vice president, or prime minister in: Angola, Benin, Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, the Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Rwanda leads the world with 64% of legislators in national parliament (the lower or single house) being women, followed by other African nations such as: South Africa (45%); Namibia (41%); Ethiopia (41%) Senegal (41%); Angola (40%) and Mozambique (40%) (this is in comparison with the United States at 29%).²

What explains this record? In this paper, we argue that one root of this success story in Africa is that historically women were able to wield political power in many African societies and did so more frequently and powerfully than in other parts of the world. In precolonial Africa, while women typically did not have equal rights to political power, there were many situations where they did have access. While there is significant variation across the continent, African history is replete with well-known female monarchs, chiefs, and constitutional leaders. Their exploits are celebrated and constitute a preponderant feature of African historical traditions. Very early legends include female pharaohs, such as Hatshepsut and Nefertiti, who ruled ancient Egypt, and the Queen Candaces of Ethiopia in the second century ([Achebe \(2020\)](#)). In parts of the Sahel, in modern Niger and Chad, and in Hausaland in northern Nigeria, women founded cities, led migrations, and conquered kingdoms. In West Africa, among the Asante and other Akan peoples, Queen Mothers had parallel leadership roles to men ([Rattray \(1923\)](#), [Busia \(1951\)](#), [Aidoo \(1977\)](#), [Farrar \(1997\)](#), [Stoeltje \(1997\)](#)). They had their own royal courts, councils, and armies.³ In the 'dual-

¹There are 111 countries to date with constitutional, electoral, or legislated political party quotas for women. Refer to: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/database>

²Refer to World Bank Open Data (<https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sg-gen-parl-zs>).

³The importance of female title holders, Queen Mothers and Sisters, is widespread throughout the state systems of Africa, including Benin, Buganda, Borno, Swazi, Lobedu and Daura ([Tripp \(2000\)](#), [Cohen \(1977\)](#), [Moagi and Mtombeni \(2020\)](#), [Sargent](#)

sex political system', practiced by groups such as Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria, each sex manages its own affairs, has its own kinship institutions, age grades, and secret and title societies ([Steady \(2011\)](#), [Okonjo \(1976\)](#), [Avila-Uribe et al. \(2024\)](#)). Several female leaders were important signatories to treaties with colonists ([Lebeuf \(1960\)](#), [Steady \(2011\)](#)).⁴

To investigate the hypothesis that there is a connection between the traditional and contemporary political representation of women in Africa, we built two original data sets.⁵ The first measures the presence of females in leadership roles in the political institutions for precolonial societies across the continent. The second collects contemporary outcome data of female representation in elections at local administrative levels.

Based on our sample, our primary empirical objective is to assess whether regions with a higher historical prevalence of traditional female political leadership also exhibit greater female representation in local political institutions today. We find a robust and significant persistence of female political power across our sample, even after accounting for country-fixed effects, historical covariates, and various geographic variables. Quantitatively, we estimate a 13% increase in the average contemporary female political representation in regions characterised by traditional female political influence. Additionally, we compare contemporary female representation between pairs of neighboring ethnic groups, where one traditionally permits female political leaders and the other does not, confirming a significant positive influence (of a similar magnitude) from traditional to contemporary female political power.

Our core findings underscore a persistent influence of female political power through Africa's periods of colonization and post-colonialism. However, we also use our data to inquire as to whether, as many scholars have argued, colonization disrupted this persistence. Historical accounts posit that colonization weakened the political power of women via three central forces: indirect rule, the influence of religion, either Christianity in the form of missionaries or via the spread of Islam, and the institutional disruption caused by the creation of arbitrary national boundaries (as argued in [Michalopoulos and Papaioannou \(2016\)](#)). We test these conjectures and find evidence of the destructive consequences of colonialism for the persistence of women's indigenous political power. The most important channel which can explain this reversal in female political power is that the political institutions created

([1991](#))).

⁴Female leadership is also known among some indigenous tribes of the Americas ([MacLeod \(1923\)](#), [Fiske \(1991\)](#)), Oceania ([Gunson \(1987\)](#)), Asia ([Reid \(1988\)](#)) and even in the Islamic world ([Mernissi \(1993\)](#), [Khan \(2017\)](#)).

⁵Neither information on traditional nor contemporary female political representation at the local level is readily available for Africa.

by the colonial powers, particularly the British, were handed to men to control. We also find that the political representation of women in ethnicities that were split by colonial borders is less likely to persist. Our empirical findings for the enduring influence of historical female leadership are all the more remarkable given the disruptions brought by colonialism to these institutions. We find little evidence for an independent role for Christian religious institutions (missions), or the spread of Islam.

Beyond investigating the long-term endurance of female power, we also explore historical factors associated with women's pre-colonial political representation. Our analysis indicates that the extent to which women engaged in different economic activities does not drive historical female political representation. Instead, it is precolonial political institutions that predominantly determine women's historical involvement in governance. In particular, and in contrast to a large literature stemming from [Engels \(1902\)](#), we find a strong positive correlation between political centralization and female representation. Moreover, while we do not find that cultural factors such as matrilineality or matrilocality, often argued to be key predictors of female empowerment, to be correlated with the propensity of women to hold political power, we do find them to be important sources of heterogeneity. In particular, we find that matrilineality is a significant positive factor for female political power in centralized states. Matrilocality, on the other hand, is important in smaller sized polities, petty chiefdoms.

We propose the following interpretation of these interaction results. In small scale African societies kinship competed with other institutions to allocate political power, including age grades and various forms of councils. A common pattern when centralization took place, however, was for one lineage or clan to assume a salient position, for example the Bushong clan in the Kuba state ([Vansina \(1978\)](#)), or the Oyoko clan as the Asante emerged ([Wilks \(1972\)](#)). When this salient kinship system was matrilineal, this plausibly heightened the influence of females in the political hierarchy. With respect to matrilocality, no large states are in fact matrilocal in the Ethnographic Atlas. Thus our finding is mostly comparing petty chieftaincies to less centralized societies. We conjecture that a limited level of centralization helps women manifest the greater solidarity matrilocality creates in terms of political representation.

Our findings contribute to a number of literatures. Economic research focused on contemporary female representation in politics tends to neglect the traditional leadership role of women across various societies. Much of this research focuses on the

impacts of introducing female political quotas.⁶ Other work uses natural experiments to examine contemporary representation of women and its consequences.⁷

More related, [Boserup \(1970\)](#) advanced the famous hypothesis that female economic empowerment was negatively related to the presence of plough agriculture and [Alesina et al. \(2013\)](#) provided econometric evidence to support this. They also show that the presence of the plough is negatively correlated with female political representation. This specific argument is unlikely to explain the variation we study, since plough use is minimal anywhere in Sub-Saharan Africa. As with Boserup's original work much current research is less focused on female political representation, but rather on general social and economic empowerment. [Becker \(2023\)](#), for example, finds that descendants of pastoral societies face greater constraints on women's mobility. Other studies highlight the impact of matrilineal inheritance ([La Ferrara \(2007\)](#), [Lowes \(2024\)](#), [Robinson and Gottlieb \(2019\)](#)), matrilocality ([Bau \(2021\)](#)), polygyny ([Dalton and Leung \(2014\)](#)), and bride price ([Ashraf et al. \(2020\)](#)) on contemporary behaviors. We examine several of these factors in our analysis, for example finding no correlation between polygyny and historical female representation, though we do find the subtle results on matrilineality and matrilocality discussed above.

The origins of female political power in Africa have been investigated outside of economics. Several scholars have emphasized economic factors such as the productive role of women in agriculture or their central role in trade ([O'Barr and Firmin-Sellers \(1995\)](#), [Sudarkasa \(1986\)](#), [Berger and White \(1999\)](#)). Particular emphasis has been placed on economic dualities in which women monopolize some activities, such as the cultivation of particular crops (see [Udry \(1996\)](#) and [Goheen \(1996\)](#) for examples). Such dualities even appear in the creation myths of some African peoples ([Isichei \(1977\)](#)).

Many of the mechanisms which have been recently studied have been discussed by feminist scholars who examine the global history and emergence of patriarchy. These include matrilineal inheritance, matrilocal residence, the supernatural power of women, but also inheritance of property, the introduction of the plough, women's groups and sources of organizational power, warfare, and the rise of the state. There is not much agreement on the importance of any of these mechanisms. Lerner, for example, argues that "while matrilineality... confers certain rights and privileges on women, decision-making power within the kinship group nevertheless rests with

⁶See, for example: [Chattopadhyay and Duflo \(2004\)](#), [Besley et al. \(2017\)](#), [Beaman et al. \(2009\)](#), [Beaman et al. \(2012\)](#), [Bhavnani \(2009\)](#), [Clayton \(2015\)](#), [Beath et al. \(2013\)](#), [Ban and Rao \(2008\)](#) and [Bardhan et al. \(2010\)](#), and [Jayachandran \(2015\)](#).

⁷See, for example: [Tripp \(2015\)](#), [Dube and Harish \(2020\)](#), and [Labonne et al. \(2021\)](#).

elder males” and concludes that “matrilineal descent does not indicate matriarchy” ([Lerner, 1986](#), 30). Others argue that “Matrilineality is necessary and indispensable” ([Goettner-Abendroth, 2023](#), 7), but not sufficient to create a matriarchal society. In addition, what is required is “women’s economic power of distribution” ([Goettner-Abendroth, 2023](#), 7). Another widespread argument, developed by [Sanday \(1976\)](#), [Sanday \(1981\)](#) and [Kalu \(1991\)](#), is that women’s political power is rooted in the presence of female deities and priestesses.⁸ Women play key ritual roles throughout the continent not just as priestesses, but also healers, and spirit mediums.⁹ Many religious institutions, such as the Nyabingi cult in Uganda and Rwanda or the spirit mediums among the Shona, wielded substantial political power and had women in prominent positions ([Ogbomo \(2005\)](#)). The capacity and effectiveness of women’s organisations may take several forms, like female age sets ([Ogbomo \(2005\)](#)), and various collective institutions such as associations of daughters ([Jell-Bahlsen \(2008\)](#)).¹⁰ Finally, Engels’ argument that the emergence of states led to the ultimate disempowerment of women is one of the most widely discussed ([Wiesner-Hanks, 2021](#)), even this has been challenged as a generalization, for example by [Gough \(1972\)](#).

The little systematic quantitative evidence there is on these hypotheses has been conducted by cross-cultural anthropologists, basing their work primarily on the Murdock Ethnographic Atlas or the Standard Cross Cultural Sample. In her study of the determinants of women’s political power in preindustrial societies, Low concludes “The strongest pattern is that of descent rule” ([Low, 1992](#), 70) and she suggests that there is a correlation between matrilineality and “women’s ability to hold public office”. Her sample, taken from [Whyte \(1978\)](#), has only 9 societies in which women are coded as having political power however. Whyte himself provides evidence that “matrilineal descent and matrilocal residence are associated with certain benefits for women” ([Whyte, 1978](#), 134), but he does not detect significant correlates of women’s political representation. He does note, consistent with Engels’ claim, that the data is “fairly strong and consistent” in implying that “In cultures with complex political structures, women... have less domestic authority and less ritualized solidarity with other women” ([Whyte, 1978](#), 134). The evidence in [Schlegel \(1972](#), 71) is also consistent with this hypothesis.¹¹

Our main contribution to this research is to advance and test the original hypothesis that the contemporary representation of women is related to their holding of

⁸Women are often portrayed as equals in religious myths and creation stories, and many societies in Africa have a mixture of male and female deities in their traditions ([Asante and Mazama \(2009\)](#)).

⁹Refer to, for example, [Rattray \(1923\)](#), [Berger and White \(1999\)](#), and [Sargent \(1991\)](#)

¹⁰Associations like the Ogbegwa-Eyana in Iyede, Ikhuo-Idumu in Esanland, Nimm of Ekoi, and Ake in Benin Kingdom were instruments through which women strengthened their status ([Ogbomo \(2005\)](#)).

¹¹See, [Low \(2005\)](#), [Garfield et al. \(2019\)](#), and [Smith et al. \(2021\)](#) for recent overviews of this literature.

traditional political offices. Our dataset on historic representation is also far more extensive than any of these existing ethnographic datasets, which allows us to detect some interesting new patterns, particularly the interaction between political centralization and matrilineal inheritance.

Research has also focused on the role of missionaries and outside religions in explaining the decline in indigenous female political power ([Lebeuf \(1960\)](#), [Ottenberg \(1960\)](#)). An influential view is that both Islam and Christianity were highly patriarchal and played a significant role in suppressing women ([Ogbomo \(2005\)](#), [Berger and White \(1999\)](#)).¹² It is commonly argued that in the African societies which adopted Islam, women were precluded from taking part in any political decisions ([Lebeuf \(1960\)](#), [Sudarkasa \(1986\)](#)). For example, [Alou \(2009\)](#) points to the example of the Sarraounia which refers to a queen or female chief in the Hausa language. Organized Islamic jihads acted to disempower such leaders in the Hausa Empire.

