

From the 'Death of God' to the Rise of Hitler*

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Abstract

Hitler's ascent to power constitutes an enduring puzzle – a transition from democracy to autocracy underpinned by popular support. We present evidence that the Nazi Party's success was partly driven by setting itself up as a quasi-religious cult, emphasizing redemption, sacrifice, and communal spirit. Vast parts of Germany only converted late to Christianity; the Church never developed deep roots there. Because of this spiritual vacuum, the Nazi message took root in these areas. We focus on two indicators to capture variation in shallow Christianity in interwar Germany: Christian first names reflect the religious outlook of parents; beliefs in clairvoyance capture (pagan) superstitious beliefs. Both indicators are strong predictors of support for the Nazi Party. Such indicators of “Shallow Christianity,” in turn, reflect the geography of medieval Christianization. The further a town or county is from a medieval monastery or medieval saint shrine, the lower the share of Christian first names, the more frequent superstitious practices in interwar Germany – and the higher the number of Nazi voters and party members. Importantly, we also find predictive power at the individual level: Within each municipality, the likelihood of joining the Nazi Party was higher for those with less Christian first names – and the higher a party member's rank, the lower the proportion of Christian first names.

Keywords: Voting; Nazi Party; Protestantism; Shallow Christianity

JEL Classification Numbers: N13, N14, N44, P16, Z12, Z18

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1 Introduction

“Where men are forbidden to honour a king they honour millionaires, athletes, or film-stars instead: even famous prostitutes or gangsters. For spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served; deny it food and it will gobble poison.”

– C.S. Lewis, Present Concerns

Max Weber famously distinguished three types of legitimate rule – rational, traditional, and charismatic. Political transitions are often viewed through the lens of rational rule – with a shift from autocracy to democracy guaranteeing greater redistribution or wider provision of common goods ([Acemoglu and Robinson 2000](#), [Lizzeri and Persico 2004](#)). From this perspective, popular support for transitions to autocracy is puzzling. Charisma-based legitimacy offers a ready solution, as it requires no utility maximization by followers; from Caesar to Napoleon, Mussolini, and Hitler, it has often been said to play an important role. In its pure form, according to Weber, the leader “[...] is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities”.¹

The term “charisma” derives from early Christian usage, describing divine grace manifested in prophecies and miraculous cures; Weber’s use transposes this religious concept to the political domain. Analyzing charisma-based legitimacy is challenging for several reasons. First, the concept emphasizes the irrationality of followers. Second, historical surveys of attitudes are rare, and the documentary record is fragmentary. Third, charismatic leaders are typically national figures, allowing only for time series or cross-country analysis.

In this paper, we examine the role of charisma and of quasi-religious legitimacy in the rise of the Nazi Party in interwar Germany. To do so, we use quasi-experimental variation based on pre-existing susceptibility to a political message based on “supernatural, superhuman powers”; using deep-rooted differences in unsatisfied “demand” for religious meaning to identify effects. While the Nazi Party promised many economic improvements and social changes, its single greatest asset was Hitler himself ([Fest 1973](#)). The “Führer” was regularly portrayed as a messianic figure in Nazi propaganda: Germany’s saviour and redeemer. [Gerth \(1940\)](#) already pointed to the case of Adolf Hitler as a prime example of Weber’s concept of charismatic legitimacy. The party regularly used religious language and imagery, from the celebration

¹Those qualities are “regarded as of divine origin” ([Weber 1968](#), p. 241).

of martyrs to the sanctification of relics (“blood banners”, etc.), and sought to replace Christian rites with pseudo-religious ceremonies for marriage (Voegelin 1939). Similarly, the emphasis on communal rituals, of salvation and redemption through the Nazi party and its leader, and the sanctity of the fatherland had clear religious overtones. The Nazi Party explicitly demanded “religious” fanaticism from its followers, many of whom described their commitment to the party in semi-religious language (Maier 2006).

We argue that shallow Christianity was a key determinant of support for the Nazi movement: National socialism appealed as a substitute religion to Germans with weak religious beliefs, filling a spiritual void that had existed since the Middle Ages. A vast literature has examined the factors driving the Nazis’ electoral success, ranging from economic immiseration, austerity, veteran status, and the density of social capital to pre-modern traditions of outgroup discrimination. While many of these variables have predictive power, one factor is known to trump all others – religious affiliation. Areas with a Protestant majority quickly succumbed to the Nazis’ electoral appeal; Catholic areas remained remarkably immune (e.g. Falter 1991, King et al. 2008, Spenkuch and Tillmann 2018). We argue that it was not Protestantism or any element of Protestant doctrine that made Protestants vulnerable to the Nazi message. Instead, Protestants were markedly less attached to their church and Christianity in general for deep-rooted historical reasons. Long before Luther, many regions of Germany had only marginal attachments to Christianity. Evidence from church visitations suggests that the Protestant attempt to create grass-root religiosity largely failed and that – outside the big cities – the population remained largely indifferent to religion (Strauss 1975).

The shallowness of Christianity predicts Nazi membership and Nazi voting. To show this, we collect data on two indicators of “Shallow Christianity” in the inter-war period. First, we analyze given names in the German population and among Nazi party members. Because parents choose first names, these can provide unique insight into a family’s worldview (Bazzi, Fiszbein and Gebresilasse 2020). Specifically, Christian first names reflect the Christian identity of the parents (Andersen and Bentzen 2022). Second, using newly digitized data from a nationwide 1930s survey of local folklore and traditions, we show that superstitious/pagan beliefs were markedly more common in areas with a lower frequency of Christian first names.

