'Elliott Green: Public Goods and National Identification'

Nations and Nationalism 25, 1 (January, 2019): 90-96

Elliott Green, LSE
e.d.green@lse.ac.uk

1. Introduction

First I would like to start with what I appreciate about this book, before moving to my critical commentary. *Nation Building* (Wimmer, 2018) is based on extensive multi-methods research, with three sets of paired comparisons and multiple chapters using a variety of quantitative techniques. The early set of chapters are in particular a highlight of the book: the chapter on Botswana and Somalia, which I most qualified to comment on, is very detailed and does a great job in exhibiting the causal relationship between the provision of public goods and nation formation in the African context. The use of multiple methodologies and a broad historical scope to answer such an important question is admirable and sets a high benchmark for other researchers.

In my commentary I want to focus on the second of Wimmer's three factors contributing to nation formation, namely public goods provision. I use data from the Afrobarometer project to query Wimmer's results in two ways. First, I test the theory that public goods are correlated with national identification within the African context, and find very mixed results. Second, I focus attention on the fact that the book's quantitative results rely heavily upon pooled-OLS rather than country fixed-effects, inasmuch as Wimmer includes some time-invariant independent variables in his analysis. As such, I present evidence from fixed effects models that fail to find any evidence for a dynamic relationship between public goods and national identification.

2. Cross-Sectional Evidence on Public Goods and National Identification

Wimmer's argument in Chapter 2 is that the equitable provision of public goods has led to assimilation into the Tswana ethnic group in post-colonial Botswana, while a lack of public goods provision in post-colonial Somalia instead has led to conflict, state collapse and ethnic fragmentation along clan lines. He then later goes onto show in Chapter 5 that two measures of public goods, namely adult literacy and railway density, are negatively and robustly correlated with ethnic exclusion as measured by the Ethnic Power Relations dataset; subsequently in Chapter 6 he also shows a negative and robust correlation between ethnic exclusion and national pride.

One way to examine the robustness of this relationship is to examine the direct relationship between national identification and access to public goods. To repeat, (Wimmer, 2018, p. 20)'s causal chain suggests that public goods only affect national identification via ethnic inclusion/exclusion, not directly, hence the two-stage analysis from Chapters 5 and 6. But it is not necessarily clear from other evidence in the book that this relationship is actually indirect, whether it is the effect of public goods in Afghanistan on national identification (Wimmer, 2018, p. 263), or the example of a woman from Ukraine at the beginning of Chapter 3, which suggested she 'would start to identify with a state that would provide her with what she needs for her daily survival... She would become loyal to such a state… [and] eventually her children will consider themselves members of the nation' (Wimmer, 2018, p. 70). Here, as elsewhere, it appears that public goods provision affects national identification (and ethnic exclusion) directly, in contradiction to Wimmer's stated argument from his introduction.

To examine this relationship I use data from the Afrobarometer, which conducts regular surveys related to political and economic development across dozens of African countries. As the dependent variable I do not use the same question that Wimmer uses in Chapter 6, which is 'how proud are you to be a member of your nation?' and which is only available from the Afrobarometer in round 1 (and only available for 10 countries). Instead I use the so-called 'Moreno' question[1] of 'do you identify more with your ethnic group or your nation'? This question, as noted by (Wimmer,

---

[1] The question is named after the Spanish political scientist Luis Moreno Fernández, who pioneered its use in surveys in Scotland and Catalonia.

2018, p. 218), is better suited at capturing national attachment than moral identification with the nation, which perhaps is better captured by the 'pride' question used by Wimmer.[2]

In previous work I have already elsewhere that the provision of public goods are not correlated with national identification using round 5 Afrobarometer data (Green, 2018a); here I use data from the most recent Afrobarometer round 6, which was conducted across 28 Sub-Saharan countries between 2014 and 2015. As detailed in the notes to Figure 1 below, I control for individual, group and country-level characteristics using a multi-level model with random intercepts at both the group and country levels. I use data on all twelve types of public good as recorded by the individual enumerators of the Afrobarometer; these include a wide variety of different public goods, from electricity and sewage to banks, schools, post offices and paved roads. In Figure 1 I list the marginal effects of each type of public good, with 95% confidence intervals. What is striking is that, of the twelve types of public good, four are positively associated with national identification (electricity, sewage, post office and paid transport), two are negatively associated (schools and paved roads) and the other six show no association. This finding does not necessarily refute Wimmer's finding that railway lines and adult literacy are robustly correlated with lower levels of ethnic exclusion, but they do suggest that the effect of public goods on ethnic exclusion and national identification may be different depending on the type of public good examined. In this sense the finding is similar to that of (Kramon & Posner, 2013), who find that different types of public goods yield different answers to the question of whether African politicians favour their co-ethnic kin or not.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

