

INDIVIDUALISM, IDENTITY, AND INSTITUTIONAL STABILITY: EVIDENCE FROM FIRST NAMES IN GERMANY, 1700–1850

Davide Cantoni

LMU Munich

Cathrin Mohr

Bonn

Matthias Weigand

Harvard

British Academy

23 June 2022

THE RISE OF THE INDIVIDUAL SELF

The rise of *individualism* is seen as a hallmark of the transition from traditional to modern societies (Durkheim, Weber, Henrich 2020)

- Detachment from traditional institutions such as organized religion and kinship
- Achievements of the individual count, not the community
- Individual agency is valued, rather than prescribed norms

THE RISE OF THE INDIVIDUAL SELF

First name choices (*anthroponimy*) have long been used as a marker of the demand for expression of individualism:

- For example, in 1880, the top 10 most popular baby names in the U.S. had a share of 32% — in 1950, 28%; in 2020, 7%

THE RISE OF THE INDIVIDUAL SELF

First name choices (*anthroponimy*) have long been used as a marker of the demand for expression of individualism:

- For example, in 1880, the top 10 most popular baby names in the U.S. had a share of 32% — in 1950, 28%; in 2020, 7%

Rich literature across the social sciences:

- First names as markers of individualism and identity (Fryer and Levitt 2004, Bazzi, Fiszbein and Gebresilasse 2020, Beck Knudsen 2021)
- Social psychologists on name choices (Zweigenhaft 1981, Twenge et al. 2010, Ogihara et al. 2015)
- Behavioral consequences of first names (Bloothoft and Groot 2008, Bentzen and Harhoff Andersen 2022)

OUR QUESTION

We study the context of “Germany” at the crossroads to modernity, 1700–1850:

- What do first name choices tell us about the rise of individualism?
- What are the drivers of this process?

OUR QUESTION

We study the context of “Germany” at the crossroads to modernity, 1700–1850:

- What do first name choices tell us about the rise of individualism?
- What are the drivers of this process?

Germany is an ideal context:

- Highly detailed data
- Rich institutional and cultural/religious variation
- Several shocks: Napoleonic invasion (1794–), [*rise of nationalism* (1830–), *industrialization* (1840–)]

OUTLINE

DATA AND FIRST PATTERNS

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

HYPOTHESES AND HETEROGENEITY OF PATTERNS

OUTLOOK

DATA AND FIRST PATTERNS

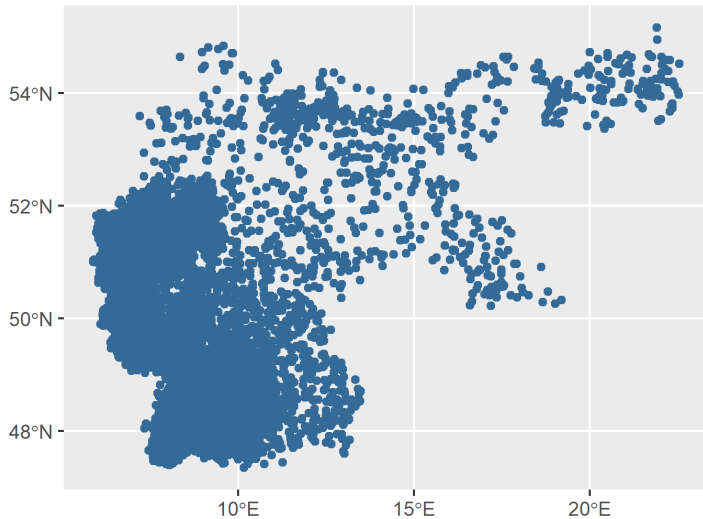
DATA SOURCE

Our data are from “Germany Births and Baptisms, 1558–1898”, collected by the Genealogical Society of Utah

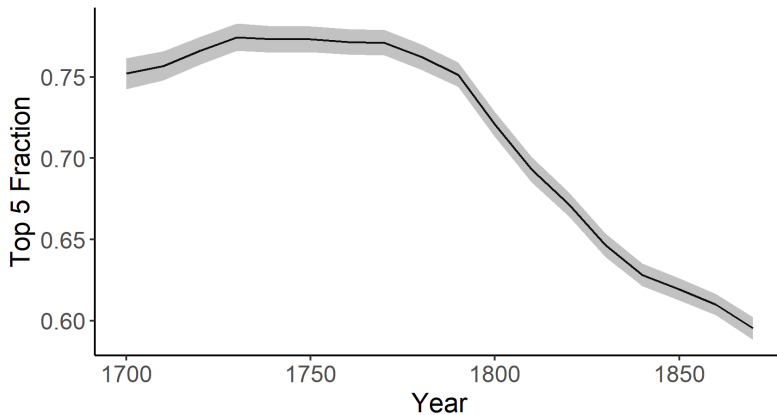
- About 44 million birth records, covering mostly the years 1700–1850
 - No last names!
- 11,000 locations from across Germany, with a preponderance of (South)West Germany
- We geolocate places
- We standardize name spellings (Johannes, Joannes, ...) — carefully (Hans?)
- (For now: only male names)