In the empirical analysis, we show that these two measures of Shallow Christianity predict larger Nazi vote shares and Nazi party entry. We use an IV-strategy to argue that the link is causal. Our instrumentation strategy exploits the logic of Christianization in North-Western Europe. While parts of Germany controlled by

the Roman Empire were exposed to Christian teachings in late antiquity already, the conversions of pagans only occurred in parts of Northern Germany in the 14th century – a difference of almost 1,000 years. Monasteries were a key driving force of Christianization, especially outside the formerly Roman areas. We consider distances to pre-1500 monasteries (Jürgensmeier and Schwerdtfeger 2005) and their density in a district as instruments and also examine the impact of distances to saints’ shrines, collected by Rothkrug (1980). Saints’ shrines are popular expressions of religious belief. All of these are indicative of the depth of ”medieval religiosity”. Since many monasteries were closed during the Reformation period (Cantoni, Dittmar and Yuchtman 2018, Heldring, Robinson and Vollmer 2021), the exclusion restriction is likely to hold: (lack of) medieval religiosity only affects our outcomes via its legacy effect on “Shallow Christianity” in the 1930s.

Medieval religiosity, in turn, is well-predicted by distances from ancient places of pagan worship. Hundreds of pre-Christian places of worship have been documented all across Germany – from “Heidenhöhlen” (pagan caves) to places of ritual sacrifice, including human sacrifice. Medieval conversion of the local pagan population reached these areas later, reflected in a lower density of monasteries and saint shrines. Distance from places of pagan worship predicts the intensity of religious practice in the 1920s and 1930s (“shallow Christianity”), and in turn, Nazi voting.

In combination, these results document a consistent pattern of (lack of) medieval Christian religiosity (stemming from late Christianization), leading to “Shallow Christianity”. This in turn predicts greater support for the Nazi Party in 1930s Germany, even when we condition on religious affiliation. Note that the share of Protestants, known to predict Nazi voting (Spenkuch and Tillmann 2018), is arguably a bad control – Protestantism spread the most where medieval religiosity was low. Protestant areas were not just different in terms of the dominant religion; Christianity had much shallower roots there. We show that Protestantism is an essential mediator of medieval religiosity’s effect on Nazi support. Even within exclusively Protestant areas, Shallow Christianity is predictive of joining the Hitler movement or voting for it.

We complement these results by analyzing the first names of functionaries in the Nazi Party. Relative to the location-specific level, Nazi party members are almost always less likely to have a Christian first name – and the higher they are in the party hierarchy, the more significant the difference to the local norm. This strongly suggests that issues of ecological inference are not crucial for our results; the family in which children grew up, and the importance they gave to Christianity, is an important predictor of involvement with the Nazi movement and the extent to

which people managed to rise to prominence within it.

These results are significant because they shed light on spiritual needs as a key driver of legitimacy² and sources of support for extremist movements. Hitler’s charisma may propelled him into his position of quasi-religious leader of a political movement. Traditional models of populism and the rise of the Nazis emphasize economic and social variables, such as a commitment to redistribution or cultural and ethnic cleavages as key motivators. Marxist theories (e.g. [Moore \(1966\)](#), [Hamilton \(1982\)](#)) focus on big business support (Nazis as agents of monopoly capitalism) and “petty bourgeois” support. Modernization theory ([Dahrendorf 1965](#)) posits that fascism resolved and completed German society’s “unfinished” modernization. Totalitarianism theory ([Arendt 1951](#), [Ortega y Gasset 1985](#), [Nolte 1965](#)) sees fascism and communism as two expressions of the same phenomenon, arguing that industrialization created “rootless masses” ready to be recruited. Here, we explore a different and complementary perspective. The role of religiosity, or its absence, in the rise of the Nazis, has not been examined empirically, despite earlier historical work on National Socialism as a “political religion” ([Voegelin 1939](#), [Gentile 1990](#), [Maier 2006](#)). Our analysis contributes to our understanding of how large segments of a highly educated population can come to support an authoritarian movement. We are also the first to provide causal evidence based on granular data of the effect of charisma on political outcomes.³

2 Historical Background

2.1 The Spread of Christianity

Religious sociologists have long argued that there were two distinct phases of Christianization in Germany: under Roman rule, “Christianity was a mass movement that spread primarily through personal efforts by the rank and file to convert their relatives, friends and neighbors” ([Stark 2004](#), p. 104). Later on, when Christianity had become a state religion, conversion efforts focused on the nobility, but the Church “did little to evangelize the general population” ([Stark 2004](#), p. 104). In areas where the second mode of conversion dominated (i.e. in northern Europe), the majority of people did not display the “exclusive commitment to Christianity nor the high levels of personal piety exhibited by the early Christians” ([Stark 2004](#), p. 77).

²This is a point distinct from religious legitimization whereby rulers justify their rule by divine election ([Rubin 2017](#)).

³[Selb and Munzert \(2018\)](#) argue that Hitler’s speeches did little to increase the Party’s electoral appeal.

Where Christianity had only shallow roots, Protestantism had a higher chance to topple the Catholic monopoly. In fact, using data for 16 European countries, Stark (1996) shows that the number of centuries since Christianization has a correlation of 0.89 with the share of Catholics in 1996, underlining that Protestantism was more successful in areas that were Christianized later. Going below the country level, and focusing on popular religion, Rothkrug (1980) and Pfaff (2013) demonstrate that Protestantism was less successful where the cult of the saints was highly developed, such as in the Low Countries, the Rhineland, or the South of Germany. At the same time, Stark (1999) shows that the number of centuries since Christianization has a correlation of 0.72 with church attendance in the late 20th century, using the 1990-1991 World Values Survey. In other words, the timing of Christianization predicts both the success of the Protestant Reformation, but also church attendance in the 20th century, *across* religious denominations.