3. Evidence from Panel Data on Public Goods and National Identification

Wimmer's argument is not, however, about the mere correlation between public goods and ethnic exclusion or national attachment, but instead a narrative by which the former causes the latter. This is essentially the story he presents in the book about why Botswana has been able to develop low levels of ethnic exclusion because of its government's increasing ability to provide public goods across the country, while by contrast Somalia's high level of ethnic exclusion and state failure was a consequence of its continued low level of state capacity and public goods provision. Indeed, this paired comparison – or most-similar case design, to use the proper terminology – is quite compelling in its detailed description of how the increase in the provision of public goods over time in post-colonial Botswana led to a decline in minority tribal identification through to the present day.

In the latter half of the book Wimmer moves beyond a series of paired comparisons to test his theories with large-N quantitative analysis. The results are consistent with a role for the three crucial factors of voluntary organizations, public goods provision and linguistic homogeneity in reducing ethnic exclusion, which in turn promotes national identification. Wimmer also finds that these three factors are themselves a consequence of a long state history, which allows for larger state capacity and greater state legitimacy. The results are compelling and based in part on laboriously-collected data.

The problem with much of the latter half of the book, however, is that the quantitative results are largely based on cross-sectional analysis across countries rather than panel data, which captures change across countries over time. If Wimmer's theory is correct then there should not only be a correlation between *levels* of state capacity or the provision of public goods and ethnic exclusion or national identification, but also a correlation between *changes over time* in both sets of variables. To examine this relationship requires the use of country- and time fixed-effects, rather than the pooled-OLS regressions which Wimmer mostly uses in Chapters 5-7. This is a particularly important point, since there is now something of a cottage industry in showing how statistical relationships demonstrated through cross-sectional or pooled-OLS regressions are actually spurious when using country and time fixed effects, such as the effect of income on

---

[2] I leave it aside here which question better captures the processes described by (Wimmer, 2018); I would argue alongside (Miller & Ali, 2014) and others that the 'national pride' question is highly problematic for a number of reasons, and the fact that (Wimmer, 2018, p. 314) himself notes that the correlation between national identification and national pride is only 0.08 (based on over 90,000 observations) is cause for concern.

democracy (Acemoglu, Johnson, Robinson, & Yared, 2008), poverty on civil war onset (Djankov & Reynal-Querol, 2010), oil reserves on civil war onset (Cotet & Tsui, 2013) or country size on trade openness (Ram, 2009). Here Wimmer uses country fixed effects only twice in Table 5.3B, where he finds that railroad density, one of his two measures of public goods provision, is no longer negative and statistically significantly associated with ethnopolitical exclusion. In the other instance the literacy variable remains statistically significant with the right sign, but I have questions about the degree to which literacy is a good measure of public goods provision in developing countries.[3]

As regards other measures of public goods, I have previously shown that country-level changes in ethno-linguistic fractionalization, as measured by Soviet ethnographers in 1961 and 1985, are negatively and robustly associated with industrialization (as proxied by carbon emissions) but not with measures of state capacity or public goods provision such as years of schooling, government revenue as a percentage of GDP or infant mortality (Green, 2018b). Here I can also use rounds 3-6 of the Afrobarometer with country and round fixed effects to examine if changes in national identification are correlated with changes in public goods provision. I use the same dependent variable, taken as a country-survey average, as before but focus on a smaller range of measures of public goods that were recorded in all four of these rounds such as access to sewage and paved roads and the presence of a post office or schools; additional details on my analysis can be found in the notes to Figure 2. As Figure 2 shows, none of the measures are positively associated with national identification, and one – paved roads – is actually negatively associated.[4]

[Insert Figure 2 here]

The finding that the presence of paved roads is associated with lower levels of national identification using both a cross-sectional and panel data approach is striking but is consistent with recent research from (De Kadt & Lieberman, 2018), who use panel data to examine the relationship between public goods provision and support for the incumbent party in southern Africa. They find that improving the quality of access to piped water, toilets and refuse collection is correlated with lower levels of support for the incumbent ANC in South Africa, which they explain partially through the ways in which greater service provision acts to ratchet up citizen expectations. A similar process may be at work with the relationship between access to paved roads and national identification; in any case, the relationship does not seem to support (Wimmer, 2018)'s argument.

