

Wealth and Political Power. Evidence from the Foundation of Buenos Aires

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Abstract

A recent literature reports evidence on the self perpetuation of representative political power (Dal Bó, Dal Bó, and Snyder 2009; Rossi 2011). Even though this evidence can explain the observed persistence of political elites, it cannot explain why these elites got into power in the first place. In this paper I exploit a unique historical event in order to explore the causal relationship between wealth and representative political power. Shortly after the foundation of Buenos Aires, plots of lands in the outskirts of the city were randomly assigned to all heads of household that participated in the expedition. This random allocation of lands generated an exogenous variation on families' wealth that I exploit in order to identify the causal relationship between wealth and the probability of having posterior political success. I find that those families receiving lands closer to the city of Buenos Aires have a higher probability of having political success, thus providing support to the hypothesis that wealth causes political power.

JEL Classification: N46; D70; J45.

Keywords: elites; political dynasties; representative political power; natural experiment; foundation of Buenos Aires.

First version: May 2010

This version: January 2011

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1. Introduction

A recent literature on political dynasties reports evidence on the self perpetuation of political power in democracies (Dal Bó, Dal Bó, and Snyder 2009; Rossi 2011). Even though the reported evidence that power begets power can explain the observed persistence of political elites, it cannot explain why certain families got into power in the first place.¹ The question, then, remains: what is the origin of representative political power? A usual suspect is wealth, and there is plenty of casual evidence providing support to this conjecture. For example, Silvio Berlusconi is both Italy's prime minister and the richest person in the country. And the super-rich Rockefellers are in the top three of America political dynasties with a vice president, three governors, two senators, and two representatives (Hess 1997). The observed correlation between wealth and political power, however, does not help to address whether there is a causal relationship between wealth and posterior political success, even in those cases where political power comes chronologically after wealth: a family type may explain both why some families are wealthy and why they have posterior political success.

In this paper I exploit a unique historical event that provides a source of exogenous variation for families' wealth, thus allowing the identification of the causal link between wealth and posterior political success. Shortly after the foundation of Buenos Aires, plots of lands in the outskirts of the city were randomly assigned to all heads of household that participated in the expedition. Thus, for reasons totally unrelated to family characteristics some families received lands close to the city whereas others received lands far from the city. This random allocation of lands generated an exogenous variation on families' wealth that I exploit in order to identify the causal relationship between wealth and the probability of having posterior political success. I find that those families receiving lands

¹ For a theoretical model on the persistence of political elites, see Acemoglu and Robinson (2008).

closer to the city of Buenos Aires have a higher probability of having posterior political success, thus providing support to the hypothesis that wealth causes political power.

The rest of the paper is as follows. Section 2 describes the foundation of Buenos Aires and the colonial political power. Section 3 introduces the natural experiment and presents the data. Section 4 reports the econometric model and the results. Section 5 concludes.

2. Foundation of Buenos Aires and colonial political power

Buenos Aires (now the capital of Argentina) was founded twice. A settlement at the present day site was established in 1536 by Don Pedro de Mendoza, but continuous attacks by local aborigines forced the settlers away, and in 1541 the site was completely abandoned. In April 1578 Juan de Garay received a mandate from the Spanish crown for a second expedition. As part of the preparation, in January 1580 Garay published in Asunción (now the capital of Paraguay) a call for heads of household willing to participate in the new expedition. Most of the answers to this call were from citizens born in Asunción, descendants of Spaniards and indigenous women, without any previous political experience, and tempted by the promise of getting lands in the new city (Orquera, 2006). Out of the 65 heads of household that ended up participating in the expedition (64 men and one woman), 13 were born in Spain and the others in the Americas (Gammalson, 1980). In May 1580 Garay arrived by sailing down the Paraná River from Asunción, and named the new city *Trinidad* and its port *Santa María de los Buenos Ayres*.

The city of Buenos Aires was formally founded in June 11, 1580. On that day, Garay appointed the initial members of the city government (*cabildo*). According to the Laws of the Indies, the conqueror had the attribution to choose the initial members of the city government. The initial city government was formed by neighbors of the city and consisted of two mayors, six aldermen, and one city attorney.