Christianity's spread across Europe took more than a millennium. While the early spread of Christianity in the Mediterranean goes back to the first century and is partly covered in the Bible's New Testament, it took until the 14th century before some of the northern parts of Europe were converted to Christianity.⁴

In the Roman Empire, Christianity went from being treated as a Jewish sect to becoming the official state religion in 380 AD under Emperor Theodosius I, who explicitly banned pagan religions. Prior to that, the Edict of Milan in 313 allowed Christians and Romans of all faiths 'liberty to follow that mode of religion which to each of them appeared best', and Emperor Constantine's baptism in 337 AD are seen as a major events in the rapid rise of Christianity. In the German parts of the Roman Empire, Trier (Latin: *Treverorum*), in the far west of Germany, close to modern-day Luxembourg, was an early centre of Christianity. Following the conversion of Constantine to Christianity, Bishop Maximin (329–346) is said to have coordinated the construction of a cathedral, which at the time was the grandest ensemble of ecclesiastical structures in the West outside Rome.⁵ Even within the Roman Empire, the spread of Christianity outside urban centres was much slower (see Fletcher, 1998, chapter 2) and paganism continued to exert a strong influence.

Beyond the Limes, the frontier of the Roman Empire, Christianity did not make any advance until well after the fall of the Roman Empire (see Fletcher 1997, chapter 3). The first major wave of conversions to Christianity in the German lands *beyond* the former borders of the Roman Empire occurred in 496 AD, when the Franks under Clovis became Christians. That was more than a century after Christianity's

⁴Lithuanians were converted in the 1380s.

⁵The cathedral was commissioned by Emperor Constantine the Great and built on top of a palace of Saint Helen, his mother (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trier_Cathedral).

rise to de facto state religion within the Roman Empire. The last Germanic people on the territory of modern-day Germany to be converted to Christianity were the Saxons during the second half of the 8th century.

Outside the areas populated by Germanic tribes, the territory east of the rivers Elbe and Saale, was populated by Slavic tribes.⁶ These areas were exposed to Christianity during the process of Germanic settlement and expansion to the east, from the late 8th century until the 14th century.⁷ The last part of modern-day Germany to be reached by Christianity was the island of Rügen, in the mid-14th century. Even after Christianity had arrived in Northern Germany, and Northern Europe more broadly, Christianity faced frequent raids by Vikings from about 900 to about 1200 AD. [Ferguson \(2010\)](#) describes one constant to all Viking tribes: their violent hatred of Christianity. It took centuries to establish Christianity as the de facto “official” religion.

We already discussed that even with the confines of the Roman Empire, after the adoption of Christianity as the de facto state religion, its presence and influence in rural areas was far from certain. But the scattered evidence available suggests that, by the 6th century, the “French” diocese of Touraine (named after the main city of Tours), was “fairly densely dotted with churches. It has been plausibly estimated that [...] most people in the diocese would have had a church within about six miles of their homes” (see [Fletcher 1997](#), p. 47). Whether Touraine is representative of all dioceses in formerly Roman territory is not clear, but the estimates suggest that Christianity had also reached the French countryside, and not just the major cities.

This cannot be said of large parts of Northern and Eastern Europe, where Christianity took many more centuries to arrive. After the conversion of kings and rulers in those areas, it is unclear how deeply rooted Christianity became. What is clear is that evangelization was not always easy: “*The task of christianizing the area between the Elbe and the Oder*⁸ *must have seemed Sisyphean to those familiar with the chronicles — every triumphant mission by a saint was followed by a heathen uprising and the need for yet another mission*” ([Carruthers 1999](#), p.33). The process of

⁶Leipzig, the largest city outside Berlin in East Germany, derives its name from the Slavic word Lipsk, which means “settlement where the linden trees stand”. We will use distance to Slavic settlements to predict *opposition* to Christianity, which is particularly relevant in the east of Germany.

⁷Christianity in these parts was introduced by a mix of Christian settlers, Christian missionaries ([Wood 2001](#)), and even via crusades, such as the Wendish Crusades in the 12th century and the Prussian crusades in the 13th and 14th centuries, in which the Teutonic Order played an important role.

⁸This is broadly the area of the 5 Eastern states of modern-day Germany, which used to form the territory of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). It sometimes is described as Germania Slavonica, the (ex-)slavic part of Germany.

Christianization in *Germania Slavonica* was often violent, quite different from the spread within the Roman Empire: “*The policy concerning pagan sacred sites was one of complete eradication, not gentle appropriation. The victors communicated the comprehensive defeat of the Slavs through the act of dragging the supreme pagan god by the neck amidst the victorious troops, superseding any linguistic boundaries in an eloquent image that combined a show of Christian military might and pagan religious humiliation*” (Carruthers 1999, p. 146). The earliest account of Christian missions east of the Elbe was written by Adam of Bremen, sometime between 1073 and 1076. He describes the destruction of the already christianized cities of Hamburg and Bremen, “*the one by pagans, the other by pseudo-Christians*”.⁹ The use of the word pseudo-Christians (*pseudochristianis*) in the 11th century is fascinating, as it suggests that outward conversion did by no means imply deep Christian belief. In fact, “*conversion from pagan to Christian identity was seldom absolute, and that the cultural practices common to pagan and Christian peoples in the Baltic accounted, at least in part, for the ease with which individuals slipped from one affiliation to the other*” (Carruthers 1999, p. 169). Similar assessments have been made about other parts of Germany outside the Roman Empire and about northern Europe more generally: “*neither the exclusive commitment to Christianity nor the high levels of personal piety exhibited by the early Christians ever developed among the majority of people in northwestern Europe*” (Stark 2001, p. 77).¹⁰

