# The Political Legacy of Elite Repression*

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**Abstract**

Most work on the legacies of violence studies mass repression. In this paper, we explore the longterm effects of selective repression of local elites on ordinary community members who had not been subject to direct repression. Drawing on the literature on the legacy of violence against civilians, we hypothesize that elite-targeted repression creates a political backlash in the affected communities. Examining the legacy of Nazi-era repression of Catholic clergy in Bavaria we ask whether historical repression against Catholic priests is associated with higher support for Christian Democrats after WWII. We find that municipalities where Catholic priests had been repressed are more likely to vote for Christian Democrats in the post-war elections. The legacy of priest repression on voting behavior persists into the present, although its magnitude wanes overtime. These findings suggest that repression of elites leaves lasting intergenerational legacies on mass political and social behavior.

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# 1 Introduction

The Dachau concentration camp, a major hub in the machinery of Nazi repression, held some 2,600 Roman Catholic priests, about a quarter of these from Germany. Around 15% of German Catholic priests in Dachau perished there (Berben, 1975). The Nazi state exterminated Jews, persecuted ethnic and social minorities like the Roma and the homosexuals, and euthanized many mentally and physically handicapped (Shirer, 1960). It also carried out a determined and large-scale campaign of intimidation against the Catholic church on German soil.[1] Seeing Roman Catholicism as a direct challenge to the supremacy of national socialism, Nazi leadership wanted the Church out of the public sphere so that the control over the hearts and minds of the faithful would pass over to the state (Lewy, 2000).[2]

We leverage this episode of historical anti-Catholic repression to address a significant theoretical question: Does persecution of community leaders influence the identity and political behavior of followers who are not directly subjected to repression? We argue that repression of elites challenges the communal identity embodied by the targeted leaders, and in doing so, generates communal trauma. This trauma, in turn, may prompt ordinary community members to adjust their political behavior as a defensive response aimed at protecting group identity in a backlash against the original act of repression. In exploring the legacy of elite repression we fill a gap in the quantitative literature on the legacies of violence, which to date has largely focused on persecution and intimidation of ordinary individuals and mass repression of groups, but has not examined in sufficient detail the repercussions of targeted repression against elites.[3]

[1] The scale of this campaign was, of course, insignificant relative to the persecution of Jews and other minorities.

[2] The Protestant church was not subject to the same level of Nazi repression. This is because, organizationally, Protestantism was much more splintered and therefore less of a centralized threat and was a religious tradition native to Germany, unlike Catholicism. Under Nazism a powerful pro-state Protestant movement emerged, the Reich Church.

[3] A selection of the broader literature on the legacies of violence includes Nunn and Wantchekon (2011), Balcells (2012), Voigtländer and Voth (2012), Besley and Reynal-Querol (2014), Charnysh (2015), Acharya, Blackwell and Sen (2016), Lupu and Peisakhin (2017), Rozenas, Schutte and Zhukov (2017), Osorio, Schubiger and Weintraub (2018), and Fouka (2018).

We draw expectations about why and how repression of leaders exerts long-lasting effects on political attitudes of followers from two literatures. First, the scholarship on the legacies of violence demonstrates that violence leads to trauma among the direct victims and their descendants (Balcells, 2012; Lupu and Peisakhin, 2017; Rozenas, Schutte and Zhukov, 2017). This trauma often results in the strengthening of in-group identity and backlash against the perpetrator (Staub, 2006; Canetti et al., 2013). Further, scholars argue that victimization experienced by individuals and families can give rise to collective trauma, whereby community members who had not experienced violence themselves come to share an indirect sense of victimhood through collective meaning creation (Alexander et al., 2004; Lifton, 2005; Vollhardt, 2012; Charnysh and Peisakhin, 2019). Second, the literature on the influence of elites on collective meaning creation and the policing of group identity has argued that elites play a crucial role in shaping collective meaning—including the sense of collective victimhood—and in socializing individuals into group values (Cavalli-Sforza et al., 1982; Zaller, 1992).

Building on this set of arguments we hypothesize that repression of elites intended as a challenge to dominant community identity leaves a lasting legacy on ordinary community members. Repression of a prominent leader is a trigger that might give rise to a sense of collective trauma—both because elites embody communal values and because they shape collective meaning—and therefore compel residents to double down in defense of their way of life and strengthen ingroup identity against outsiders. We expect the act of elite repression to result in a lasting shift in social and political identities in the affected locality in defense of the threatened community identity.

Elites are important because they influence the formation of public preferences in the realm of politics (Zaller, 1992; Druckman and Lupia, 2000; Linz, 2012). *Religious* elites can be especially consequential because they set the moral tone for communal life and, in the case of Catholicism, hold the keys to the afterlife. Under authoritarianism, religious groups maintain what are often the only cross-cutting large-scale associations outside of the purview of the state, and therefore "the history lesson for the authoritarian ruler is clear:

religion should be suppressed or contained" (Koesel, 2014, p. 4). When religious elites in authoritarian settings choose to flex their political muscle, they are capable of mounting a powerful challenge to the ruler, as the ayatollahs did in Iran in 1979, or the Catholic clergy in Latin America and Poland during the third wave of democratization, or Muslim clerics in the Arab Spring (Gill, 1998; Nugent, 2020).

We test the theoretical proposition that elite repression results in lasting changes in the political behavior of ordinary community members in the context of Nazi repression of Catholic priests in Bavaria, a predominantly Catholic region of southern Germany. Priests were targeted alongside Nazi repression's main victims—Jews, socialists, homosexuals, and the handicapped—specifically for challenging Nazi ideology's attempted dominance in political and social life. Because of the nature of priest appointments, this targeted repression was largely orthogonal to community characteristics (Hoffmann, 1977; Lewy, 2000). To examine the effect of clerical repression we draw on a compendium detailing Catholic priest persecution (von Hehl, 1996). The data that we digitized and geolocated indicate that a little under half of all Catholic clergy in Bavaria (3,975 of around 8,500 priests) experienced some form of repression at the hands of the Nazi state in 1933–1945. Repression ranged from minor police warnings to death sentences, but most of it was non-violent, low-intensity coercion in the form of surveillance, threats, professional bans, and fines.[4] As Levitsky and Way (2010) noted, low-intensity coercion requires high state capacity and is considerably more effective in silencing the opposition than sporadic violent repression of mass protests. The fact that we study primarily the legacy of low-intensity coercion against elites is an important scope condition of the argument.

Under the Weimar Republic (1918-1933), in Bavarian Catholic communities life revolved around religious identity. "Opposition to various aspects of modernization triggered the development of a dense matrix consisting of religious community, associations and clubs, schools, and political representation in the form of the Centre Party (Zentrum). Within

[4] "Low-intensity coercion" is a term that we borrow from Levitsky and Way (2010). Ferree (2005) termed this "soft repression" and Davenport (2007) referred to it as "civil liberties restrictions".

this web of institutions and organizations questions of life and death were clarified and the meaning of life defined" (Grossboelting, 2016, p. 27). When the Nazi state erupted on the scene and began to repress Catholic clergy, many ordinary Catholics interpreted this as an assault on their way of life. The result was an emergence of a sense of collective trauma and a hardening of the desire to protect the Catholic community from possible future encroachment by state authorities.

The best way to respond to the collective memory of trauma going forward was to back a political party that was most likely to defend Catholic values. In the post-1945 period, Christian Democrats (running as Christian Social Union, CSU, in Bavaria, and as Christian Democratic Union, CDU, nationally) were that party. In the words of a leading historian of the Catholic church in post-1945 Germany, "the CDU now had a partner in its aggressive canvassing of Catholic voters and the majority of bishops and their various dioceses massively supported the Union in the elections of 1949 and 1953, not just through more or less open appeals to voters to support the party but also by making Church infrastructure available to it" (Grossboelting, 2016, p. 61). Under the CDU/CSU government, the Church Tax was introduced at the national level and became a vital source of funding for both Catholic and Protestant denominations, confessional religious education became a regular subject in state schools, the state promoted Catholic family values, and church officials were introduced into key state institutions like the Army, the broadcasting authorities, and government ethics commissions. Protestant critics maintained that the government was "under obvious or tacit Catholic leadership," and many ordinary Catholics considered CDU/CSU to be the "contemporary continuation of the old Center party" (Grossboelting, 2016, p. 59).

Our expectation then is that the communal backlash against elite repression should result in higher support for the political party most likely to prevent future attacks against the dominant communal identity. Consistent with this expectation, we find that historically rural and predominantly Catholic municipalities where parish priests had been repressed under Nazism were more likely to vote for the Christian Democrats in the initial post-war elections

(1949-1969) by around two percentage points relative to municipalities where no clergy had been repressed. In the analyses of the more recent elections we show how the legacy effect of Nazi-era priest repression persisted into the 21st century and gradually diminished over time, until it was no longer discernible by 2021.

We test the microfoundations of the argument by showing that the effects of priest repression were higher in smaller municipalities, where the sense of communal identity was tighter. We also demonstrate that the legacy effects of priest repression were stronger in communities where priests served longer and therefore had a chance to bond more meaningfully with their parishioners. In this way we are able to link Catholic community strength to stronger legacy effects of priest repression after the war.