It is also widely argued that under colonialism, women's political roles were often eliminated or overlooked ([Berger and White \(1999\)](#), [Asante and Mazama \(2009\)](#), [Moagi and Mtombeni \(2020\)](#), [Tripp \(2008\)](#)). Colonial administrative systems enabled European officials to govern through indigenous male authorities, formalizing male institutions while ignoring their female counterparts ([O'Barr and Firmin-Sellers \(1995\)](#)). A common assessment is that "Generally, the colonial administration ignored women" ([Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997](#), 62). It is argued that colonists seldom acknowledged the existence of female political structures, and the introduction of single-sex systems replaced dual-sex ones, consolidating power among men ([Hafkin and Bay \(1976\)](#)). Scholars emphasize how the British system of indirect rule, which was most explicit in its reliance on indigenous authorities, notably transformed men's political positions into salaried jobs while overlooking women's roles entirely. Colonial rulers, coming from societies that did not recognise women's collective political power as legitimate, perpetuated attitudes that contributed to the erosion of women's political influence, which on occasion was also deliberately dismantled (see ([Egharevba, 1968](#), 75-76) for an example from the Benin kingdom in Nigeria).

Another channel via which colonialism may have disrupted traditional female centered political institutions is via the arbitrary partition of African societies between different colonies. [Michalopoulos and Papaioannou \(2016\)](#) find this is associated with higher levels of conflict and this has been hypothesized to be a source of the po-

¹²Traditional religions can also be used against women. For example, superstitions, such as those against menstruation, giving birth to twins, or breech births, could result in women being mistreated ([Ogbomo \(2005\)](#)). Traditional religion has also been used against women in the form of witchcraft accusations ([Asante and Mazama \(2009\)](#)).

political disempowerment of women (see, for example [Whyte \(1978\)](#) and [Ross \(1986\)](#)).

Scholars do document instances where women maintained political authority throughout the colonial period.¹³ In some cases, indigenous political leadership in the post-colonial era continued its legacies through monarchies, chieftaincies, and the system of village, clan, and lineage headship. Certain rulers, particularly chiefs and paramount chiefs, were integrated into the postcolonial parliamentary framework, such as the House of Chiefs in certain nations, while others retained semi-autonomous chieftaincy systems. Field research suggests that many women leaders persist in exerting authority and power within their chiefdoms ([Steady \(2011\)](#)).

This persistence was at least partially due to the fact that, facing declining official status, women in several instances redirected their efforts towards anti-colonial activities ([Berger and White \(1999\)](#)). Across West and West Central Africa, women responded to colonial rule with overt hostility and rebellion, often defending their economic interests as traders. Some protested the loss of their political power during the colonial era and revived precolonial gender-based solidarities to organize resistance. Women engaged in strikes, nationalist movements, and in cases such as among the Igbo and in Guinea-Bissau, outright rebellion ([Archibong et al. \(2024\)](#)).

Our contribution to these literatures is to present the first econometric evidence of an actual reversal of women's political representation and to investigate empirically some of the salient hypotheses about why this may have happened.

Research on contemporary African female political participation in administrative levels below national legislators is scant. In many parts of Africa, particularly in the rural areas, traditional political structures govern alongside the more modern democratic institutions, though to our knowledge, no one has investigated systematically the connection between traditional and modern representation.

Our findings on persistence contribute to the broader literature on the influence of traditional political institutions on contemporary outcomes. A notable example is the work of [Michalopoulos and Papaioannou \(2013\)](#), which demonstrates a positive link between precolonial political complexity and current economic performance.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines our original data collection process. Section 3 investigates the historical correlates of precolonial female political representation. Section 4 presents our analysis of the long-term persistence of female political power. Section 5 explores the impact of colonization on this persistence. Finally, Section 6 concludes our findings.

¹³For example, the women chiefs of Sierra Leone as studied by [Day \(2012\)](#).

2 Data Collection

2.1 Historical Female Political Representation

To define our key variable of interest, whether ethnic groups traditionally allowed for women to fill political leadership positions, we rely on a question from the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS).¹⁴ The question of focus (variable SCCS.582) is: "Intermediate or local political leaders (non-kin group)". Possible answers are: Only males (1); Both sexes, males more powerful (2); Both sexes, females equally powerful (3). This question was one of many questions developed by [Whyte \(1978\)](#) to uncover the status of women (with regards to their position in several realms: religious, political, economic, domestic, or sexual) across 93 preindustrial societies. In accord with that work, we define an intermediate and/or local political leader as an individual who has some form of principal authority or control over multiple family groups within a given ethnic group. We expansively define a local or political leader as an individual who has authority or significant influence over members of the same ethnic group beyond a single familial lineage. Such leaders may include village paramount chiefs, monarchs, village headmen and women, or other individuals with formalized influence such as 'Queen Mothers'.

The Whyte sample, which includes information for our question of interest (SCCS.582) is comprised of 74 societies, and only 9 are from sub-Saharan Africa. (The original SCCS dataset only includes 34 ethnic groups (out of a total of 186) from sub-Saharan Africa.) Therefore, we endeavored to collect this information on our own for as many ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa as possible.

Our starting point was the set of 862 preindustrial societies listed in Murdock's (1967) Ethnographic Atlas (EA), of which 412 were located in sub-Saharan Africa. Murdock's Atlas includes information on a large set of traditional ethnic-level characteristics which measure various cultural, political, and economic practices. To this data set of 412 sub-Saharan African societies, we endeavoured to add information on whether or not a given society traditionally allowed women in formal political positions of leadership. For the 9 sub-Saharan African ethnic groups already included in the SCCS subsample of [Whyte \(1978\)](#), we kept their coding, and this served as the starting point of our data set to which we aimed to extend to all 412 sub-Saharan African groups covered in the EA.

For each ethnic group, we constructed a list of all relevant references. We first re-

¹⁴The SCCS is a dataset which describes a subset of 186 societies that also appear in Murdock's Ethnographic Atlas (EA). The SCCS contains a more extensive set of variables than EA.

turned to the original sources that Murdock used to code the Atlas and then to the Ethnographic Surveys of Africa.¹⁵ These latter surveys were put together by the International African Institute in London between 1945 and 1980 and contain summaries of information concerning all studied African ethnicities. The information most relevant for this project is their description of women's roles in traditional political structures. We also relied on hundreds of additional ethnographic studies on particular ethnic groups across Africa, compiled from various electronic and literary sources. These sources include both primary and secondary literary references on each culture, electronic databases such as the Human Relation Area Files (eHRAF), World Cultures, Anthropology Plus, and articles published in academic journals. A complete list of references used for the literature-based data collection is available on our website developed for this project.¹⁶

Our ethnographic coding process followed the methods outlined by Whyte (1978). We formed a gender-balanced team of 12 undergraduate research assistants. In an effort to mitigate bias associated with gendered interpretations of the primary sources, each research assistant is paired with another team member of the opposite sex. The sample was divided equally across each research assistant pair who, for each ethnic group assigned, were tasked with independently reading through the references listed in our bibliography and encoding a set of cultural characteristics on gender into standardized categorical variables. The research assistants in each pair then reconvened to resolve their independent codes into a single encoding. Where they are in agreement, that code is the final source-based code. Where they disagree, they try to come to an agreement based on the available information. Where the pair could not agree, the code is set to 'Ambiguous'.

A principal investigator and a lead research assistant (one female, one male) piloted the preliminary coding procedure and monitored the codings generated by the undergraduate research assistant team. Any codes requiring review were identified and discussed with the responsible undergraduate pair. A final systematic review of all the source-based codes was conducted to identify errors and maintain consistency.

Of the 412 sub-Saharan African ethnic groups in our sample derived from Murdock, 307 groups had some form of literary sources with information pertinent to the present study. To gather data for the remaining groups, we developed an electronic survey to mimic the variables coded in the literature-based phase. The remaining uncoded groups, along with a random 10% sub-sample of the groups already coded by

¹⁵These are the sources used by Moscona et al. (2020).

¹⁶See: <http://cournot.sun.ac.za/fppssa/index.html>

our undergraduate research assistants as a quality check, constitute a ‘survey-based’ sample. We identify potential survey respondents as individuals who can credibly comment on precolonial characteristics, including academic researchers, members of the ethnic group itself, and other cultural experts. Potential respondents were approached through an outreach campaign to complete the electronic survey of their own volition. Refer to Appendix A.1 for more details on this survey-based data collection process.

In the end, we compiled information on 320 ethnic groups (77% of the original 412 ethnic groups). For our key variables of interest, the possible answers that we code are: (i) No mention/missing information; (ii) Ambiguous; (iii) Absent; (iv) Present, no gender characteristics mentioned; (v) Males only; (vi) Equal or near equal influence by gender; (vii) Both genders but females hold more influence; (viii) Both genders but males hold more influence; (ix) Females only.

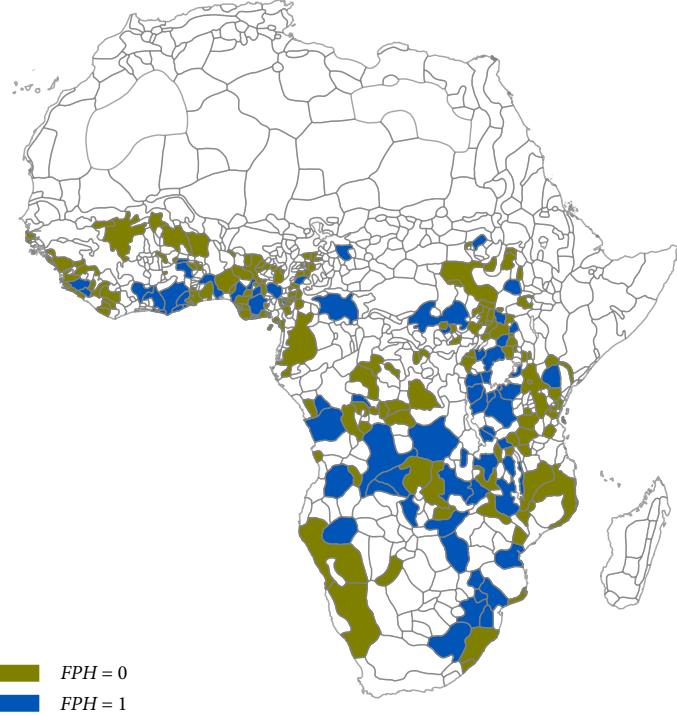
Categories (i), (iii), and (iv) are cases where either: there is no mention of political leadership; local political leadership is not present; or is present but no mention of gender (respectively). For all of these categories, we code our variable as undefined.

We created an indicator variable equal to one if our coded answers were: (vi) Equal or near equal influence by gender; (vii) Both genders but females hold more influence; (viii) Both genders but males hold more influence; (ix) Females only; and equal to zero if: (v) Males only.

We also left our indicator variable as undefined if: (ii) Ambiguous. The category ‘Ambiguous’ refers to when the two coders could not agree on how to interpret the texts.

Ultimately, we were able to definitively code our variable for 262 societies, since of the 320 observations, 46 were coded as Missing (i.e., (i), (iii), or (iv)) and 12 were coded as Ambiguous. Among the 262 societies, 31.3% allowed for women to fill political leadership positions. For the vast majority of these cases, category (viii) held true so that males tended to hold more influence. In these societies, the formally elected chief was typically a male member of the lineage, but the queen mother or another female title holder held significant power. This power ranged from holding the chief or “headman” position, consultation from the chief over most decisions, holding absolute authority over certain spheres of life, nominating the male leadership candidate, or serving if the appointed chief was still a child. In many cases, it was stated that the chief or official head was typically a male, but a female is also possible.

Figure 1: Traditional Female Leadership



Notes: Boundaries of ethnic homelands based on the Murdock Ethnographic Atlas. In blue: traditional ethnic homelands that allowed women to hold political leadership positions. In green: those that did not.

Figure 1 depicts the geographic distribution of traditional female political representation across the ethnic homelands from the Murdock map of Africa.

Our indicator variable does not capture the varying degrees of political power that female leaders were entitled to, but given the difficulties in interpreting the texts, we think this is the most reliable way to code our key variable of interest. It should, however, be mentioned that there is significant variation in the roles of women in traditional political institutions and the degree to which they could influence decisions for the society. For example, the Mamprusi people of northern Ghana and Togo are known to allow women to exercise political authority as village chiefs, or *pwaanaba*, translated roughly as “female king”. Female Mamprusi chiefs wear male clothing and must leave their current husband in order to ascend to the role ([Drucker-Brown \(1975\)](#)). Furthermore, the Mamprusi royalty enables the senior *pwaanaba* to exert considerable influence on political outcomes within the society and tasks her with military defense of the village by way of her charge to protect various sacred shrines. Some African peoples have designated special, yet limited, roles for women to preside over the society alongside a male majority. The Dilling of southern Sudan reserve a special position for at least one woman amongst the *ginadi*, clan elders who form the political leadership body of the group. She is expected to rep-

resent women of the society in political and judicial affairs ([Hawkesworth \(1932\)](#)). The Pimbwe of modern day Tanzania have traditionally been organized under a paramount chief, the *Mwene*, who administered subject villages alongside his wife, referred to as the queen mother. While this highest level of political authority within the group allowed women virtual gender equality, this was not necessarily the case with local leaders and village chiefs ([Willis \(1966\)](#)). There are also cases in which women were able to attain a limited leadership status in times of war or duress. While the paramount chief of the Xhosa of southern Africa had to be a member of the royal family, a woman might temporarily act as a regent over the entire group ([Soga \(2013\)](#)). In our dataset all these cases are coded as ones in which women did have traditional political leadership roles, though obviously there is a great deal of heterogeneity between them.