Monasticism began in the period 300-500 AD (see Davis, 2018) – possibly as a response to Christianity rising in acceptance and ultimately becoming the official state religion of the Roman Empire by 380. While previously martyrdom was a potential mark of distinction for Christians when they were a persecuted minority, this was no longer possible after Christianity had become a state religion. Careers as lawyers or even bishops could not achieve the same mark of distinction as did a life dedicated to God in a monastery (Fletcher 1997, p. 26). While the travels of individual missionaries are only scarcely documented, and the foundation years of local churches and chapels patchy at best, the foundation years of monasteries have been recorded with a great deal of accuracy as a result of better record-keeping by monastic orders. This allows us to measure the spread of “institutionalized Christianity” across the German lands. Noticeably, to the extent that monasticism only starts to flourish towards the end of the Roman Empire, in our empirical analysis we

⁹ “[...] altera vastata est a paganis, altera discerpta est a pseudochristianis”.

¹⁰In the broad debate in the social sciences about secularization, some have even gone as far as saying: “*There could be no de-Christianization of Europe [...] because there never was any Christianization in the first place. Christian Europe never existed*” (Greeley 1995, p. 63). Or, in the words of Bloch (1961): “*popular religion in most of Europe “remained ‘pagan animist’ [...] and [Christianity] was an outward veneer.*”

will pay special attention to whether an area was *ever* part of the Roman Empire. But especially outside the Roman Empire, the spread of monasteries manifests the presence of institutionalized Christianity, as substantial investments were required to build and maintain a monastery.¹¹

Much has been written about the Protestant Reformation (see [Becker, Pfaff and Rubin 2016](#), for an overview) which started in the town of Wittenberg where Martin Luther taught. Interestingly, the Reformation was more successful in the North-Eastern parts of Germany - the same parts of the country where Christianity arrived late. The lack of deep roots of institutionalized Christianity arguably allowed a new market entrant (Luther and Protestantism) to “capture” that geographic area more easily than where Catholicism was firmly entrenched (see [Ekelund, Hébert and Tollison 2002](#), [Bercea, Ekelund Jr and Tollison 2005](#)). The arrival of Protestantism in an area rarely led to effective indoctrination. Martin Luther himself observed, having visited parishes in Saxony ([Parker 1992](#)):

“Dear God help us, what misery have I seen! The common man, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about Christian doctrine; indeed, many pastors are in effect unfit and incompetent to teach. Yet they are all called Christians, are baptized, and enjoy the holy sacraments even though they cannot recite either the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed or Commandments. They live just like animals...”

Church visitations – systematic inspections of religious practice carried out by the authorities – paint a dire picture of widespread irreligiosity, especially outside the cities: *“the Protestant visitation returns [...] undermined for ever the triumphalist claims [...] that the Reformation enjoyed [...] deep popular support in the sixteenth century. On the contrary, the surviving evidence indicates a widespread inability [...] to create an acceptably pious laity”* ([Parker 1992](#)). Across Northern Germany, there is case after case of pastors preaching to empty churches, clerics not knowing the basics of the faith they are meant to teach, and almost complete ignorance of church teachings among the laity ([Strauss 1975](#)).

Importantly, our empirical analysis goes beyond the Protestant-Catholic denominational divide. While it may be the case that, overall, Protestant areas display more shallowness than Catholic areas – and that is *one* reason why Protestantism has been found to be strongest predictor of Nazi voting –, there is substantial variation

¹¹In line with this, the dissolution of monasteries during the Protestant Reformation was the source of substantial wealth transfers in both England (see [Heldring, Robinson and Vollmer 2021](#)) and Germany (see [Cantoni, Dittmar and Yuchtman 2018](#)).

within Protestant, and within Catholic areas, so that the religious denomination of the majority population in a broad area is merely a marker of underlying differences.

Takeaway for our empirical analysis. Since Christianity spread differently in the formerly Roman parts of Germany, in our regressions we control for whether an area of Germany was ever part of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, the spread of monasticism allows us to capture the diffusion of institutionalized Christianity. We use the foundation century of the first monastery within 25 km (or within 50 km) of a locality as a control variable to capture the spread of Christianity in the region.¹² Importantly, the degree of deep-rootedness or shallowness will vary substantially within frontier areas as monasteries themselves were rare.

While being part of the Roman Empire and the spread of monasteries captures the spread of Christianity at a macro-level, our interest centres around the shallowness, or deep-rootedness of Christianity, at the *local* level. To predict that, we exploit two sources of variation that measure the opposition to Christianity: pagan places of worship, and Slavic settlements. While Viking opposition to Christianity affected Germany only in the form of occasional external attacks, Slavic resistance arose from the eastward expansion of German(ic) settlers, and constituted a mix of opposition against Germanic settlers and Christianity. To predict the deep-rootedness or shallowness of an area, we thus use distance to pagan places of worship and distance to Slavic settlements as instrumental variables.

Throughout, we show results controlling (or not) for the share of Protestants in a county to demonstrate that shallow Christianity goes “deeper” than the official religious denomination.

2.2 The Rise of the Nazi Party

The Nazi Party was founded in Munich in 1920. Initially committed to an immediate, violent overthrow of the democratic order, it staged a coup in 1923, which failed. Afterwards, the party was banned, its leaders in exile or in jail. Gradually, restrictions on the party were relaxed afterwards, and it began to compete again in state and national elections. Adolf Hitler was released from prison in late 1924.