What are the mechanisms behind the transmission of the legacy effects of elite repression? Initially, it was the Catholic church itself, the institution that had been repressed, that kept alive the memory of a political threat to Catholicism. Many priests who had been repressed by the Nazis continued to serve in the same parishes after WWII. Elsewhere, the acts of historical repression were likely brought up in sermons. We demonstrate that in communities that experienced priest repression mass attendance and voter turnout levels were higher in the post-war decades.[5] Starting in the late 1960s, as priests retired and died, and secularization began to empty out the churches, the institutional mechanism was no longer sufficient. At that time, family transmission of partisanship gradually came to replace it (on intergenerational transmission of partisanship see Campbell et al. (1960); Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2004); Jennings, Stoker and Bowers (2009)). The first generation that directly witnessed priest repression and thus developed warmer feelings toward Christian Democrats as the potential bulwark against future encroachment on the Church transmitted these warmer feelings toward the CSU to their offspring, even as religiosity among the later

[5]CDU/CSU is traditionally more favorable to regional rights than the Socialist party (SPD), historically Germany's other major party. Thus, it could be conjectured that we are picking up the effect of stronger preferences for Bavarian regionalism in the repressed communities. The fact that mass attendance levels are higher in communities where priests had been repressed links higher support for CSU directly to the Catholic church rather than the secular spirit of Bavarian regionalism.

generations was declining.[6]

The findings, in their totality, furnish evidence in support of the hypothesis that ordinary individuals alter their political behavior in response to communal trauma triggered by elite repression. We expect our argument to hold under conditions of "soft" and relatively short-lived repression in communities that have a strong sense of groupness. The analysis contributes to the literature on the legacies of violence by showing that repression *against elites* is one of the mechanisms by which violence reshapes political behavior over the long-term. To the best of our knowledge, ours is among the first studies of the effects of elite repression on long-term shifts in political behavior (also see Krakowski and Schaub (2022); Martinez (2022); Charnysh and Pique (2023)). Second, we contribute to studies on the influence of religious authorities on political behavior (Djupe and Gilbert, 2003; Trejo, 2009; Condra, Isaqzadeh and Linardi, 2019; McClendon and Riedl, 2019; Blair et al., 2021; Pulejo, 2023). Work in this tradition emphasizes how the church can be a safe haven for anti-regime sentiment with far-reaching implications both for regime collapse and for subsequent post-authoritarian politics (Wittenberg, 2006; Grzymała-Busse, 2015).

# 2 The Catholic Church and the German State

## 2.1 Repression of the Catholic Church

In Germany, the church-state struggle first became intense in the *Kulturkampf* (culture war) of 1872–78, when Chancellor Bismarck attempted to seize control over clerical appointments and to force the Catholic Church out of education. These attempts failed, and the Church emerged out of the *Kulturkampf* with a powerful political party, the Center Party (*Zentrum*), and gradually became a major force in German party politics (Kalyvas, 1996). In the last few elections before the Nazis seized power in 1933, the Center Party and its

[6]To demonstrate intergenerational transmission of partisanship requires survey evidence across multiple generations. These data are not available.

Bavarian ally held about 15% of all seats in the federal parliament. At the individual level, being Catholic became a strong predictor of not voting for the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) (Spenkuch and Tillmann, 2018; Becker and Voth, 2023).

The Center Party's senior officials, notably Franz von Papen, who served as the first vice-chancellor under Hitler, abetted the NSDAP's rise to power. Some of these acted out of the fear of socialism and in the hope of preserving the everyday functioning of the church in a Nazi-dominated state. Their actions turned out to be a bad miscalculation. Nazism was a religion in its own right with powerful symbols, rituals, and dogmas built around the cult of the Aryan race and the German state (Evans, 2005). Nazi leaders were stridently anti-clerical. Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, declared that "we live in an era of the ultimate conflict with Christianity" and that it was the state's duty to "give the German people... the non-Christian ideological foundations on which to lead and shape their lives" (quoted in Longerich (2011, p. 270)).

Shortly after Hitler's rise to power in 1933 some 2,000 functionaries of the Bavarian People's Party (BVP)—a more conservative and religious splinter of the Center Party—were rounded up and arrested. By July of that year the Vatican signed an agreement with the German state (*Reichskonkordat*) that granted the Catholic church the right to manage the religious life of its parishioners in exchange for complete withdrawal from politics. Accordingly, the Center Party and BVP self-dissolved along with the Catholic Teachers' Union. Catholic Action, a predecessor of the Christian Democratic movement, was also pressured to wind down.

In the summer of 1934 prominent Catholics were swept up in the purges of the Night of the Long Knives. The head of Catholic Action, the editor of Munich's influential Catholic weekly *Der Gerade Weg*, and the national director of the Catholic Youth Sports Association were all murdered (Hoffmann, 1977). In 1936, the state embarked on a campaign to destroy the Church's moral reputation. In the so-called 'immorality trials' hundreds of monastics were dragged before courts on charges of sexual impropriety and currency manipulation.

Around the same time the Bavarian state government banned nuns from teaching in schools on the grounds that "the National Socialist State wants a school, a youth, and a form of education in harmony with the National Socialist spirit" (Kershaw, 2000, p. 201).

The Catholic Church responded to this wave of persecutions with formidable might. In a vehement encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge*, published in 300,000 copies unprecedently in German and not the customary Latin, and read out in every Catholic church in Germany on Palm Sunday 1937, Pope Pius XI condemned the neo-pagan idolization of race, spoke out in defense of the rights of man as divinely ordained in a critique of the Reich's sterilization policies, and threatened that the Church "would defend its rights and its freedom in the name of the Almighty" (Spicer, 2004, p. 57).

The Nazi regime redoubled its efforts in response. Simultaneous membership in the *Hitler Jugend* and Catholic youth associations became impossible. By July 1937 the Bavarian state banned most Catholic youth organizations, and in 1939 the state declared that all Catholic confessional schools in Bavaria have been disbanded or converted to public/community schools (*Gemeinschaftsschulen*) (Evans, 2005; Horn, 1979). In 1941, all church newspapers and periodicals were shut down, decrees were adopted to abolish school prayer and remove crucifixes from schools, and monasteries ordered to self-dissolve (Lewy, 2000). By the time that the tide of war turned against Nazi Germany, Catholic religious life had been seemingly largely erased from the public sphere.

## 2.2 Life in the Parish and the Dynamics of Priest-Led Resistance

In seeking to confine Catholic practice only to Sunday services and feast days, Nazi officials repressed thousands of local clergy. In the Weimar Republic, Catholic communal life was centered around the Church, with its masses, feast days, religious festivals, associations for every generation and occupation group, and control over nurseries and primary schools. Symbols played an important role in that life with crucifixes displayed in every home and classroom, and Vatican's white and yellow flags flown on feast days. "[A]ctivities and festiv-

ities and above all the Church year moulded the life cycle of the individual and family. A life integrated into this milieu 'from cradle to grave' was bookended by baptism and a Church burial" (Grossboelting, 2016, p. 27).

At the center of the Catholic milieu stood the parish priest. He presided over communal activities and embodied the salvation of one's soul. An activist parish priest was not hesitant to use this power. For example, when Father Heinloth of Ochsenfeld, in the diocese of Eichstaett, was instructed by the Secret State Police (*Gestapo*) to leave his post over derogatory remarks he made about the community school ran by party loyalists "he informed his parishioners that on the Bishop's orders he was taking away the Sacrament and extinguishing the sacred light in the church." (Kershaw, 2000, p. 204). Parishioners begged Heinloth to return, and, when he did, illegally, Heinloth was arrested. In response, villagers shouted abuse at local officials, and SS guards were brought in to restore order. For fear of further unrest, the case against Heinloth before the Special Court that decided political cases was dropped and he was transferred.

Everyday resistance by Catholic clergy in defense of the Church's traditional sphere of authority—what Spicer (2004) termed "pastoral resistance" (*Seelsorge-Resistenz*)—consisted of a multitude of small gestures that added up for effect. Catholic priests often demonstratively refused to use the 'Heil Hitler' greeting. They put out banned church flags and refused to fly the swastika or to ring church bells for secular political celebrations. Many did not baptize babies with non-Christian names or did not remove their hats or salute when nationalist songs were sung or Nazi symbols displayed.

As the Church–Nazi conflict intensified after 1936, some parish priests purposefully scheduled religious celebrations and catechism classes to coincide with Nazi events. Attendance at church festivals was typically higher than at those organized by the Party (Horn, 1979). Religious gatherings—and especially festivals celebrating the investiture of new priests (*Primizfeiern*)—resembled anti-government rallies. At one such gathering, at the Passion Theater of Obergammau in the diocese of Munich-Freising, "one preacher caused unrest among his

listeners by hinting that the time would come when each Catholic would have to vote whether he wished to remain a Catholic and still have a priest" (Kershaw, 2000, p. 197). All of this led Gestapo in Bavaria to remark in their reports "that the churchgoing population takes at heart the side of the priests and that therefore the support for the clergy becomes greater... the influence of the Church on the population is so strong that the National Socialist spirit cannot penetrate" (quoted in Kershaw (2000, p. 201)).

Clerics varied in their willingness to challenge the regime. Some, like Father Albert Willimsky, criticized the state often and openly, from the pulpit, in the classroom, in the local inn, and even to complete strangers on public transport. Willimsky was detained several times and died in the Dachau concentration camp in 1940 (Spicer, 2008, p. 75–81). Others, like Josef Fäth, the chaplain of Leidersbach in the diocese of Würzburg, used their spiritual authority to consolidate local public opinion around them and were able, at least for a time, to express their political views with vehemence and some impunity (Kershaw, 2000, p. 200). A small minority of Catholic priests enthusiastically supported the Nazis. Known as "brown priests," they advocated for unity between the Catholic church and the Nazi state and some worked as government informers (Spicer, 2008). Many clerics simply stayed quiet and tried hard to create an impression of being apolitical.