► Sample restrictions

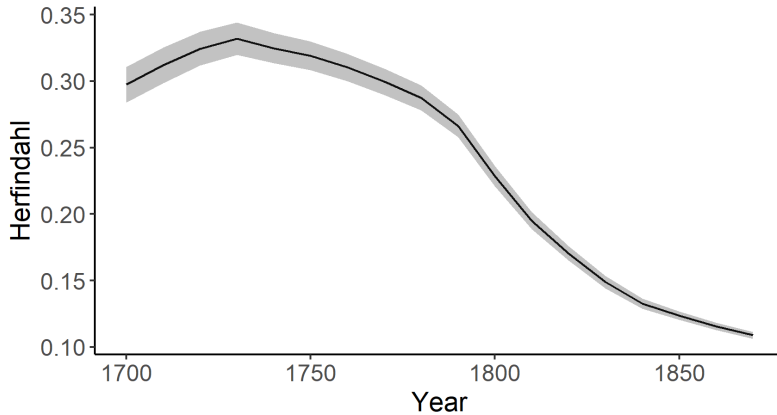
ALL BIRTH LOCATIONS



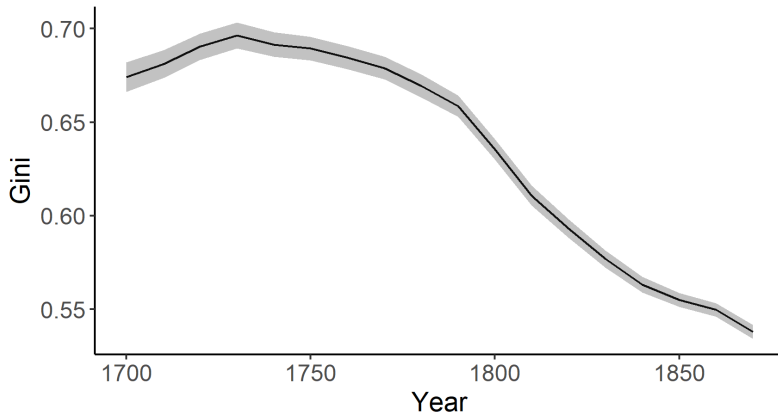
A RADICAL BREAK — TOP 5 NAMES FRACTION



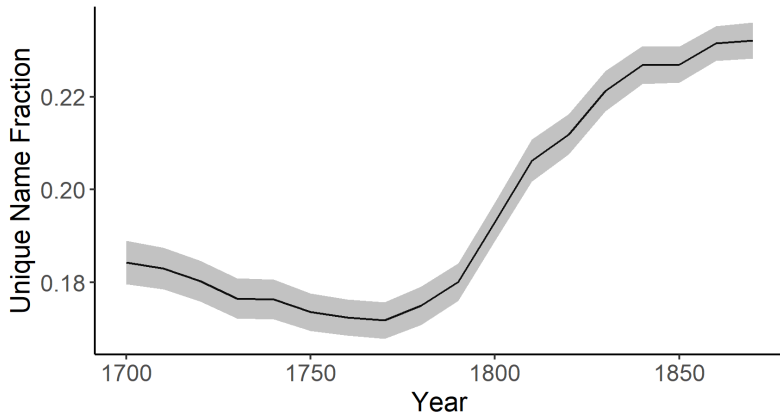
A RADICAL BREAK — HERFINDAHL



A RADICAL BREAK — GINI



A RADICAL BREAK — UNIQUE NAMES



A RADICAL BREAK — REGRESSIONS

	Top 5 Fraction (1)	Herfindahl (2)	Gini (3)	Fraction Unique Names (4)
Post 1789	-0.0890*** (0.0024)	-0.1225*** (0.0032)	-0.0798*** (0.0019)	0.0318*** (0.0012)
R ²	0.67122	0.66247	0.65545	0.71670
Observations	46,790	46,790	46,781	46,790
Mean dep. var (pre-1789)	0.7675	0.3112	0.6837	0.1764
Place fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓

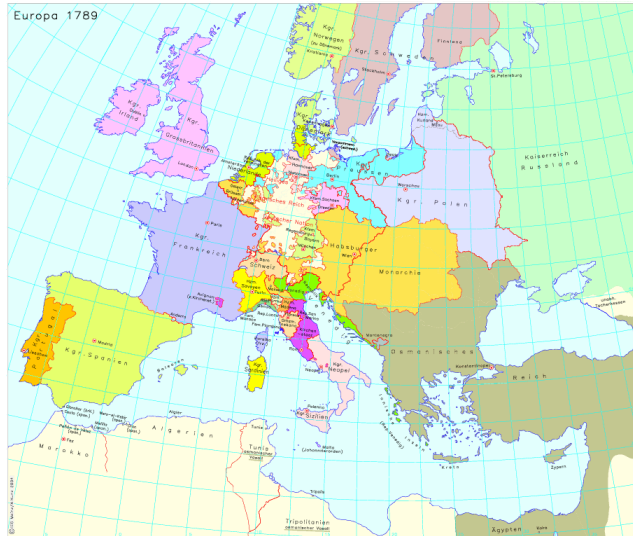
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

WHY AND WHERE — EUROPE AT THE TURN TO THE 19TH CENTURY

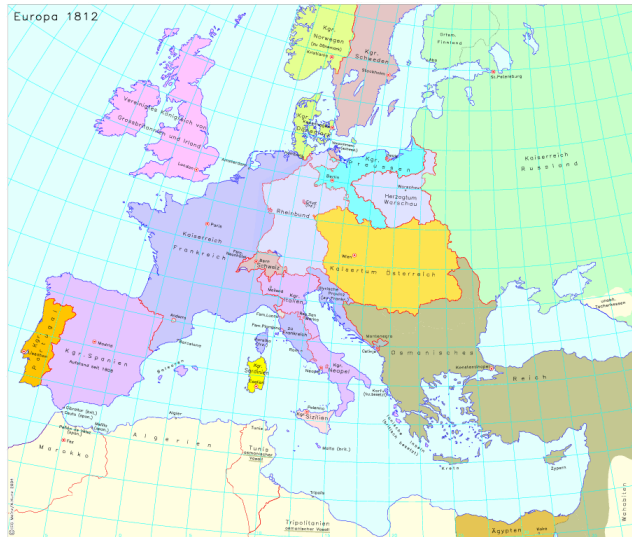
Why did this change occur around 1790? And is this effect heterogeneous across space?

- Europe witnesses the most radical shakeup of its political landscape following the French Revolution of 1789
- Revolutionary and Napoleonic troops redraw the maps of Europe and obliterate long-existing polities
- This change is particularly drastic in Germany, where the institutional framework of the Holy Roman Empire is abolished
- The post-Congress of Vienna (1815) map differs markedly from the *ancien régime* arrangements