When competing in the national elections of 1928, the party scored a paltry 2.6% of the vote. It appeared destined for obscurity. Its electoral fortunes began to change after 1929, with the onset of the Great Depression and the fall of the last democratic government with a parliamentary majority. In 1930, the party participated

¹²It allows us to trace the Christian “frontier” in a similar way as others have used the location of settlers in the US to trace the expansion of US institutions (see [Bazzi, Fiszbein and Gebresilasie 2020](#)).

in a broad coalition of bourgeois and right-wing parties agitating in a referendum against the Young Plan, a rescheduling of Germany's reparation obligations. In the national election in September 1930, the party achieved a major breakthrough, receiving 18.3% of the vote. As the German economy continued to deteriorate and the country's financial system collapsed, its vote share surged, becoming the largest party in parliament in 1932. Hitler was narrowly defeated in his bid to become President in 1932. Eventually, he was appointed Chancellor at the head of a coalition of right-wing parties in January 1933 (Fest 1973).

The Nazi Party as a quasi-religious movement. The Nazi Party itself used religious language and imagery aggressively, often casting itself as an alternative to established religion. For example, its youth movement, the *Hitlerjugend*, used in its official song the following stanza:

*We are the happy Hitler Youth;
We have no need for Christian virtue;
For Adolf Hitler is our intercessor
And our redeemer
No priest, no evil one
Can keep us
From feeling like Hitler's children.
Not Christ do we follow, but Horst Wessel!¹³
Away with incense and holy water pots...* (Helmreich 1979, p. 267)

Even simple, everyday activities like greetings were infused with quasi-religious imagery – “Heil Hitler” means, literally, “salvation Hitler.” Party congresses regularly involved batteries of flak lights, forming “cathedrals of light” above the participants, lending an air of religious celebration to the political gathering.

Other rituals involved even more overt pseudo-Christian symbolism. In staged ceremonies, the “blood banner” of the movement, carried during the failed putsch of 1923, touched other flags, thereby “sanctifying” them during a ceremony known as *Fahnenweihe* (“banner consecration”). Similarly, in 1928, the party faithful gathered in the city of Kaub, on the Rhine, where Blücher's army had crossed in 1813. There, they cleansed themselves in the waters, washing away the “sin” of defeat in 1918 and the allegedly shameful November revolution.

Abel's (1938) collection of essays submitted by Germans who had joined the Nazi Party offers a unique insight into the mind of Germans joining the Nazi party. While clearly a selected sample, there are no other examples of open-ended documents written by individuals themselves, reflecting on their motivations. While

¹³After being shot by Communists in 1930, Horst Wessel became a “martyr” of the Nazi movement.

many themes and topics are touched on in these essays (Merkel 1975), here we highlight the importance of religious imagery and concepts.

The submission of Agnes Mosler-Sturm, of Berlin-Spandau, illustrates the use of religious imagery. She speaks about how

“a **revelation** illuminated us – he [Hitler] is the Germany’s savior! [...] civil war broke out, everything high and **holy** was trampled into the mud by the animalistic, jewish-marxist, ... masses. With [...] most **holy** indignation we fight for Hitler and his idea [...] a single scream of **redemption**: Adolf Hitler is chancellor [...] new hope, new **faith**, new power emerges from the German people like an enormous stream [...] a great, good, and strong people stand up courageously, to follow its only **god-given** Führer and **savior** – Adolf Hitler...”

The word “holy” appears 227 times in the 344 transcribed biographies,¹⁴ “faith” (glauben/Glaube) 575 times, “religion” some 104 times, and “redemption” 10 times. For comparison – “Jew/Jews” gets 597 hits, “fatherland” 613, and Hitler, 1858.

Earlier scholars have highlighted the pseudo-religious side of the Nazi party. Bracher (1971) spoke of “grotesque practices” that “testified to the quasi-religious impact” of Nazi propaganda.¹⁵ Mosse (1975) observed that in Nazi gatherings, “...the symbolic content [...] took priority, the ritual expression of a shared worship that was so crucial to their sense of belonging.” Finally, Lacqueur (1962) argued that “choosing Hitler was not an act of political decision, not the choice of a known program or ideology; it was simply joining a quasi-religious mass movement as an act of faith.” Earlier scholarship, while highlighting these features, remains divided on its overall importance. Schreiber (2009) contended that the notion of the Nazi movement as a quasi-religious cult was analytically “empty”. Other historians have concluded that the religiosity of Nazi language was only a form of skin-deep propaganda (Mommsen 2003, Hockerts 2003). Finally, Steigmann-Gall (2000), analyzing cross-municipality patterns of church attendance, concluded that “enough evidence is at hand to discount categorically the long-held supposition that the Nazi movement got its strength primarily from Protestants who had lost their faith or experienced a Nietzschean “Death of God”. As yet, there is no systematic, quantitative analysis of the hypothesis that shallow Christianity contributed to the rise of the Nazi party.

¹⁴Out of 597 biographies submitted, 344 have so far been transcribed.

¹⁵A related literature describes National Socialism as a “political religion” (Voegelin 1939, Gentile 1990, Maier 2006).

3 Data

We draw on several different data sources, some of which are standard. A full list is in the Online Appendix. Here, we highlight two new sources from which we collected new data.

3.1 The German Folklore Atlas

Over the period 1930-35, German anthropologists under Fritz Böhm conducted a systematic study of German folklore (“Archiv der Deutschen Volkskunde” - ADV). They sent out a total of five questionnaires with 243 questions to over 20,000 contacts all over Germany, asking questions ranging from harvest rituals to the meaning of certain birds in local culture and the restrictions placed on newly-weds. The project was taken over by the SS in 1938; since 1945, the material – in the form of 4.5 million file cards – was transported to West Germany, where it is today held at the University of Bonn.

