Original Research Article

The Effect of Political and Economic Autonomy on Post-Colonial Development: A Comparative Analysis of British Colonies

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ABSTRACT

Former British colonies have followed markedly different developmental trajectories since independence. Some have achieved economic growth and stable democracies while others have experienced economic and political instability. This study examines whether political autonomy during British colonial rule is associated with economic performance and democratic governance after independence. An autonomy index was constructed using eight dimensions of colonial self-government and applied to twelve former British colonies. Economic performance was measured using gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in purchasing power parity (PPP) adjusted constant 2011 international dollars, while political development was measured using Polity V polity scores. Comparative analyses, cross-country visualizations, Pearson correlation, and linear regression analyses were performed using one contemporary observation per country.The results indicate that higher levels of autonomy during colonial rule are associated with positive economic and political outcomes. Australia and Canada, achieving the highest levels on the autonomy scale, attained stable democratic governance and per capita incomes exceeding $25,000. Countries with lower autonomy scores, including Bangladesh, Burma/Myanmar, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, generally experienced weaker economic performance and political instability. Intermediate autonomy cases, such as Cyprus and Guyana, showed gradual improvement in development over time. These findings support the institutional persistence hypothesis by suggesting that government structures established during colonial rule continued to influence long-term development after independence. This study adds to the comparative development literature by demonstrating that differences in colonial political autonomy within a single imperial system were associated with long-term economic and political outcomes.

Keywords: post-colonial development; political autonomy; governance structures; economic development; democratization; comparative analysis

INTRODUCTION

Understanding why some countries achieve sustained economic growth and stable political systems while others do not remains one of the central questions in economics and political science (1). Former British colonies exhibit a wide variation in long-term development despite sharing common imperial histories. While some former colonies, including Australia and Canada, developed stable democratic institutions and high-income economies, others, such as Nigeria,

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Uganda, and Burma/Myanmar, experienced persistent political instability and weaker economic performance. Explaining these varying trajectories is critical in the study of comparative development.

Previous research has argued that institutional arrangements established during colonial rule frequently persist after independence and shape the political and economic environments inherited by newly sovereign states (1, 2). Legal systems, fiscal institutions, and patterns of political participation often survived the transition to independence and continued to influence subsequent development. Development economists have observed that external interventions, including foreign aid and technical assistance, often produce mixed results when underlying institutional capacity is weak (3).

Within the British Empire, substantial variation in colonial governance provides an opportunity to examine how differences in political autonomy may have influenced long-term development. Colonies differed substantially in the degree of representative government, executive independence, and judicial autonomy they attained prior to independence. Geographic distance, strategic priorities, and local political conditions all contributed to these differences in colonial governance.

The institutional persistence framework developed by Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson serves as the primary theoretical foundation for this study (1). The framework argues that institutional arrangements established during the colonial period persist beyond independence and continue to influence economic and political development. While Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (1) focus primarily on the distinction between extractive and inclusive institutions, less attention has been devoted to variation in political autonomy within a single imperial system and whether differing degrees of self-government were associated with long-term development after independence. This study isolates political autonomy as a measurable institutional dimension across former British colonies. This allows for a more granular analysis of how variations within a single imperial system may have shaped long-term development outcomes.

This study constructs a weighted autonomy index comprising eight dimensions of colonial self-government and applies it to twelve former British colonies representing diverse geographic regions and historical experiences. The resulting autonomy scores are examined in relation to contemporary measures of economic performance and political development. By focusing on institutional variation within a common imperial framework, this study evaluates whether greater colonial political autonomy was associated with stronger long-term economic and political outcomes.

This study focuses exclusively on former British colonies, which allows the colonial framework to be held roughly constant while varying the degree of autonomy within it. This is both a strength and a limitation: the findings may not generalize to French, Belgian, or Dutch colonial experiences, which operated under quite different administrative philosophies. A sample size of twelve countries is sufficient for comparative review but too small for robust statistical analysis, and the results should be interpreted as suggestive rather than definitive.

The autonomy index, while systematic, involves interpretive judgments in its construction. The weighting scheme applied to the eight components is necessarily subjective, and alternative weighting strategies could reasonably be justified. Data availability also varies considerably across cases and time periods, requiring some approximation in matching historical records to consistent measurement frameworks. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the high-autonomy countries in this sample, Australia and Canada, were also settler colonies with predominantly European populations and very different starting conditions than the African and Asian cases. These confounding factors cannot be fully resolved within the current design and should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Research Design

This paper examines the relationship between levels of political autonomy during the colonial period and post-independence economic and political outcomes. The analysis covers twelve former British colonies and follows each through the colonial period, the moment of independence, and the years that followed. Historical observations from all three periods are used to describe institutional trajectories, while inferential analyses use one contemporary observation per country.