2.2 Contemporary Female Political Representation

Our key outcome variable of interest is contemporary local-level female political representation across Africa. This is also information which is not readily available, so we also embarked upon collecting this information ourselves.

The overarching objective of the data collection process was to collate data on female political representation at the local government level. The final data contains detailed information about winning candidates at various local administrative levels. Our key outcome variable of interest is defined as the proportion of seats won by females in each administrative division.

Our data collection methodology was to have research teams consisting of two post-graduate economics students from Stellenbosch University in South Africa (1 male, 1 female), who were tasked with sourcing local election data for all sub-Saharan African countries that hold subnational elections. Data was primarily sourced from the respective countries' electoral commissions. Other sources for obtaining election data included, *inter alia*; election reports by NGO's, researchers at other academic institutions, embassies, and numerous local government organizations. Where possible, the collected data was verified by a secondary source. All data entries were monitored and verified by the lead research assistant in order to minimize the probability of transcription errors.

If the researchers were certain that gender-identifying data could not be obtained, a two-fold methodology was adopted to determine the gender of winning candidates. Firstly, researchers worked in their teams to find gender-identifying information for each individual winning candidate. This was achieved by finding gender-specific

pronouns in relevant news articles, reports, and government statements that mentioned the winning candidate. If gender-specific pronouns could not be sourced, then researchers identified the winning candidates on a variety of social networks in order to identify the gender. The second approach to determining the gender of winning candidates was by making use of a gender-specific names database. Gender API (2017) provides a comprehensive, country-specific, names database which was used to query the gender of an individual using their first name as an identifier. Three countries (Benin, the Republic of the Congo, and Zambia) required the use of the Gender API (2017) to determine the gender of the winning candidates. Each individual name query returned the gender associated with the first name followed by an indication of the number of samples and a percentage specifying the accuracy of the result. Queries were localised by country to enhance the accuracy of results and a minimum accuracy percentage of 90% was selected to ensure the validity of the data.¹⁷

The scope of the study covered all of sub-Saharan Africa but we ended up with significant missing information. First, not all countries in Africa have elections at the local level. In addition to this, there are countries which have local elections, but the information is not available. There were substantial barriers to collecting the data. Many electoral commission (IEC) websites are either poorly designed, nonexistent, or hacked. Our repeated requests for help and/or access to information were not successful with many IEC officials. Poor record keeping and political instability further hindered the data collection process.

The final sample is comprised of 2768 local administrative units spanning 23 countries in Africa. The dates of the elections for which we were able to find data were between 2011 and 2016. Our key outcome variable of interest is the proportion of seats won by females in each administrative division. The average of this variable is 0.242 with a standard deviation of 0.174. [Figure 2](#) depicts the geographic variation in this data set. Refer to Appendix A.2.1 for a list of the elections covered in our data set and to our project website for information on how the below map was created and for more detailed information on the specific elections in each country.¹⁸

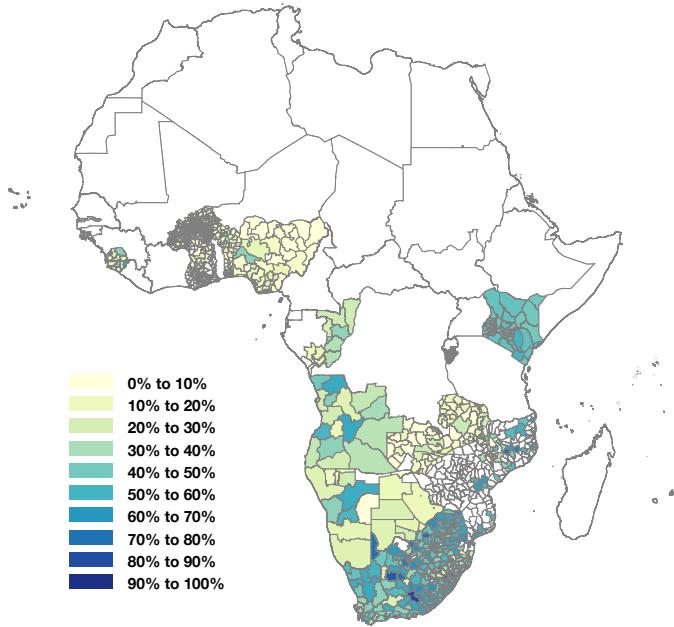
3 Determinants of Historical Female Political Power

In this section, we explore the historical correlates of the variation that we observe in precolonial female political representation across Africa. As discussed, scholars

¹⁷Refer to: <https://www.gender-api.com/>.

¹⁸See: <http://cournot.sun.ac.za/fppssa/index.html>

Figure 2: Contemporary Female Political Representation



Notes: Boundaries of administrative units and share of elected female political seats within each unit.

emphasize different contributing factors to explain whether societies allowed for women to have political influence. These fall mainly into three broad categories: economic, cultural and political. The economic emphasis pertains to women's direct role in subsistence production. The cultural refers to such factors as matrilineal inheritance or matrilocal residence. The political emphasis highlights specific political institutions (e.g., the presence of more centralized political institutions and states).

To test for evidence of these conjectures, we estimate a simple OLS regression where the outcome of focus, denoted by FPH_g , is defined as whether an ethnic group g historically allowed for women to serve as political leaders. We focus on a set of historical determinants defined at the ethnic group level, g , which are grouped into three broad categories. (The data sources, as well as summary statistics, for all of our explanatory variables are described in Sections B and C of the Appendix.)

Economic Determinants: Our measures are informed by the work of [Alesina et al. \(2013\)](#) who demonstrate how certain ecological conditions were suitable for plough agriculture which in turn spilled over into female (dis) empowerment, including political representation. As exogenous sources of variation for plough use, they rely on the classification of crops by [Pryor \(1985\)](#) into “plough positive” and “plough negative”. We use their data. Relying on information contained in the Ethnographic Atlas, we also include as controls, the traditional economic activity of a given ethnic

group, such as the degree to which the society practiced gathering, hunting, fishing, husbandry, or agriculture.

Cultural Determinants: We consider cultural practices that have been conjectured and sometimes demonstrated to have persistent effects on female outcomes. Once again, relying on information available in the Ethnographic Atlas, we consider whether a given society was traditionally matrilineal and/or matrilocal, if polygyny was permitted and whether brideprices were practiced.

Political Determinants: Our measures that speak to the historical political environment are informed by the work of [Michalopoulos and Papaioannou \(2013\)](#) and their focus on the extent of traditional political centralization of a society. From information available in the Ethnographic Atlas, we consider three measures of political centralization. The first two measures are the levels of jurisdictional hierarchy within and beyond the local community and the third is the complexity of settlement patterns.

[Table 1](#) considers first the economic determinants of FPH_g . As we move along the regression columns, we include different sets of covariates. The first column presents only the raw correlations. The second column introduces a standard set of geographic variables (averaged up to the ethnic homeland level) which measure: elevation, temperature, precipitation, ecological diversity, land area and malaria suitability.¹⁹ Column (3) also includes the cultural determinants (as described above) and column (4) controls for the political determinants (as described above). The final column introduces all three sets of covariates. We see from the coefficient estimates presented in [Table 1](#) that none of the historical economic determinants are significantly correlated with historical female political power.

The Ethnographic Atlas also contains information, for a smaller sub-sample of societies, on the degree of female involvement in each subsistence activity: gathering, fishing, husbandry, and agriculture.²⁰ In Table D3 (in Section D.2 of the Appendix), we test whether these alternative measures of female economic activity are positively correlated with traditional female political power, and find that they are not. Thus, confirming that we find very little evidence to support the conjecture that the prevalence of indigenous female political power hinges on female economic power.

[Table 2](#) presents analogous estimation results with a focus instead on the cultural determinants. We see that there is a positive correlation between matrilineality and

¹⁹Refer to: [Michalopoulos \(2012\)](#), [Fenske \(2014\)](#), and [Harari and La Ferrara \(2018\)](#) (among others).

²⁰For each of these activities, the data contain an index which is increasing in female involvement; which ranges from males only perform the activity, to both sexes (but males appreciably more), to equal participation, to females appreciably more, to females alone. This information is also available for hunting, but there is no female participation in this activity

Table 1: Historical Female Political Power - Economic Determinants

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Gathering	0.086 (0.364)	0.133 (0.418)	0.113 (0.423)	0.303 (0.331)	0.287 (0.334)
Hunting	0.096 (0.366)	0.042 (0.419)	0.033 (0.425)	0.198 (0.332)	0.183 (0.334)
Fishing	0.110 (0.361)	0.143 (0.416)	0.128 (0.422)	0.271 (0.328)	0.250 (0.331)
Husbandry	0.086 (0.361)	0.103 (0.416)	0.088 (0.422)	0.248 (0.329)	0.239 (0.333)
Agriculture	0.113 (0.363)	0.170 (0.418)	0.151 (0.423)	0.308 (0.330)	0.289 (0.333)
Plough Negative Crops	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Plough Positive Crops	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Observations	236	236	231	220	216
Geographic Determinants		✓	✓	✓	✓
Cultural Determinants			✓		✓
Political Determinants				✓	✓
Mean Dep. Variable	.309	.309	.307	.323	.319
Observations	236	236	231	220	216

Notes: The dependent variable is an indicator for historical female political power. Columns (1)–(5) sequentially introduce geographic, cultural, and political controls. Coefficients report OLS estimates of the association between each economic activity and historical female political power. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Significance levels: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%.

Table 2: Historical Female Political Power - Cultural Determinants

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Bride Price	0.024 (0.074)	0.018 (0.074)	0.016 (0.077)	0.006 (0.075)	0.011 (0.079)
Polygyny	0.068 (0.098)	0.096 (0.101)	0.070 (0.101)	0.009 (0.098)	0.016 (0.101)
Matrilocal	0.027 (0.119)	0.023 (0.118)	-0.027 (0.123)	0.050 (0.121)	0.048 (0.128)
Matrilineal	0.159* (0.085)	0.109 (0.089)	0.093 (0.093)	0.121 (0.084)	0.093 (0.088)
Geographic Determinants		✓	✓	✓	✓
Economic Determinants			✓		✓
Political Determinants				✓	✓
Mean Dep. Variable	.306	.307	.307	.319	.319
Observations	232	231	231	216	216

Notes: The dependent variable is an indicator for historical female political power. Columns (1)–(5) sequentially introduce geographic, economic, and political controls. Coefficients report OLS estimates of the association between each cultural practice and historical female political power. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Significance levels: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%.

traditional female political power, but that the relationship is not robust to the inclusion of additional covariates.

[Table 3](#) instead considers the political characteristics. The top panel of the table shows that the degree of political hierarchy beyond the local community is strongly positively correlated with female political representation. We explore this relationship further in the lower panel of [Table 3](#), where we create dummy variables for each of the different categories of political complexity, whereby the comparison category is stateless societies. We aggregate the top two levels of centralization into “large state” since there are so few observations in the highest bin. Given the focus in the literature on the relevance of matrilineal descent in determining female authority and positions of power ([Schneider and Gough \(1961\)](#), [Brule and Gaikwad \(2021\)](#), [Robinson and Gottlieb \(2019\)](#)), we also interact these political categories with whether the society practices matrilineality. Interestingly, we see that first it is the paramount chiefdoms and the large states which are driving the positive correlation with female political power and that this relationship is even stronger in matrilineal societies. The pattern here is highly reminiscent of [Michalopoulos and Papaioannou \(2013\)](#) who also find that their results are driven by the more centralized polities in Africa.

Other research has highlighted the importance of matrilocality as a traditional determinant of female power. In Table D4 (in Section D.2 of the Appendix), we present

the results from an analogous empirical specification to that in the lower panel of [Table 3](#), where we instead interact the different political categories with matrilocality. In our sample, matrilocality is present in 13.6% of societies, and it is more common in the lower levels of the political hierarchy (i.e., stateless and petty chiefdoms). In this specification, overall we find a strongly negative correlation between matrilocality and traditional female political influence, but we do detect a significant positive interaction effect with petty chiefdoms and matrilocality (relative to stateless). We do not detect significant interaction effects for the higher levels of the hierarchy (paramount chiefdoms and large states), but these societies are very rarely matrilocal (there are no matrilocal groups within the large state category).

Tables 1 through 3 present evidence for the political explanation for historical female political representation in Africa. Our results suggest that variation in political institutions, and particularly the way that these interact with cultural institutions, are the key determinants of female political representation. We do not find support that women's economic role is a key driver of their formal political representation.

We further validate these relationships by exploring additional cultural measures from the database of folklore narratives introduced to economists by [Michalopoulos and Xue \(2021\)](#). This data set is based on the [Berezkin \(2015\)](#) folklore catalog of oral traditions from around the world. It categorizes stories passed down through generations into motifs to facilitate cross-cultural comparisons. One can compute the share of motifs associated with specific concepts. We focus on the variables in this dataset which speak to the political environment of a society as well as measures of gender inequality. [Table 4](#) presents regression results following the estimation strategy of [Michalopoulos and Xue \(2021\)](#), where our measure of historical female political leadership is regressed on the share of motifs associated with a particular concept, while controlling for the log of the total number of publications associated with a given society and the year of the first publication (referred to as "Motif Controls" in the tables).