The anthropologists conducting the survey sought to cover all of Germany. They sent questionnaires to every known place, which were mapped onto a unique system of grid-cell references. Since we are interested in the survival of pagan beliefs, we systematically collected all the file cards for question 176a in the ADV: “Are there certain people, according to the people’s opinion, who have the power to see the future?” We chose this question because it is of general interest, and common to many pagan religions. The question was asked in 13,953 locations; in 10,088 of them, respondents gave a definite answer of either yes or no (in the remainder, they left the field blank). Since many of the locations used in the ADV survey do not readily correspond to modern-day municipalities, we geo-code the – finely-grained – grid-cell reference for each file card, and then aggregate the answers to modern-day counties. In this way, we seek to reduce measurement error.

3.2 Places of pagan worship and Slavic settlement

All across Germany, for thousands of years before Christianization, people worshiped pagan gods. While local practices varied greatly, and few direct sources describe these practices, the remnants of rituals and symbolic centers of pre-Christian religion remain in many places. For example, near the city of Güstrow, we find the so-called “stone dance of Boitin” – a set of four concentric stone “circles”. Constructed between 600 and 400 BC, archaeologists surmise that the area served as a pre-historic calendar and/or as a funerary chamber. In other places, there is evidence of use of

the location for religious purposes until the time of Christianization. In Niederdorla, for example, a moor was used for pagan sacrifices, with bones and ceremonial gifts from the period 600 BC to 1100 AD excavated by archaeologists – a period of use of at least 1700 years, markedly longer than the total duration of Christian presence in the area up until now.

We scrape the locations of all known pagan sites from the online reference resource www.digital-culture.de, and calculate distances to them for the municipalities in our main database. We do the same for places of Slavic origin, which we take from www.openstreetmap.fr/en/slavic-placenames-in-germany.

We use these data in a supplementary analysis where we show that “medieval religiosity” can be predicted by opposition to Christianization via the presence of places of pagan worship, and (non-Christian) Slavic settlements.

4 Shallow Christianity in the Interwar Period

Here, we measure Shallow Christianity in two ways – by the share of Christian first names, and the surviving level of superstition.

4.1 First names

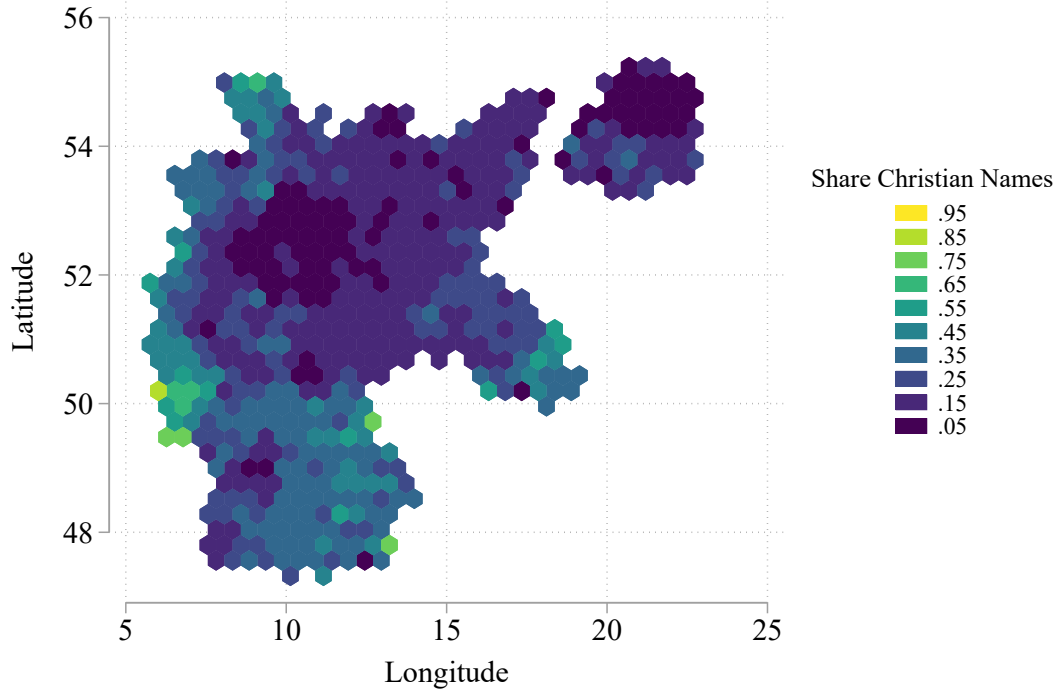
First names are determined by parents. They offer a unique window into the preferences and views of parents. Here, we analyze how Christian the names given to children are in Germany, and compare the population distribution with that among Nazi followers and leaders.

We use two measures – the share of first names that are also found on churches (“Christian first names”), and the Andersen/Bentzen approach to determine how religious a name is, using the distribution of church names in Germany: For example, “Peter” is the name on 23 major medieval churches in Germany, accounting for 6.4% of the total. On the other hand, only one German church is named after Wolfgang (0.28%). Andersen/Bentzen create an index by calculating

$$\text{RNI}_i = \frac{\text{Pr}(\text{Name}_i|\text{Church})}{\text{Pr}(\text{Name}_i|\text{Church}) + \text{Pr}(\text{Name}_i|\text{Person})}$$

The Andersen/Bentzen index gives greater weight to names that are a) common on churches and b) rare among people. For example, the name “Kornelius” is rare in the population, but common on churches. Conversely, the most popular German male first name, “Karl”, is not present on any German church. The index is 1 for

Figure 1: Christian first names in Germany



Note: Each hexagon maps the share of population with a Christian first name in that geographic area.

