

**Abstract:**

Research on female political representation has tended to overlook the traditional role of women as leaders across many societies. We test for the persistence of pre-colonial female leadership in determining contemporary formal political representation across Africa. We collate two original data sets for our purposes. Using several estimation strategies, including an RD design at ethnic boundaries, we demonstrate how ethnic groups that traditionally permitted women into leadership positions exhibit a larger female share of elected seats in formal local political institutions today. In accord with historical accounts, we find some evidence of a reversal of female power due to institutional changes enforced by the colonists.