Sample Selection

The twelve countries included were Australia, Canada, Bangladesh, Burma/Myanmar, Cyprus, Nigeria, Guyana, Ireland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Aden/Yemen. The investigation focused on the time of European preeminence, between the 1880s and decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s. They were chosen because they represent a wide range of colonial experiences. Some, like Australia and Canada, operated largely as self-governing dominions, while others were governed more directly from London. Restricting the sample to British colonies helps hold the colonial framework constant. Practically, and important to data acquisition, all twelve countries have historical and economic data to make consistent comparison feasible.

Variables and Measurement

These are the two most commonly used indicators of long-term national success in the development literature (4). GDP per capita provides a standardized measure of economic output, while Polity V polity scores offer a widely accepted metric for democratic governance (5).

The main independent variable is political autonomy during colonial rule, measured through a constructed index. The index draws on eight dimensions of governance: legislative authority, executive independence, the presence of local courts, control over taxation, tribute obligations, budget control, defense authority, and whether a local civil service existed. Scores across these dimensions are summed to produce an overall autonomy rating on a scale of 0 to 10.

On the outcome side, economic performance is measured using GDP per capita in purchasing power parity (PPP), constant 2011 international dollars obtained from the World Bank World Development Indicators database. Democratic development is tracked using Polity V polity scores, with property rights and press freedom indicators drawn in where the data permits. Population size and growth rates provide controlling variables for interpreting economic comparisons across countries of very different scales. Using standardized measures such as GDP per capita and Polity V polity scores allows for comparison across countries with different historical and geographic contexts.

Table 1. Autonomy scores and selected development indicators for twelve former British colonies. *Autonomy scores were constructed using a weighted index of eight dimensions of colonial self-government: legislative authority, executive independence, judicial autonomy, taxation authority, tribute obligations, budgetary control, defense authority, and civil service administration. Economic development is measured using GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2011 international $), and political development is measured using Polity V polity score. The table summarizes variation in colonial autonomy and corresponding post-independence outcomes across the study sample (n = 12 countries).*

Country	Autonomy Score (0–10)	GDP per Capita (PPP, Constant 2011 International $)	Polity V Polity Score (Recent)
Australia	9.5	>25,000	10
Canada	9.5	>25,000	10
Ireland	7.75	~22,600	10
Guyana	6.75	~14,000	3
Aden/Yemen	5.25	~3,900	-1.5
Cyprus	4.25	~18,700	9.5
Nigeria	3.5	~2,500	-1
Tanzania	3.5	~1,200	-2
Uganda	3.5	~1,300	-3
Zambia	3.5	~1,800	-2
Burma/ Myanmar	2.5	~1,400	-4
Bangladesh	2.0	~1,600	1.5

Notes: *Autonomy scores range from 0 to 10, with higher values indicating greater levels of colonial self-government. GDP per capita values are reported as GDP per capita, purchasing power parity (PPP), constant 2011 international dollars, obtained from the World Bank World Development Indicators database. PPP-adjusted international dollars account for differences in price levels across countries and provide a standardized measure for cross-country comparison of economic development. Polity V polity scores range from −10 (fully autocratic) to +10 (fully democratic).*

Construction of the Autonomy Index

The autonomy index was developed using a structured comparative coding framework based on eight dimensions of colonial self-government: legislative authority, executive independence, judicial autonomy, taxation authority, tribute obligations, budgetary control, defense authority, and civil service administration. For each dimension, benchmark cases representing the highest and lowest observed levels of autonomy within the sample were identified using constitutional records, colonial legislation, independence acts, and administrative documents. These benchmark cases established the criteria for assigning scores across three levels of autonomy (high, medium, and low). For descriptive interpretation, autonomy scores were grouped into low (<4.0), intermediate (4.0–6.99), and high (≥7.0) categories. These thresholds were used only to organize the narrative presentation of results and were not used in the statistical analyses.

Each dimension was scored on a standardized scale ranging from 0 to 1. A score of 1 represented substantial local control over the relevant governmental function, 0 represented direct metropolitan control, and 0.5 represented partial or shared authority. Additional intermediate scores were assigned when documentary evidence indicated institutional arrangements that fell between these categories. Ambiguous cases were resolved through comparison with benchmark cases and review of multiple historical sources.

To improve coding consistency, each country's score was derived using a standardized coding protocol that recorded the documentary evidence supporting each component score. The autonomy index was constructed from primary constitutional documents, independence legislation, and colonial legal instruments (6–23), with each country's score derived from the specific documentary sources listed in Table 2.

To reflect differences in the relative importance of institutional functions, selected dimensions were assigned greater weights. Legislative authority received a weight of 2.0 because representative lawmaking is a central feature of self-government. Executive independence and civil service administration each received weights of 1.5 because both are closely associated with administrative capacity, policy implementation, and institutional continuity. The remaining dimensions were assigned weights of 1.0. Weighted component scores were summed to produce a final autonomy score ranging from 0 to 10, with higher scores indicating greater levels of colonial self-governance.