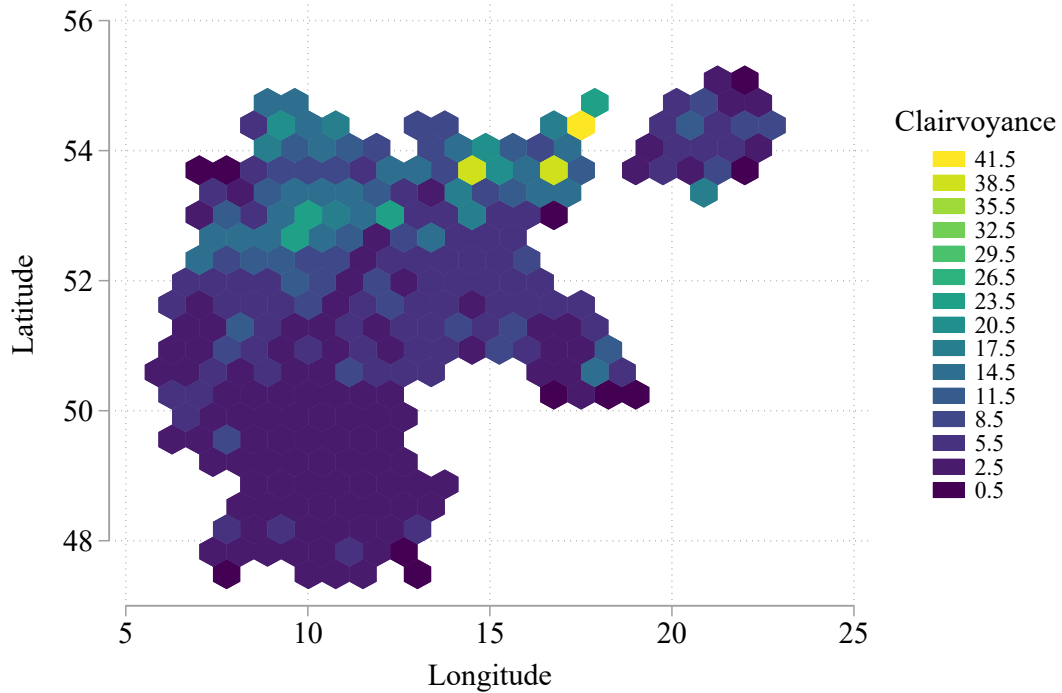
names that are only used on churches, and 0 for those only used by people. Overall, the two measures are highly correlated ($\rho = 0.9875$).

Figure 1 gives an impression of how frequent Christian first names are in Germany, using data from the roll of WWI casualties (“Verlustlisten”). Instead of using the Andersen/Bentzen index, here we simply use a dummy variable for whether a name has any Christian connotation, as proxied by church frequencies. Christian first names are rarely in the majority, but there are pockets of more frequent usage. Interestingly, these occur in the North and in the East of the country, where Christianization occurred later.

4.2 Superstition and Shallow Christianity

The German Folklore Atlas (ADV) asked numerous questions about local folklore and cultural practices. Here, we focus on clairvoyance. For each county, we calculate the number of places where people believe in the existence of “seers” people who have particular insight into what the future will bring. In some parts of Germany, the local enumerators marked their papers “not known here” or “no such practice in

Figure 2: Clairvoyance beliefs in Germany



Note: Each hexagon represents the sum of responses to the German Folklore Atlas (ADV) within that geographical area which stated a belief in fortune tellers.

living memory!” In dozens of other locations, beliefs in supernatural foreknowledge of the future was recorded.

While there is substantial variation in this variable between the North and South of Germany overall, there is also ample, local variation (Figure 2).

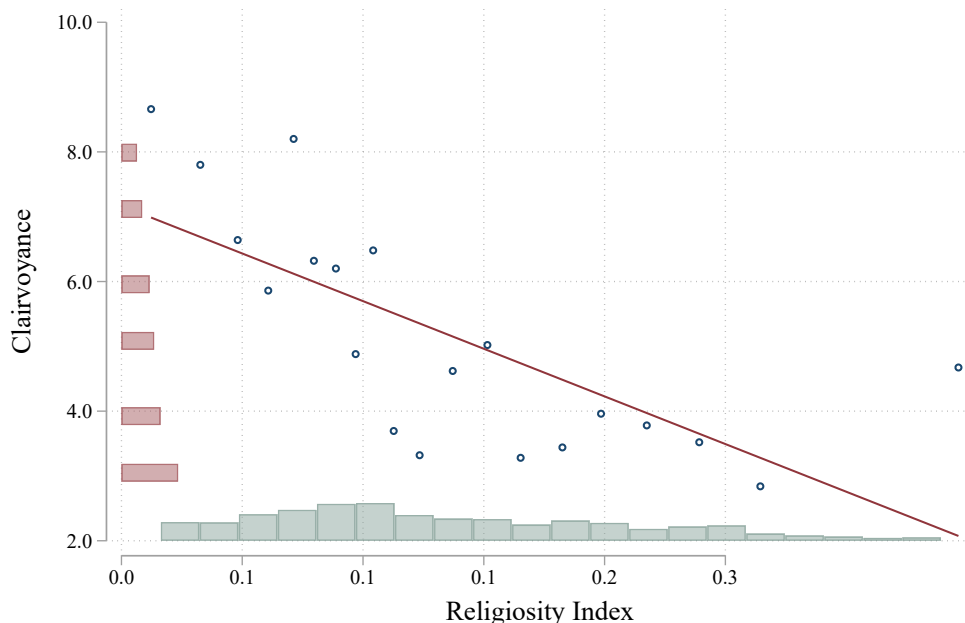
4.3 Christian names and clairvoyance

How much do these two indicators agree with each other? Figure 3 shows that both are strongly correlated with each other: Where the share of people believing in supernatural “seers” is high, the share of Christian first names is low. We will use the *first principal component* of these two measures as our indicator of “Shallow Christianity” from now on.