The Nazi state had a low tolerance for any critics, including those from the Catholic milieu. Those clerics who criticized the regime, disrespected Nazi symbols, or resisted the state's attempts to quash Catholic associational life were punished. The state's police apparatus, particularly the Gestapo, along with local teachers—almost universally strongly supportive of Nazism and anti-clerical—and local Nazi party members and mayors kept a close watch for signs of resistance by the clergy. Denunciation by teachers, trained under Nazism, or local officials was a common pathway to repression. The historical record suggests that, on average, *priests who were more energetic in pushing back against the state were ones who were more likely to be repressed.*[7]

[7]Some repressed priests were denounced by local elites because of grudges. At times, in areas where the local administrative apparatus was more robust, priests were more likely to come under pressure from the

The history of the village of Fürstenfeldbruck, in the archdiocese of München-Freising, is instructive. Until 1939, Pastor Heinrich Feiler was the priest there; he "primarily limited himself to pastoral care in the narrower sense, avoided conflicts, and seemed to give in under pressure" (Forstner, 2009, p. 246). Father Feiler was not subject to state repression. On Feiler's retirement, he was replaced by Martin Mayr, who was "very outspoken" and had been involved in political work with BVP before 1933. Within two years, Mayr was banned from teaching, and by 1942 state authorities forced Mayr's dismissal for political unreliability. As Kershaw remarks, "the personality and energy of individual priests unquestionably influenced the degree of bitterness with which the Church struggle was contested" (2000, p. 198). All else equal, those who put up more of a fight were also the ones who were more likely to be repressed.

## 2.3 Political Catholicism After 1945

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the German state suffered from an acute crisis of political legitimacy. Political institutions were thoroughly discredited, and the very idea of a German nation seemed, for a time, distasteful. The Catholic church, less complicit in collaboration with the Nazis than the Protestant denomination (Lewy, 2000), stepped up to fill the resultant void in political values. Heinrich Krone, a cofounder of CDU, noted that '[t]he only choice open to us as a people is to profess our faith in Christianity" (quoted in Grossboelting (2016, p. 43)). Buoyed by an alternative sense of political purpose emanating from the Church and grateful for the fact that Catholic authorities were willing to speak up for ordinary Germans in the denazification trials, ordinary citizens began returning to the Catholic church.[8]

Catholic hierarchs were interested in reviving the Church's political influence, while Christian Democrats were keen to secure a broad voter base. This created a natural alliance

state (von Hehl, 1996). We control for state capacity in the empirical analyses.

[8]For instance, in the archdiocese of München-Freising attendance at Sunday mass increased from 35.2 to 38.9 per cent between 1945 and 1950 (Grossboelting, 2016).

between the CDU/CSU and the Catholic church. That alliance was initially so strong that Catholic bishops joined the CDU/CSU politicians in discouraging the revival of the Center party on the grounds that the CDU was better capable of securing the role of religion in political life than a resuscitated smaller and Catholic-only Center Party. Church dogma wove itself into the fabric of political life under Germany's first post-war chancellor Konrad Adenauer, himself a Catholic. Religious values found institutional protection through introduction of the Church tax, state agreement to introduce religious education into school curricula, and induction of Catholic and Protestant priests into the Army, state broadcasting corporations, and government ethics commissions. Adenauer's era (1949–1963) came to be characterized by the three Ks: Kirche, Käfer, Konservatismus ([Catholic] Church, [Volkswagen] Beetle, Conservatism).

Catholicism's centrality to German politics was not to last forever. Inflows of expellees from Eastern Europe and post-war modernization weakened the Catholic milieu, and a strictly Catholic way of life was becoming increasingly less relevant to a society rocked by social and political upheavals of the 1970s. As a result, church attendance declined rapidly through that decade. Nevertheless, the association between CDU/CSU and political Catholicism endured. Even as Christian Democrats sought to expand their appeal to all religious denominations and their Socialist rivals worked to shed the image of a Protestant workers' party, CDU's conservative stance on family values and abortion ensured the continuation of that party's status as the natural ally of the Catholic church.

# 3 Theory and Mechanisms

Our expectation that repression of elites might have a lasting effect on communities comes from a synthesis of the literatures on the legacies of violence and on preference formation. The literature on the legacies of violence argues that exposure to violence creates long-term downstream effects. Studies in social psychology suggest that exposure to violence results in

trauma among the direct victims and, in a backlash against the act of violence, strengthens the in-group bonds and hardens negative attitudes toward the perpetrators (Staub, 2006; Canetti et al., 2013). These effects of trauma have been shown to operate not only among the victims themselves but also among their descendants (Balcells, 2012; Lupu and Peisakhin, 2017; Rozenas, Schutte and Zhukov, 2017) and other community members whose families had not been victimized (Canetti et al., 2013; Charnysh and Peisakhin, 2019).

According to social psychology, the mechanism by which individual trauma is translated into collective trauma is through a process of meaning creation operating at the level of the group. In this way, acts of violence against some individuals can become pivotal and come to define the narrative about the group experience (Alexander et al., 2004; Lifton, 2005; Vollhardt, 2012; Canetti et al., 2018; Wayne, Damann and Fachter, First View). The process of infusing a collective identity with meaning and framing a group as being victimized—and therefore deserving of special protection—is heavily shaped by opinion leaders within the affected community. These elites play a pivotal role in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of ordinary community members by offering them informational cues. In canonical work on preference formation Zaller (1992) argued that elite cues are one of the main sources of political information for citizens (see also Druckman and Lupia (2000); Gabel and Scheve (2007); Linz (2012)). Studies in evolutionary biology show that community elites also shape and transmit political identities by setting standards and policing them (Boyd and Richerson, 1985; Cavalli-Sforza et al., 1982; Bowles and Gintis, 2013).

This leads us to hypothesize that repression targeting elites within tightly-knit groups generates collective trauma and heightens the perceived threat to group values among all members. A natural response to collective trauma is a desire to protect the community from further attacks. This often manifests in a reaffirmation of community values and support for political actors or institutions perceived as defenders of the community's way of life.

While attacks on ordinary community members may be sufficient to produce a sense of collective trauma, the persecution of elites is particularly likely to have this effect. This is

because elites, as opinion leaders, play a disproportionate role in defining and reshaping the group's collective identity.[9] Religious figures, in particular, exemplify the role of community elites in settings where religion commands respect.[10] In the context of this study, we hypothesize that in localities where Catholic priests faced repression under Nazism, support for the Christian Democrats—the political party most closely associated with defending Catholic values—was stronger in the post-1945 period (H1).

A backlash effect against elite repression is more likely when local elites are well-respected and highly visible, so that an attack against them is also understood as an attack against the community itself. Not every community member needs to rally around the flag when local elites are attacked and, conceivably, repression can peel off some individuals. To test the intuition that a backlash effect is more likely in more tightly-knit communities and ones where local elites are better established we hypothesize that the effect of Nazi repression on post-war support for Christian Democrats will be more pronounced in smaller, more stable and connected communities (H2) and those where priests served for longer periods and were therefore better embedded and more visible (H3).

The memory of repression and resultant changes in community identities are likely transmitted over time through the institution that was repressed—in this instance, the Catholic Church—and through families. Initially, the Church, through surviving priests or commemorative events, likely preserved the memory of the local threat to the Catholic milieu and heightened the local sense of political Catholicism. Thus, we expect that mass attendance should be higher in localities where priests had been repressed under Nazism (H4). Over time, the power of the institutional transmission mechanism was bound to decline. Priests

[9]Indeed, Alexander et al. (2004) argue that the perception of collective trauma can be constructed by opinion leaders even in the absence of direct persecution, whether of ordinary members or elites, simply through elite manipulation of public opinion.

[10]Religious leaders have been shown to mobilize voters, influence electoral decisions, and shape post-conflict reconciliation dynamics in regions such as Africa, Latin America, and the United States (Djupe and Gilbert, 2003; Trejo, 2009; Condra, Isaqzadeh and Linardi, 2019; McClendon and Riedl, 2019; Blair et al., 2021; Pulejo, 2023). In countries like Iran, Guatemala, Chile, Poland, Tunisia, and Egypt, religious elites have played leading roles in successful political protests against authoritarian regimes (Gill, 1998; Grzymała-Busse, 2015; Lynch, 2012; Nugent, 2020). Similarly, under Hungary's communist regime, local clergy nurtured anti-regime political identities within their congregations (Wittenberg, 2006).

who had served under Nazism retired and died, and a rise in secularism meant that fewer people went to church. At that point, the family likely took over as the dominant transmission mechanism for the political effect of elite repression. We know from the literature on the intergenerational transmission of partisan identities that parents influence their children's voting choice through childhood socialization (Campbell et al., 1960; Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2004; Jennings, Stoker and Bowers, 2009). Thus, we expect that once a stronger pro-CSU identity took hold in the first generation of Bavarian Catholics in communities where priests had been repressed, that stronger attachment to the CSU and higher political activism was passed down to subsequent generations. Notably, transmission of a pro-CSU partisan identity did not require the younger generation to be aware of the acts of Nazi repression in their communities. What we do expect to find in the affected communities is higher political activism expressed through higher voter turnout across multiple generations (H5).

# 4 Data

## 4.1 Repression

The causal variable in this study is incidence of repression against Catholic clergy in Bavaria—this includes parish priests, chaplains, teachers of religion who have priestly rank, and monastics. The data are digitized from a historical compilation of Nazi-era repression against Catholic clergy commissioned by the Church (von Hehl, 1996). The compilation is now in its fourth edition and stands at over 3,000 pages. The entries are based on records from the Gestapo, police, courts, and diocese archives, and post-war surveys of Catholic priests. Any missingness, insofar as it exists, is primarily due to the fact that some security archives were destroyed in WWII. The data are organized in the form of brief individual biographical entries that detail the priest's name, date of birth and death, locations where the person was repressed and positions within the church hierarchy, and a narrative section,

usually a few sentences about the acts of repression. That section usually gives the dates of specific incidents and describes them as well as the resultant state sanctions.