The officials of colonial *cabildos* had different roles. The mayors, the most important position in the city government, served as judges of first instance in all criminal and civil cases and acted as presiding officers of the city government. The aldermen were in charge of the administration of the territory, whereas the city attorney was the legal representative of the city.

The duration of the mandates was one year, and the officials had to wait for one term before being eligible for re-election. The members of the city government were elected annually (traditionally on January 1) by the neighbors of the city (Gammalson 1980; Lynch 2006). Even though the positions were *ad honorem*, being a member of the city government was desirable. The allocation of lands was an attribution of the *cabildo* of Buenos Aires (Rodriguez Molas 1982). This was important in a context where land tenancy and social status could not be dissociated (Rodriguez Molas 1982). The city government was also in charge of solving land disputes between neighbors and establishing the rules and authorization for *vaquerias* (the right to slaughter the wild cattle in the countryside).² To give an example of the importance of being a member of the *cabildo*, in April 1609 the city government gave allowances for *vaquerias* to only forty neighbors out of the two hundred. The beneficiaries were mostly officers or previous officers of the city government.

3. Natural experiment and data

In October 1580 Juan de Garay proceeded to distribute lands inside and outside the city limits among the 65 first inhabitants. According to the Laws of the Indies (see *Disposiciones de Felipe II en las Ordenanzas de 1573*) lands had to be distributed using random assignment (see also Pando 1987, p. 60).³ Inside the city he distributed plots of

² Before the 17th century there was almost no livestock in the area, only allowances for *vaquerias* provided by the *cabildo*.

³ For example, lands were also assigned randomly after the foundation of Montevideo (now the capital of Uruguay). See <http://www.escueladigital.com.uy/historia/colonizacion/fundmvd.htm>.

land (*solares*) that were used for residential purposes (Figueira 2006). Outside the city limits Garay distributed farms called *suertes de chacra* (*suerte* means luck in Spanish). All these farms headed east facing the Río de La Plata and had between 255 and 425 meters width and approximate 5,200 meters long. The first farm was located just outside the city limits, in the current neighborhood of Retiro, and the last one was located approximately 21 kilometers to the north of the city limits, in the current town of San Fernando. That is, all the farms distributed by Garay were located to the north of the city. The reason for distributing lands only to the north of the city is that the lands heading the river to the south of the city are swamps, and even today these lands remain unused. At that time the lands to the west were occupied by local aborigines.

From the very beginning the land was valuable and the farms were used to produce wine and to cultivate fruits, vegetables, and cereal crops (Gammalson 1980, pp. 41-42).⁴ Five years after the foundation of Buenos Aires the estimated harvest in this area was 472 tons of wheat, 341 tons of barley, and 28 tons of corn (Figueira 2006).

I use the distance of the farms to the city of Buenos Aires (*Distance*, in Kilometers) as an instrument for wealth. The random allocation of the farms suggests that *Distance* may be exogenous in a model of political power. Since at that time families resided in the city and the farms were worked by aborigines and slaves, in principle the supply of time available for political activities should not be directly affected by the distance of the farm to the city.⁵ In the results section I also show a false experiment that reassure the exogeneity of *Distance*.

Aside from being exogenous, there are at least two reasons to believe that *Distance* is a relevant instrument for wealth. First, the combination of harvest transported by land

⁴ Garay also distributed bigger plots of land in the countryside, the so called *suertes de estancia*. These lands, however, were not occupied until the end of the 17th century (Pando 1987).

⁵ Still, wealth might have a potential direct effect on the supply of time available for political activities since the positions in the city council were *ad honorem*.

from the farms to the city and very precarious roads (González Lebrero 2002, p. 84) made the distance between the farm and the city an important driver of agriculture costs. To have an idea of travel times during that period, covering the 620 kilometers between the port of Buenos Aires and the city of Córdoba took about 30 days (Rodríguez Molas 1982, pp. 21-22). Floods and attacks by aborigines made the situation even worse. Second, not only the roads but also the farms were frequently attacked by aborigines (González Lebrero 2002, p. 47 and p. 84), and those farms closer to the city fort were more protected. Indeed, even today the price of the land decreases with the distance to the city of Buenos Aires (Cruces, Ham, and Tetaz 2010).⁶

Using the language of experiments, *Distance* can be thought as a continuous treatment variable. This variable was constructed using official registries of that time.⁷ The average distance of the farms to the city of Buenos Aires is ten kilometers, with a maximum distance of 21 kilometers.