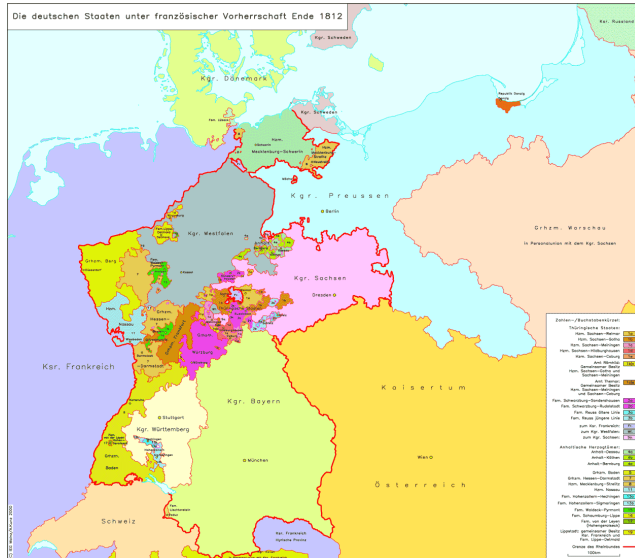
EUROPE BEFORE 1789



EUROPE UNDER NAPOLEON



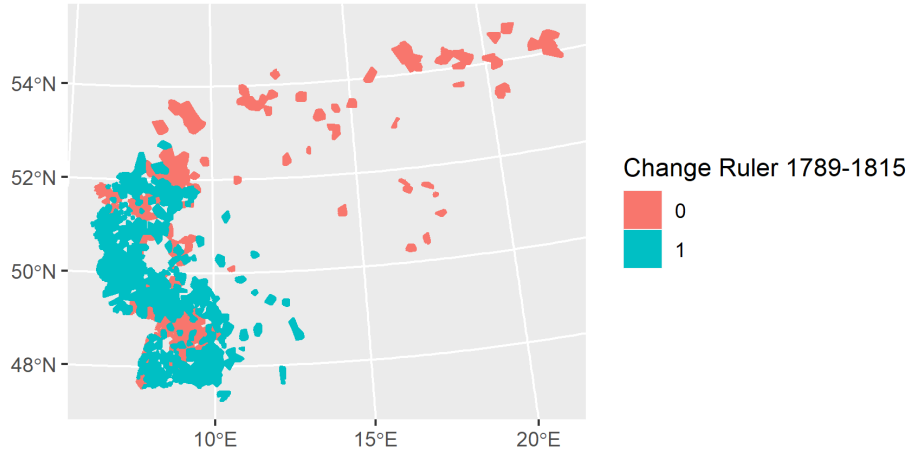
GERMANY UNDER NAPOLEON



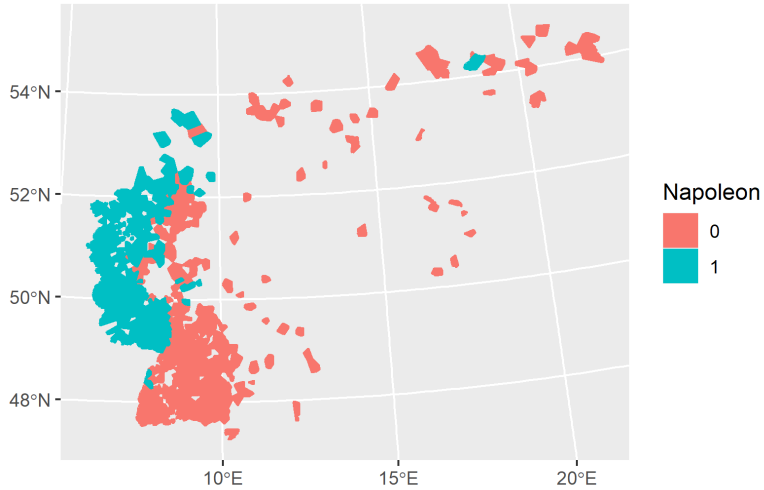
In Germany, 2 trajectories are common:

1. Some states — large (Prussia) and medium-sized (Baden, Bavaria, Württemberg, Saxony...) — are *strengthened* in the post-Vienna setup, and have made territorial gains
2. Many other states *disappear* from the map and the cities and towns are assigned to one of the remaining, post-Vienna polities

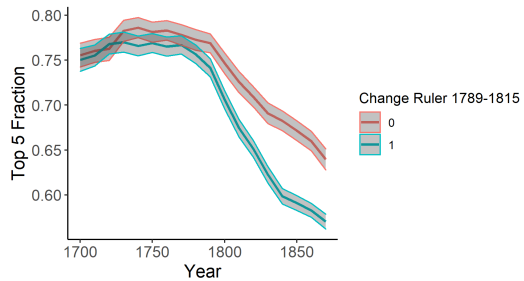
TREATMENTS IN GERMANY — RULE CHANGE FROM 1789 TO 1815



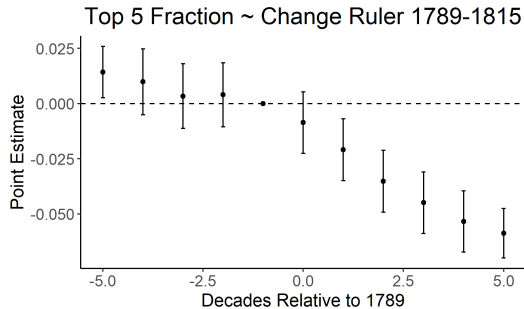
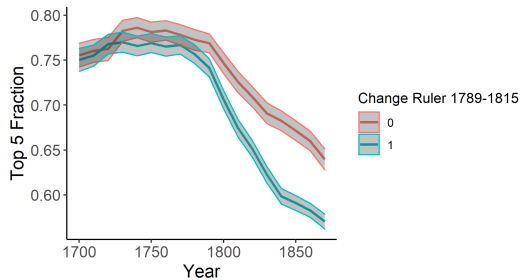
TREATMENTS IN GERMANY — NAPOLEONIC INVASION



TOP 5 SHARE — EFFECTS BY RULE CHANGE 1789–1815



TOP 5 SHARE — EFFECTS BY RULE CHANGE 1789–1815

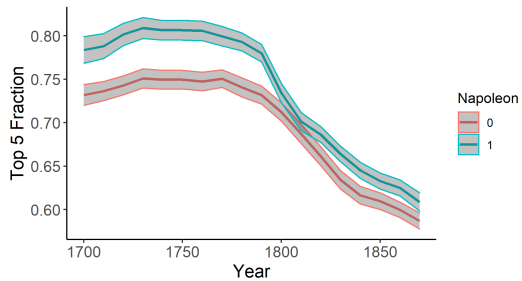


► Gini

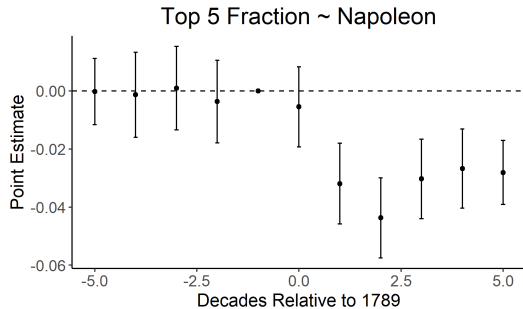
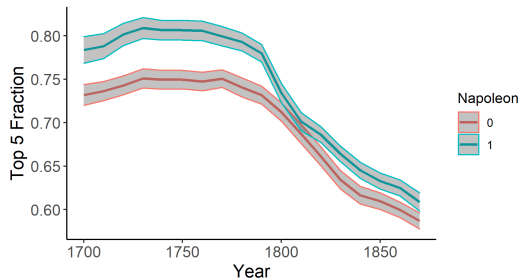
► Herfindahl