The top panel of [Table 4](#) considers the gender norms (referred to as "Male Bias") measure constructed by [Michalopoulos and Xue \(2021\)](#) which captures the difference between male and female motifs for a given stereotype and normalized by the total number of motifs in an ethnic group's oral tradition. The variable "Male Bias" captures the degree to which an oral tradition describes males relative to females as more violent, less dependent, less engaged in domestic affairs, and more physically active. We see from the top panel of [Table 4](#) that there is no robust significant correlation between historical female political representation and this measure of historical

Table 3: Historical Female Political Power - Political Determinants

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Panel A: Political Variables:					
Settlement	0.028 (0.019)	0.047** (0.022)	0.031 (0.027)	0.047** (0.023)	0.034 (0.027)
Hierarchical (local)	-0.037 (0.046)	-0.010 (0.047)	-0.037 (0.049)	-0.001 (0.047)	-0.030 (0.049)
Hierarchical (beyond)	0.188*** (0.034)	0.142*** (0.037)	0.135*** (0.038)	0.152*** (0.037)	0.145*** (0.038)
Panel B: Political Interactions:					
Petty Chiefdom	0.077 (0.070)	0.078 (0.068)	0.111 (0.073)	0.076 (0.069)	0.110 (0.074)
Paramount Chiefdom	0.267*** (0.101)	0.221** (0.095)	0.219** (0.096)	0.218** (0.097)	0.218** (0.098)
Large State	0.553*** (0.121)	0.478*** (0.124)	0.477*** (0.131)	0.476*** (0.125)	0.477*** (0.132)
Matrilineal	-0.047 (0.073)	-0.065 (0.072)	-0.067 (0.083)	-0.080 (0.094)	-0.076 (0.109)
Petty*Matrilineal	0.313** (0.133)	0.275** (0.134)	0.242 (0.150)	0.277** (0.138)	0.254 (0.155)
Paramount*Matrilineal	0.290** (0.146)	0.257* (0.144)	0.227 (0.153)	0.259* (0.149)	0.225 (0.161)
Large*Matrilineal	0.397*** (0.131)	0.455*** (0.140)	0.441*** (0.149)	0.441*** (0.151)	0.445** (0.179)
Geographic Determinants		✓	✓	✓	✓
Economic Determinants			✓		✓
Cultural Determinants				✓	✓
Mean Dep. Variable	.321	.323	.323	.319	.319
Observations	221	220	220	216	216

Notes: The dependent variable is an indicator for historical female political power. Columns (1)–(5) sequentially introduce geographic, economic, and cultural controls. Panel A reports OLS estimates of the relationship between each political institution and historical female political power. Panel B reports OLS estimates of interactions between political institutions and cultural practices. The two panels present results from separate regressions. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Significance levels: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%.

gender inequality.

The middle panel of [Table 4](#) instead considers the measure that [Michalopoulos and Xue \(2021\)](#) focus in on to reflect political hierarchy, that is, the share of motifs which refer to the words "king, kingdom, kingship, queen, prince, and princess". We see that this alternative measure of political complexity is strongly positively correlated with historical female political leadership (consistent with the findings of [Table 3](#)). The final panel of [Table 4](#) considers additional conceptual dimensions of political institutions (as coded by [Michalopoulos and Xue \(2021\)](#)) and demonstrates a significantly positive correlation between motifs associated with the concepts of "political", "power", and "democratic" and historical female political representation.

4 Persistence of Female Political Power

We now turn to investigating whether historical female political representation in a given ethnic homeland has a persistent impact on contemporary female political representation in local elections. To match a historical ethnic homeland to a contemporary local administrative unit, we overlay the two maps. The borders of ethnic homelands and contemporary administrative units typically do not match up. That is, more than one ethnic homeland can be located within a given administrative unit, and a given ethnic homeland can also traverse an administrative border. For illustrative purposes, refer to [Figure 3](#) for the Angola case. The black lines show the boundaries of the modern administrative units, and the blue lines define the boundaries between ethnic groups from the Murdock Ethnographic Map, where their centroids are in olive.

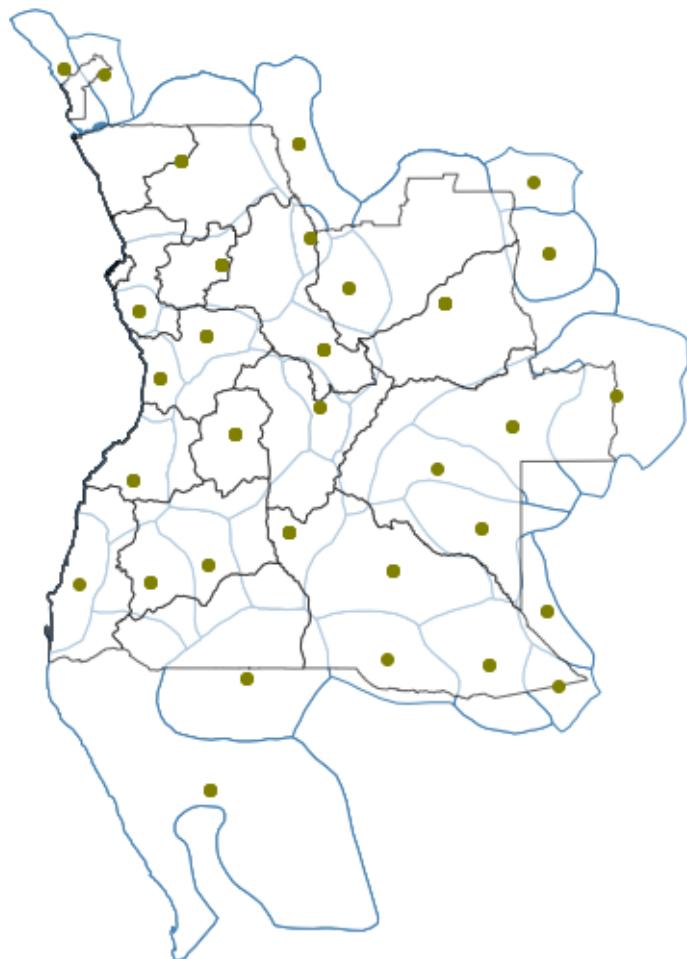
To assign the historical information (using the information from ethnic groups) to contemporary administrative units, we employ three methods to characterize FPH_{ic} and estimate three different corresponding specifications of equation (1). (i) We define FPH_{ic} as equal to one if the largest ethnic homeland located in an administrative unit i historically allowed women to serve as political leaders and equal to zero if not. (ii) We define FPH_{ic} equal to one if at least one ethnic group located in the administrative unit allowed for female leaders in the past. (iii) We define FPH_{ic} as a weighted average (of an indicator variable of whether an ethnic group allowed women to serve as political leaders) across all ethnic homelands located within the boundary of the administrative unit. Using these merging methods, we have historical information for roughly 1966 administrative-election observations.

Table 4: Historical Female Political Power - Folklore Correlates

	Male Bias	Male Bias	Male Bias	Male Bias
Historical Female Political Leadership	0.016* (0.007)	0.010 (0.008)	0.006 (0.011)	0.003 (0.011)
Mean Dep. Variable Observations	.095 227	.096 213	.095 226	.096 212
	King/Queen	King/Queen	King/Queen	King/Queen
Historical Female Political Leadership	0.113*** (0.021)	0.094*** (0.012)	0.134*** (0.031)	0.115*** (0.022)
Mean Dep. Variable Observations	-3.755 227	-3.753 213	-3.755 226	-3.753 212
Motif Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Political Controls		✓		✓
Geographic Controls			✓	✓
	Political	Government	Power	Democratic
Historical Female Political Leadership	0.101*** (0.021)	0.017 (0.009)	0.182*** (0.020)	0.040*** (0.007)
Mean Dep. Variable Observations	1 212	1 212	1 212	1 212
Motif Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Political Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Geographic Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: Regression results follow the estimation strategy of [Michalopoulos and Xue \(2021\)](#). We regress our measure of historical female political leadership on the share of motifs associated with each concept, controlling for the log of the total number of publications for a given society and the year of the first publication. *Male Bias* is defined as the difference between male and female motifs in an ethnic group's oral tradition, normalized by the total number of motifs. *King/Queen* captures the share of motifs referencing terms such as king, kingdom, kingship, queen, prince, and princess. The bottom panel shows the share of motifs associated with the concepts *Political*, *Government*, *Power*, and *Democratic*. The three panels represent three separate regression specifications. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Significance levels: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%.

Figure 3: Angola Maps



Notes: Boundaries of administrative units (black) and ethnic homelands (blue).

Our main empirical specification can be characterised by the following equation:

$$FPC_{ictc} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 FPH_{ic} + X'_{ict} \Theta + \gamma_c + \delta_t + \alpha_e + \varepsilon_{ictc}. \quad (1)$$

The outcome of focus, denoted by FPC_{ictc} , is defined as the share of elected female political seats in a local administrative unit i , in country c , electoral year t , and election type e . Our explanatory variable of interest is represented by FPH_{ic} , which characterises whether women were historically allowed to serve as political leaders in a given local administrative unit i . X'_{ict} reflects a set of control variables defined at the administrative unit level, which we describe in detail below. γ_c is a country-fixed effect that controls, among other factors, any federal policies dictating gender quotas of some form. We also include into the estimation election year fixed effects, represented by δ_t . α_e is an election type fixed effect of which there are six categories: First Past the Post, Block Vote, List Proportional Representation, Mixed Member Proportional System, Parallel System, and List Proportional Representation d'Hondt method (refer to Appendix A.2.2 for more details).

The challenges in identifying the effects of historical female leadership on contemporary female political representation in an OLS estimation, defined by equation (1), are that certain confounding factors simultaneously determine both FPC_{ictc} and FPH_{ic} . Our main empirical strategy in this section to address this concern is to include an extensive set of measures (represented by X'_{ict}) to control for relevant geographic, historical, and cultural factors that could bias our estimates of β_1 in equation (1). To this end, we use the same groupings of historical covariates we explored in Section 3.

As in the estimations of Section 3, we include a set of standard geographic variables (averaged up to the administrative unit level) that measure elevation, temperature, precipitation, ecological diversity, land area, and malaria suitability. These exogenous geographic determinants have been demonstrated to influence contemporary economic development outcomes as well as the incidence of conflict in Africa.²¹

We turn next to the economic, cultural and institutional measures that we considered before and have been argued to particularly affect women's role in society. Like in Section 3, our choice of economic productivity measures is informed by the work of [Alesina et al. \(2013\)](#), where specific crops are relatively more suited to the plough, and we also include as controls the traditional economic activity of a given ethnic group (gathering, hunting, fishing, husbandry, or agriculture). As before, the cul-

²¹Refer to: [Michalopoulos \(2012\)](#), [Fenske \(2014\)](#), and [Harari and La Ferrara \(2018\)](#) (among others).

tural practices we consider are those that have been hypothesized to have persistent effects on female outcomes. These are whether the society practices: matrilocality, matrilineality, polygyny, and or brideprices. Our final set of controls are those reflecting the traditional political complexity of a society: the two measures of political centralization (levels of jurisdictional hierarchy within and beyond the local community) and the complexity of settlement patterns.

For the above described control variables defined at the ethnic homeland level (i.e., those from the Ethnographic Atlas), how we aggregate the information up to the administrative unit depends upon the specification of equation (1). As explained above, we consider three ways to assign the historical ethnographic information to the administrative unit. Depending on how we are defining FPH_{ic} in our estimation specification, we follow the analogous methodology to define the corresponding control variables. That is, in case (i), we assign the ethnographic information from the largest ethnic homeland located in an administrative unit. For case (ii), where we define FPH_{ic} equal to one if at least one ethnic group located in the administrative unit allowed for female leaders in the past, we do the same for other binary variables used from the ethnographic atlas as controls. For the categorical ones (i.e., with more than two categories), we redefine these to be binary variables in this second specification. In case (iii), we instead compute a weighted average (by land area) of a given ethnographic variable across all ethnic homelands located in the administrative unit.

4.1 Estimation Results

In this section, we present our main empirical results from estimating (1) for our three main specifications, which vary on how we merge the historical and contemporary data sources.

The top panel of [Table 5](#) reports the results using specification (i) where we assign the ethnographic information from the largest ethnic homeland located in an administrative unit. As we move across the columns, we vary which covariates are included into the estimations, and the final column includes them all at once. We see a robust positive and significant relationship between historical female political leadership and contemporary female political representation. The magnitude of the coefficient reflects an approximate increase of 13% of the average of the dependent variable.

The middle panel of [Table 5](#) reports the results for specification (ii), where we defined FPH_{ic} equal to one if at least one ethnic group located in the administrative unit allowed for female leaders in the past. The lower panel of [Table 5](#) is from specification (iii) where we instead compute a weighted average (by land area) of a given

ethnographic variable across all ethnic homelands located in the administrative unit. We again see a robust and significantly positive correlation between historical and contemporary female political representation, where the magnitude of the estimated coefficient remains relatively constant throughout the different specifications.

4.2 Contiguous Sample

The above section has demonstrated a consistently positive and significant correlation between historical female political leadership and contemporary female political representation. Despite the robustness of this finding, even when we account for an extensive set of observable characteristics, there may still remain an unobservable characteristic which is biasing our estimates. This would be the case if a particular characteristic determines contemporary female political representation and also the propensity for a society to allow for female leadership in the past. One factor might be an unobservable determinant of economic development, which is in turn correlated with female political representation today and in the past.