The outcome of interest is *Political Power*, a dummy variable that takes the value of one for those heads of household with posterior political power (that is, member of the city government after 1580) and/or that had relatives with political power in the future (35 percent of the sample). The political positions considered are mayor, alderman, and attorney in the city government. This variable was constructed based on the genealogical trees in Gammalson (1980) and cross checked with information from original sources. If for one particular head of household there is no information on the genealogical tree, I assume that for that head of household there are no descendants with political power. Later on I show that the results hold when the sample is restricted to those heads of household for whom genealogical information is available.

⁶ Of course, this is only indicative since the land in the geographical area I am analyzing is now used for residential purposes, and the same land at the beginning of colonial times was used for agriculture.

⁷ See *Fundación de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, por Don Juan de Garay, con otros Documentos de Aquella Época*. Buenos Aires, Imprenta del Estado, 1836.

From the 65 foundational heads of household, twelve held a posterior political position (six of them won the position of mayor), and 16 had a relative holding political power in the future.

The database has also information on a set of individual characteristics (previous to the random assignment of lands or pre-treatment) for the 65 heads of household that participated in the foundation of Buenos Aires: *Previous Political Power* is a dummy variable that takes the value of one for Juan De Garay, his son, and the foundational members of the city government chosen by Garay (16 percent of the sample); *Spaniard* is a dummy variable that takes the value of one if the head of household was born in Spain (20 percent of the sample); and *Previous Children* is a dummy variable that takes the value of one if the head of household came to the expedition accompanied by his or her children (18 percent of the sample). All the information on the individual characteristics was obtained from Gammalson (1980) and, whenever possible, cross checked with original sources. Finally, I create a variable (*Width*, in meters) to capture the differences in width between farms. Given that farms had similar length (Pando 1987), *Width* is a proxy variable for farms' size. It is not clear from the historical registries the reason why the farms had different size. But taking into account that *Width* is not correlated with *Distance* (the correlation is equal to -0.15, and not significant), two possibilities arise. The first possibility is that Garay randomly awarded farms of different size. In this case, *Width* would play a similar role to *Distance*, provided one is willing to accept that larger farms are more valuable. The second possibility is that, even though the order of the lands (that is, the distance of the farm to the city) was randomly allocated, Garay used his discretion to favor some inhabitants by giving them a larger farm. If this were the case, the differences in farm's width would reflect some (pre-treatment) heterogeneity in individual characteristics; for example, how highly the individual was in the consideration of Garay.

The latter conjecture is supported by the data: *Width* is positively correlated with holding previous political power and with being Spaniard. Therefore, I assume through the paper that differences in width are a proxy for an unobservable individual characteristic capturing some sort of (pre-treatment) social or economic status. Notice that this is the most conservative approach given that *Width* is positively and significantly correlated with *Political Power*.

Summary statistics are reported in Table 1. Although the location of lands was randomly assigned, it is useful to examine whether, *ex post*, the pre-treatment characteristics of the heads of household are correlated with *Distance*. Table 2 reports the results of regressions of *Distance* on the set of the individual pre-treatment characteristics. As shown in columns (1) to (5), the pre-treatment characteristics are individually and jointly not significant predictors of *Distance* (the F statistic p-value is equal to 0.37) thus suggesting that the randomization was successful in ensuring orthogonality between covariates and treatment assignment. Of particular importance is the fact that *Spaniard* is not correlated with *Distance* (in fact, the conditional correlation is positive) since some authors report that Garay was biased in favor of Spaniards to the detriment of descendants of Europeans born in the Americas (Orquera 2006).

One potential concern may arise from the inclusion in the analysis of those heads of household with previous political power: after all, the objective of the paper is to explore the origins of political power. Therefore, in column (6) I report the same exercise for the sub-sample of heads of household without previous political power and find similar results (the F statistic p-value is equal to 0.75).

