

Charismatic Leaders and Nation-Building: The Case of Mustafa Kemal “Atatürk”

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Introduction

Can leaders contribute to nation-building, beyond policy choices? The idea that individual leaders are able to shape the future of their nations is a long-lasting hypothesis in social sciences. You can track it back to Thomas Carlyle’s “Great Men Theory of History”, according to which “*the history of the world is but the biography of great men*” (Carlyle 1841), or to Max Weber’s more nuanced argument according to which some “charismatic” leaders are able to rally people around a common vision and legitimize new political orders (Weber 1947). The economics literature takes this hypothesis seriously: the ability of individual leaders to shape identity, coordinate groups or persuade and organize followers motivates a large theoretical literature (Hermalin 1998, Akerlof and Holden 2016, Acemoglu and Jackson 2015; Verdier and Zenou 2018). While it is easy to find historical examples of individuals who created political movements aimed at national transformation for good or ill¹, we still have little empirical evidence on how they had an impact, beyond invoking their “charisma” to explain their success *ex post*.

This chapter summarizes the main findings of Assouad (2021), which studies the activities and legacy of one historical leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. The Turkish context constitutes a perfect historical set up to understand how leaders can nation-build. After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, Atatürk led a group of Ottoman soldiers, secured the Turkish territory against European invasion and created the Turkish nation-state in 1923. Atatürk then designed and led the Turkish nation-building reforms, and is therefore viewed as an archetypical example of a “charismatic leader”, whose biography is often confused with Turkey’s modern history (Ibrahim and Wunsch 2012, Heper 1980, Zürcher 2012). Concretely, his government implemented classic nation-building policies in an authoritarian manner, to promote a common national identity built around the Turkish ethnicity. They centralized the educational system and imposed a new and unique national curriculum; they built railroads to homogenize the new territory and they created a common national language.

Beyond designing the reforms, Atatürk took a personal role to rally citizens around his program and visited a quarter of all Turkish cities, which makes the setting particularly well suited to study his impact.

Setting: The Turkish Language reform and Atatürk’s massive campaign effort

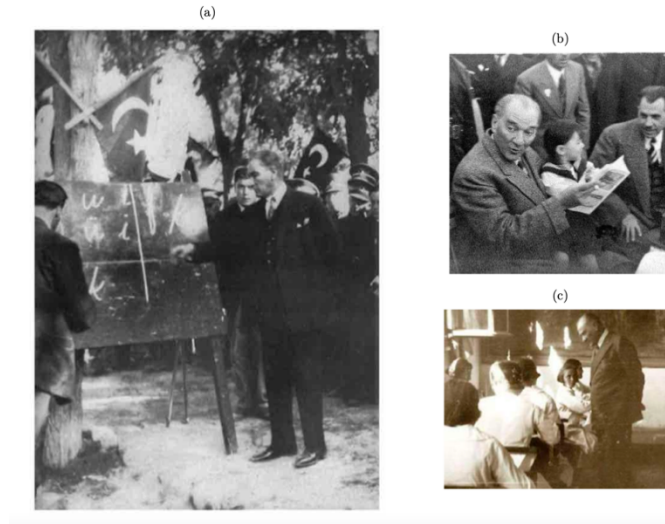
I focus on one nation-building policy, the language reform, to analyze Atatürk’s role. The language reform was a pillar of Atatürk’s cultural revolution, and one of his main legacies. Atatürk wanted to create a Turkish language, common across regions, religions, ethnicities and classes in order to foster a common national identity (Türköz, 2018). The reform, officially implemented in 1934, consisted in “purifying” the Ottoman vocabulary, by removing words of foreign origin (Arabic, Farsi etc.) and by replacing them with words in “*Pure Turkish*”, either invented or found in the Turkish oral tradition and folklore (Lewis, 1999, Türköz, 2018, Aytürk,

¹ Examples include Alexander the Great, George Washington, Napoleon, Sukarno, Lenin or Mao.

2008; Caymaz and Szurek, 2007). As a result, a large number of booklets and dictionaries listing old ottoman words and their synonyms in the new language were published (Türköz, 2018).

In order to explain the ongoing nation-building policies, including the language reform, Atatürk visited more than 167 cities between 1923 and 1938. This massive campaign effort earned him the additional nicknames of “first teacher” and of name-giver.² Figure 1 shows pictures taken during his visits.