In Bavaria, 47% of all Catholic priests (3,975 of about 8,500) were subject to some form of repression under Nazi rule. Generally, activist priests who directly or indirectly criticized or challenged the regime were targeted. In total, allowing for the fact that larger towns had more than one priest, some 35% of the 7,300 Bavarian municipalities—and 44% of all rural municipalities—saw Catholic clergy repressed between 1933 and 1945. The location of repression episodes is reported at settlement level. Given that the dependent variable—voting returns—is at municipality (*Gemeinde*) level, we aggregate repression data to municipalities too. Municipalities are either a single larger settlement or an aggregation of two to three villages. Especially in the countryside, where historical municipality and parish boundaries often coincided, it makes substantive sense to aggregate repression in this way. The majority of repressed priests stayed put in the same parish throughout the Nazi period, and many remained there after WWII. Among repressed priests, 67% were subject to repression in a single parish. The remainder moved about and were persecuted in multiple parishes.[11]

Most repression against Catholic priests in this setting was of a low-intensity variety in the form of surveillance, threats, interrogations, fines, and professional disruptions; only a minority of clerics were subject to arrest or execution (for details see Appendix E.1). We operationalize repression by, first, constructing a binary variable that takes on a value of "1" if there was at least one instance of clergy repression in a given municipality in 1933–1945 and "0" otherwise. In some municipalities multiple priests were repressed at various points in time. To capture this we also compute the total count of repressed priests in a given municipality; this count ranges from 0 to 65. The repression count is especially high in cities like Munich and Augsburg and at large monasteries, which housed hundreds of clerics. The indicator and count variables are our primary measures of priest repression. Given that larger settlements had more priests, there is a risk of a mechanical finding that larger

[11]The maximum number of repression locations is nine.

settlements—where voting patterns might be different—experienced more repression. To address this concern we control for the number of residents at the level of municipalities in the baseline specification, and in Appendix D.1 we also normalize the number of repressed priests by 1,000 residents at the municipal level. Normalized results are consistent with those reported in the body of the paper.

In the robustness checks we use two additional measures that get at the severity of repression. One is a manually coded five-point scale of repression intensity ranging from warnings from party authorities (category 1) to lengthy prison sentences or execution (category 5).[12] The other measure is a repression sentiment score constructed by 13 native German speakers, who independently scored lemmatized proper nouns in the biographical entries from "-3" (least repressive) to "3" (most repressive). Each biographical entry was assigned a total repression score by summing the scores for individual nouns in that entry.[13]

The geography of repression is represented visually in Figure 1, where municipalities that experienced at least one episode of repression are denoted alongside information on the proportion of Catholics across all of Bavaria's municipalities. It is clear from this figure that repression affected the entirety of Bavaria but was relatively milder in the Protestant corridor in the North where there were few Catholic priests.

## 4.2 Outcome Variables

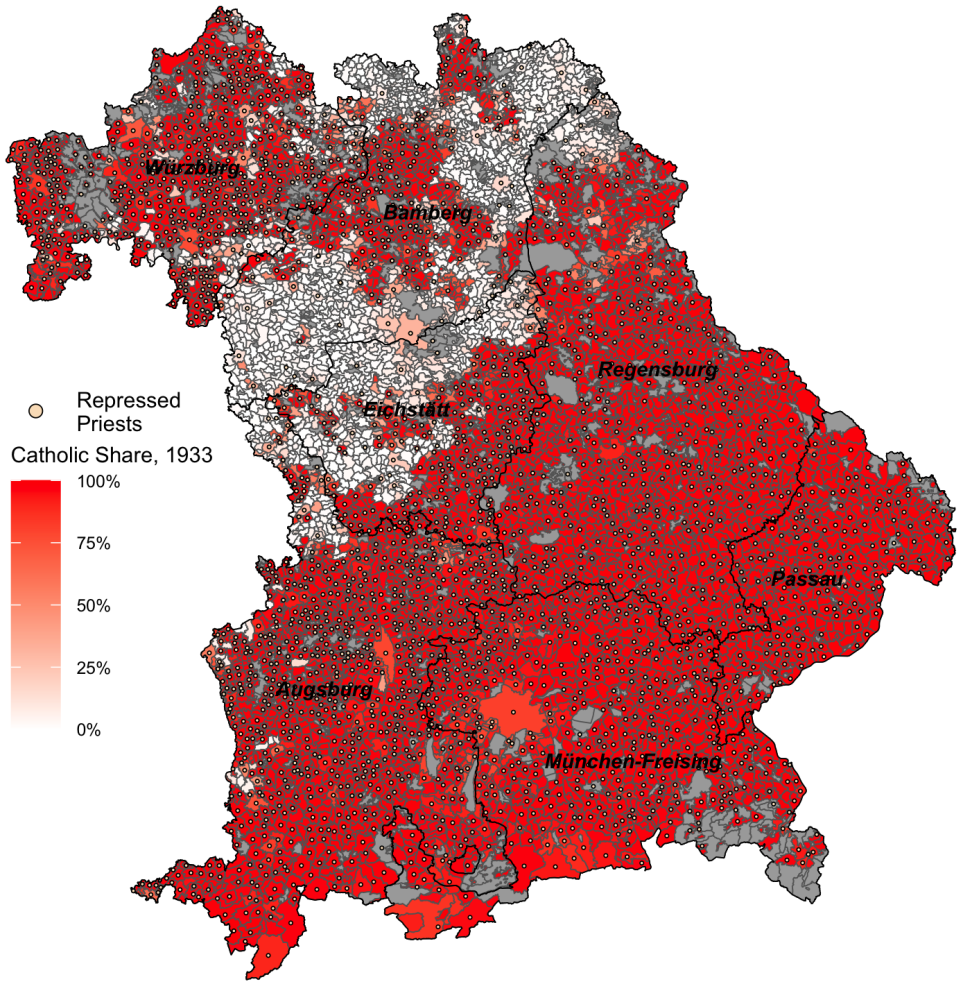
The main outcome variable is post-WWII electoral support for Christian Democrats. We study the effect of Nazi-era repression of Catholic clergy in every federal parliamentary election from 1949 to 2021 by examining the level of support for the CSU in municipalities where priests had been repressed compared to those where no clergy was persecuted.[14] All the electoral data are from the Bavarian Statistical Office. As the sample is limited to exclusively

[12]More details on how this variable is constructed and its description are in Appendix E.1.

[13]Further details on this measure are in Appendix E.2.

[14]Since 1953 German voters cast two votes in federal parliamentary elections: one for a specific candidate and one for a party. We look at the proportional tier vote for parties. Voting results are usually very similar across both tiers. The first post-war election in 1949 only had the party vote.

Figure 1: Geography of Priest Repression and the Presence of Catholics




Note: The figure displays the location of municipalities in which at least one priest was repressed during the Nazi era and the proportion of Catholics at municipality level in each of the seven Bavarian dioceses.

Catholic communities (details below), it is safe to assume that most municipalities in the control group had at least one cleric. In subsidiary analyses we also restrict the sample to communes with at least one known religious building; the results hold (see Appendix D.3). We cannot study voting in state elections because the data necessary to construct controls for Weimar-era voting were destroyed in the war.

To test the mechanisms behind the post-war activation of the Catholic base as a legacy of priest repression we also collected data on electoral turnout and mass attendance. Mass attendance data at the municipality level are difficult to find, but we did manage to obtain a selection of such disaggregated data from the German Bishops' Conference for the diocese of Munich-Freising, the largest of the seven dioceses in Bavaria, at ten-year intervals from 1970 to 2010 (data point for 2000 is missing).

# 5 Research Design

## 5.1 Unit of Analysis

Municipality (*Gemeinde*) is the lowest unit of analysis in this project. There were 7,261 municipalities in Bavaria in the 1930s. Municipal borders remained largely unchanged from the 1920s to the immediate post-war period; the few changes that did occur are referenced in Appendix A.2.[15] For ease of referencing, we use the municipality and district (*Kreis*) boundaries as they stood in 1951.[16] A major administrative reform in the 1970s reduced the number of Bavarian municipalities to 2,054 through amalgamation. For the first six post-war elections from 1949 to 1969 our explanatory and outcome variables are at the level of historical municipalities. In the analyses of long-term persistence from 1972 to 2021 we use modern-day municipalities, and the explanatory variables and historical controls

[15]The exclave of Palatinate is excluded from all analyses; it was part of of Bavaria before WWII but was ceded to Rheinland Pfalz in 1946.

[16]Referencing units to the 1951 borders introduces minor measurement error only in the two controls on interwar voting.

are aggregated to the level of these larger post-reform units. We refer to the pre-1970 municipalities and districts as "historical" and to the post-1970 units as "modern-day".

## 5.2 Sample

We restrict the sample to rural municipalities that were more than 90% Catholic in the 1930s. In these communities, we expect priests to be especially effective and news of repression to reach most inhabitants. Because religious sorting was very pronounced in Bavaria, much of the state is predominantly Catholic (see Appendix A.5). Cities (*Stadtkreise*) are excluded from the sample because they are more subject to population movement than rural settlements. The fact that many residents of Bavarian cities today do not trace their ancestry to inhabitants of these settlements in the 1930s makes the theory of identity transmission inoperable there. Once cities and majority-Protestant municipalities are excluded, we are left with 78% of Bavarian municipalities in 1933.[17]

## 5.3 Specification

An ideal specification would be a difference-in-difference design reporting a change in support for Catholic parties between the interwar and post-WWII periods in communities that experienced priest repression and those that did not. This type of specification requires municipality-level voting data for the interwar period. However, electoral data at that level of aggregation did not survive the war. The only available interwar voting data—assembled by Hänisch (1989) and Falter, Lindenberger and Schumann (2009)—are at the level of rural districts, municipalities of over 2,000 inhabitants, and cities. Districts contain dozens of municipalities, whereas the theory stresses the close-knit bond between the local priest and his parishioners. Therefore, district level difference-in-difference analysis is relegated to Appendix F.1 and yields results consistent with the main specification.