The current weighting strategy of the score components is a simplification that may not accurately reflect the relative importance of the underlying variables (e.g. fiscal control versus military authority). Additionally, scoring relied on historical records and legal documents that were not always unambiguous, so some degree of interpretive judgment was unavoidable. Further refinement of the underlying scoring algorithm will be the source of future studies.

Data Sources

Economic data, particularly GDP per capita, comes from the World Bank (4). Democracy scores are drawn from Polity V polity scores (5). Colonial governance structures were reconstructed from a combination of primary sources. These included official government records and legal documents from the colonial period, and secondary literature on British imperial administration. Aligning these sources across countries and time periods presented challenges, and some approximation was necessary where coverage gaps existed. Where multiple constitutional or legislative instruments governed successive stages of colonial administration, the principal documents defining legislative authority, executive independence, judicial autonomy, and administrative self-government immediately preceding independence were used for scoring.

Because several colonial entities were later incorporated into modern states or renamed after independence, historical and contemporary labels were standardized for consistency. The British-administered colony of Aden is reported as Aden/Yemen because the colonial autonomy score reflects the institutional arrangements of the Aden Colony and Aden Protectorate prior to decolonization, while contemporary outcome measures are drawn from the modern state of Yemen. This mapping is inexact because Aden represented only part of present-day Yemen and later became part of South Yemen before unification with North Yemen in 1990. Therefore, Yemen-related findings should be interpreted as a continuity-based approximation rather than a claim of exact territorial or institutional equivalence.

Similarly, British Burma is reported as Burma/Myanmar because the colonial autonomy score reflects British Burma under the Government of Burma Act 1935, while contemporary outcome measures are drawn from the modern state of Myanmar.

Additional Outcome Measures

Property rights were measured using the Heritage

Foundation Index of Economic Freedom [2024], which reports property rights on a 0–100 scale, with higher values indicating stronger legal protection of private property (24). To facilitate graphical comparison with the 0–10 autonomy index, property rights scores were linearly rescaled according to:

Property Rights (normalized) = Original Heritage Property Rights Score ÷ 20

producing a normalized scale ranging from 0 to 5. Press freedom was measured using the 2024 Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index (25). The 2024 RSF methodology reports higher scores as greater press freedom (0–100 scale). To facilitate comparison with the autonomy index, RSF scores were similarly normalized according to:

Press Freedom (normalized) = Original RSF Score ÷ 20

yielding values between 0 and 5. The current (2024) RSF methodology assigns higher scores to greater levels of press freedom; therefore, no reverse coding was required prior to normalization. All supplementary institutional indicators were obtained from the 2024 editions of their respective datasets and were used solely as contemporary measures of institutional quality.

These indicators were included as supplementary measures of institutional quality and were analyzed alongside GDP per capita and Polity V polity scores. Where multiple years of data were available, contemporary values were used to facilitate cross-country comparison of long-run institutional outcomes.

Data Analysis

The analysis is primarily comparative and visual. Scatterplots are used to map the relationship between autonomy scores and post-independence outcomes. These figures illustrate relationships between colonial autonomy and both economic measures, such as GDP per capita, and political measures, such as Polity V polity scores. Time-series comparisons then show how individual countries evolved from the colonial period through independence and into the present. Throughout, particular attention is paid to differences between the

Table 2. Primary documentary sources used in construction of autonomy index scores. *Autonomy scores were derived from constitutional acts, colonial administrative orders, independence legislation, and formal governance agreements. These sources were used to evaluate legislative authority, executive independence, judicial autonomy, taxation authority, tribute obligations, budgetary control, defense authority, and civil service administration for each colony.*

Country	Principal Documentary Sources Used for Coding	Reference(s)
Australia	Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act (1900); Statute of Westminster (1931)	(8, 16)
Canada	Statute of Westminster (1931); Constitution Act, 1867	(16, 22)
Ireland	Constitution of Ireland (1937), Constitution of the Irish Free State (1922)	(9, 23)
Nigeria	Nigeria (Constitution) Order in Council (1954); Nigeria Independence Act (1960)	(14, 15)
Tanzania (Tanganyika)	Tanganyika Independence Act (1961)	(17)
Uganda	Uganda Agreement (1900); Uganda Independence Act (1962)	(18, 19)
Zambia	Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland Order (1953); Zambia Independence Act (1964)	(10, 20)
Guyana (British Guiana)	British Guiana Constitution Orders in Council (1928–1943); Guyana Independence Act (1966)	(7, 13)
Bangladesh	Government of India Act (1935)	(12)
Burma/Myanmar	Government of Burma Act (1935)	(11)
Aden/Yemen	Aden Colony Order in Council (1936)	(6)
Cyprus	Cyprus Act 1960; Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus (1960)	(21)

Note: *Multiple documentary sources were consulted where necessary to resolve ambiguities in institutional arrangements. Final autonomy scores were assigned using the coding protocol described in the Methods section and weighted according to the autonomy index framework.*

Table 3. Autonomy Index Components and Weighting Scheme. The autonomy index was constructed from eight dimensions of colonial self-government reflecting the degree of local political, administrative, fiscal, and legal authority exercised within each colony. Components were weighted according to their presumed importance for institutional development and governance capacity, with greater emphasis placed on legislative authority, executive independence, and civil service administration. Weighted component scores were summed to produce a final autonomy score ranging from 0 to 10, where higher scores indicate greater levels of colonial political autonomy.