Figure 1: Atatürk, the “Name Giver” and “First Teacher”: Pictures taken during his visits

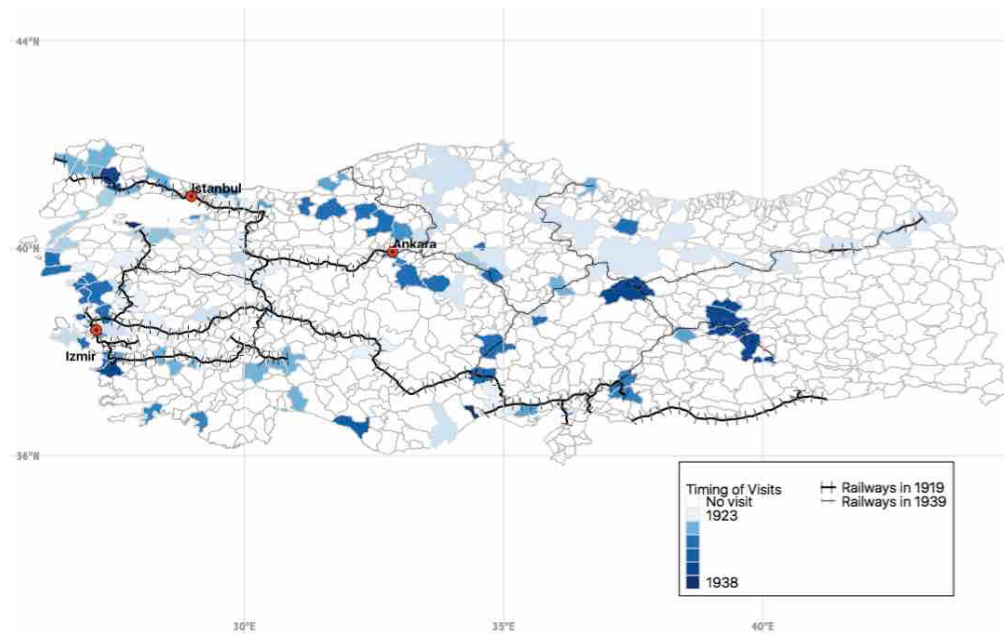


Source: Assouad (2021)

I assemble a novel and detailed historical database with information on the locations and dates of all Atatürk’s visits. Figure 2 displays a map of the visited districts, as well as their timing. To estimate the impact of these propaganda visits on the diffusion of the new language locally, I collected and digitized all historical booklets and newspapers published in the 1930s to disseminate the new words. Figure 3 displays examples of these sources, which allowed me to create a comprehensive list of the new “Pure Turkish” words. Finally, I also collected a unique historical source: the universe of birth certificates of Turkish citizens born between 1920 and 1950, with information on their first names and places of birth. As in Turkey, first names are common nouns, I am able to identify first names in the new language. I use the share of newborns with a Pure Turkish name in a given district and year to proxy the successful diffusion of the central state national identity in the periphery.

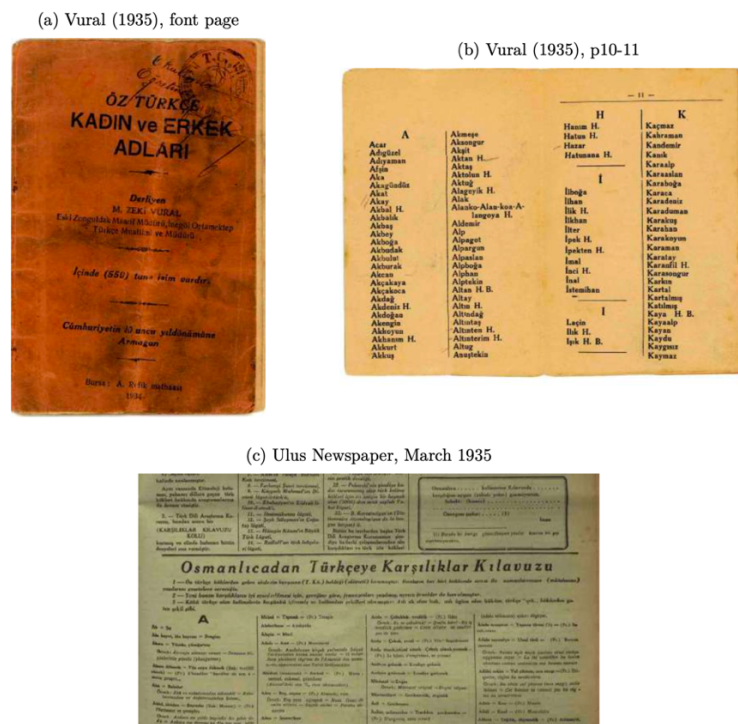
² As described in (Türköz, 2018, p. 85), this nickname of the name-giver “begins with the performative act of naming of the new regime as *Cumhuriyet* (Republic). He then gives the surname *İnönü* to *İsmet Paşa*, for his bravery in the *İnönü Battlefield* during the *Independence War*”. He also renamed geographic places and infrastructures during his visits, and advised people he met to name their children with Pure Turkish names.