► Unique Names

TOP 5 SHARE — EFFECTS BY NAPOLEONIC INVASION



TOP 5 SHARE — EFFECTS BY NAPOLEONIC INVASION



► Gini ► Herfindahl ► Unique Names

HYPOTHESES AND HETEROGENEITY OF PATTERNS

Taking stock thus far:

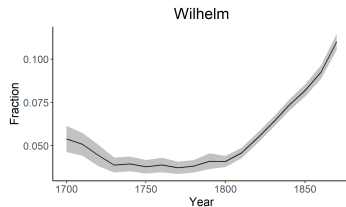
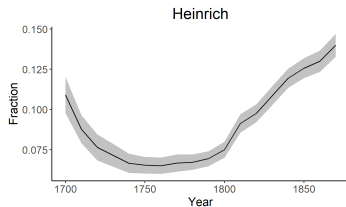
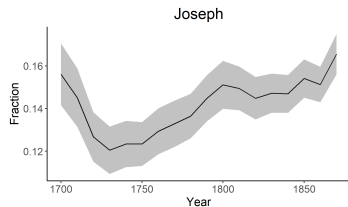
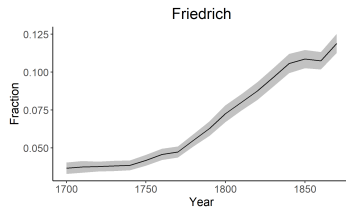
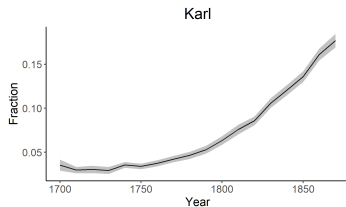
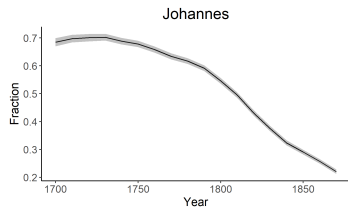
- Break towards more “individualism” in names (lower top 5 share / Gini / Herfindahl, higher share of unique names) after 1789
- Break is stronger in places with a more marked institutional change 1789–1815

Taking stock thus far:

- Break towards more “individualism” in names (lower top 5 share / Gini / Herfindahl, higher share of unique names) after 1789
- Break is stronger in places with a more marked institutional change 1789–1815

Which names gain / lose from these trend breaks?

EFFECTS BY NAME



THE RISE OF NATIONALISM

- Generic (“Christian”) names decline
- “National” names are on the rise

Top names in 1700

Johannes	0.447
Hans	0.048
Joseph	0.032
Heinrich	0.027
Georg	0.027
Jakob	0.022
Peter	0.021
Matthias	0.020

Top names in 1850

Johannes	0.151
Karl	0.089
Heinrich	0.080
Friedrich	0.078
Jakob	0.040
Wilhelm	0.039
Joseph	0.035
Franz	0.033

THREE PATHS TO NATIONALISM

We look at three sets of first names, marking three possible expressions of adherence to a “national” identity post 1815:

1. **Germanic names:** Names such as *Heinrich, Herrmann, Karl, Ulrich...* → adherence to traditional, national ideals (Germanic heroes, Medieval emperors)
2. **Prussian rulers:** *Friedrich, Wilhelm* → adherence to pan-Prussian idea of nationalism and hopes for unification under Prussian leadership
3. **Local (post 1815) rulers:** *Maximilian, Ludwig* (in Bavaria), *Georg, August* (in Hanover), etc. → adherence to local rulers and “small” nationalism

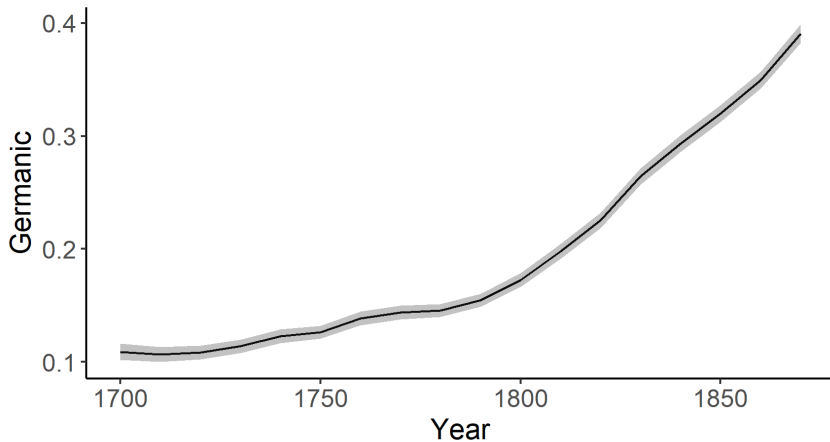
THREE PATHS TO NATIONALISM

We look at three sets of first names, marking three possible expressions of adherence to a “national” identity post 1815:

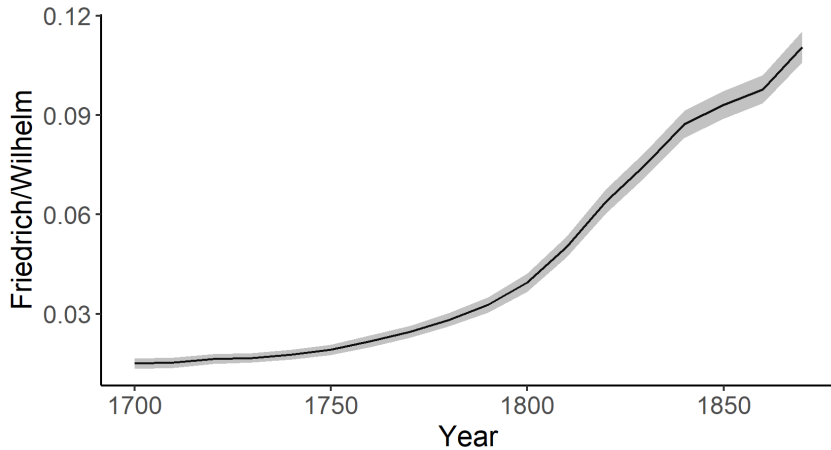
1. **Germanic names:** Names such as *Heinrich, Herrmann, Karl, Ulrich...* → adherence to traditional, national ideals (Germanic heroes, Medieval emperors)
2. **Prussian rulers:** *Friedrich, Wilhelm* → adherence to pan-Prussian idea of nationalism and hopes for unification under Prussian leadership
3. **Local (post 1815) rulers:** *Maximilian, Ludwig* (in Bavaria), *Georg, August* (in Hanover), etc. → adherence to local rulers and “small” nationalism

In contrast, we measure particularism/local identity through names of local patron saints.