Index Component	Weight	Description	Rationale for Weighting
Legislative Authority	**2.0**	Degree of local control over lawmaking and representative institutions	Legislative institutions form the foundation of self-government and democratic participation.
Executive Independence	**1.5**	Extent to which executive authority was exercised by locally accountable officials rather than metropolitan appointees	Executive control influences policy implementation and administrative autonomy.
Judicial Autonomy	1.0	Independence of local courts and legal decision-making authority	Supports rule of law and dispute resolution.
Taxation Authority	1.0	Local authority to levy and collect taxes	Measures fiscal independence and revenue generation capacity.
Tribute Obligations	1.0	Degree to which revenues were extracted by the imperial government	Reflects constraints on local economic decision-making.
Budgetary Control	1.0	Authority over expenditure and fiscal planning	Indicates practical control over governmental priorities.
Defense Authority	1.0	Local responsibility for military and security decisions	Measures sovereignty in security matters.
Civil Service Administration	**1.5**	Presence and authority of a locally managed civil service	Reflects administrative capacity and experience in governance prior to independence.
Total Possible Weight	**10.0**		

Note: Component scores were assigned using the coding protocol described in the Methods section and were based on constitutional records, colonial administrative documents, independence legislation, and formal governance agreements. Legislative authority received a weight of 2.0, executive independence and civil service administration each received weights of 1.5, and all remaining components received weights of 1.0, yielding a maximum possible autonomy score of 10.0.

high-autonomy dominions and the directly governed colonies, treating these as the clearest test of whether greater self-governance left a lasting developmental footprint.

Inferential analyses were conducted using one contemporary observation per country (n = 12), with each former British colony serving as the unit of analysis. Pearson correlation coefficients and simple bivariate linear regression were used to evaluate the association between colonial autonomy scores and contemporary measures of economic performance, political development, property rights, and press freedom. The complete country-level dataset used for inferential analyses is provided in Supplementary Table S1.

Historical observations from the colonial, transition, and post-independence periods were retained for descriptive comparisons of institutional trajectories but were not treated as independent observations in statistical testing. This approach avoids pseudoreplication arising from repeated observations within individual countries while preserving the historical context of institutional development.

Because the analysis relies on a small comparative sample, these p-values should be interpreted as exploratory evidence of association rather than definitive causal estimates. Historical observations from the colonial, transition, and post-independence periods are presented descriptively to illustrate institutional trajectories but were not included in inferential statistical analyses. This study was conducted by a single investigator using historical documentary evidence, therefore formal inter-rater reliability testing was not possible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Autonomy Scores

Autonomy levels at independence differed significantly across the twelve representative cases as shown in Figure 1. Canada and Australia have the highest scores, above 9, followed by Ireland at 7.75. In these cases, local institutions such as legislatures, courts, and civil services were functioning well prior to independence. Bangladesh and Burma/Myanmar received the lowest autonomy scores, at 2.0 and 2.5, respectively, while Aden/Yemen received an intermediate score of 5.25. Most of the African cases, including Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, fall into a relatively narrow range between 3 and 4. The scores group into bands represented by high, intermediate, and lower clusters. These patterns suggest a positive relationship between higher autonomy scores and stronger post-independence outcomes.

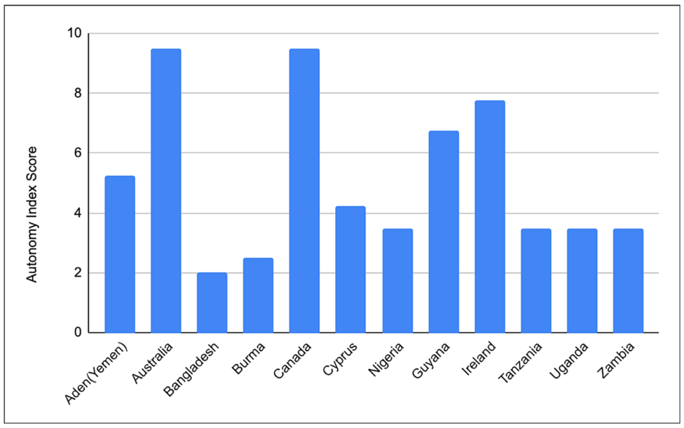

Figure 1. ***Colonial autonomy scores across twelve former British colonies at independence.*** *The figure displays the weighted autonomy index score for each country on a scale from 0 to 10, where higher scores indicate greater levels of colonial self-government. Scores were derived from eight dimensions of governance, including legislative authority, executive independence, judicial autonomy, taxation authority, tribute obligations, budgetary control, defense authority, and civil service administration. Data were compiled from colonial constitutional records, independence acts, and government documents (6–23). X-axis: country. Y-axis: autonomy score (0–10). Sample size: n = 12 countries.*