4. Conclusion

Here I have attempted to question the relationship between public goods provision and national identification as proposed by Wimmer. I used cross-sectional and panel-data evidence from the Afrobarometer project to show how there is no consistent relationship between service provision and national identification, including a surprising finding that the provision of paved roads is actually negatively correlated with national identification in both cross-sectional and panel data analysis. At the very least, I would hope this analysis would provoke more attempts to test Wimmer's public goods argument with more data, not just in Africa but world-wide, which would only serve to generate more discussion around what is already a fascinating research agenda.

---

[3] In previous work I found a higher correlation between literacy and local-level GDP per capita than with primary school enrolment in contemporary Uganda (Bandyopadhyay & Green, 2016). There is also an obvious question as to whether a contemporary measure of literacy is a better proxy for the provision of public goods decades ago than today; (Wimmer, 2018, p. 173) justifies this proxy by referring to Somalia's adult literacy program but it is unclear how wide-spread such programs are. For more on the problems of measuring adult literacy data see (Kovacevic, 2011).

[4] Additional results with electricity and piped water (which I drop in Figure 2 for reasons of multicollinearity) also show no relationship with national identification.

Bibliography

Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., Robinson, J. A., & Yared, P. (2008). Income and Democracy. *American Economic Review, 98*(3), 808-842.

Bandyopadhyay, S., & Green, E. D. (2016). Pre-Colonial Political Centralization and Contemporary Development in Uganda. *Economic Development and Cultural Change, 64*(3), 471-508.

Cotet, A. M., & Tsui, K. K. (2013). Oil and Conflict: What Does the Cross Country Evidence Really Show? *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics, 5*(1), 49-80.

De Kadt, D., & Lieberman, E. S. (2018). Nuanced Accountability: Voter Responses to Service Delivery in Southern Africa. *British Journal of Political Science, forthcoming*.

Djankov, S., & Reynal-Querol, M. (2010). Poverty and Civil Wars: Revisiting the Evidence. *Review of Economics and Statistics, 92*(4), 1035-1041.

Green, E. D. (2018a). Ethnicity, National Identity and the State: Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa. *British Journal of Political Science, forthcoming*.

Green, E. D. (2018b). Industrialization and Ethnic Change in the Modern World. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, forthcoming*.

Kovacevic, M. (2011). *Review of HDI Critiques and Potential Improvements*. Human Development Research Paper #2010/33, UNDP.

Kramon, E., & Posner, D. N. (2013). Who Benefits from Distributive Politics? How the Outcome One Studies Affects the Answer One Gets. *Perspectives on Politics, 11*(2), 461-474.

Miller, D., & Ali, S. (2014). Testing the National Identity Argument. *European Political Science Review, 6*(2), 237-259.

Ram, R. (2009). Openness, country size, and government size: Additional evidence from a large cross-country panel. *Journal of Public Economics, 93*(1-2), 213-218.

Wimmer, A. (2018). *Nation Building: Why Some Countries Come Together While Others Fall Apart*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Figure 1: Marginal Effects of Public Services on National Identification, Afrobarometer Round 6
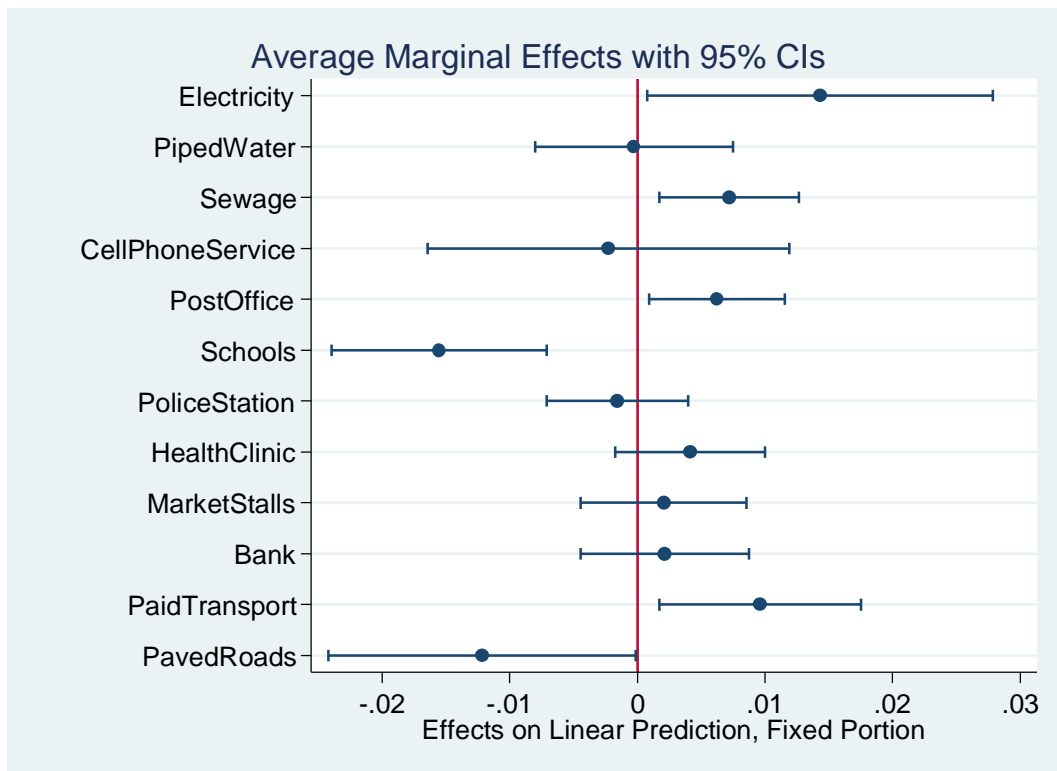
Notes: The results are from a multi-level model with random intercepts at the ethnic group and country levels. Individual-level control variables include age, age squared and dummies for secondary-school education, gender, urban residence, Muslim identification, radio ownership, TV ownership, access to the internet and full-time employment. Ethnic-group level control variables include percentage of total population and co-ethnicity with the President. Country-level controls include log of GDP per capita, ELF and a dummy for former British colonies. All public service variables are dummies indicating their presence in the enumeration area, as completed by the enumerator. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the respondent answered 'I feel only [nationality]' or 'I feel more [nationality] than [ethnicity]', and 0 otherwise. N=40,967 across 501 country-ethnic groups and 28 countries.