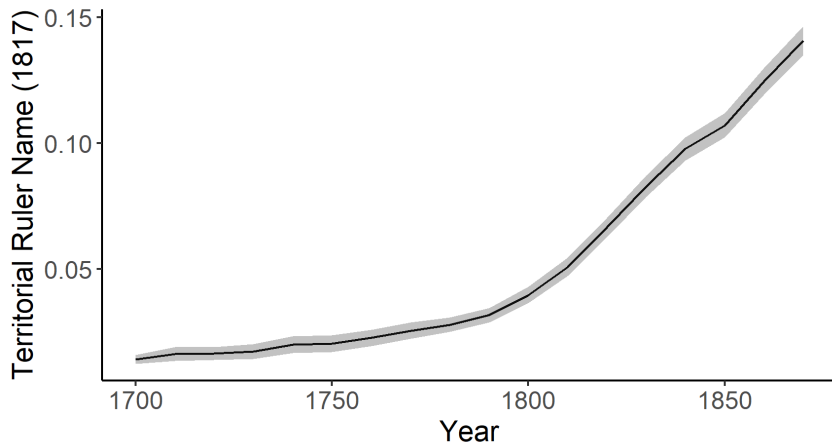
TURN TOWARDS NATIONALISM — GERMANIC NAMES



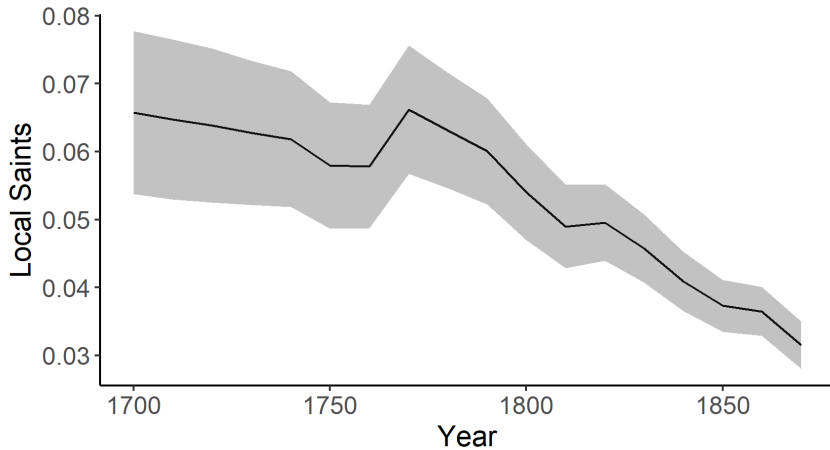
TURN TOWARDS NATIONALISM — PRUSSIAN RULERS



TURN TOWARDS NATIONALISM — LOCAL RULERS



TURN AGAINST LOCAL IDENTITIES — PATRON SAINTS



TURN TOWARDS NATIONALISM — REGRESSIONS

	Fraction Germanic Names (1)	Fraction Local Saints (2)	Fraction Friedrich/Wilhelm (3)	Fraction Post-1815 Ruler (4)
Post 1789	0.1275*** (0.0022)	-0.0114*** (0.0029)	0.0471*** (0.0012)	0.0556*** (0.0013)
R ²	0.70847	0.85452	0.65782	0.74776
Observations	46,790	20,240	46,790	46,758
Mean dep. var (pre-1789)	0.1262	0.0625	0.0201	0.0208
Place fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓

What explains these patterns? Three approaches:

Social identity theory

1. Individuals want to “fit in” a new group; long for a greater community; signal belonging (Tajfel and Turner 1986, Akerlof and Kranton 2000, Shayo 2009, Bénabou and Tirole 2011)
 - More Germanic / Prussian / local ruler names in places that change hands 1789–1815

What explains these patterns? Three approaches:

Social identity theory

1. Individuals want to “fit in” a new group; long for a greater community; signal belonging (Tajfel and Turner 1986, Akerlof and Kranton 2000, Shayo 2009, Bénabou and Tirole 2011)
 - More Germanic / Prussian / local ruler names in places that change hands 1789–1815
2. Oppositional identity (Bisin et al. 2011, Bénabou and Tirole 2011): Individuals reject new, larger state (Prussia/other polity)
 - Fewer local ruler names in places that change hands 1789–1815
 - Effect stronger in places that are “less aligned” with new rulers

Evolutionary theory of cultural change

(Boyd and Richerson 1985, 2005, Giuliano and Nunn 2022)

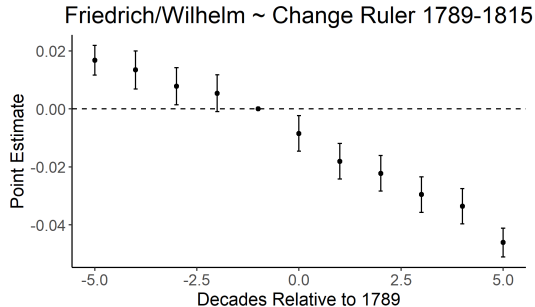
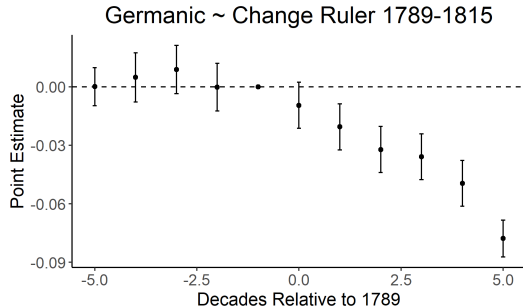
3. Stick to tradition in places that have a stable environment; turn to new names in places where the environment is unstable
 - Stronger decline in concentration measures in places that change hands 1789–1815
 - Stronger decline in concentration measures in places that have a history of unstable rule
 - More Germanic names in places with unstable environment