In addition, the main results in the paper do not change substantially if the set of individual characteristics are included as controls.

3. Econometric model and results

As discussed above, unobserved family characteristics may potentially bias OLS estimates of wealth in a regression model for political power. To overcome this problem I use the randomly allocated distance of the farm to the city as an instrument for wealth. Since wealth data is not available at the individual or family level, I estimate the following reduced form regression:

$$\text{Political Power}_i = \alpha + \gamma \text{Distance}_i + \beta X_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where γ is the (reduced form) parameter of interest, X_i is a matrix of individuals' characteristics, and ε_i is the error term.

An anticipation of the main results is shown in Figure 1. This figure represents the proportion of heads of household with posterior political success in terms of the distance of the farm to the city, and suggests that the probability of having posterior political success is negatively related to the distance of the farm to the city: 50 percent of the heads of household that received a farm located within seven kilometers from the city limits have some sort of posterior political power, compared to 14 percent of those receiving lands located between 14 and 21 kilometers from the city limits (the difference is statistically significant at the one percent level).

The main results are reported in Table 3. As shown in column (1), *Distance* is a significant predictor of the probability of having posterior political success. The effect is not only statistically significant but also quantitatively substantial. An increase of one standard deviation in the distance of the farm to the city (six kilometers) decreases the probability of having posterior political power in about twelve percent.

As observed in column (2), the value and significance of the coefficient of *Distance* remains unchanged when I control for holding previous political power. The coefficient of *Previous Political Power* is interesting in itself: holding a previous political position

increases the probability of having posterior political success in about 28 percent. This is in line with the previous literature on the self perpetuation of political power.

In column (3) I control for the set of pre-treatment characteristics available. Again, the value of the coefficient on *Distance* is negative and statistically significant at the ten percent level, and its value similar to the previous ones. In this model, the coefficient corresponding to *Width* is positive and significant, and the magnitude of the coefficient suggests that an increase of one standard deviation in the farm's width (35 meters) increases the probability of having political success in the future in about 15 percent.

As reported in columns (4) to (6), the impact of *Distance* on *Political Power* is significant when the sample is restricted to those heads of household without previous political power (without and with controls) and when Ana Díaz is excluded from the sample. (The latter is of potential relevance given that women were not eligible for political positions.)

Overall, under the assumption that the distance of the farm to the city is capturing differences in families' wealth, the results indicate that wealthier families are more likely to have posterior political success.

Robustness checks

I also run a series of additional robustness checks. First, I define posterior political power as the number of family members that held a position in the city council (instead of a dummy variable) after 1580. Again, as reported in columns (1) and (2) in Table 4, *Distance* is negatively correlated with the alternative measure of posterior political success.

Second, I restrict the analysis to those heads of household for whom the genealogical tree is available. As shown in columns (3) and (4) in Table 4, the negative relationship between distance and the probability of having posterior dynastic power

persists in this restricted sample, thus suggesting that the availability of data on descendants is not driving the results. Indeed, it is noteworthy that I manage to find significant effects given the relatively small sample available.

False experiment

I run a false experiment to reassure that the reported correlation between the distance of the farms to the city and posterior political power is not emerging from a spurious negative correlation between availability of information on descendants and distance to the city. I create a dummy variable that takes the value of one for those heads of household with posterior relatives in the military (captain or superior), using again the genealogical trees in Gammalson (1980). As reported in Table 5, the coefficient on *Distance* is both not significant and small. The coefficients on distance are three to thirteen times larger (depending on the particular regression) in the models of political power compared to the models of serving in the military. Interestingly, the heads of household holding a military position are 27 percent more likely to have posterior relatives in the military, a figure that is similar to the one obtained in the model of political power.

Mechanisms

I explore three possible mechanisms behind the result that wealth is causing representative political power: (i) number of descendants, (ii) purchasing the positions in office, and (iii) wealth as a device to solve a problem of asymmetric information between voters and candidates to political positions.