Figure 2: Number of Districts visited by Atatürk and Timing of the Visits



Source: Assouad (2021). Districts in blue are visited by Atatürk and districts in white are not. Districts in light blue were visited first, starting in 1923. Darker shades indicate districts visited later on, until 1938.

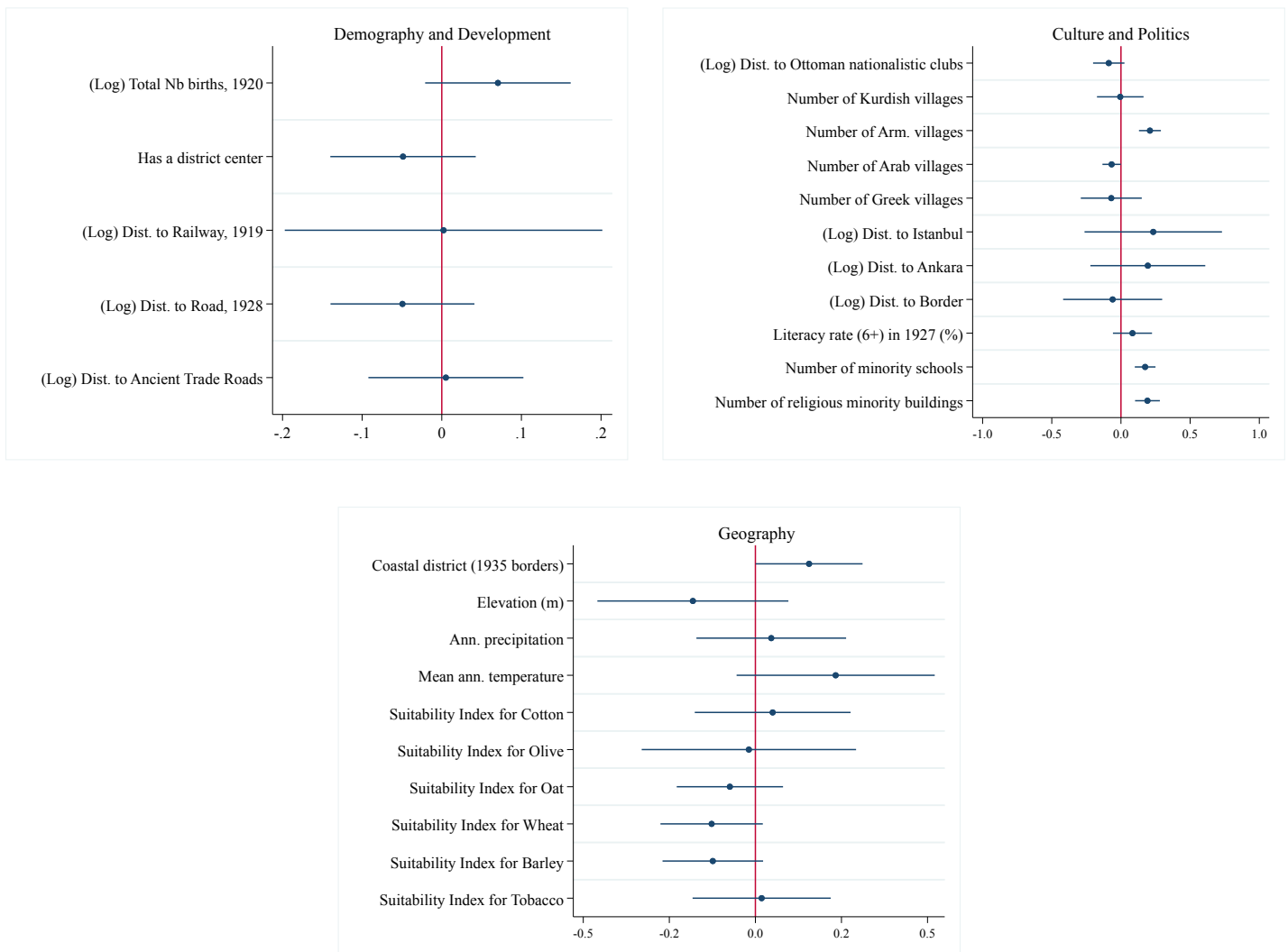
Figure 3: Example of sources used to create the list of Pure Turkish words