Given this possibility, we also consider a form of Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD) where we restrict our analysis to contiguous ethnic homelands, which likely share many similar unobservable characteristics (which may in turn determine economic development outcomes, both past and present) but differ in whether or not their society traditionally allowed for female political leadership. We then compare associated levels of female contemporary political representation across the contiguous borders.

To match the contemporary information with an historical ethnic homeland for this estimation strategy, we first obtained the set of all contiguous ethnic homelands that differ by their historical female political representation. These are depicted by the blue and green pairs in Figure 4, where blue are the female positive leadership homelands (i.e., $FPH_g = 1$) and green are the female negative leadership homelands (i.e., $FPH_g = 0$).

To match the contemporary administrative units to this restricted set of contiguous ethnic homelands, we kept only the information for the administrative units that have a centroid falling inside the boundaries of a given ethnic homeland. Those that do not have a centroid in one of the contiguous ethnic homelands are dropped.

Our main RD empirical specification can be characterised by the following equation:

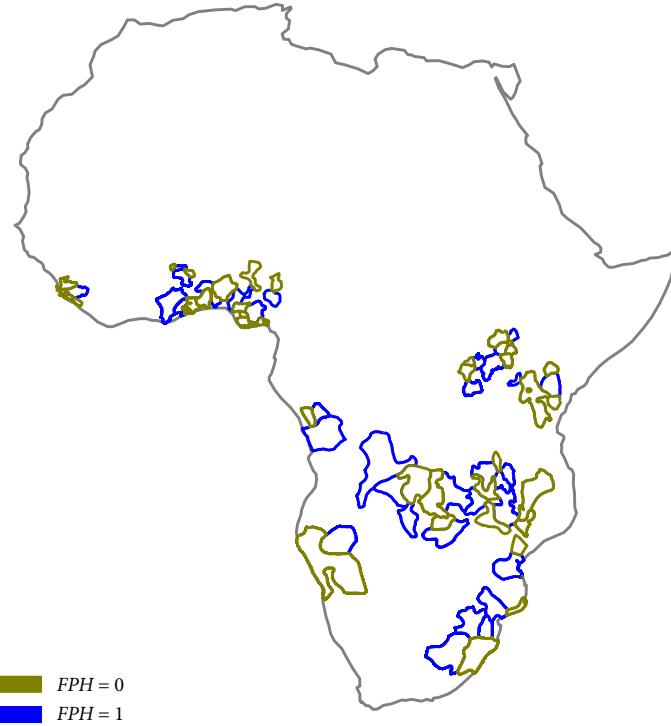
$$FPC_{ip} = \gamma_p + \beta FPH_g + f(distance_{ip}) + X_i' \Delta + \varepsilon_{ip}, \quad (2)$$

Table 5: Contemporary Female Political Representation

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Specification 1:								
Historical Female Political Leadership	0.023** (0.010)	0.018*** (0.006)	0.019*** (0.006)	0.023*** (0.007)	0.023*** (0.007)	0.023*** (0.007)	0.018*** (0.006)	0.028*** (0.008)
Mean Dep. Variable Observations	.243 1576	.243 1576	.243 1576	.243 1576	.251 1512	.242 1558	.243 1576	.25 1494
Specification 2:								
Historical Female Political Leadership	0.024*** (0.009)	0.012** (0.006)	0.011* (0.006)	0.015*** (0.006)	0.019*** (0.006)	0.016*** (0.006)	0.012** (0.006)	0.021*** (0.007)
Mean Dep. Variable Observations	.236 1966	.236 1966	.236 1966	.236 1966	.239 1943	.236 1966	.236 1966	.239 1943
Specification 3:								
Historical Female Political Leadership	0.033*** (0.010)	0.020*** (0.006)	0.020*** (0.006)	0.024*** (0.006)	0.028*** (0.006)	0.020*** (0.006)	0.020*** (0.006)	0.024*** (0.007)
Mean Dep. Variable Observations	.236 1966	.236 1966	.236 1966	.236 1966	.239 1943	.236 1951	.236 1966	.238 1928
Electoral FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Geographic Controls		✓						✓
Economic Controls				✓				✓
Gender Customs					✓			✓
Political Controls						✓		✓
Plough Neg./Pos. Crop							✓	✓

Notes: Coefficients report OLS estimates of the association between historical female political power (Historical Female Leadership) and contemporaneous female political power from three separate regression specifications. Specification 1 defines Historical Female Leadership as an indicator equal to one if the largest ethnic homeland in the administrative unit traditionally allowed female leadership. Specification 2 defines it as one if at least one ethnic homeland within the administrative unit traditionally allowed female leadership. Specification 3 defines it as the land-area-weighted average of an indicator equal to one if an ethnic group located in the administrative unit traditionally allowed female leadership. Standard errors clustered at the administrative unit level are in parentheses. Significance levels: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%.

Figure 4: Contiguous Ethnicities



Notes: Sample of neighboring ethnicities with differing historical female political participation. In blue: ethnicities that allowed female leaders. In green: ethnicities that did not allow female leaders.

where i denotes an administrative unit and p denotes a contiguous ethnic homeland pair where one ethnic homeland traditionally allowed female leadership and the other did not. The outcome of focus, denoted by FPC_{ip} , is defined as the share of elected female political seats in a local administrative unit i . The explanatory variable of interest is FPH_g , an indicator function equal to one if the administrative unit i is located in an ethnic homeland which traditionally allowed female political leadership, and equal to zero otherwise. $f(distance_{ip})$ denotes a polynomial which is a function of the distance (in km) from the centroid of the administrative unit i to the nearest point on the border of the ethnic group pair p . In our baseline specification, we consider a linear polynomial. X'_i denotes a vector of covariates that include country and electoral type fixed effects, as well as geographic and historical controls defined at the administrative unit.

Our estimation results for this empirical specification are reported in Table 6. Once again, we observe a consistently positive and significant impact from historical female leadership to contemporary female political representation. Refer to Figure D1 in Section D.1 in the Appendix for a graphical representation of these findings. The figure shows the bin scatter plots of the unconditional relationship between contemporary female political representation and distance to the border (between the two

ethnic homelands) from the centroid of the administrative unit. The border is at kilometer 0, and positive values indicate kilometers in the ethnic homelands which traditionally allow for female leadership. The plot on the left-hand side assumes a first-degree polynomial in the distance to the border, and the right-hand side plot assumes a second-degree polynomial.

Table 6: Contemporary Female Political Representation - RD Estimations

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Historical Female						
Political Leadership	0.020*	0.020*	0.019*	0.029***	0.024**	0.030***
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.009)
Ethnic Pair FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Electoral FE			✓	✓	✓	✓
Geographic Controls				✓		✓
Plough Neg./Pos. Crops					✓	✓
Mean Dep. Variable	.249	.249	.249	.249	.249	.249
Observations	1033	1033	1033	1033	1033	1033

Notes: The dependent variable is an indicator for contemporary female political representation. Each column reports results from a regression comparing adjacent ethnic groups that differ in their historical female power measure. All specifications include ethnic pair fixed effects. Additional controls are introduced sequentially across columns. Robust standard errors clustered at the ethnic pair level are in parentheses. Significance levels: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%.

4.3 Robustness Results

Our main results have demonstrated a significant positive correlation between historical and contemporary female political representation. We interpret this to be causal and to capture a direct persistent effect of female political power through time.

An alternative interpretation is that we are picking up the persistence of some other factor, the most likely one being a measure of economic development, rather than the direct persistence of female political power. To this end, our main specifications (of Section 4.1) account for pre-determined economic determinants like, geographic measures and precolonial economic activities of the different ethnic groups. Likewise our RD type estimation strategy (of Section 4.2) aims to further address this concern by focusing in on a comparison of adjacent ethnic homelands, with distinct

traditional female leadership practices, but share very similar geographic endowments.

Still, a finding of potential relevance is that a central determinant of historical female political representation is the political complexity (i.e. levels of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community) of a given society (as seen in Section 3 [Table 3](#)). The well-known work of [Michalopoulos and Papaioannou \(2013\)](#) has demonstrated the importance of this variable of political complexity in determining contemporary development outcomes. In particular, they demonstrate how traditional political complexity positively determines light density today.

Given this earlier work, an alternative interpretation of our findings could be that precolonial measures of female leadership are just picking up the impacts of political complexity, which in turn determines development outcomes today, which is in turn determining contemporary female political representation. So that it is really the persistent channel from traditional political complexity to contemporary development outcomes which is explaining our results rather than a persistent effect of female political power.

To address this concern, we first note that all of our estimation results are robust to including measures of traditional political complexity (these are the results presented in columns (6) and (8) in the three panels of [Table 5](#)). To dig deeper into this alternative channel, we further consider the relationship between our key outcome variables and the light density measure.

Table D5 in the Appendix (Section D.2) first checks whether there is a significant correlation between historical female political representation and contemporary light density. We see that there is none. Tables D7 and D8 add light density as a control in our key estimations on contemporary female representation. Table D7 (in Section D.2 in the Appendix) demonstrates that our key result of the persistent effects of historical female leadership is robust to including light density as a control in all three of our specifications and, moreover, that light density is not correlated with contemporary female political representation. Table D8 shows analogous results for our RD specification, which are graphically depicted in Figure D2 (Section D.1 of the Appendix).

5 Impacts of Colonization

Our main findings demonstrate a persistent effect of female power through the colonization and post-colonial periods of Africa. However, we may want to inquire as to

whether colonization impacted this process of persistence. Rattray, the first colonial anthropologist of Ghana, finally realizing his ignorance on this topic recorded “The Queen Mother had and still has ... a great influence over all the women ... I have asked the old men and women why I did not know all this – I had spent very many years in Ashanti. The answer is always the same: “The white man never asked us this; you have dealings with and recognize only men; we supposed the European considered women of no account, and we know that you do not recognize them as we have always done.” ([Rattray, 1923](#), 84).

As discussed in the Introduction, there are three central forces which are emphasized in the literature to explain why colonization weakened the political power of women. They include: (i) indirect rule; (ii) religious influence; and (iii) split ethnicities. Regarding (i), it is generally hypothesized that colonial administrations permitted Europeans to govern through indigenous male authorities to the exclusion of female ones. Scholars stress that the British system of indirect rule was most explicit in this regard. Regarding (ii), it is conjectured that external religions, which penetrated Africa through trade and missionary expansions, tended to suppress the freedom of women by imposing strongly conservative and patriarchal values on indigenous societies. For (iii), the arbitrariness of ethnic groups into different colonies plausibly disrupted the political institutions in ways which were unfavorable to women. The resulting conflicts may have been one mechanism that reduced the influence of women in political decisions.

To test for these three conjectures, we create a persistence measure as our main outcome variable of interest. The purpose is to test whether any of the above described three forces (associated with the colonial experience) had any destructive impacts on the political influence of women.

To this end, we match the data from an historical ethnic homeland to a contemporary administrative unit if the centroid of the contemporary unit lands within the historical ethnic homeland.²² Our focus is on creating a female political power persistence measure. To this end, we restrict ourselves to ethnic groups which traditionally permitted women in positions of power, i.e., $FPH_{ic} = 1$.

To define whether there is a persistence in female political power, we use the information from our contemporary female political representation measure, FPC_{ictc} , defined as the share of elected female political seats in a local administrative unit i , in country c , electoral year t , and election type e . This contemporary measure is a

²²Each administrative unit is matched to one ethnic homeland, but a given ethnic homeland can potentially be matched to several administrative units depending on where the respective borders lie.

continuous variable, and we need to categorize the relevant cut-off for which there is still significant female representation. When computing this, we must take into account whether a given election had mandated female quotas.

In almost all countries with female political quotas at the sub-national levels of government, the quota of women is approximately 30%.²³ However, only half of the countries with quotas in place respect them in the sense that the average female representation in this sample is below 30%. As a first pass, we construct a dummy variable, denoted by FPC_{icte}^{high} , which is equal to zero if $0 \leq FPC_{icte} < 0.30$ and the country imposes quotas at the sub-national level. For countries without a quota system, we define $FPC_{icte}^{high} = 0$ if $0 \leq FPC_{icte} < 0.15$. Otherwise, we define $FPC_{icte}^{high} = 1$. So we assume that a female representation greater than 15% reflects significant participation for countries without a quota, and greater than 30% for countries with a quota system in place. We also consider alternative cut-offs, where we increase and decrease the assumed cut-off for countries without a quota system and increase the cut-off for countries with a quota system, and the main results ensue. Refer to the results of Figure D3 in the Appendix (Section D.2).

We define a dummy variable representing persistence, denoted by P_{icte} , such that: $P_{icte} = 1$ if $FPH_{ic} = 1$ and $FPC_{icte}^{high} = 1$; and $P_{icte} = 0$ if $FPH_{ic} = 1$ and $FPC_{icte}^{high} = 0$. So in our analysis, we are comparing areas where female political power has persisted to those where instead a reversal transpired. On average, we observe persistence for roughly 53% of our sample (depending on the cut-off we employ). So that for the remaining 47% of societies a reversal occurred instead.

To test for the impacts of the three colonial forces described above, we consider three sets of explanatory variables as determinants of the persistence of female political power, as defined by P_{icte} (described above).