**Figure 2: Marginal Effects of Public Services on National Identification,
Afrobarometer Rounds 3-6**
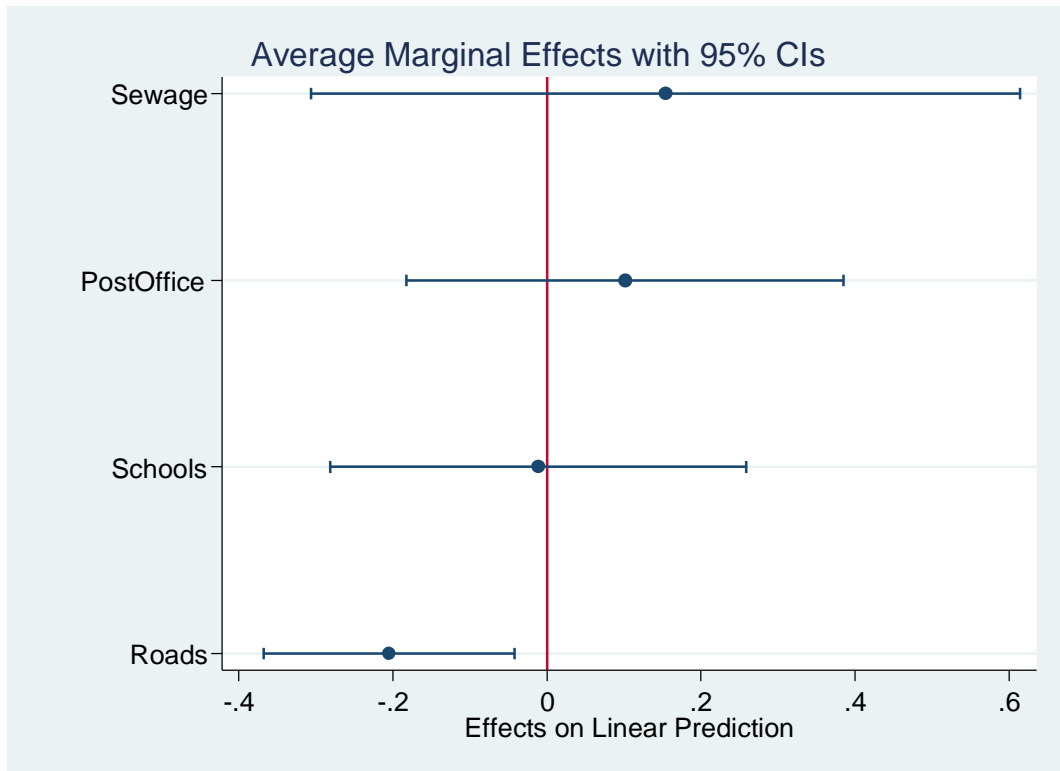
Notes: The results are from an OLS regression of national identification on country and round fixed effects, with robust standard errors clustered at the country level. Controls include percentage urban, percentage employed, percentage with more than a primary school degree and Polity2 democracy score. N=91 observations across 27 countries.