First, I show that the main result of the paper does not emerge from a correlation between wealth and the number of direct descendants. Column (1) in Table 6 shows that *Distance* is not significantly correlated with *Number of Children* (a variable capturing the

total number of recognized children of the foundational neighbors).⁸ Since political power at that time was held by men, I replicate the exercise in column (1) but computing only the number of recognized sons. As report in column (2), there is no significant correlation between *Distance* and the number of sons. These results, jointly with those reported in columns (3) and (4) in Table 4 reassure that the correlation between *Distance* and *Political Power* is not due to the number of descendants or to the availability of information on descendants.

Second, I explore the possibility that the results are driven by wealthier neighbors purchasing their positions in office; after all, from the end of the 16th century some of the positions in the *cabildo* were available for sale (the positions of alderman and city attorney could be legally sold in public auction, whereas the position of mayor was not for sale). To explore the purchasing-of-positions mechanism I consider as posterior political power only the position of mayor, the position in the *cabildo* that was not available for sale. As reported in column (3) in Table 6, the main result is maintained. Of course, there is still the possibility of wealthier neighbors buying votes in a non legal way in order to win the position of mayor.

Finally, I explore the possibility that wealth is signaling type in an intergenerational context. To do so, I propose a very simple two-generation setting in which I assume that: (i) all citizens are interested in obtaining political power, so all citizens are potential candidates for the political positions available. This assumption matches the data in this paper (see the discussion in the final paragraph in Section 2); (ii) the candidates are of high or low type regarding their productivity as *cabildo* officers, and the type of the candidate is not directly observed by voters; (iii) the wealth of the candidate is observable by the voter, and it may provide a signal for type.

⁸ There is only information available on recognized children, that is, children that the foundational neighbors had with their wives.

Two problems of asymmetric information are faced by the principal (the voter). The first one is related to monitoring consumption (as in Di Tella and Weinschelbaum 2008). In trying to minimize the expected bribe taking by representatives, voters have to weight on three opposite effects. First, wealthier agents have lower marginal utility of income, thus having fewer incentives to take bribes. Second, consumption of wealthy agents is more difficult to monitor, which increases the incentive of wealthy agents to take bribes. Third, and related to the type of the agent problem discussed below, if wealthier agents have higher ability, they might use this ability to avoid being captured when taking bribes.

The second problem of asymmetric information relates to the unobserved type of the agent (the officer of the city government). If (observable) wealth is positively correlated with agent's (unobservable) type, principals willing to hire a good agent will choose, *ceteris paribus*, wealthy representatives.

For the generation of agents that participated in the random allocation of lands, the variability of wealth arising from the differences in the distance of the farm to the city of Buenos Aires is not informative on their type. Therefore, for this group of individuals being assigned a farm closer to the city of Buenos Aires should not increase the probability of being elected into office through the signaling-of-type channel.

From an intergenerational perspective, however, wealth and type are likely to be correlated, in the sense that is expected that a higher level of wealth in generation t would be positively correlated with good agents in generation $t+1$. This positive correlation could arise, for example, from better nutrition and education (important in a context of general under nutrition and paid education). This implies that the wealth of the foundational neighbors provides a signal for their descendants' type. In this context, an observational implication is that the observed correlation between *Distance* and *Political Power* has to be weaker for the foundational neighbors compared to their descendants.

In order to test the model, in columns (4) and (5) in Table 6 I distinguish between holding posterior political power (*Own Posterior Political Power*) and having posterior relatives holding political power (*Post Relative Posterior Power*). As implied by the model, the relationship between wealth and political power is small and not significant for the current generation, and larger (in absolute value) and strongly significant for posterior generations. This provides some support to the hypothesis that wealth is providing a signal for type.

4. Conclusions

The second foundation of Buenos Aires provides an ideal setting to study the origins of representative political power. First, most of the participants in the foundational expedition were citizens born in the Americas without previous political positions. Second, lands in the outskirts of the city were randomly assigned to all participants of the expedition shortly after the foundation of the city, generating an exogenous variation of wealth that can be exploited in order to identify the causal relationship between wealth and posterior political success. I find that those families receiving lands closer to the city of Buenos Aires have a higher probability of having political success, thus providing support to the hypothesis that wealth causes political power. I also test for mechanisms and find some evidence that the result is not emerging from a correlation between wealth and the number of direct descendants or from the legal purchase of political positions. I do find some support to the hypothesis that wealth is providing a signal for type.