[17]The classification into rural municipalities and cities is from the 1933 census. We also exclude municipalities that have turnout of over 105% because of concerns over the quality of administrative data in these units; this reduces the sample by 3.8%.

Given the interwar data limitations, our baseline estimation is a series of cross-section regressions of the CSU vote share at the municipality level after WWII on the incidence of repression from 1933 to 1945 also at the level of the municipality, with district level controls for interwar support for Catholic and Nazi parties and other municipality-level historical controls. In the main specification we model electoral behavior in the post-war period as follows:

$$\text{CSU Vote Share}_{mdt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Repression}_m + X_d'\Phi + W_m'\Gamma + \kappa \Delta voters_{m,t-1949} + \rho + \epsilon_{mdt} \quad (1)$$

where $Repression_m$ denotes whether at least one priest in municipality $m$ in district $d$ was repressed during the Nazi era, and with $t \in \{1949, 1953, ..., 2021\}$.

Expression (1) includes two district-level controls $X_d$ for electoral behavior prior to the onset of Nazi rule. The first is support for Catholic parties—the Center Party and the Bavarian People's Party—in the 1928 election, to acknowledge that post-WWII vote for the CSU might be a product of pre-Nazi support for political Catholicism.[18] The second is vote for the NSDAP in 1928, because in settlements where the Nazi party was popular, repression against the clergy might have been more likely.[19] The specification contains a battery of controls for municipality characteristics in the interwar period, $W_m$: population size, percentage of Catholic inhabitants, percentage of inhabitants working in agriculture, and income tax revenue. These come from a variety of historical data sources; see appendices A.1 for details and A.3 for summary statistics. We account for post-war population growth by controlling for percentage change in the number of registered voters between election $t$ and 1949. To minimize unobserved heterogeneity between municipalities we include modern-day

[18]We use the data for a single year, 1928, because there are missing values for some of the previous elections. Nevertheless, results are similar when other years are used; see Appendix D.5. BVP was more autonomist, monarchist, and conservative than the Center Party. BVP's successor, the Bavarian Party (BP), was revived in 1946 and competed for votes with CSU in the 1949 and 1953 elections. By 1957 BP became irrelevant after a series of strategic blunders.

[19]In Appendix B we report the results with an alternative election cycle, November 1932, when Nazi electoral popularity was at its peak. We prefer to use the 1928 data in the main specification because for the 1932 and 1933 elections voting results were not reported at the more fine-grained level of municipalities over 2,000 inhabitants. Results hold.

district fixed effects $\rho$.[20]

## 5.4 Balance

The analyses are based on the assumption that priest repression is orthogonal to the political characteristics of the municipality. If, in contrast, priests, who are subsequently repressed, are appointed to especially pro-Catholic parishes—suggesting that municipality characteristics, rather than the priest's willingness to defend Catholic values, is the primary pathway to state repression—then what our analyses would pick up is that historically especially pro-Catholic parishes are persistently more likely to vote for a Catholic political party after WWII.

The historical record suggests that the logic of priest appointment had little, if anything, to do with political leanings of the priest or his future parishioners. The Clerical Legal Code of 1917 specified that appointments were subject to the availability of vacancies and exam scores in theology. While older clerics were able to apply for specific vacancies, almost all appointments were subject to nomination by the Vicar-General and approval by the diocesan administrative council, the *Ordinariat* (Jone, 1950).[21]

That priest repression under Nazism is orthogonal to a settlement's political leanings before the onset of Nazi rule is confirmed in balance tests where we compare the vote for Catholic parties (Center Party and BVP) and the NSDAP in 1928 in areas that were to experience priest repression later and those that would not.[22] The results are reported in Table 1. If anything, pre-1933 support for Catholic parties is by a small margin lower in communities where priests would be repressed later, although the statistical significance of this effect disappears once controls are added.

From this table it also appears that repression was more common in larger, less agricul-

[20]Redistricting in the 1970s reduced the number of districts from 198 to 96. Historical district fixed effects are highly collinear with interwar electoral data, which is why we use modern-day districts for the fixed effects.

[21]A small number of positions were subject to 'patronage nominations' by the state government or local nobility. These appointments were also subject to approval by church authorities.

[22]Balance tests using the 1932 and 1933 electoral results are reported in Appendix B; they are similar.

Table 1: Balance Table

| | No Repressed Priest | Repressed Priest | Diff. | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1928 Catholic Vote | 45.78 | 45.35 | 0.43 | 0.311 |
| 1928 NSDAP Vote | 2.38 | 2.44 | -0.06 | 0.360 |
| 1933 Catholics (%) | 99.06 | 98.57 | 0.49 | 0.000 |
| 1933 ln(Population) | 5.84 | 6.46 | -0.62 | 0.000 |
| 1939 ln(Income Tax) | 0.01 | 0.03 | -0.02 | 0.000 |
| 1939 Agriculture (%) | 68.28 | 55.27 | 13.01 | 0.000 |
| *N* | 2,524 | 1,966 | | |

*Note:* The sample is restricted to the working dataset: rural municipalities that were 90%+ Catholic. In this table, we compare means of key controls for municipalities which saw their parish priest repressed and those that did not (=1 if any priest was repressed in town between 1933 and 1945 and 0 otherwise).

tural, and wealthier municipalities. This puts into question the assumption that municipalities that experienced repression and those that did not were similar on every dimension. To address this concern we add controls and execute supplementary analyses. First, we account for the repressive capacity of the Nazi regime by adding to the main model a variable for the number of state officials, a standard measure of state capacity. Second, we also control for the extent of non-elite repression. There was no indiscriminate mass repression in Bavaria, but socialists and, especially, Jews were targeted. Socialists were persecuted largely in cities, where factories were located, and this group is therefore less relevant in our rural sample. However, we do add a control for the intensity of anti-Jewish repression at the municipal level, proxied by whether there were Jews present in a given municipality in 1933.[23] Third, in supplementary analyses we control for the pre-Nazi intensity of Catholic associational life—where available, we coded the number and type of Catholic associations by municipality—to account for how well entrenched institutionally Catholicism was. Lastly, to allow for the fact that the Catholic church might have been responding strategically to state repression

[23]To the best of our knowledge, we are the first team of researchers to gain access to the individualized dataset of Jewish settlement and subsequent direct and indirect repression (deportation to concentration camps and voluntary exile) and make use of its geographic structure (see Appendix A.6 for spatial visualization of this variable).

we reconstructed priests' trajectories in one diocese—Augsburg—and are able to drop from the analyses all priests appointed after Hitler's rise to power in 1933 in subsequent analyses.

In addition, we use two strategies to account for possible *unobserved* variation between repressed and unrepressed communities. In the first, we *only* consider communities where at least one priest had been repressed and ask whether repression of *additional* clerics was associated with an increase in the post-war support for CSU. The second strategy is the aforementioned difference-in-difference analysis at the district level where we examine whether the difference in support for Catholic parties between repressed and non-repressed districts increased after Nazism. Results across all these tests and sub-analyses are qualitatively equivalent: we find consistently that Nazi-era elite repression is associated with higher support for Christian Democrats after the war.

# 6 Results

## 6.1 Main Model

In Table 2 we present the main set of results. In these analyses we regress post-war CSU vote share in the six elections prior to the redrawing of municipality boundaries on two alternative measures of priest repression under Nazism. These are (1) a binary variable for whether at least one priest had been repressed in a given municipality (columns 1-6) and (2) a count variable that measures the effect of repression of each additional priest in that municipality (columns 7-12). Municipalities in which no priest had been repressed are in the baseline. All models include the full battery of historical controls. We cluster standard errors at the level of historical districts, as interwar electoral returns are aggregated at that level, and include modern-day district fixed effects.

The results indicate that municipalities where a parish priest had been repressed by the Nazis were considerably more likely to vote for the CSU in the immediate post-war elections by comparison to municipalities where repression had not taken place. The effects are

Table 2: Vote Share of the CSU in the 1949–1969 Bundestag elections at municipality level as a function of the frequency of priest repression