To test for the role of indirect rule, we estimate the impact of the colonizer identity on female political persistence. Panel A of [Table 7](#) demonstrates that British colonial rule was more likely to destroy female political persistence (as compared to another European power). As we move across the columns, we vary which covariates are included into the estimations in line with our main empirical analysis.²⁴

We next explore the role of external religions. Panel B of [Table 7](#) demonstrates that the presence of Christian missions does not appear to have a strongly significant detrimental effect on the persistence of female political power. If anything, greater exposure to Catholic missions enabled the persistence. In [Table 7](#), we use as our core

²³Refer to the details provided in Section A.2.3 in the Appendix.

²⁴Refer to Table D9 in the Appendix (Section D.2) to see how these covariates determine P_{icte}

Table 7: Female Political Persistence - Colonization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Panel A:							
British Colonizer	-0.403*** (0.144)	-0.176* (0.094)	-0.199** (0.086)	-0.217*** (0.080)	-0.309*** (0.112)	-0.393*** (0.128)	-0.412*** (0.143)
Panel B:							
Catholic Missions	0.094** (0.042)	0.108*** (0.033)	0.155*** (0.054)	0.093** (0.036)	0.096*** (0.034)	0.096** (0.041)	0.087** (0.041)
Protestant Missions	-0.029 (0.020)	-0.011 (0.014)	-0.049* (0.026)	-0.033* (0.019)	-0.021 (0.014)	-0.026 (0.019)	-0.030 (0.019)
Panel C:							
Split Ethnic Group	-0.068** (0.026)	-0.067*** (0.021)	-0.071** (0.028)	-0.072** (0.029)	-0.046* (0.023)	-0.067*** (0.024)	-0.061** (0.025)
Panel D:							
Trade Route 600	0.047 (0.041)	-0.012 (0.052)	0.052 (0.062)	0.010 (0.071)	-0.155 (0.108)	0.094 (0.061)	0.033 (0.036)
Trade Route 1700	-0.047 (0.041)	-0.010 (0.036)	-0.060 (0.041)	-0.010 (0.071)	0.029 (0.046)	-0.047 (0.040)	-0.034 (0.036)
Panel E:							
Atlantic Slave Trade	-0.000 (0.004)	0.003 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)	0.004* (0.002)	-0.000 (0.004)	0.001 (0.003)
Indian Ocean Slave Trade	-0.001 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.005)	-0.002 (0.005)	0.006 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.002 (0.005)
Geographic Controls			✓				
Economic Controls				✓			
Cultural Controls					✓		
Political Controls						✓	
Plough Neg./Pos. Crops							✓
Light Density							✓
Mean Dep. Variable	0.530	0.530	0.530	0.561	0.532	0.530	0.530
Observations	980	980	980	916	972	980	980

Notes: The five panels reflect five different regression specifications. Electoral fixed effects are included in regressions (1) through (7) of Panel A. Electoral and country fixed effects are included in regressions (1) through (7) of Panels B through E. The number of missions and slave exports are computed in logs (plus one). Standard errors are clustered at the ethnic homeland level and are in parentheses. Significance level: *** 1%, ** 5%, and * 10%.

explanatory variable the number of historical missions (in logs), both Catholic and Protestant, in a given ethnic homeland. We can alternatively use a dummy variable for the presence of any historical mission (Catholic and Protestant) or the average distance to a historical mission, and the results are very similar.

For the expansion of Islam into Africa, we rely on the work of [Michalopoulos et al. \(2018\)](#) who studied the spread of Islam via trade expansion and use their information on the locations of historical trade routes or ports before 600 CE, as well as the expansion of trade networks up to 1800 CE as an exogenous source of variation (which were particularly relevant for West Africa). We regress these two relevant variables on our persistence measure in panel D of [Table 7](#) and find no statistically significant effects.

To investigate the impacts of colonization working via the dismemberment of ethnic groups across borders, we borrow from the work of [Michalopoulos and Papaioannou \(2016\)](#) and consider whether the colonists partitioned a given ethnic group when they were dividing up the continent into separate nations during the "Scramble for Africa". [Michalopoulos and Papaioannou \(2016\)](#) use this partitioning as a quasi-natural experiment to demonstrate how these imposed divisions led to persistent conflict. Panel C of [Table 7](#) demonstrates that if the colonists split a given ethnic homeland by a national border, this significantly decreased the probability of persistent female political power, and, instead, a reversal of power into the hands of men was more likely to occur.

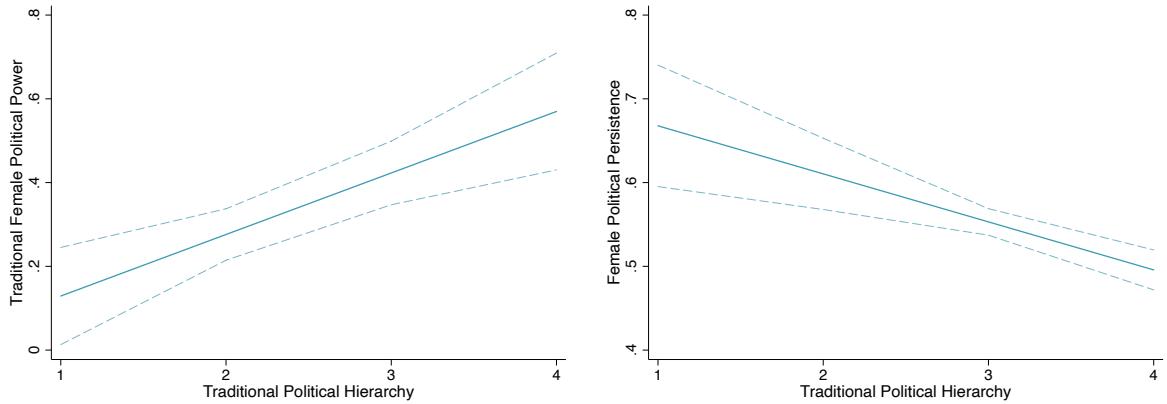
We also consider the potential conflictual impacts of the slave trade. We use the indicators from [Nunn and Wantchekon \(2011\)](#) of the log number of slave exports from the Atlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades. We see in Panel E that these indicators do not have significant impacts on the persistence of female political power.²⁵

Although not a set of exhaustive tests, the results of [Table 7](#) do provide some empirical support for the historical accounts of the destructive consequences of colonialism for women's indigenous political power. The specific channels appear primarily through political institutions imposed by the colonists via indirect rule and the partitioning of ethnic groups across national borders.

Further suggestive support that the colonists' direct intervention into indigenous political institutions led to a decline in female influence is found in Table D9 in the Appendix (Section D.2). In this table, we report on which of the precolonial ethnographic covariates significantly determine our measure of female political persis-

²⁵[Teso \(2019\)](#) examines the persistent impacts of female-biased sex ratios experienced by African societies from the disproportionate export of male slaves. The study finds that descendants of more heavily affected groups today exhibit more progressive gender-role attitudes.

Figure 5: The Reversal of Traditional Female Political Power



Notes: OLS estimated coefficients for different levels of traditional political hierarchy (beyond the local community). Left-hand side: Effects on historical female political power, FPH_{ic} ; right-hand side: Effects on the persistence of female political power, P_{ictc} . All regressions include country fixed effects as controls. Dotted lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

tence, P_{ictc} . A noteworthy finding is that the precolonial political complexity (i.e., jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community) of a given ethnic group predicts a significant decline of female political power. This finding is in contrast to our results from [Table 3](#) in Section 3 which demonstrated that it was political complexity which was the most important historical positive predictor of female participation in traditional leadership positions. These opposing relationships are clearly depicted in [Figure 5](#), which plots the estimated coefficients for the different levels of traditional political hierarchy for traditional female political power on the left-hand side, and its persistence on the right-hand side.

A plausible explanation for these two findings is that the colonists were more likely to enforce indirect rule in societies with more centralized political institutions ([Bolt et al., 2022](#)), but that, in accordance with historical narratives, only formally recognized males' roles in these traditional institutions, thus effectively destroying traditional female political power.

By contrast, we do not find strong evidence of deleterious effects from outside religious influence with respect to the persistence of female political power. In Table D6 in the Appendix (Section D.2), we further demonstrate that there is no significant correlation between the spread of Christianity or Islam with historical female political representation.

6 Conclusions

A core finding of this paper is that traditional female political power has a strong persistent influence on the representation of females in local-level political institutions

in sub-Saharan Africa today. Given that in many developing country contexts, particularly in rural areas, ethnic and lineage-based political institutions prevail, and can co-exist alongside more formal administrative units, it seems pertinent to understand and acknowledge more broadly the influence of women in these enduring indigenous institutions.

Our results do not speak to the mechanisms via which this persistence happens. One idea, following [Beaman et al. \(2009\)](#) could be that the history of female representation established women as effective leaders. Most likely, we believe, is that the underlying features of these societies which help create female political leadership in the past, persist in ways which empower females politically today. For example, in Section 3 we found this connected to political centralization in traditional African societies. Yet most of these political institutions exist today and likely still operate to empower women politically.

Despite this persistence, historical accounts also point to the destructive forces of colonization for female political power. We uncover some empirical evidence, which suggests that the political structures enforced by the colonists led on average to a reversal of indigenous female power into the hands of men. This was particularly the case in British colonies which practiced indirect rule and amongst ethnic groups that were split between different colonies.

Finally, some of our empirical findings speak in part to an extensive literature mostly outside of economics on the determinants of traditional female political representation. Early conjectures link the emergence of the state with the disempowerment of women [Engels \(1902\)](#), but also argued that women were more politically powerful in societies with matrilineal kinship and matrilocal residency. We find that the pre-colonial political centralization of ethnic groups is positively correlated with female involvement in politics, thus contradicting this hypothesis to some extent. We also find that matrilineal kinship and matrilocality are only significant positive factors when they occur in conjunction with particular political institutions. For example, matrilineal kinship is strongly associated with female political representation when it occurs in more highly centralized polities like states.²⁶ Finally, we also find that traditional political centralization leads to a decline in women's involvement after the colonial period. This finding is likely due to colonists being better able to enforce institutions in line with their own preferences to the exclusion of women in more politically centralized societies. These findings present a much more nuanced view of the consequences of the development of the state for female political em-

²⁶This contrasts somewhat with some of the historical accounts documenting a decline of matriarchal agency in the context of political expansion ([Saidi \(2010\)](#), [Akyeampong and Obeng \(1995\)](#)).

powerment and the circumstances under which this acts to the detriment of female empowerment.

We do not uncover strong historical links between female economic empowerment and political representation.

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APPENDIX

FOR ONLINE PUBLICATION

A Original Data Collection

A.1 Historical Female Political Representation Dataset

Survey-based data collection Of the 412 African ethnic groups in our sample 307 groups had some form of literary sources with information pertinent to the present study. To gather data for the remaining groups, we developed an electronic survey to mimic the variables coded in the literature-based phase.

Survey responses were cleaned for consistency with the literature-based data. One meaningful difference in the survey-based phase is that unlike the literature-based encoding, we could not feasibly train each potential survey respondent on each definition to the same level as we did for the undergraduate research assistant team tasked with literature-based coding. We address this by including definitions and examples for each variable considered by the survey so that each respondent can better understand each specific question.

Upon completion of the above data collection, raw data from the literature and survey-based collection phases was then reviewed systematically. The purpose of the final data review is to (1) correct any simple coding errors or anomalies, (2) verify consistency in the coding process, and (3) reconcile data collected from the literature and survey-based sources.

Finally, since our survey-based sub-sample of groups included a random sub-sample of groups already covered by the literature-based phase, 27 groups had overlapping ethnographic codes from both the literature-based encoding and the survey responses. We develop a process to merge overlapping survey responses with the literature-based codes. It is important to note that this process strives to keep the dataset consistent with itself. Our reconciliation procedure is as follows. If a variable was missing from the literature-based coding, we used the survey-based code, and vice versa. When the codes conflicted, we used the note provided by the literature-based team to reconcile the difference. Evidence from the primary literature, given in the note used by the research assistant to justify their code, was used to generate the final code. In cases in which the note associated with the literature based code indicates that the value was coded, we preferred the most frequently occurring survey response. If the code conflict could not be resolved through the literature-based

note, we tried one last search through any available web and print sources to see if any accessible information could resolve the conflict. Any remaining conflicts that cannot be merged through the previous rules we coded to ambiguous in the final dataset.

