

## PRECOLONIAL LEGACIES AND INSTITUTIONAL CONGRUENCE IN PUBLIC GOODS DELIVERY

EVIDENCE FROM DECENTRALIZED WEST AFRICA

By MARTHA WILFAHRT

Scholars have long identified political bias in the way African politicians distribute state resources. Much of this literature focuses on the role of group identities, mainly ethnicity, and partisanship. This article shifts the focus to local governments, which have become increasingly important players in basic social service provision, and argues that public goods allocation under democratic decentralization is intimately shaped by historical identities. Specifically, the author highlights the role of identities rooted in the precolonial past. To explain this, she articulates a theory of institutional congruence, arguing that greater spatial overlap between formal institutional space and informal social identities improves the ability of elites to overcome local coordination problems. Looking to the West African state of Senegal, the author deploys a nested analysis, drawing on interviews with rural Senegalese elites to understand how the precolonial past shapes local politics today via the social identities it left behind. She also tests the argument with a unique, geocoded data set of village-level public goods investments in the 2000s, finding that areas that were once home to precolonial states distribute goods more broadly across space. These patterns cannot be explained by ethnic or electoral dynamics. Two brief examples from on-the-line cases illuminate how the presence of precolonial identities facilitates local cooperation. The article thus calls into question the tendency to treat identities as static over time, highlighting the interactive relationship between institutions and identities while drawing attention to emerging subnational variation in local government performance following decentralization reforms across the developing world.

### CONTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

MARTHA WILFAHRT is a visiting assistant professor at Northwestern University. Her research focuses on distributive politics and state-society relations in sub-Saharan Africa, with a particular emphasis on historical legacies. She can be reached at [martha.wilfahrt@northwestern.edu](mailto:martha.wilfahrt@northwestern.edu).