| | (1) 1949 | (2) 1953 | (3) 1957 | (4) 1961 | (5) 1965 | (6) 1969 | (7) 1949 | (8) 1953 | (9) 1957 | (10) 1961 | (11) 1965 | (12) 1969 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Repressed priest (1933-1945, binary) | 1.62*** | 1.06*** | 1.36*** | 1.10*** | 1.08*** | 1.36*** | | | | | | |
| | (0.37) | (0.35) | (0.31) | (0.27) | (0.29) | (0.27) | | | | | | |
| Repressed priests (1933-1945, count) | | | | | | | 0.47*** | 0.42*** | 0.38*** | 0.37*** | 0.35*** | 0.44*** |
| | | | | | | | (0.09) | (0.07) | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Population (1933, log) | -1.23** | -1.29** | -1.71*** | -1.21*** | -1.08*** | -1.07*** | -1.12* | -1.26** | -1.61*** | -1.15*** | -1.02*** | -1.00*** |
| | (0.57) | (0.57) | (0.46) | (0.36) | (0.35) | (0.36) | (0.56) | (0.57) | (0.45) | (0.36) | (0.35) | (0.36) |
| Catholic Vote Share (1928, %) | 0.13** | 0.26*** | 0.20*** | 0.16*** | 0.12*** | 0.17*** | 0.13** | 0.26*** | 0.20*** | 0.16*** | 0.12*** | 0.17*** |
| | (0.06) | (0.05) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.06) | (0.05) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| State Officials (1939, log) | 0.22 | 0.86** | 0.72** | 0.66** | 0.76*** | 0.85*** | 0.40 | 0.95*** | 0.87*** | 0.77*** | 0.88*** | 1.00*** |
| | (0.39) | (0.34) | (0.28) | (0.28) | (0.28) | (0.27) | (0.38) | (0.34) | (0.28) | (0.28) | (0.28) | (0.27) |
| Income Tax Revenue (1939, log) | 7.24 | 9.93* | 11.66** | 9.52** | 6.30* | 6.04* | 1.73 | 5.61 | 7.06 | 5.45 | 2.37 | 1.07 |
| | (5.05) | (5.27) | (4.83) | (4.09) | (3.31) | (3.35) | (5.25) | (5.25) | (4.62) | (4.01) | (3.26) | (3.14) |
| Jewish Settlement (1933-1945, binary) | 0.76 | 0.70 | 1.08** | 0.44 | 0.27 | 0.12 | 0.69 | 0.63 | 1.03* | 0.38 | 0.21 | 0.05 |
| | (0.60) | (0.55) | (0.53) | (0.47) | (0.42) | (0.42) | (0.59) | (0.55) | (0.53) | (0.47) | (0.42) | (0.43) |
| Agricultural pop. (1939, %) | 0.17*** | 0.23*** | 0.34*** | 0.39*** | 0.37*** | 0.32*** | 0.17*** | 0.24*** | 0.34*** | 0.39*** | 0.37*** | 0.32*** |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| NSDAP Vote Share (1928, %) | 0.56*** | 0.69*** | 0.49*** | 0.37*** | 0.37*** | 0.41*** | 0.56*** | 0.69*** | 0.49*** | 0.37*** | 0.37*** | 0.41*** |
| | (0.19) | (0.15) | (0.11) | (0.09) | (0.10) | (0.10) | (0.19) | (0.14) | (0.11) | (0.09) | (0.10) | (0.10) |
| Catholic Population (1933, %) | 0.67*** | 0.50*** | 0.52*** | 0.64*** | 0.59*** | 0.51*** | 0.68*** | 0.51*** | 0.53*** | 0.64*** | 0.60*** | 0.52*** |
| | (0.14) | (0.11) | (0.09) | (0.08) | (0.07) | (0.09) | (0.14) | (0.11) | (0.09) | (0.08) | (0.07) | (0.09) |
| Constant | -38.01*** | -11.75 | -2.05 | -15.46* | -6.20 | -1.12 | -39.81*** | -12.44 | -3.55 | -16.49** | -7.20 | -2.36 |
| | (13.84) | (11.14) | (8.73) | (8.46) | (7.63) | (8.75) | (13.47) | (10.95) | (8.51) | (8.29) | (7.46) | (8.50) |
| Observations | 4,479 | 4,458 | 4,457 | 4,455 | 4,445 | 4,403 | 4,479 | 4,458 | 4,457 | 4,455 | 4,445 | 4,403 |
| R-squared | 0.52 | 0.53 | 0.61 | 0.70 | 0.71 | 0.64 | 0.52 | 0.53 | 0.61 | 0.70 | 0.71 | 0.64 |
| Δ Registered Voters | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| District Fixed Effect | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |

*Note:* The unit of analysis is the historical municipality. Δ Registered Voters denotes the percentage change in the number of registered voters relative to the 1949 election. District fixed effects correspond to modern-day districts. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the historical district level. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

statistically significant and large: Support for the CSU increased by 1.62 and 1.36 percentage points in 1949 and 1969, respectively, in municipalities where at least one parish priest had been repressed under Nazism (columns 1 and 6). The effect size on the continuous measure of repression is similar: A one-standard deviation increase in the total number of priests repressed drove up postwar support for the CSU by 2 and 1 percentage points in 1949 and 1969, respectively (columns 7 and 12). Additional votes cast for the CSU generally came at the expense of the Socialists (SPD) (see Appendix E.3), who in the post-war decades were understood to favor liberal reproductive rights and oppose conservative family values (Grossboelting, 2016). Additional votes for the CSU could not have meaningfully come from the far-right camp because far-right parties were marginal through these decades. Support for the far-right in communities where priests had been repressed is, nevertheless, negative, although rarely statistically significant (Appendix E.3). All in all, these results are consistent with hypothesis 1.

The results are also robust to normalizing the total count of repressed priest by municipal population (Appendix D.1).[24] To account for the influence of bishops on parish priests, we also re-ran the model with fixed effects for the seven Bavarian dioceses instead of administrative districts; the results hold (see Appendix D.2). The results are robust to subsampling the data to municipalities with religious buildings (70% of the sample)—thus, ensuring that the baseline definitely contains unrepressed clerics—and to adjusting standard errors to allow for spatial correlation whereby information on priest repression might circulate between neighboring municipalities (see Appendices D.3 and D.4, respectively).[25]

The richness of the historical compendium on priest persecution allows us to consider alternative measures of repression. We reconceptualize the causal variable as (i) a five-category measure of repression intensity, running from minor sanctions to a concentration camp sentence and (ii), a hand-coded measure of repression intensity based off the biographical entries

[24]The specification where repression is normalized by population is also directly comparable with the subsequent longer-term analyses in Section 7.

[25]Results also hold if we log-transform the repression count variable to address the problem of uneven distribution of repression across municipalities.

describing the nature of persecutions. When these two variables are used as substitutes, the direction and statistical significance of the legacy effect on voting remains unchanged—see Appendices E.1 and E.2.

## 6.2 Addressing Selection Concerns

There is a reasonable concern that the reported results might not be a product of priest repression but of some set of unobserved variables. We address this possibility in several ways. First, we run a difference-in-difference analysis at the level of *historical districts*. Because priests had been repressed in *all* districts, in this analysis we explore whether the change in the level of support for Catholic parties was different in districts where repression was above the sample average relative to those below it. If support for political Catholicism is due to some confounder, then the difference between districts below and above the sample repression mean should be zero as both sets of districts lived through the same set of historical experiences other than priest repression. If, on the other hand, priest repression heightens support for Catholic parties then we should observe a positive difference across the two sets of districts in favor of areas where more priests had been repressed. The results are reported in Appendix F.1. There we validate the parallel trend assumption—the idea that districts above and below the repression mean had very similar voting patterns prior to the onset of priest repression—and find that support for Christian Democrats went up by seven percentage points in districts with higher levels of priest repression.

An alternative way to allay concerns about the selection on unobservables is to exclude all municipalities where no priests had been repressed and explore whether more repression is associated with stronger post-war support for Christian Democrats. When we restrict the sample only to municipalities where at least one priest had been repressed, we find, consistent with expectations, that post-war support for CSU went up with every additional priest repressed; see Appendix F.2 for details.

Another potential threat to inference is that diocesan officials might have taken politics

into account when appointing parish priests by, for instance, assigning activist priests to politically organized parishes to counterbalance Nazi power. We address this possibility by examining the effect of repression on priests appointed before 1933—thus, severing the link between priest assignment and Nazi takeover of power. To run this test we reconstructed the career trajectories of all repressed priests in the diocese of Augsburg (800+ priests repressed) to record the year when they were appointed to a given municipality.[26] We find that even in municipalities where priests were appointed before Nazis seized power, repression is associated with higher post-war vote for the CSU; for details see Appendix F.3. This suggests that politics did not play a decisive role in the process of priest assignment to parishes.

Finally, we re-run the main model with additional control variables that might plausibly account for alternative explanations for the findings. First, municipalities may have varied in the density of Catholic networks, which might explain both the logic of appointment of activist priests in 1933–1945 and post-war support for the CSU. To address this possibility, we control for the presence of Catholic associations and their type in the 1920s. Associations do matter for post-war support for CSU—they are an alternative measure for the strength of Catholic community life—but clergy repression coefficients remain statistically significant; see Appendix F.4.1 for results.[27] Second, we include a control for the intensity of repression against Catholics in the *Kulturkampf*; these data are from Haffert (2022). We find that the legacy effect of Nazi repression remains unchanged; see Appendix F.4.2.[28] Third, we control for the presence of Catholic priests who collaborated with the Nazi regime or "brown priests" (data from Spicer (2008)). The results are not affected; see Appendix F.4.3. We also add a district-level control on the influx of German refugees from Central and Eastern Europe after WWII (data from Braun and Franke (2021)); the results remain substantively unchanged as shown in Appendix F.4.4.[29]

[26]We had to limit this resource-intensive exercise to a single diocese.

[27]We do not control for the density of Catholic associations in the main specification because information on Catholic associations is not available for all dioceses.

[28]We do not include the Kulturkampf measure in the main analyses because it is highly collinear with the battery of fixed effects.

[29]The expellee variable is not included in the main model because of endogeneity concerns: namely over

# 7 Long-Term Effects

We now turn to the longer-term legacy effects. In this section historical repression indicators are aggregated to the level of the consolidated post-reform modern municipalities. Redistricting in the 1970s created municipalities of larger sizes; to account for this we normalize the total count of repressed priests by municipality population in 1969, the year of the last census before redistricting.[30] Historical controls are likewise aggregated to modern-day municipalities; summary statistics for these variables are in Appendix A.4.

We run the same specification for the long-run models as for the earlier baseline model. In Figure 2 we plot the marginal effects of the number of priests repressed per 1,000 inhabitants in a given municipality on CSU vote share in all elections over a 50 year period from 1961 to 2021; the corresponding regression results are in Appendix C.[31] In 1961, an increase in the number of priests repressed by Nazi authorities by one standard deviation is associated with an increase in the vote share of the CSU by 1.54 percentage points. By 2021 this effect diminishes to 0.21 of a percentage point and for the first time becomes statistically indistinguishable from zero. Between these two data points there is a continuous and gradual decline in the magnitude of the legacy effects.