Source: Assouad (2021). Figures (a) and (b) display pages of a booklet published by Vural and Figure (c) is an excerpt of the newspaper “Ulus”.

To estimate the causal impact of Atatürk's visits on the diffusion of the new language locally, I compare districts visited and non-visited, before and after Atatürk's first visits, controlling for large number of variables. I additionally leverage the large amount of information available on the scheduling of his visits which allows me to identify targeted districts, that is all the origin and destination point he planned to visit. I restrict my analysis districts that were visited due to their lying along the road of an itinerary – the treatment group. The control group is made of nearby districts, crossed by the itinerary but not visited. As shown in Figure 4, visited and non-visited districts in the restricted sample appear to be very similar over a large set of historical and geographic covariates, and constitute a plausible comparison group to visited districts on Atatürk's way.

Figure 4: Balance Plot between Visited and Non-Visited Districts (Restricted Sample)

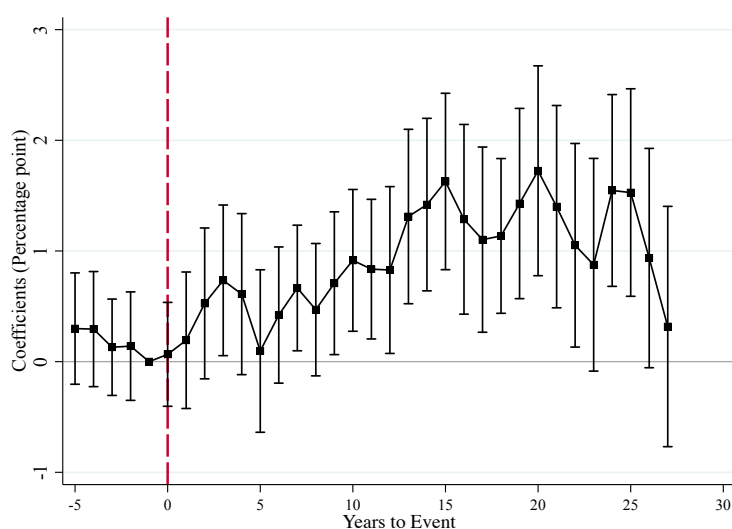


Source: Assouad (2021).

Main Results: Atatürk's visits increased the share of Pure Turkish first names

I find that Atatürk's visits caused an increase of 7 percent in the use of first names in "Pure Turkish", the new language introduced by the state as part of its homogenizing endeavor. Following the visits, the share of "Pure Turkish" names in visited districts increases significantly relative to the share in control districts as shown in Figure 5. The effect persists and its magnitude is growing over time, reaching 1.5 percentage points after fifteen years, which represents a medium-run increase of over 20 percent. Then, the effect decreases and disappears after twenty-five years. This result is robust across a wide range of specifications.³

Figure 5: Impact of Atatürk's Visit on "Pure Turkish" First Names



Source: Assouad (2021).