(H1) *LESS* NATIONAL NAMING IN PLACES THAT CHANGE RULER

No evidence that people in places that change hands 1789–1815 have a higher demand for national names, or long for pan-German / Prussian identity:

(H1) LESS NATIONAL NAMING IN PLACES THAT CHANGE RULER

No evidence that people in places that change hands 1789–1815 have a higher demand for national names, or long for pan-German / Prussian identity:

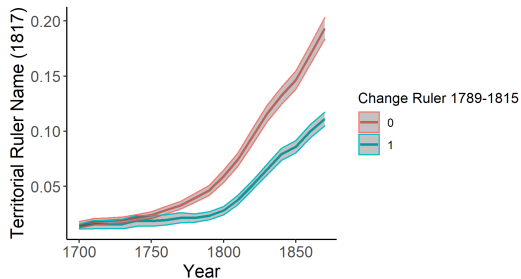


(H2) LESS LOCAL RULER NAMING IN PLACES THAT CHANGE RULER

People in places that change hands 1789–1815 *reject* the names of the new local rulers:

(H2) LESS LOCAL RULER NAMING IN PLACES THAT CHANGE RULER

People in places that change hands 1789–1815 *reject* the names of the new local rulers:



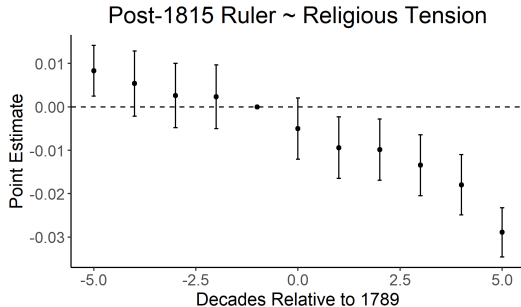
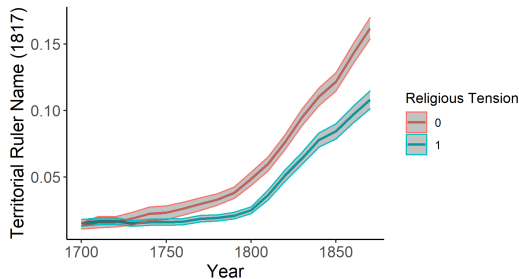
(H2) OPPOSITIONAL IDENTITY WITH IDEOLOGICAL MISALIGNMENT

We test whether this development of an *oppositional identity* is stronger where there are stronger reasons to reject the identity of the new ruler:

- Places that end up as a religious minority relative to the (new) ruling dynasty
 - E.g., Protestant locations assigned to (Catholic) Bavaria after 1815, or Catholic locations assigned to (Protestant) Prussia [▶ Map](#)
- Places that end up in the strongest, predominant polity of post-1815 Germany: Prussia [▶ Map](#)

(H2) STRONGER REJECTION OF LOCAL RULERS WITH RELIGIOUS MISALIGNMENT

Rejection of local rulers' names is *stronger* when there is a religious misalignment between the population and the ruling dynasty:



(H2) STRONGER REJECTION OF LOCAL RULERS WITH RELIGIOUS MISALIGNMENT

	Fraction Friedrich/Wilhelm (1)	Fraction Germanic Names (2)	Fraction Post-1815 Ruler (3)
Rule Change \times Post 1789	-0.0354*** (0.0035)	-0.0455*** (0.0058)	-0.0423*** (0.0037)
Religious Tension \times Post 1789	-0.0162*** (0.0026)	-0.0140*** (0.0054)	-0.0042 (0.0032)
R ²	0.67405	0.77043	0.73086
Observations	23,405	23,405	23,405
Place fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓

(H2) ANTI-PRUSSIAN FEELINGS — REGRESSIONS

Rejection of Prussian or pan-Germanic names is *stronger* in places that end up in Prussia, relative to other places that change hands in 1789–1815:

(H2) ANTI-PRUSSIAN FEELINGS — REGRESSIONS

Rejection of Prussian or pan-Germanic names is *stronger* in places that end up in Prussia, relative to other places that change hands in 1789–1815:

	Fraction Friedrich/Wilhelm (1)	Fraction Germanic Names (2)	Fraction Post-1815 Ruler (3)
In Prussia 1817 × Post 1789	0.0439*** (0.0056)	0.0502*** (0.0099)	0.0268*** (0.0056)
Rule Change × Post 1789	-0.0329*** (0.0034)	-0.0329*** (0.0055)	-0.0356*** (0.0036)
In Prussia 1817 × Rule Change × Post 1789	-0.0249*** (0.0066)	-0.0544*** (0.0122)	-0.0224*** (0.0068)
R ²	0.68202	0.77209	0.73271
Observations	23,405	23,405	23,405
Place fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓

(H3) EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES OF CULTURAL CHANGE

We hypothesize that unstable environments make individuals more likely to abandon tradition → stronger reduction in concentration

(H3) EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES OF CULTURAL CHANGE

We hypothesize that unstable environments make individuals more likely to abandon tradition → stronger reduction in concentration

We measure the instability of the environment through:

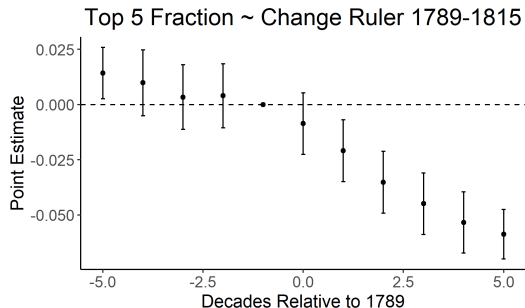
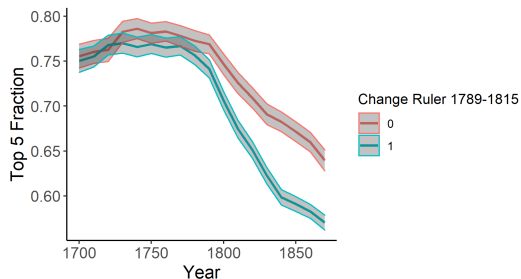
- Changing ruler from 1789 to 1815
- The number of times a place changed rule (due to conflict) in the period 1500–1789 (median split)

TOP 5 SHARE — EFFECTS BY RULE CHANGE 1789–1815

As already seen — reduction in concentration is stronger in places with rule change 1789-1815:

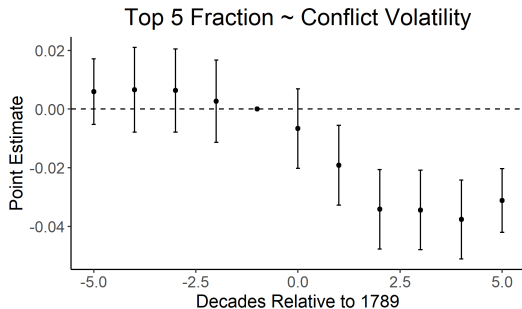
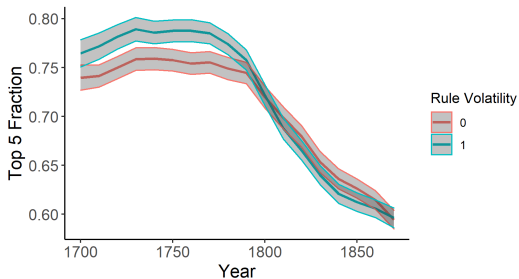
TOP 5 SHARE — EFFECTS BY RULE CHANGE 1789–1815

As already seen — reduction in concentration is stronger in places with rule change 1789-1815:



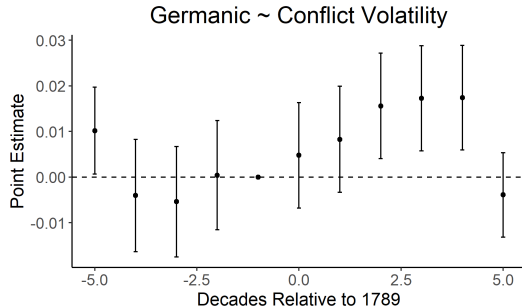
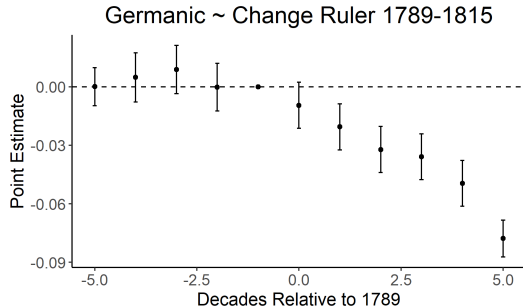
TOP 5 SHARE — EFFECTS BY RULE VOLATILITY PRE-1789

Same pattern when measuring (conflict) volatility of rule before 1789:



GERMANIC NAMES — EFFECTS BY RULE VOLATILITY

However, places with more unstable rule do not necessarily turn more towards “nationalist” (Germanic) names



OUTLOOK

LOOKING AHEAD

Study of first names reveals 1789 — the *end of the “old world”* in continental Europe — as a dramatic turning point.

Study of first names reveals 1789 — the *end of the “old world”* in continental Europe — as a dramatic turning point.

What we still need to understand better:

- Increasing trend of homogeneity up to 1789
- Economic and cultural drivers, rather than political ones
- Better measurement of ideological content of names: *polarization* vs. concentration
- Interactions with the *rise of nationalism* post 1830: supply of ideology and active use of ideological capacity from the state

APPENDIX SLIDES

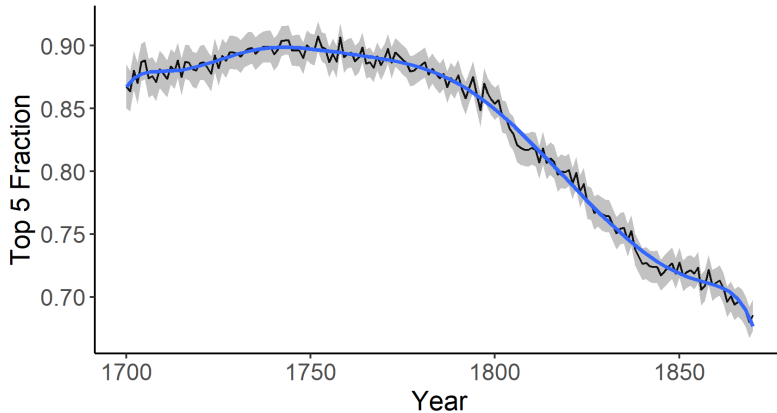
SOME DATA CLEANING

To obtain a consistent sample, we operate the following sample restrictions:

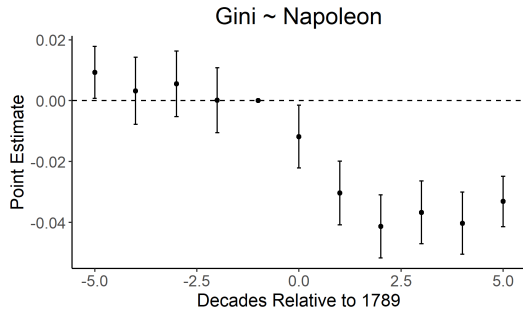
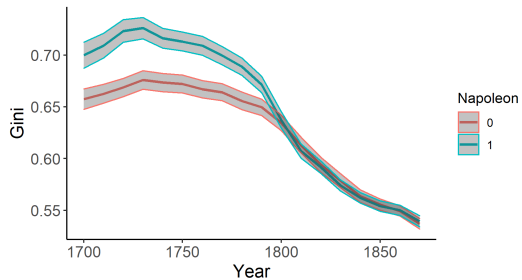
- aggregate by decades
- exclude names that occur only ≤ 2 times over the whole period
- exclude places that first appear after 1700, or drop out before 1850
- exclude places-decades in the lowest quartile of births (< 44 births)
- exclude places with < 8 decades of coverage
- draw 100 names per place-decade

(Results are robust to variations of sampling restrictions)