Economic Outcomes

Figure 2 demonstrates a strong positive association between colonial autonomy and contemporary GDP per capita across the twelve study countries. Australia and Canada achieved the highest autonomy scores and the highest contemporary GDP per capita, while lower-autonomy countries generally remained at substantially lower income levels. Historical GDP trajectories are discussed for descriptive context but were not included in the inferential analyses. Ireland, with a transition autonomy score of 7.75, grew from approximately \$3,350 at independence to over \$22,600 in the post-independence period, a trajectory consistent with the broader pattern. Figure 2 presents the cross-sectional relationship between colonial autonomy scores and contemporary GDP per capita across the twelve study countries. This relationship was statistically significant in the cross-sectional country-level analysis, with a p-value of 0.000085.

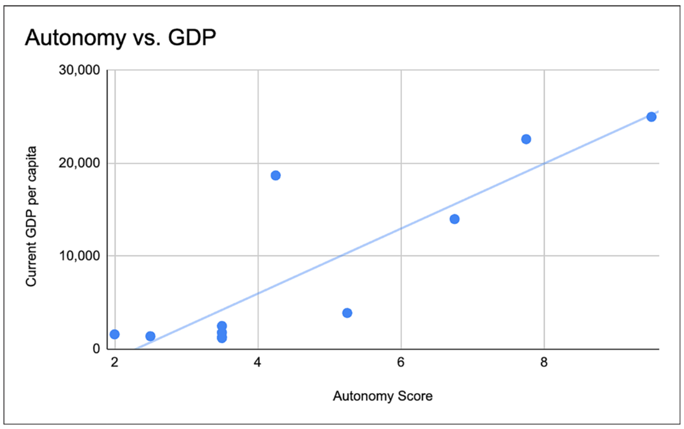

Figure 2. ***Relationship between colonial autonomy and post-independence GDP per capita.*** *Scatterplot showing the association between autonomy index scores and recent GDP per capita values across twelve study countries. Autonomy scores range from 0 to 10, with higher values indicating greater colonial self-government. GDP per capita is measured in PPP-adjusted constant 2011 international dollars. Each point represents one contemporary country observation. Historical observations discussed in the text were not included in inferential analyses. Australia and Canada were plotted at 25,000 because Table 1 reports their GDP per capita as greater than 25,000; therefore, the two observations overlap in the figure. The fitted regression line represents a simple bivariate linear regression (Pearson correlation equivalent). X-axis: autonomy score (0–10). Y-axis: GDP per capita (constant 2011 USD). Sample size: n = 12 countries. Pearson correlation coefficient r = 0.895; p = 0.000085.*

By contrast, the low-autonomy African cases showed much more modest economic growth. Tanzania's real GDP per capita stood at roughly $720 at independence and reached only $1,248 in the modern period. Uganda moved from $942 to $1,297. Nigeria, despite significant oil wealth, grew from only $991 to $2,532. Zambia improved from $1,005 to $1,868. These figures represent real improvements but remain a fraction of the incomes achieved by the high-autonomy dominions.

Bangladesh and Burma/Myanmar, both with limited autonomy under British India, similarly remained low-income, with Bangladesh reaching $1,626 per capita in the modern period. Aden/Yemen, which had a slightly higher autonomy score in transition at 5.25, reached $3,924, showing somewhat better performance than the African cases. Cyprus, an intermediate range case with a transition score of 4.25, showed stronger performance, reaching $18,719 in the modern period. Its location and proximity to EU markets likely contributed significantly to its better performance.

Political Outcomes

The pattern in democracy scores mirrors the economic findings as shown in Figure 3. Australia and Canada both achieved and maintained Polity V polity scores of 10, the maximum, throughout the post-independence period. Ireland reached a score of 10 as well after a period of transition. Cyprus climbed from a post-independence score of 7.5 to 9.5 in recent decades. The graph demonstrates a positive correlation between autonomy scores and Polity V polity scores. This relationship was statistically significant in the cross-sectional country-level analysis, with a p-value of 0.00275, suggesting that the association between greater colonial autonomy and stronger democratic outcomes is unlikely to be the result of random variation.

