

Resisting Absolutism and Empire Centralization: How Early Institutions Shape Conflict

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Why do some societies resist centralization by powerful states? This paper argues that early representative institutions create enduring loyalties that shape collective responses to later political consolidation. We test this mechanism in early modern Catalonia, where the Spanish crown dismantled long-standing representative institutions in the seventeenth century. Our empirical strategy exploits The Book of Souls (Serra et al. 2015), a unique census of individuals randomly selected by lottery to serve in Catalonia's three estates—ecclesiastical, military, and royal. The lottery mechanism provides plausibly exogenous variation in exposure to political office before institutional suppression. Linking surnames across generations, we show that descendants of disenfranchised officeholders were significantly more likely to participate in anti-Bourbon revolutionary activity during the 1714 War of the Spanish Succession. Instrumental-variable estimates confirm a causal effect of institutional disenfranchisement on resistance to Bourbon centralization. The effects are strongest among urban elites and those with trade-related occupations, suggesting that economic and political incentives reinforced opposition. These findings show how early institutions forged durable political identities that constrained state-building and shaped long-term resistance to central authority.