A.2 Contemporary Female Political Representation Dataset

A.2.1 Electoral Coverage

- **Angola** Municipal administrators election (August 2012)
- **Benin** Commune election (April 2015)
- **Botswana** Local government council election (October 2014)
- **Burkina Faso** Commune election (June 2016)
- **Burundi** Town council election (May 2010)
- **Cape Verde** Municipal assembly election (July 2012); Municipal chamber election (July 2012)
- **Comoros** Municipal council election (February 2015)
- **Republic of the Congo** Department elections (September 2014)
- **Eswatini** Tinkundla (village) election (March 2013); Town council election (February 2012)
- **Uganda** District council election (February 2011)
- **Ghana** District assembly election (September 2015)
- **Kenya** County assembly election (March 2013)
- **Lesotho** Community council election (April 2005); Community council election (October 2011)
- **Malawi** District council election (May 2014)
- **Mauritius** Municipal council election (December 2012); Municipal council election (June 2015); Village council election (December 2012)
- **Mozambique** Municipal election (August 2013)
- **Namibia** Municipal council election (November 2015); Regional council election (November 2015)
- **Nigeria** State house of assembly election (April 2011)

- **Rwanda** District council election (April 2016)
- **Sierra Leone** District election (November 2012)
- **South Africa** District council election (May 2011); Local municipal election (May 2011); Provincial legislature election (May 2014)
- **Zambia** Local council election (September 2011)
- **Zimbabwe** Municipal election (March 2008); Municipal election (July 2013)

A.2.2 Election Types

- **First Past the Post:** The simplest form of plurality/majority electoral system. The winning candidate is the one who gains more votes than any other candidate, even if this is not an absolute majority of valid votes. The system uses single member districts and the voters vote for candidates rather than political parties.
- **Block Vote:** A plurality/majority system used in multi-member districts. Electors have as many votes as there are candidates to be elected. The candidates with the highest vote totals win the seats. Usually voters vote for candidates rather than parties and in most systems may use as many, or as few, of their votes as they wish.
- **List Proportional Representation:** Each party or grouping presents a list of candidates for a multi-member electoral district, the voters vote for a party, and parties receive seats in proportion to their overall share of the vote. In some (closed list) systems the winning candidates are taken from the lists in order of their position on the lists. If the lists are 'open' or 'free' the voters can influence the order of the candidates by marking individual preferences.
- **Mixed Member Proportional:** A mixed system in which the choices expressed by the voters are used to elect representatives through two different systems—one List PR system and (usually) one plurality/majority system—where the List PR system compensates for the disproportionality in the results from the plurality/majority system.
- **Parallel System:** A mixed system in which the choices expressed by the voters are used to elect representatives through two different systems—one List PR system and (usually) one plurality/majority system—but where no account is taken of the seats allocated under the first system in calculating the results in the second system.

- **Proportional Representation d'Hondt:** Employs an alternative mathematical means for calculating number of seats in a Proportional Representation system

A.2.3 Sub-National Gender Quotas

Data Source: Gender Quotas Database

- **Angola** Legislated Candidate Quotas: 30% female representation in governing bodies.
- **Benin** None.
- **Botswana** None.
- **Burkina Faso** Legislated Candidate Quotas: Candidate lists must include at least 30% women.
- **Burundi** Reserved seats: 30% seats reserved for women.
- **Cape Verde** Legislated Candidate Quotas: Candidate lists must include at least 40% women.
- **Comoros** None.
- **Republic of the Congo** Legislated Candidate Quotas: Candidate lists must include at least 30% women.
- **Eswatini** None.
- **Ghana** None.
- **Kenya** Reserved seats: 33% Seats Reserved for women.
- **Lesotho** Reserved seats: 30% Seats Reserved for women.
- **Malawi** None.
- **Mauritius** Legislated Candidate Quotas: Candidate lists must include at least 33% women.
- **Mozambique** None.
- **Namibia** Legislated Candidate Quotas: Candidate Lists must include at least 30% women.
- **Nigeria** None.
- **Rwanda** Legislated Candidate Quotas: Committees must include at least 30% women.

- **Sierra Leone** Legislated Candidate Quotas: Executive committees must have at least 30% women.
- **South Africa** Legislated Candidate Quotas: Candidate lists must include 50% women.
- **The Gambia** None.
- **Uganda** Reserved Seats: 33% Seats Reserved for Women.
- **Zambia** None.
- **Zimbabwe** Legislated Candidate Quotas: Elective and government bodies should include 50% women.

B Covariate Data Sources

- **Elevation:** - at 1km level. USGS EROS Archive - Digital Elevation - Global 30 Arc-Second Elevation (GTOPO30) from Earth Resources Observation and Science (EROS) Center.
- **Temperature:** - at 0.5 degrees grids. CRU TS dataset from the UK's Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), the US Department of Energy, and the UK National Centre for Atmospheric Science (NCAS).
- **Precipitation:** - at 0.25 degrees (roughly 25km at the equator). NASA Global Precipitation Measurement.
- **Light Density:** Defense Meteorological Satellite Program (DMSP) in the National Geophysical Data Center (NGDC), part of NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI).
- **Ecological Diversity :** Fenske (2014).
- **Malaria Suitability :** Alsan (2015).
- **Missions Stations :** Nunn (2010)
- **Crop Suitability:** FAO-GAEZ and Alesina et al. (2013) and Pryor (1985). Male crops: wheat, barley, teff, rye, buckwheat, wet rice. Female crops: dry rice, sorghum, maize, millet (foxtail and pearl), root crops, tubers (carrot, sugar beet, yam, sweet potato), tree crops (banana, coconut).

List of ethnic variables from **Murdock Ethnographic Atlas**:

- Historical Dependence on Gathering, Hunting, Fishing, Animal Husbandry, and Agriculture. Variables v1–v5 respectively in Murdock's Ethnographic Atlas. The variables take integer values from 0–9 increasing in percent dependence on the food source.
- Bride Price. Variable v6. Indicator variable that equals one when bride price or bride wealth ($v6 = 1$).
- Polygyny. Variable v9. Indicator variable that equals one if v9 is 2 or larger.
- Matrilocal. Variable v12. Indicator variable that equals one when $v12 = 5$.
- Matrilineal. Variable v43. Indicator variables that equals 1 when v43 does not equal to 1.
- Settlement. Variable v30. Variable takes integer values from 1-8, increasing in pre-colonial settlement complexity. Range is from 'nomadic or fully migratory' (1) to 'complex settlements' (8).
- Levels of Jurisdictional Hierarchy of the Local Community. Variable v32. Takes on values 1-3. Range is: Independent families (1), Extended families (2), to Clan-barrios (3).
- Levels of Jurisdictional Hierarchy Beyond the Local Community. Variable v33. Takes on values 1-5. Range is: No political authority beyond community (1); Petty Chiefdoms (2); Larger Chiefdoms (3); States (4); to Large States (5).

In Specification 3 of [Table 5](#), the ethnic level controls in the regressions are a weighted average of each ethnographic variable. The weights are the share of land that each ethnicity occupies in an administrative unit. A complication is that there are categorical variables (with more than two categories). Thus, before computing the indicator, we converted these variables to dummy variables depending on the specific values of each case. The variables and the categories set as one are: - v1-v5 (Intensity of gathering, hunting, fishing, animal husbandry and agriculture): $1(x \geq 5)$. More than 50% dependence. - v30 (settlement): $1(x \geq 6)$. Community, compact or complex settlements - v32 (jurisdictional local): $1(x \geq 2)$. Three or more levels of organization - v33 (jurisdictional beyond local): $1(x \geq 2)$. Larger chiefdoms, states or large states.

C Summary Statistics

Table C1: Historical Ethnic Homelands - Summary Statistics

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median
Historical Female Leadership	0.308	0.463	0.000
Elevation	464.2	497.3	292.7
Temperature	24.81	2.676	25.08
Precipitation	0.319	1.189	0.000
Ecological Diversity Index	0.345	0.230	0.398
Malaria index	14.23	8.454	13.93
Land area	284.4	414.5	139.1
Gathering Dependence	0.338	0.789	0.000
Hunting Dependence	0.949	0.675	1.000
Fishing Dependence	0.941	1.028	1.000
Husbandry Dependence	1.814	1.238	1.000
Agriculture Dependence	5.954	1.430	6.000
Plough Negative Crop Suitability	4.532	1.504	5.073
Plough Positive Crop Suitability	0.773	0.643	0.787
Bride Price	0.785	0.412	1.000
Polygyny	0.902	0.298	1.000
Matrilocal	0.136	0.344	0.000
Matrilineal	0.323	0.469	0.000
Settlement Complexity	6.112	1.386	7.000
Political Hierarchy (Local)	1.937	0.661	2.000
Political Hierarchy (Beyond)	2.329	0.890	2.000
King Related Motifs	-3.769	0.688	-3.557
Political Related Motifs	-4.354	0.427	-4.605
Government Related Motifs	-4.559	0.177	-4.605
Power Related Motifs	-3.517	0.703	-3.435
Democratic Related Motifs	-4.561	0.194	-4.605
Male Bias Related Motifs	0.098	0.091	0.085
Log Catholic Missions	0.289	0.494	0.000
Log Protestant Missions	0.728	0.792	0.693
Trade Route 600	0.038	0.192	0.000
Trade Route 1700	0.122	0.328	0.000
Log Atlantic Slave Trade Exports	3.107	4.142	0.000
Log Indian Ocean Slave Trade Exports	1.092	2.802	0.000
Split Ethnic Group	0.443	0.498	0.000

Notes: The unit of observation is an ethnic homeland. There are a total of 237 homelands in the sample.

Table C2: Contemporary Female Political Representation - Summary Statistics

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median
Contemporary Female Political Representation	0.239	0.173	0.226
Historical Female Leadership	0.628	0.484	1.000
Sub-national Quota System	0.583	0.493	1.000
Persistence 10% & 30%	0.603	0.490	1.000
Persistence 15% & 30%	0.530	0.499	1.000
Persistence 20% & 30%	0.509	0.500	1.000
Persistence 20% & 35%	0.368	0.483	0.000
Persistence 20% & 40%	0.312	0.464	0.000
British Colonizer	0.512	0.500	1.000
Log Catholic Missions	0.291	0.574	0.000
Log Protestant Missions	0.870	1.003	0.693
Split Ethnic Group	0.626	0.484	1.000
Trade Route 600	0.002	0.049	0.000
Trade Route 1700	0.185	0.389	0.000
Log Atlantic Slave Trade Exports	3.310	4.712	0.000
Log Indian Ocean Slave Trade Exports	0.622	1.877	0.000

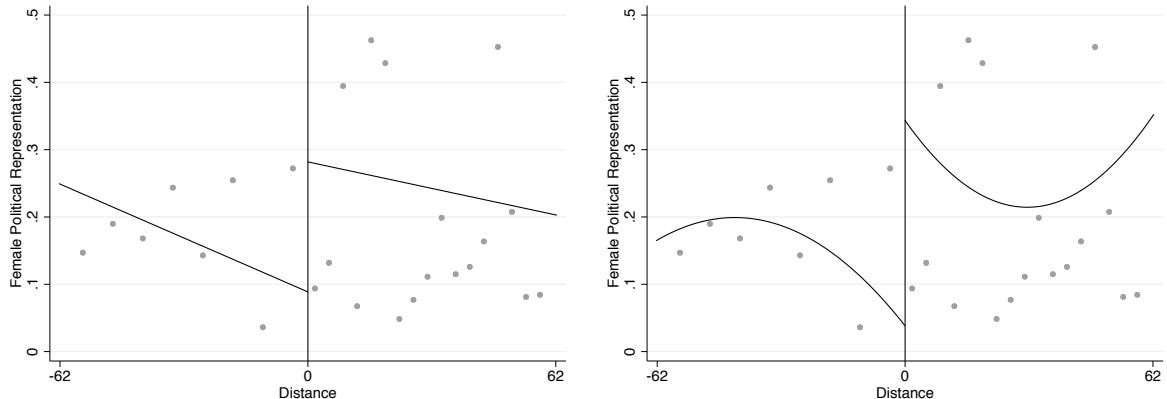
Notes: The unit of observation is an administrative unit, there are a total of 2703 in the sample .

D Additional Results

D.1 RD Plots

The two plots in Figure D1 present the correlation of Table 6 graphically just using the raw data. The figure shows the bin scatter plots of the unconditional relationship between contemporary female political representation and distance to the border. The border is at kilometer 0, where positive values indicate kilometers in the ethnic homelands which traditionally allowed for female leadership and negative values for when female leadership was not traditionally present. The first graph assumes a first degree polynomial in distance and the second one assumes a second degree polynomial.

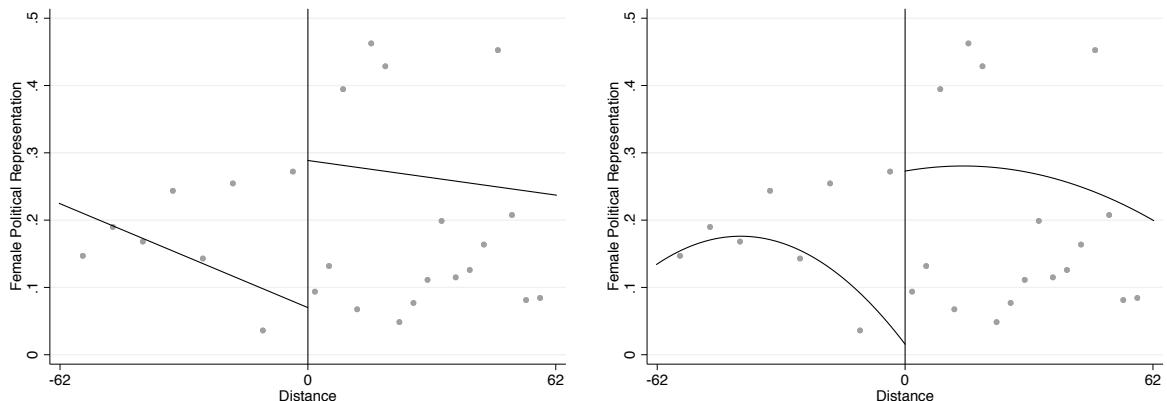
Figure D1: RD Plot - Contemporary Female Political Representation



Notes: RD plot for the unconditional relationship between contemporary female political representation and distance to the border. The border is at kilometer 0, and positive values indicate kilometers in the ethnic homelands which traditionally allow for female leadership. The first estimate uses a first degree polynomial and the second estimate uses a second degree polynomial.