The African cases tell a very different story. Nigeria scored negative 10 at independence and improved only marginally to negative 1 in the modern period. Tanzania scored negative 10 at independence and sits at negative 2 today. Uganda went from negative 10 to negative 3. Zambia similarly remained in negative territory. Bangladesh averaged negative 3.5 in its early post-independence period, improving to positive 1.5 more recently. Burma/Myanmar scored negative 4 post-independence, consistent with decades of military rule.

Aden/Yemen presents a particularly stark case. Despite a higher autonomy score than the African colonies at transition, it recorded a Polity V polity scores of negative 7 in the early post-independence period and negative 1.5 in the modern era, reflecting the destabilizing effects of Cold War involvement, oil politics, and eventual state collapse. Guyana improved from negative 10 at independence to positive 3 in the modern period, consistent with its intermediate range autonomy score of 6.75.

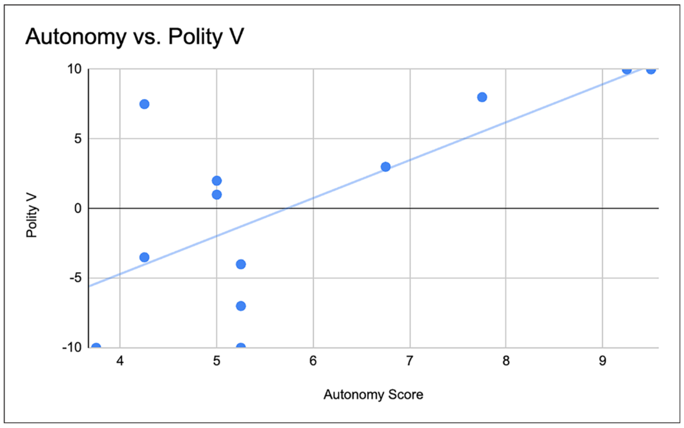

Figure 3. Relationship between colonial autonomy and democratic governance. *Scatterplot showing the association between autonomy index scores and Polity V polity scores across twelve former British colonies. Autonomy scores range from 0 to 10, with higher values indicating greater colonial self-government. Polity V polity scores range from −10 (fully autocratic) to +10 (fully democratic). Each point represents one contemporary country observation. Historical observations discussed in the text were not included in inferential analyses. The fitted regression line represents a simple bivariate linear regression (Pearson correlation equivalent). X-axis: autonomy score (0–10). Y-axis: Polity V polity score (−10 to +10). Sample size: n = 12 countries. Pearson correlation coefficient r = 0.780; p = 0.00275.*

Institutional Quality

The data on property rights and press freedom reinforce the pattern noted in other areas as shown in Figures 4 and 5. High-autonomy countries show property rights scores consistently above 4.5 and press freedom scores above 3.5. Australia scored 4.75 on property rights and 3.77 on press freedom in the post-independence period. Canada and Ireland show similar profiles. The low-autonomy African cases score substantially lower on both indicators, with Tanzania at 2.87 and 1.25, Uganda at 3.49 and 1.75, and Nigeria at 4.75 and 2.32 in the modern period, showing some improvement but still well below the dominion-level scores. A positive

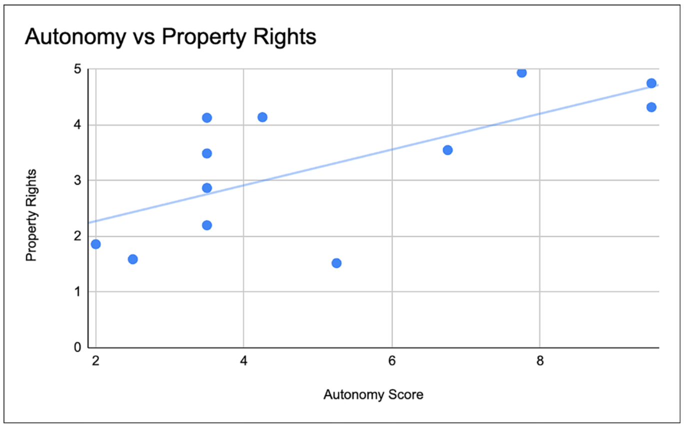

Figure 4. ***Relationship between colonial autonomy and property rights protections.*** *Scatterplot showing the association between autonomy index scores and property rights indicators across twelve former British colonies. Higher autonomy scores indicate greater colonial self-government. Property rights values shown on the y-axis are normalized Heritage Foundation Index of Economic Freedom property rights scores (original 0–100 scale divided by 20). Higher values indicate stronger legal protection of private property. Each point represents one contemporary country observation. Historical observations discussed in the text were not included in inferential analyses. The fitted regression line represents a simple bivariate linear regression. X-axis: autonomy score (0–10). Y-axis: property rights score. Sample size: n = 12 countries. Pearson correlation coefficient r = 0.328; p = 0.298.*