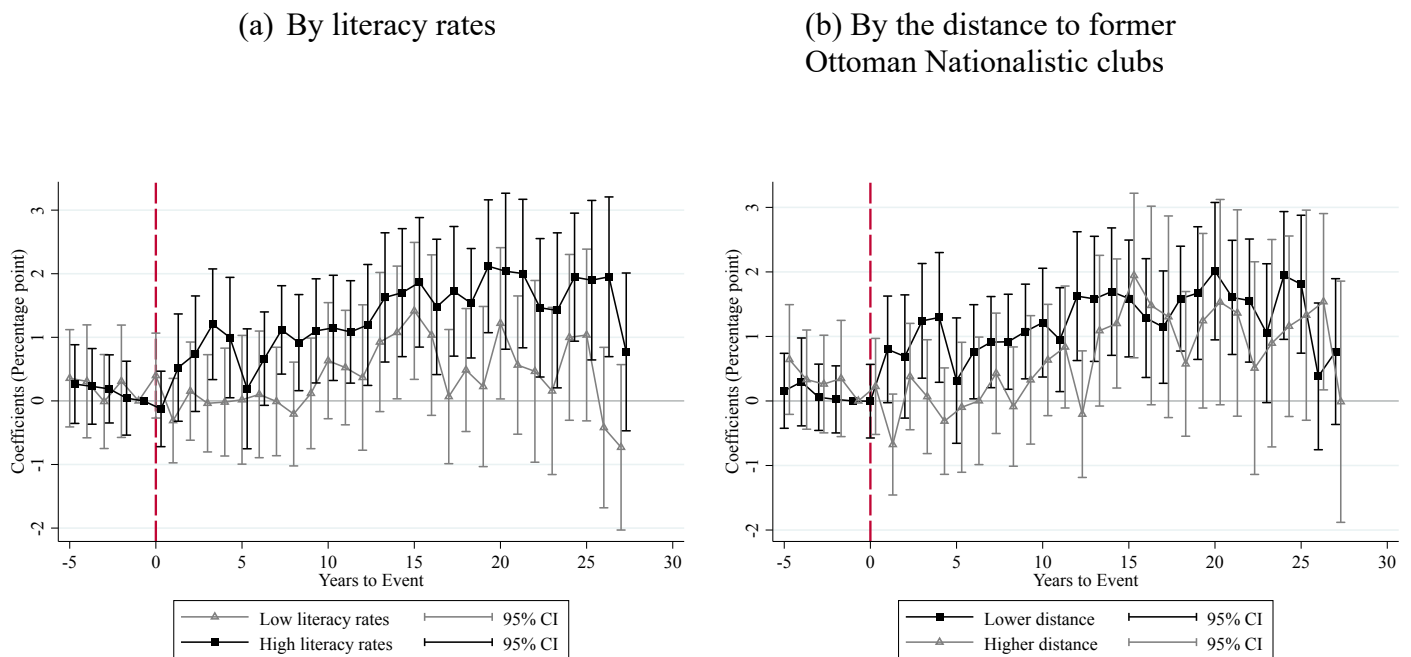
Possible mechanisms: rallying the crowd or top-down elite persuasion?

This finding raises a theoretical question: did Atatürk shape identity by mobilizing the masses—depictions of charismatic leaders often emphasize such a channel. Or, did Atatürk's effect work in a top-down manner, by persuading influential elites?

I find that the top-down mechanism seems to have been predominant. Atatürk's impact was larger in localities with higher literacy rates as shown in Figure 6a. It was also larger in districts with more pre-existing nationalistic associations, founded under the Ottomans by a modernizing, educated elite (Figure 6b). This mechanism is consistent with other studies which have shown that social capital can foster the rise and diffusion of an ideology (Satyanath et al. 2017).

³ The estimated effect is robust to using the full sample (including the end point and targeted districts) or to using a sample including only districts on the railway; they are also robust to not including control variables, to excluding children with fathers who were not born in the same districts (which might possibly have migrant parents who selected into the visited districts).

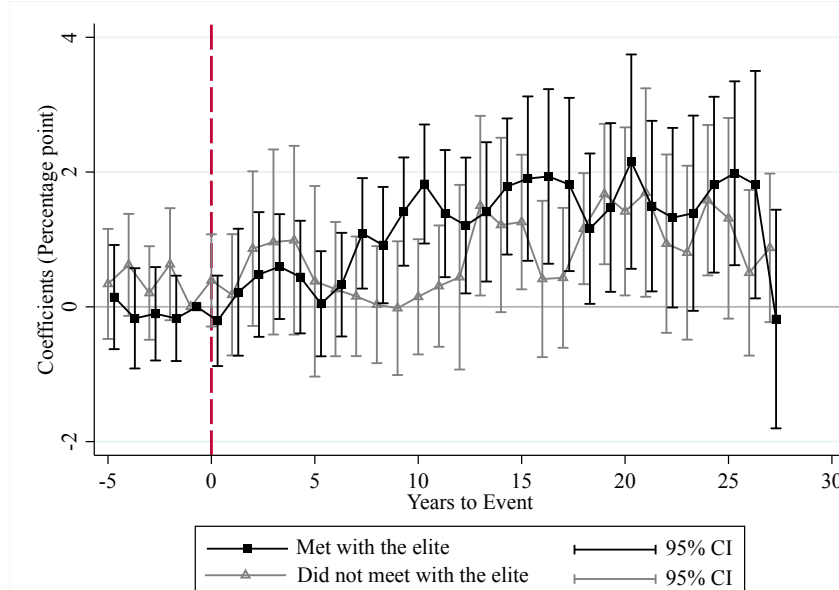
Figure 6: Heterogeneous Impact of Atatürk's Visits on the share of Pure Turkish names