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Table 1. Summary statistics

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
Distance (in kilometers)	10.64	6.15
Political Power	0.35	0.48
Previous Political Power	0.17	0.38
Spaniard	0.20	0.40
Previous Children	0.18	0.39
Width (in meters)	319.52	35.46

Note: The total number of observations is 65.

Table 2. Relationship between the distance of the farm to the city and the pre-treatment characteristics

	<i>Distance</i>					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Previous Political Position	-3.121 (2.020)				-2.240 (2.717)	
Spaniard		-1.412 (1.858)			0.390 (2.271)	1.763 (2.617)
Previous Children			-2.405 (2.073)		-1.913 (1.987)	-0.461 (2.569)
Width				-0.026 (0.022)	-0.014 (0.024)	0.025 (0.033)
Observations	65	65	65	65	65	54

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Model (6) excludes individuals with previous political positions. All models include an intercept and are estimated by OLS.

Table 3. Estimates for the probability of having posterior political success

	<i>Dependent variable: Political Power</i>					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Distance	-0.022** (0.009)	-0.018** (0.009)	-0.016* (0.009)	-0.020** (0.009)	-0.024*** (0.009)	-0.024*** (0.010)
Previous Political Position		0.283* (0.170)	0.045 (0.227)			
Spaniard			0.024 (0.180)		0.188 (0.211)	0.192 (0.211)
Previous Children			0.095 (0.159)		0.097 (0.202)	0.085 (0.226)
Width			0.004*** (0.001)		0.004** (0.002)	0.004** (0.002)
Constant	0.583*** (0.119)	0.500*** (0.129)	-0.918** (0.467)	0.521*** (0.135)	-0.834 (0.600)	-0.867 (0.626)
Observations	65	65	65	54	54	53

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Models (4) to (6) and (10) to (12) exclude from the sample those individuals with previous political positions. Models (6) and (12) also exclude Ana Díaz (the only woman that was a head of household). Models (7) to (12) restrict the sample to those heads of household for whom the genealogical tree is available. All models are estimated by OLS. *Significant at the 10% level. **Significant at the 5% level. ***Significant at the 1% level.

Table 4. Robustness checks

	<i>Dependent variable: Number of Descendants with Political Power</i>		<i>Dependent variable: Political Power</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Distance	-0.040* (0.023)	-0.012 (0.008)	-0.029** (0.013)	-0.032** (0.016)
Constant	0.671** (0.339)	0.285** (0.138)	0.890*** (0.137)	0.889*** (0.199)
Observations	65	54	33	25

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. Models (3) and (4) restrict the sample to those heads of household for whom the genealogical tree is available. All models are estimated by OLS. *Significant at the 10% level. **Significant at the 5% level. ***Significant at the 1% level.

Table 5. False experiment: posterior relatives in the military

	<i>Posterior Relatives in the Military</i>	
	(1)	(2)
Distance	-0.005 (0.009)	-0.001 (0.008)
Military		0.269* (0.159)
Constant	0.329*** (0.114)	0.241** (0.104)
Observations	65	65

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. All models are estimated by OLS. *Significant at the 10% level. **Significant at the 5% level. ***Significant at the 1% level.

Table 6. Exploring mechanisms

	<i>Number of Children</i>	<i>Number of Sons</i>	<i>Political Power Mayor</i>	<i>Own Political Power</i>	<i>Post Relative Political Power</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Distance	-0.066 (0.057)	-0.029 (0.036)	-0.010* (0.006)	-0.005 (0.007)	-0.017* (0.009)
Constant	3.401*** (0.761)	1.527*** (0.469)	0.242*** (0.092)	0.240*** (0.097)	0.427*** (0.118)
Observations	33	33	65	65	65

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. All models are estimated by OLS. *Significant at the 10% level. **Significant at the 5% level. ***Significant at the 1% level.

Figure 1. Relationship between the distance of the farm to the city and posterior political success