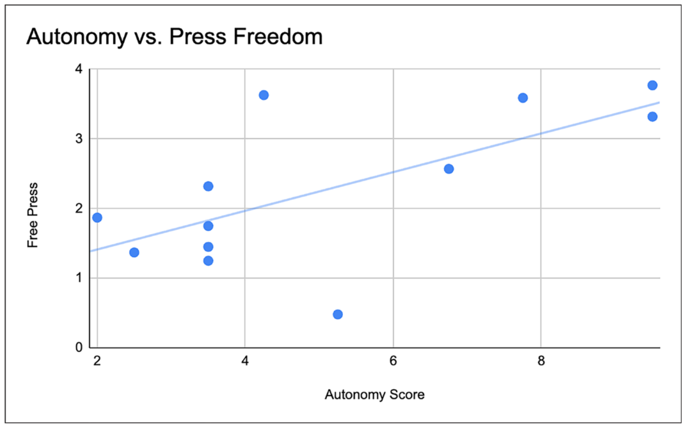

Figure 5. ***Relationship between colonial autonomy and press freedom.*** *Scatterplot showing the association between autonomy index scores and press freedom indicators across twelve former British colonies. Higher autonomy scores indicate greater colonial self-government. Press freedom values shown on the y-axis are normalized Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index scores (original 0–100 scale divided by 20). Higher values indicate greater press freedom. Each point represents one contemporary country observation. Historical observations discussed in the text were not included in inferential analyses. The fitted regression line represents a simple bivariate linear regression. X-axis: autonomy score (0–10). Y-axis: press freedom score. Sample size: n = 12 countries. Pearson correlation coefficient r = 0.637; p = 0.0259.*

association was observed between colonial autonomy and contemporary property rights; however, this relationship did not reach statistical significance in the country-level analysis ($r = 0.328$, $p = 0.298$). Figure 5 shows a positive correlation between autonomy scores and press freedom. With a p-value of 0.0259, this relationship is statistically significant, suggesting a strong association between greater colonial self-governance and higher levels of press freedom.

Implications and Significance

The relationship between colonial autonomy and post-independence development is unlikely to result from autonomy itself. Rather, autonomy appears to have influenced the institutional capacities that newly independent states inherited. Practical experience in governance prior to independence was more likely in colonies possessing elected legislatures, local executives, and professional civil services. These structures provided mechanisms for maintaining political and legal continuity. This allowed for transition of authority rather than the creation of entirely new governing systems.

This interpretation is consistent with the institutional persistence framework proposed by Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (1). Their work argues that institutions created during the colonial period continue to influence development after formal colonial rule ends. Our findings suggest that political autonomy may have been one pathway through which more inclusive institutions emerged. Colonies that exercised greater authority over their administrative functions developed institutional capabilities that remained of great value after independence.

The findings also support aspects of Mamdani's theory of indirect rule (26, 27). Many African colonies in this sample were governed through traditional authorities operating under colonial supervision rather than through representative civic institutions. While these arrangements maintained order at low administrative burden, they did not provide the requisite experience with modern democratic governance. Many of these states, after independence, faced the challenge of constructing national institutions without having previously developed robust legislative or administrative systems.

The comparison between Australia and Canada on one hand and Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia on the other illustrates this mechanism. The former entered independence with functioning legislatures, professional civil services, and significant control over domestic affairs. The latter generally remained under stronger metropolitan control until independence and therefore inherited weaker institutional foundations. The substantial differences observed in both economic and political outcomes are consistent with the argument that institutional preparation before independence matters for development.

Colonial autonomy alone cannot fully explain post-independence outcomes in several cases. Cyprus achieved stronger economic and democratic outcomes than expected from its moderate autonomy score. Geographic proximity to Europe and integration with European markets provided Cyprus with advantages beyond those captured by the autonomy index. This supports the observation that successful geopolitical integration can enhance the benefits of institutional pedigree.

Guyana, despite relatively high autonomy compared with many African colonies, settled with a mixed outcome. Ethnic and political instability limited their advancement in ways that might not have impacted more robust colonial institutions. This suggests that autonomy may create opportunities for success but does not guarantee it.

Aden/Yemen represents perhaps the most important exception. Its autonomy score was higher than those of several African colonies, yet its democratic outcomes remained poor. This outcome highlights the importance of external factors not captured by the autonomy index. Regional conflict, Cold War intervention, oil politics, state fragmentation, and civil war repeatedly disrupted institutional development. Aden/Yemen therefore demonstrates that inherited institutions can be overwhelmed by powerful geopolitical and security pressures.

These exceptions suggest that colonial autonomy should be viewed as probabilistic rather than deterministic. Greater autonomy appears to increase the likelihood that countries develop stable institutions and achieve stronger long-term outcomes while geography, demographics, resource dependence, and international politics work to shape developmental trajectories. The existence of these exceptions ultimately strengthens the analysis by illustrating the complex interaction between colonial legacies and ensuing historical events.