Source: Assouad (2021).

I also study the heterogeneity of the effect depending on the activities Atatürk conducted locally. I find that the effect is stronger in places where Atatürk met with local elites rather than where he held mass rallies, suggesting that co-optation of the elite is a key driver of the effect (Figure 7). This finding is in line with a large historical literature which concludes that Atatürk's nation-building program mostly successful among an urbanized and educated upper and middle class, but did not reach the masses and the countryside, where eighty percent of the population lived (Tuna 2018).

Figure 7: Heterogeneity Analysis, depending on whether or not Atatürk met with local elites



Source: Assouad (2021).

The role of the persuaded elite can also be seen in the institutions they support locally. Atatürk's visits led to the formation of branches of Atatürk's party, the "People's Houses" (*Halk Evleri*). The People's Houses were community centers opened and operated by the CHP between 1932 to 1944, with the duty to "*propagate the regime's ideology and policies to the population through the circulation, application and enactment of a variety of discourses and activities*" (Lamprou, 2015, p. 19). To understand whether the visits laid the seeds for institutional changes locally, I collect new data on the locations and dates of creation of the Houses. I find that the visits are strong predictors of the opening of a People's House, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Atatürk's Visits are among the main predictors of the Opening of a People's House

Dep. Variable:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Presence of a House within:	5 km	se	10 km	se	20 km	se
(Log) Dist. to the nearest Visit	-0.044***	(0.007)	-0.065***	(0.008)	-0.002	(0.008)
Other predictors selected by LASSO						
(Log) Dist. to a Prov. center	0.092***	(0.010)	0.046***	(0.013)	-0.406***	(0.017)
(Log) Dist. to a Dis. center	-0.196***	(0.005)	-0.420***	(0.005)	-0.312***	(0.006)
(Log) Dist. to the road, 1928	-0.006***	(0.002)	-0.024***	(0.003)	-0.026***	(0.004)
(Log) Dist. to a Ott. nationalistic club	0.001	(0.008)	-0.014	(0.009)	-0.037***	(0.011)
(Log) Dist. to Ankara	0.058***	(0.019)	0.147***	(0.037)	0.443***	(0.057)
(Log) Dist. to a rebellion	-0.006	(0.007)	-0.025***	(0.008)	-0.021**	(0.010)
(Log) Dist. to a battlefield	-0.041***	(0.008)	-0.056***	(0.009)	-0.025**	(0.011)
Nb of arab villages within 10 km	-0.003*	(0.002)	-0.022***	(0.003)	0.002	(0.004)
Nb of arab villages within 20 km	-0.003***	(0.001)	-0.003**	(0.001)	-0.013***	(0.002)
Nb of kurd villages within 20 km	-0.001***	(0.000)	-0.001*	(0.000)	0.003***	(0.001)
(Log) Dist. to a Arab village	0.075***	(0.014)	0.234***	(0.023)	0.048	(0.035)
(Log) Dist. to a Arm. village	0.033**	(0.017)	0.044	(0.033)	0.150***	(0.049)
(Log) Dist. to a Greek village	0.117***	(0.022)	0.102***	(0.038)	0.104**	(0.050)
Growing Period Length	0.000**	(0.000)	0.001***	(0.000)	0.000*	(0.000)
Elevation	-0.000***	(0.000)	-0.000***	(0.000)	-0.000***	(0.000)
Suitability index for oat	0.000	(0.000)	0.001***	(0.000)	0.001***	(0.000)
Suitability index for olive	-0.000	(0.000)	0.000	(0.000)	0.000	(0.000)
Constant	0.130	(0.103)	0.365*	(0.187)	0.422	(0.275)
Observations	35,703		35,703		35,703	
R-squared	0.294		0.548		0.648	
District FE	✓		✓		✓	