These results provide additional support for the hypothesis that state repression against elites leaves a lasting political legacy and confirm that state-led attempts to change dominant communal identities can produce a powerful and long-lasting political backlash effect. Overall, we document a legacy effect of almost a century in duration and its gradual decay. This is novel in the literature on the historical legacies, where few studies are able to demonstrate diminishing legacy effects over time.

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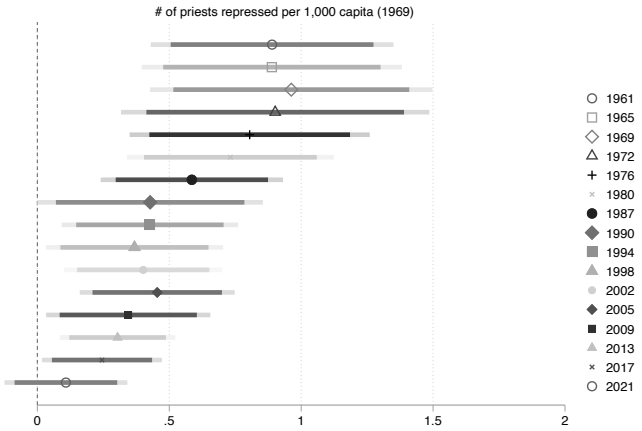
time migrants may have self sorted into like-minded communities.

[30] If priest repression in the earlier models for 1949–1969 is normalized by population in 1933, results hold; see Appendix D.1. Likewise, normalizing priest repression in the longer-term models (1961–2021) by 1933 population yields substantively similar results, although effects decay at a faster rate.

[31] The Bavarian Statistical Office has made electoral returns at the level of post-reform municipalities available starting from the 1961 election. We use the period overlap, 1961–1969, to compare earlier treatment effects at the historical municipality level, 1949–1969, to those in this section at modern municipal boundaries, 1961–2021.

Figure 2: Effect of Repression on CSU Vote Share in Bavaria for Bundestag Elections, 1961-2021



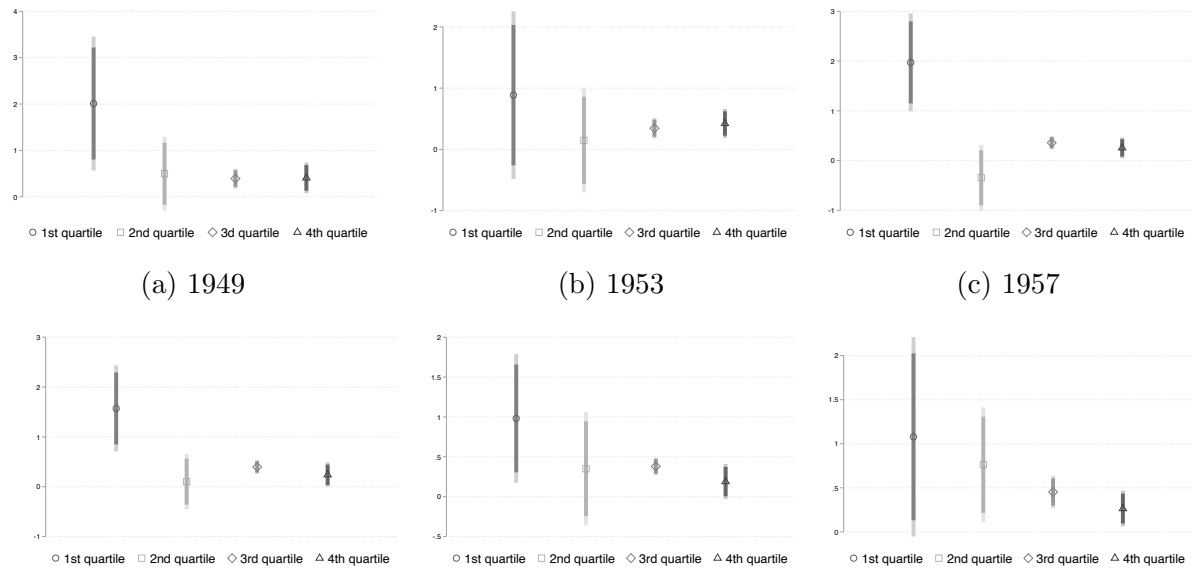

*Note*: The unit of analysis is the modern-day municipality. The total number of parish priests repressed is aggregated at modern municipality and normalized by the 1969 population. All models include the full set of covariates and modern-day district fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at modern district level. See Appendix C for the regression table.

To check for the robustness of the long-term results we implement a placebo test. A placebo is an outcome that is not connected to the hypothesized causal variable and therefore should not vary with variation on the causal variable. We use the level of support for a ban on smoking in public places in a 2010 Bavaria-wide referendum as such placebo. As expected, we find that priest repression does not predict support for the smoking ban; these results are reported in Appendix G.

# 8 Microfoundations

In this section we explore whether there is supporting evidence for the microfoundations of the argument. The theory suggests that the legacy of repression should be felt more in communities where the bond between the parish priest and parishioners is stronger, i.e. in smaller municipalities and those where priests served longer. There, residents are more likely to know that the priest has suffered persecution and to internalize the act of repression as communal trauma.

Figure 3: Vote Share of the CSU in the 1949–1969 Bundestag elections at Municipality level by Municipality Size and Election Cycle




(a) 1949 (b) 1953 (c) 1957

(d) 1961 (e) 1965 (f) 1969

*Note*: The unit of analysis is the historical municipality. The coefficients are shown for municipalities of different population size as per the 1933 census: first quartile (less than 265 inhabitants), second quartile (265-426), third quartile (426-728), and fourth quartile (more than 728 inhabitants). All models include a full set of covariates along with modern-day district fixed effects and standard errors are clustered at historical district level.

We compare the strength of the legacy effects in smaller and larger municipalities in Figure 3. There we divide municipalities into quartiles by population size and examine the effect of repression, operationalized as the count of priests repressed, for each quartile in the six elections before the municipal boundary reform, 1949–1969. We find that the repression effects are consistently higher in smallest municipalities (up to 265 inhabitants) by around one percentage point than in largest municipalities (over 728 inhabitants). Consistent with expectations, the effect magnitude decreases gradually as municipalities increase in size. This provides evidence in support of hypothesis 2.[32]

[32]This finding also allays a possible concern about the logic of repression raised in the section on historical balance where it seemed that larger and wealthier municipalities were more likely to see priests repressed. While priest repression was more frequent in larger municipalities, its effect reverberated more deeply in smaller, more tightly-knit communities.

We explore how the effect of repression varied by the length of priests' tenure in a parish by leveraging priests' age. Going over the diocesan yearbooks we noticed that older priests were considerably less likely to move between parishes than younger ones. Generally, by age 40 priests tended to settle. Given the highly standardized career paths of priests, we make the simplifying assumption that older priests had also spent more time in their respective municipalities prior to the Nazi seizure of power and the onset of repression.[33] The legacies of the repression effect for different priest age groups are explored in Figure 4. Here we divide the sample into priests under and over the age of 40 as of 1930. We find that repression of priests in both age groups increased post-war support for Christian Democrats. However, consistent with hypothesis 3, the effect size for the older cohort with deeper roots in the community is significantly larger than for the younger generation.[34]

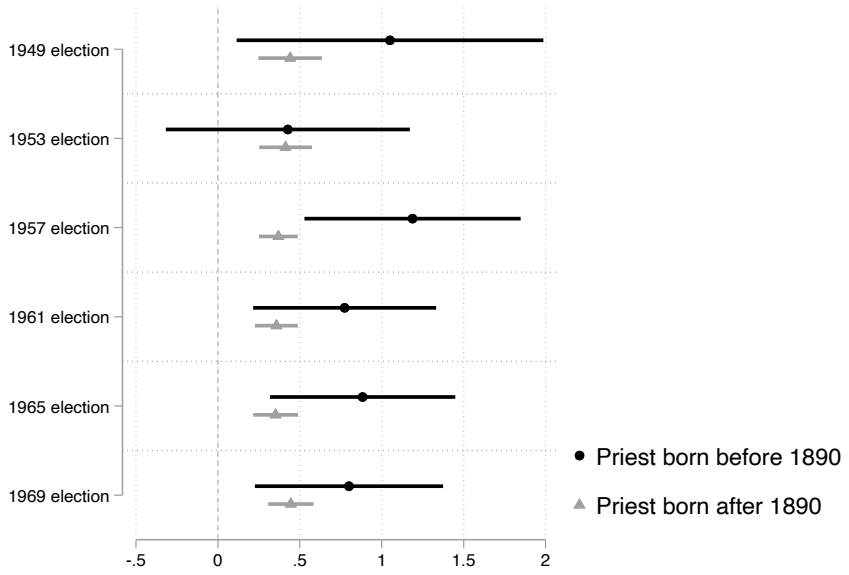
# 9 Mechanisms of Transmission

The long-term elite repression effects reported earlier in Figure 2 shed light on the hypothesized transmission mechanisms. Initially, the Church itself was likely reminding parishioners in the affected municipalities that the Catholic milieu there came under a particularly intense attack under Nazism. Many priests who had suffered non-lethal repression continued to work in the parishes where they had experienced persecution. Until 1965 about half of the repressed priests were still alive, and many had not retired. By the 1972 election, 70% of repressed priests were deceased, and by 1994 all them had passed on. In parallel, church attendance declined as the relevance of religion to daily life came under attack. By implication then, a mechanism other than the institution of the Church must be responsible for the effect transmission since at least the 1970s. That mechanism is most likely the family, whereby the first generation that directly witnessed priest repression altered its partisan

[33]Insofar as some older priests did move around, by comparing the repression effect on older and younger priests we back out a lower-bound estimate of this effect.