Limitations and Alternative Explanations

The most significant limitation of this study is the settler colony confound. Australia and Canada were not just high-autonomy colonies. They were also populated predominantly by European settlers who brought with them legal traditions, political norms, and human capital that the African and Asian cases simply did not have. It is impossible to fully separate the effect of colonial autonomy from the effect of settler demographics, and any claim that autonomy alone explains the gap between Australian and Tanzanian development outcomes would be an overstatement.

Geography and natural resources also matter. Nigeria's oil wealth has not translated into broad-based prosperity, but its presence complicates straightforward comparisons with resource-poor cases (28). Differences in political institutions may also have influenced how natural resource revenues were managed and distributed following independence. Consequently, variation in resource governance represents a potential alternative explanation for some of the differences observed across countries in this study. This indirectly may have benefited countries like Ireland whose membership with the European Union and associated favorable tax policies have fueled its modern boom.

Proximity to Europe was of importance and demonstrated in the case of Cyprus which benefited from faster communication and travel to the European center. Many of the variables noted above are not formally captured in the autonomy index and could independently explain some of the variation in outcomes.

Finally, the autonomy index itself involves simplifying assumptions. The weighting of the eight components may not reflect the true relative importance of each dimension of self-governance. Future research could work to design alternative coefficient weighting schemes or use more granular measures of specific institutional features. Because inferential analyses were conducted using one observation per country, statistical power was limited for secondary outcomes such as property rights.

CONCLUSION

Former British colonies have experienced widely different political and economic outcomes. This study examines whether colonial autonomy was associated with those varying trajectories. Across twelve diverse countries and more than a century of historical development, the evidence suggests a strong correlation between colonial institutional structures and present-day outcomes. However, these findings are not entirely deterministic, as some countries have demonstrated meaningful political and economic progress through sustained reform and institutional strengthening.

Future research could extend these findings in several ways. The autonomy index could be applied to former French, Belgian, Dutch, and Portuguese colonies to determine whether the relationship between colonial autonomy is specific to the British imperial system. In addition, future studies could design alternative weighting algorithms for individual index components to assess whether certain forms of autonomy exert stronger long-term effects. Finally, the use of more frequent time series data would allow the examination of how institutional trajectories evolved in the decades immediately following independence. Ultimately, these findings underscore that contemporary global inequality cannot be fully understood without recognizing the enduring influence of colonial institutions and the unequal foundations they established. Additional comparative research will further clarify the conditions under which these institutional legacies persist and evolve.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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Supplementary Table S1. Country-level dataset used for inferential statistical analyses. *Inferential analyses were performed using one contemporary observation per country (n = 12). GDP per capita values are reported as purchasing power parity (PPP), constant 2011 international dollars (World Bank). Polity V polity scores range from −10 (fully autocratic) to +10 (fully democratic). Property rights were obtained from the Heritage Foundation Index of Economic Freedom (2024). Press freedom was obtained from the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index (2024). To facilitate comparison with the autonomy index, both institutional indicators were normalized by dividing the original 0–100 scores by 20, yielding a 0–5 scale for graphical presentation.*

Country	Autonomy Score (0–10)	GDP per Capita (PPP, Constant 2011 International $)	Polity V Score	Heritage Property Rights (0–100)	Normalized Property Rights (÷20)	RSF Press Freedom (0–100)	Normalized Press Freedom (÷20)
Australia	9.50	>25,000	10.0	**95.0**	**4.75**	**75.4**	**3.77**
Canada	9.50	>25,000	10.0	**86.4**	**4.32**	**66.4**	**3.32**
Ireland	7.75	~22,600	10.0	**98.8**	**4.94**	**71.8**	**3.59**
Guyana	6.75	~14,000	3.0	**71.0**	**3.55**	**51.4**	**2.57**
Aden/ Yemen	5.25	~3,900	–1.5	**30.4**	**1.52**	**9.6**	**0.48**
Cyprus	4.25	~18,700	9.5	**82.8**	**4.14**	**72.6**	**3.63**
Nigeria	3.50	~2,500	–1.0	**82.6**	**4.13**	**46.4**	**2.32**
Tanzania	3.50	~1,200	–2.0	**57.4**	**2.87**	**25.0**	**1.25**
Uganda	3.50	~1,300	–3.0	**69.8**	**3.49**	**35.0**	**1.75**
Zambia	3.50	~1,800	–2.0	**44.0**	**2.20**	**29.0**	**1.45**
Burma/ Myanmar	2.50	~1,400	–4.0	**31.8**	**1.59**	**27.4**	**1.37**
Bangladesh	2.00	~1,600	1.5	**37.2**	**1.86**	**37.4**	**1.87**

Note: *Historical country-period observations presented elsewhere in the manuscript were used only to illustrate institutional trajectories and were not included in inferential statistical analyses. Pearson correlations and linear regressions reported in Figures 2–5 were calculated using these twelve independent country observations.*