

Identity and Institutional Change: Evidence from First Names in Germany, 1700–1850

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Abstract :

How does culture change in response to major institutional shifts? What is the role of culture in selecting and stabilizing new institutional equilibria in critical junctures? We study the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire (1789–1815), when half of the Central European population changed rulers. Our annual data on 44 million geolocated birth records between 1700 and 1850 provide a real-time measure of identity choices. In cities that changed rulers, the name distribution changed, becoming more dispersed, unique, and polarized. Using detailed records on diplomatic negotiations, we construct comparable control groups to isolate these effects, which emerged immediately and persisted over time. Examining mechanisms, we provide evidence suggesting that the transition increased uncertainty and eroded the supply of loyalist identity, creating an identity vacuum that competing stakeholders — religious and nationalist groups — actively filled. These cultural shifts became institutionalized, fostering tensions with the new regimes. Our findings underscore the dual challenge of cultural and administrative integration in state-building after regime transitions.