[34]These results are suggestive, as old age might be correlated not only with duration of service in a given community but also with rhetorical skill and administrative acumen.

Figure 4: Effect of Repression by Birth Cohort of Repressed Priest




Note: OLS coefficients shown for municipalities separated by whether the repressed priest had been born before or after 1890. If multiple priests were repressed in the same locality, we consider the age of the youngest one in order to maximize variation around the 1890 cutoff. All models include the full set of covariates, modern-day district fixed effects, and standard errors clustered at historical district levels.

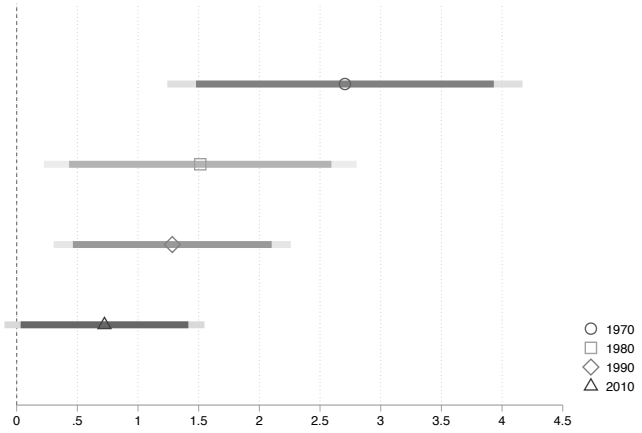
preferences in favor of the CSU and then passed on this stronger pro-CSU partisan identity onto the subsequent, more secular generations.[35] While demonstrating this effect rigorously requires evidence from inter-generational surveys, the results reported here provide strong indirect support for it.

The transmission hypothesis has two other observable implications. We argued that in communities where priests had been repressed, parishioners should have been mobilized in defense of the threatened Catholic identity by the Church itself and/or within families. In this section we test whether repressed communities had higher levels of attendance at mass and higher voter turnout.

In Figure 5 we explore the effect of Nazi-era priest repression on mass attendance levels.

[35]Theoretically, there might also be an institutional channel of transmission via schools. In practice, this channel is irrelevant in the context of rural Bavaria, as the Catholic church was not able to open many religious schools after the war, and of the few that existed, most were in cities.

Figure 5: Effect of Repression on Mass Attendance in the Diocese of Munich-Freising in 1970–2010




*Note*: The unit of analysis is the modern municipalities and the sample is restricted to the Munich-Freising diocese (N = 284). Total parish priests repressed are normalized by population and aggregated at modern municipality. All models include a full set of covariates aggregated at the modern municipality level along with modern-district fixed effects and standard errors clustered at the level of modern districts. 90% and 95% CI in dark and light color respectively. Corresponding regression output is in Appendix H.

We have these data for a single diocese, that of of Munich-Freising, for the years 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2010. The data reflect a gradual decline in mass attendance. In 1970, on average 40% of Catholics attended Sunday mass but only 15% did so in 2010. The underlying model specification is the same as in Figure 2 with the standard battery of controls and fixed effects.[36] It is clear from the figure that Nazi-era priest repression has historically been associated with higher mass turnout levels in the affected municipalities. For each additional priest repressed, attendance at mass increased by around 2.7 percentage points in 1970 and 0.7 percentage points in 2010. This evidence is consistent with hypothesis 4, and the data indicate, once again, that the effect of priest repression on political Catholicism has been waning over time.

Second, we examine whether municipalities where priests had been repressed have higher turnout. For simplicity of presentation we only report the coefficients for the count variable

[36]We are not able to control for pre-Nazi mass attendance levels because we have not been able to locate the necessary historical data at the micro-level.

Table 3: Turnout Models, 1949–1969

| | (1) 1949 | (2) 1953 | (3) 1957 | (4) 1961 | (5) 1965 | (6) 1969 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Repressed priests (1933-1945, count) | 0.31*** | 0.17*** | 0.09** | 0.13*** | 0.11** | 0.09** |
| | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.05) | (0.03) | (0.05) | (0.04) |
| Population (1933, log) | -1.83*** | -1.62*** | -1.47*** | -1.13*** | -1.28*** | -1.39*** |
| | (0.32) | (0.34) | (0.28) | (0.25) | (0.25) | (0.27) |
| Catholic Vote Share (1928, %) | 0.08*** | 0.08*** | 0.09*** | 0.08*** | 0.09*** | 0.10*** |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| State Officials (1939, log) | 0.47** | 0.81*** | 0.52*** | 0.34** | 0.35** | 0.30 |
| | (0.21) | (0.22) | (0.20) | (0.14) | (0.15) | (0.18) |
| Income Tax Revenue (1939, log) | 14.30*** | 11.24** | 12.75*** | 5.60** | 7.18*** | 9.41*** |
| | (3.19) | (4.59) | (3.31) | (2.39) | (2.72) | (3.37) |
| Jewish Settlement (1933-1945, binary) | 0.02 | 0.18 | -0.04 | 0.02 | 0.41* | 0.37 |
| | (0.33) | (0.33) | (0.33) | (0.22) | (0.24) | (0.26) |
| Agricultural pop. (1939, %) | 0.03*** | 0.03*** | 0.02 | 0.03*** | 0.03*** | 0.01 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| NSDAP Vote Share (1928, %) | -0.00 | 0.16** | 0.02 | 0.14** | 0.18*** | 0.10 |
| | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.09) | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.08) |
| Catholic Population (1933, %) | 0.30*** | 0.01 | 0.23*** | 0.13** | 0.14*** | 0.07 |
| | (0.07) | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.06) |
| Constant | 60.87*** | 86.75*** | 63.87*** | 78.39*** | 75.31*** | 82.07*** |
| | (6.84) | (5.90) | (5.98) | (5.52) | (5.52) | (6.37) |
| Δ Registered Voters | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| District Fixed Effect | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 4,469 | 4,458 | 4,457 | 4,455 | 4,445 | 4,403 |
| R-squared | 0.26 | 0.33 | 0.45 | 0.34 | 0.34 | 0.31 |

*Note:* The unit of analysis is the historical municipality. Δ Registered Voters denotes the percentage change in the number of registered voters relative to the 1949 election. District fixed effects correspond to modern-day districts. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the historical district level. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

that captures the legacy effect for every additional priest prosecuted in the municipality.[37] The results are reported in Table 3. Consistent with hypothesis 5, we find that for every additional priest repressed by Nazi authorities in a municipality, turnout in post-war elections there went up. For a one standard deviation increase in the number of repressed priests turnout increased by 0.5 and 0.13 percentage points in 1949 and 1969 respectively.[38] The magnitude of the repression effect on turnout gradually decreased over the post-war decades. This suggests that there is a decay in the mobilizational legacy of elite repression consistent with results for CSU support. The fact that the decay is present for voting and voter turnout suggests that Catholic mobilization and vote for Catholic parties are connected, as the theory stipulates.

# 10 Conclusion

In this paper we set out to explore the effects of elite repression on subsequent political behavior by ordinary community members who themselves had not experienced direct repression. We explored this question in the context of Nazi persecution of Catholic priests in Bavaria and post-WWII voting dynamics. Our expectation was that repression against elites backfires by threatening communal values and creating shared trauma among the ordinary community members. We argued that this trauma, in turn, would result in a change in political behavior, and, namely, in higher support for the political party that is most likely to protect the communal way of life that was previously threatened. In this instance, we hypothesized that localities where priests had been repressed would be more likely to vote for Christian Democrats, the party most closely affiliated with the Catholic cause, after the war.

Drawing on a unique compendium of state repression against Catholic priests and historical and more recent social and political data we found that Nazi-era repression of Catholic

[37] Results are consistent if the binary variable is used instead.

[38] Turnout in these elections was very high at 85.7% in 1949 and 86.7% in 1969.

clergy is associated with higher support for Christian Democrats in all the post-war elections, all the way into the 21st century. The magnitude of this effect has been declining over time. In the immediate post-war elections historical repression was associated with an increase of about two-percentage points in the vote share of Christian Democrats. By the late 2010s Christian Democrats had around a quarter of a percentage point electoral advantage in municipalities where persecution had taken place.

In exploring the mechanisms behind the transmission of stronger Catholic identities forged through the repression of clergy by the Nazis, we showed how the Catholic base was more strongly mobilized in municipalities where repression had taken place as evidenced by higher turnout in elections and attendance at mass in those localities. This set of tests provides strong indirect support for the role of the Church and, subsequently, families in the transmission of communal memories of repression and resultant stronger political Catholicism and pro-CSU partisanship. In addition, we showed that the legacy effects are stronger in smaller communities where repressed priests had served for longer periods—this is consistent with the hypothesis that elites have greater influence over political identities if they are well embedded in community life, and if the community is tightly knit.

To the best of our knowledge, ours is among the first studies in political science to explore the political legacy of elite repression (see also Thomson (2022); Krakowski and Schaub (2022); Martinez (2022); Charnysh and Pique (2023)). The findings have important implications for our understanding of how targeted repression of community elites can have major downstream effects on political behavior. These findings also have direct implications for the study of the impact of secularization and repression of religious figures in the contexts of colonial conquest, foreign interventions, and domestic repression of clergy, but also for work on other types of elite repression, like, for instance, the repression of civil rights leaders and opposition activists. This study explores the legacy of a particular type of elite repression—state-directed low intensity coercion over a relatively short period. Further work is needed to explore the legacy effects of state-sponsored hard elite repression—entailing

lengthy imprisonment or outright killings—and over longer periods.

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