A RADICAL BREAK — TOP 5 NAMES FRACTION

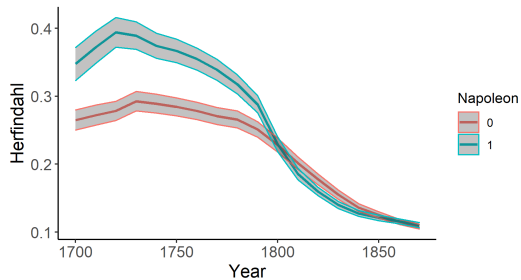


GINI — EFFECTS BY NAPOLEONIC INVASION

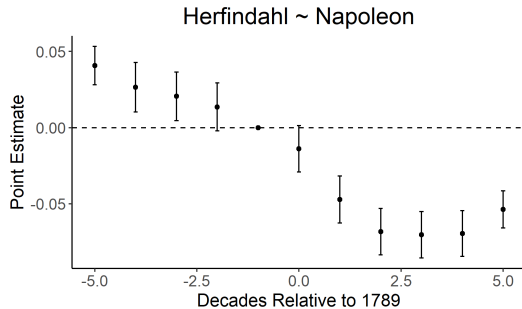


► Back

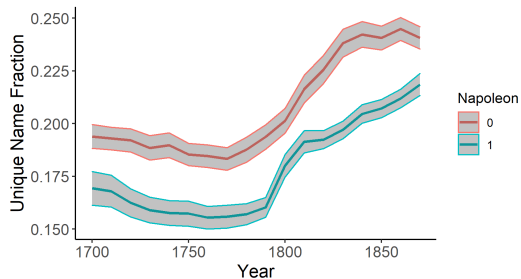
HERFINDAHL — EFFECTS BY NAPOLEONIC INVASION



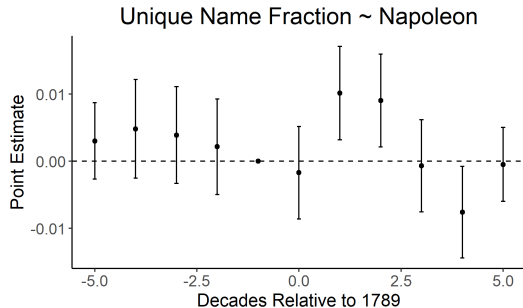
► Back



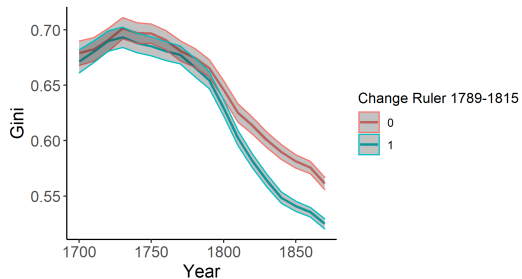
HERFINDAHL — EFFECTS BY NAPOLEONIC INVASION



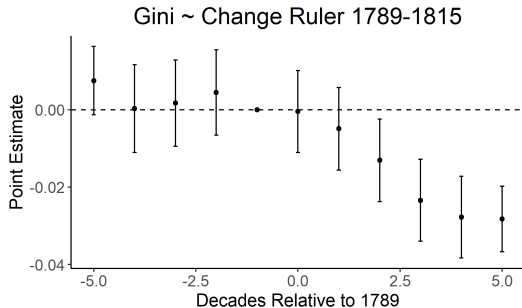
► Back



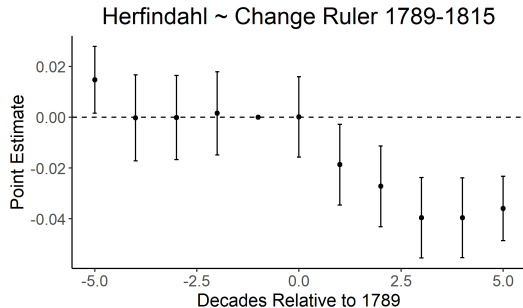
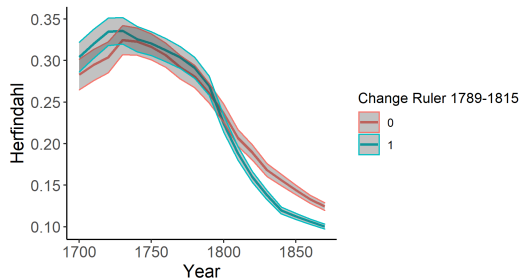
GINI — EFFECTS BY RULE CHANGE 1789–1815



► Back

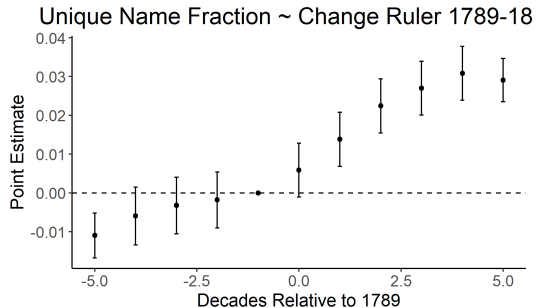
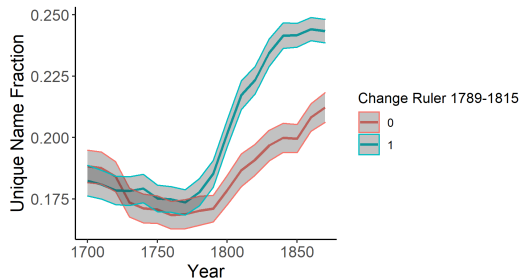


HERFINDAHL — EFFECTS BY RULE CHANGE 1789–1815



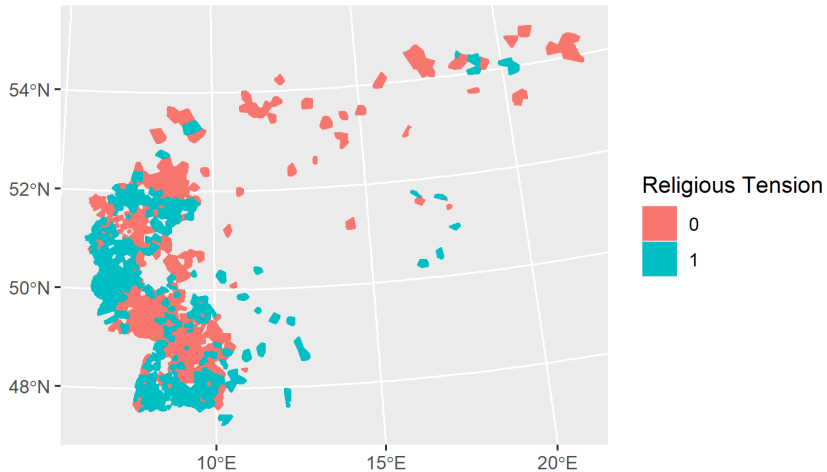
► Back

UNIQUE NAMES — EFFECTS BY RULE CHANGE 1789–1815



► Back

TREATMENTS IN GERMANY — RELIGIOUS TENSION



TREATMENTS IN GERMANY — RELIGIOUS TENSION