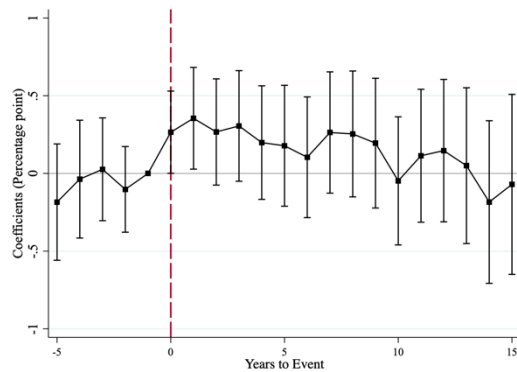
Notes: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Standard errors in parenthesis.

Source: Assouad (2021). The regressions are run on a database at the town level (35,000 villages and cities), with information on the nearest visited city and nearest city with a People's House. The visits are strong predictors of the opening of a House.

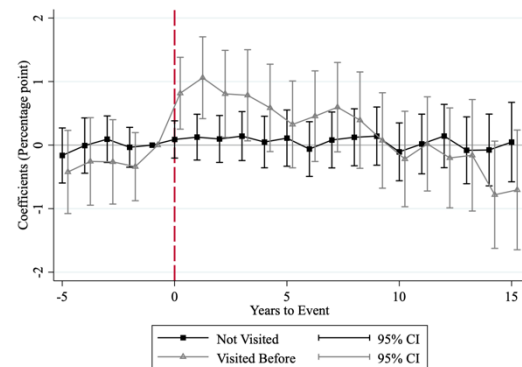
Moreover, using the staggered establishment of the Houses and comparing localities before and after a House was established, I show that they also have a positive effect on the diffusion of "Pure Turkish" names (Figure 8a). The effect is driven by places that had already been visited by Atatürk (Figure 8b). The Houses therefore appear to serve as a complement to the leader's individual actions. This is consistent with the dynamics of the main effect, shown in Figure 5, and with the fact that Atatürk's effect is significant only after a few years and is strongest after ten years. Rather than the visits themselves, it is the infrastructure and institution building they trigger that explain the diffusion of "Pure Turkish" names, which relativizes the "great man view".

Figure 7: Impact of the Opening of a People’s House on Pure Turkish First Names and Heterogeneity depending on the Visit Status

(a) Effect of the Houses on Pure Turkish Names



(b) Effect of the Houses on Pure Turkish Names- Heterogeneity by visit status



Source: Assouad (2021).

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the spread of Pure Turkish first names does not necessarily measure the spread of the new Turkish national identity. Given the authoritarian and repressive nature of the regime, especially toward ethno-religious minorities, the adoption a “Pure Turkish” name can be interpreted in three different ways (Kuran 1995). First, giving a “Pure Turkish” first name could be a sign of sincere adherence to the reform program and to the new identity. Second, it could be a sign of believing that the regime is well-entrenched and will last: naming your child with a “Pure Turkish” name could therefore be opportunistic, to get access to new career opportunities for example. Finally, it could be the result of fear and forced assimilation, especially among non-Turkish minorities urged to “Turkify” their culture. The fact that localities with former nationalistic associations and higher literacy rates drive the main effect suggest that sincere adherence and opportunism from the elite explains the effect. I also find that Kurdish areas, where the largest minority group lived, adopt more the new names in the short-run, suggesting that fear of repression and forced assimilation also explain the results. The diffusion of “Pure Turkish” first names locally should therefore be interpreted as the sign of a successful penetration of the central state into the periphery.

Conclusion

This chapters provides the first empirical evidence on the ability of an individual leader to affect nation-building and identifies elite persuasion and the institutional development it induced as the key mechanisms. These findings go against a lot of priors regarding what has made charismatic leaders persuasive in the past and the present, in particular to foster nation-building. Traditional depictions of charismatic leaders emphasize their ability to appeal to the masses, to lead by example and to build “*imagined communities*” of nations during emotionally charged mass rallies (Anderson, 1983). I find, on the contrary, that the effect is not due to the visits *per se* but to what the visits induced: local institutional change and the creation of a class of supportive elite, which however, was enough to legitimize the new nation.

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