The two graphs in Figure D2 present the analogous RD plots (to those of Figures D1) where average light density is controlled for. Our key findings appear robust.

Figure D2: RD Plot - Contemporary Female Political Representation (Light Density)



Notes: RD plot for the relationship between contemporary female political representation and distance to the border controlling for the average light density in the administrative unit. The border is at kilometer 0, and positive values indicate kilometers in the ethnic homelands which traditionally allow for female leadership. The first estimate assumes a first degree polynomial and the second estimate assumes a second degree polynomial.

D.2 Regression Results

Table D3: Historical Female Political Power - Female Subsistence Role

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Female Role - Gathering	-0.030 (0.056)	-0.001 (0.054)						
Female Role - Fishing			-0.000 (0.039)	-0.010 (0.040)				
Female Role - Husbandry					-0.051 (0.052)	-0.040 (0.047)		
Female Role - Agriculture							0.008 (0.049)	0.015 (0.052)
Geographic Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Economic Controls		✓		✓		✓		✓
Mean Dep. Variable	.452	.452	.37	.37	.349	.349	.369	.369
Observations	62	62	100	100	106	106	160	160

Notes: The dependent variable is an indicator for historical female political power. Coefficients represent the ols estimates between each female role in each subsistence activity and historical female political power. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Significance levels: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%.

Table D4: Historical Female Political Power - Political Interactions (Matrilocal)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Petty Chiefdom	0.097 (0.062)	0.102* (0.061)	0.127* (0.066)	0.116* (0.067)	0.139** (0.070)
Paramount Chiefdom	0.360*** (0.083)	0.310*** (0.084)	0.289*** (0.087)	0.298*** (0.086)	0.275*** (0.088)
Large State	0.561*** (0.110)	0.498*** (0.115)	0.490*** (0.122)	0.546*** (0.116)	0.538*** (0.122)
Matrilocal	-0.091** (0.044)	-0.065 (0.043)	-0.122** (0.057)	-0.159** (0.079)	-0.224** (0.093)
Petty*Matrilocal	0.436*** (0.145)	0.355** (0.150)	0.358** (0.153)	0.366** (0.158)	0.383** (0.161)
Paramount*Matrilocal	0.195 (0.188)	0.108 (0.187)	0.144 (0.194)	0.156 (0.195)	0.203 (0.204)
Large*Matrilocal	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Geographic Determinants		✓	✓	✓	✓
Economic Determinants		✓		✓	
Cultural Determinants				✓	✓
Mean Dep. Variable	.302	.303	.303	.307	.307
Observations	235	234	234	231	231

Notes: The dependent variable is an indicator for historical female political power. Columns (1)-(5) sequentially introduce geographic, economic, and cultural determinants. Coefficients represent the ols estimates between each political institution and political institution interacted with Matrilocality and female political power. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Significance levels: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%.

Table D5: Historical Female Political Power - Light Density

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Light Density	0.014*	0.007	0.005	0.011	0.008
	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.010)
Geographic Determinants		✓	✓	✓	✓
Economic Determinants			✓		
Cultural Determinants				✓	
Political Determinants					✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mean Dep. Variable	.309	.309	.309	.307	.323
Observations	236	236	236	231	220

Notes: The dependent variable is an indicator for historical female political power. Columns (1)-(5) uses a different combination of geographic, economic, cultural, and political determinants. All models have country fixed effects. Coefficients represent the ols estimates between Light Density density measure and female political power. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Significance levels: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%.

Table D6: Historical Female Political Power - Colonization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Catholic Missions	0.100	0.057				
	(0.065)	(0.064)				
Protestant Missions	0.123***	0.069				
	(0.041)	(0.046)				
Trade Route 600		-0.009	-0.126			
		(0.193)	(0.209)			
Trade Route 1700		0.044	0.098			
		(0.111)	(0.112)			
Atlantic Slave Trade				0.001	-0.003	
				(0.007)	(0.008)	
Indian Ocean Slave Trade				0.021*	0.012	
				(0.012)	(0.012)	
Geographic Determinants		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mean Dep. Variable	.308	.308	.308	.309	.309	.309
Observations	237	237	237	236	236	236

Notes: The dependent variable is an indicator for historical female political power. Coefficients represent the ols estimates between a dimension of colonization and female political power. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Significance levels: *** 1%, ** 5%, * 10%.

Table D7: Contemporary Female Political Representation - Light Density

	Specification 1:		Specification 2:		Specification 3:	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Historical Female Leadership	0.018*** (0.006)	0.030*** (0.008)	0.012** (0.006)	0.021*** (0.007)	0.020*** (0.006)	0.025*** (0.007)
Light Density	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)
Electoral FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Geographic Controls		✓		✓		✓
Economic Controls		✓		✓		✓
Cultural Controls		✓		✓		✓
Political Controls		✓		✓		✓
Plough Neg./Pos. Crops		✓		✓		✓
Mean Dep. Variable	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239
Observations	1576	1494	1966	1943	1966	1928

Notes: In columns (1) and (2) [Specification 1], Historical Female Leadership is defined as one if the largest ethnic homeland in the administrative unit traditionally allowed for female leadership. In columns (3) and (4) [Specification 2], Historical Female Leadership is defined as one if at least one of the ethnic homelands located in the administrative unit traditionally allowed for female leadership. In columns (5) and (6) [Specification 3], Historical Female Leadership is the weighted average (by land area) of an indicator variable equal to one if an ethnic group (located in the administrative unit) traditionally allowed for female leadership. Standard errors are clustered at the administrative unit level are in parentheses. Significance level: *** 1%, ** 5%, and * 10%.

Table D8: Contemporary Female Political Representation - RD Estimations - Light Density

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Historical Female						
Political Leadership	0.020*	0.019*	0.029***	0.024**	0.030***	0.031***
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Light Density	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Ethnic Pair FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Electoral FE			✓	✓	✓	✓
Geographic Controls				✓		✓
Plough Neg./Pos. Crops					✓	✓
Mean Dep. Variable	.249	.249	.249	.249	.249	.249
Observations	1033	1033	1033	1033	1033	1033

Notes: All regressions include the distance (in km) from the centroid of the administrative unit to the nearest point on the border of the ethnic group pair. Significance level: *** 1%, ** 5%, and * 10%.

Table D9: Female Political Persistence - Ethnographic Determinants

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Bride Price	0.015 (0.092)	0.009 (0.088)	0.045 (0.095)						
Polygyny	-0.107 (0.097)	-0.131 (0.100)	-0.140 (0.113)						
Matrilocal	-0.054* (0.032)	0.002 (0.030)	-0.025 (0.037)						
Matrilineal	-0.036 (0.057)	-0.050 (0.039)	-0.041 (0.074)						
Settlement			0.000 (0.011)	0.012 (0.010)	0.024* (0.013)				
Hierarchical (local)				-0.042** (0.017)	-0.021 (0.018)	-0.037** (0.018)			
Hierarchical (beyond)				-0.056*** (0.012)	-0.043*** (0.012)	-0.069*** (0.021)			
Plough Negative Crops						0.012 (0.010)	0.009 (0.012)	0.007 (0.011)	
Plough Positive Crops							-0.015 (0.017)	-0.008 (0.014)	-0.007 (0.014)
Electoral FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Geographic Controls		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
Economic Controls			✓			✓			✓
Mean Dep. Variable	0.561	0.561	0.561	0.532	0.532	0.532	0.530	0.530	0.530
Observations	916	916	916	972	972	972	980	980	980

Notes: The dependent variable is the persistence measure P_{ict} as defined in Section 5. Geographic controls include: elevation, temperature, precipitation, ecological diversity, and malaria suitability. Economic controls include the degree to which the society practiced gathering, hunting, fishing, husbandry, or agriculture. Standard errors clustered at the ethnic homeland level are in parentheses. Significance level: *** 1%, ** 5%, and * 10%.

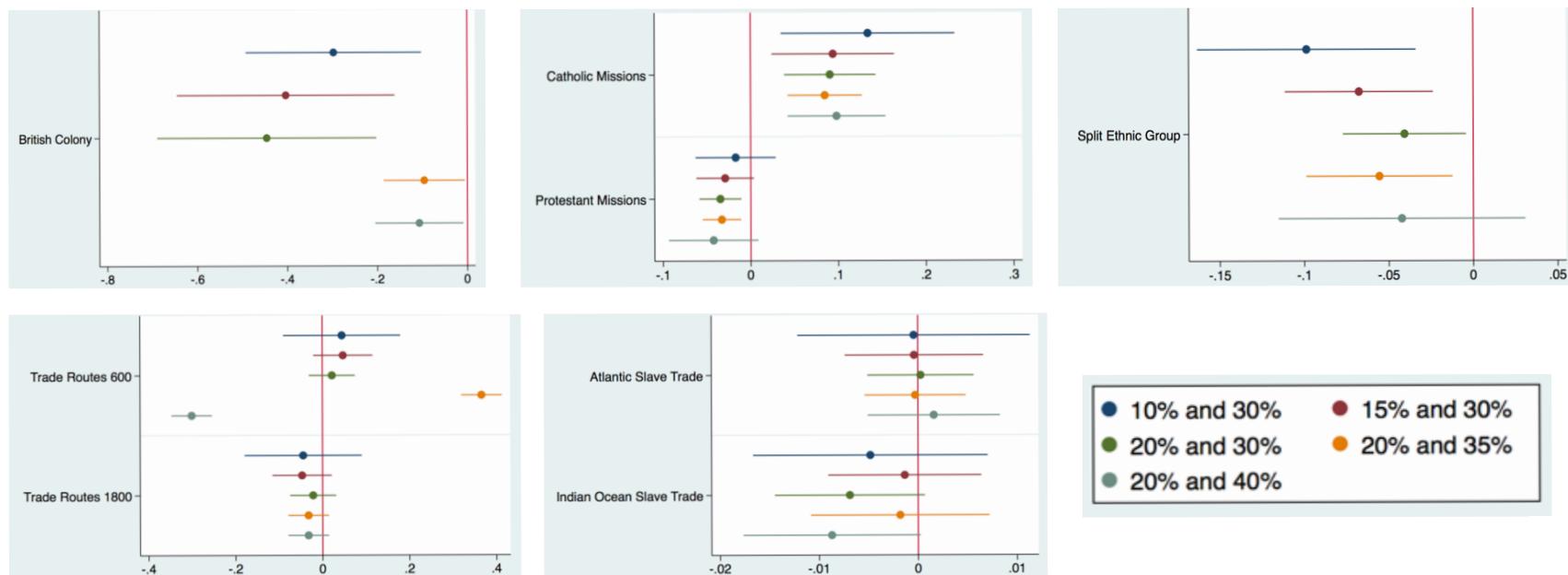
Figure D3 depicts the estimated coefficients analogous to those reported in [Table 7](#) of Section 5. The regression estimations match Panel A of [Table 7](#) in the first figure on the top left; Panel B in the top middle figure; Panel C in top right; Panel D in the bottom left; and Panel E in the bottom right. What is varied is which cutoffs are used to define our key outcome variable of interest, the persistence of female political power represented by P_{icte} .

In our main specification in [Table 7](#) (of Section 5), we construct a dummy variable, denoted by FPC_{icte}^{high} , which is equal to zero if $0 \leq FPC_{icte} < 0.30$ and the country imposes quotas at the sub-national level. For countries without a quota system, we define $FPC_{icte}^{high} = 0$ if $0 \leq FPC_{icte} < 0.15$. Otherwise, we define $FPC_{icte}^{high} = 1$. We then define a dummy variable representing persistence, denoted by P_{icte} , such that: $P_{icte} = 1$ if $FPH_{ic} = 1$ and $FPC_{icte}^{high} = 1$; and $P_{icte} = 0$ if $FPH_{ic} = 1$ and $FPC_{icte}^{high} = 0$.

So, in the main specification, we are assuming that greater than 15% female representation represents significant participation for countries without a quota, and greater than 30% for countries with a quota system in place. In Figure D1, we consider alternative cutoffs, where we increase and decrease the assumed cutoff for countries without a quota system and increase the cutoff for countries with a quota system.

In Figure D3, the blue point reflects the estimated coefficient (across the three specifications reflected in the three different panels) where we assume that greater than 10% female representation represents significant participation for countries without a quota, and greater than 30% for countries with a quota system in place. The red point uses 15% for countries without a quota and 30% for countries with a quota. The green uses 20% and 30% respectively and for the last two (yellow and grey) we increase the relevant cutoff for countries with a quota to 35% and 40% respectively.

Figure D3: Female Political Persistence and Colonization



Notes: Estimated coefficients are depicted from estimations analogous to those reported in Table 10 of Section 5. The first figure matches the regression estimations of Panel A of Table 10; the second figure for Panel B; the third figure for Panel C; the fourth figure for Panel D; and the fifth figure for Panel E. Each colored point reflects an estimated coefficient on the outcome P_{ictc} defined for different cut-offs. The legend describes the cut-offs used for countries with no quotas and the one used for countries with quotas respectively. The plots show the estimated coefficients with 90% confidence intervals (for three types of explanatory variables: British Colony; Number of Catholic and Protestant Missions; Split Ethnic Group; Occurrence of Trade Routes; and Number of Slave Exports) using these different cut-offs to define outcome variable P_{ictc} .