5 Main empirical results

In this section, we examine the link between shallow Christianity in the interwar period, and Nazi support. Starting from bivariate patterns in the data, we move to

Figure 3: First name index versus clairvoyance indicator



Note: Bin-scatter of the Andersen/Bentzen religiosity index against measure of clairvoyance. The shallow Christianity indicator is built from the first principal component of these two measures.

OLS regressions, before introducing our IV-strategy, based on “medieval religiosity”.

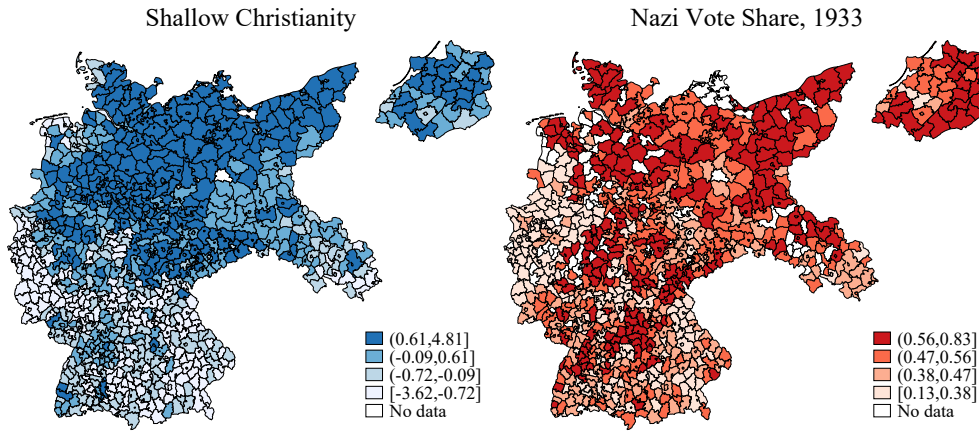
5.1 Basic patterns

Figure 4 compares the geography of Shallow Christianity and of Nazi voting in 1933. It reveals a broad pattern of similarity across German regions, with important variation from North to South and from East to West. While counties with shallow Christianity and high Nazi vote shares are overwhelmingly in the North and East of the country, and areas with Shallow Christianity and low Nazi vote shares are frequent in the West and South, there are important regional variations within these macro regions. In our empirical work below, we will add province fixed effects to avoid results being driven by these aggregate patterns.

To explore these patterns further, we use bin-scatter plots of “Shallow Christianity” against three different outcome variables: the Nazi vote share in 1933, in 1930, and the share of new Nazi party entry (for entry up to the end of 1932).

In table 1, we show the corresponding regression results, with and without controls. We first document the statistical strength of the relationships suggested by the bin-scatter plots. As col. 1-3 show, we find highly significant coefficients for the Shallow Christianity PCA for 1933 Nazi support. We also find a positive coefficient

Figure 4: Maps of the shallow Christianity and vote share of the Nazi Party (1933)

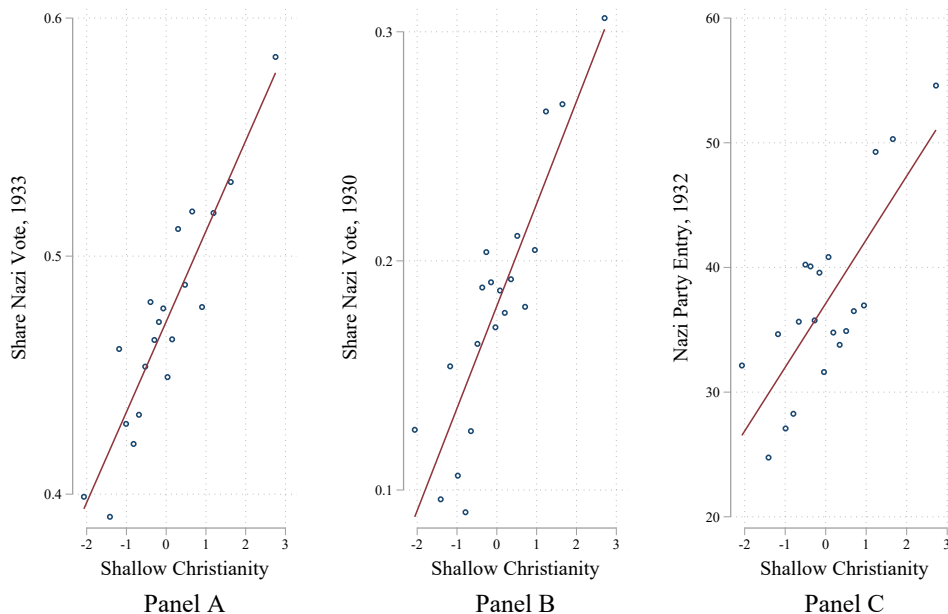


Note: Data in maps is aggregated and displayed at the county level. A darker blue colouring in the first map indicates “shallower” Christianity. A darker red colouring in the second map measures a higher NSDAP vote share.

for 1930, but adding controls reduces the magnitude of the coefficient and the precision of the estimates. For party entry, we find a strong and large effect (for entry up to the end of 1932) without controls, and a significant effect when we control for province fixed effects and the share of Protestants.

Even if Shallow Christianity reliably predicts Nazi support, we want to know how important its predictive power is relative to other factors. One simple method to assess relative importance is to use Shapley values from a machine learning exercise. We predict Nazi voting in 1933 as a function of the reduced set of controls in col. 2/5/8 (in order to avoid contamination with a “bad control”) using random forest estimation. Then, we calculate a measure of importance from the Shapley values, derived from changes in the RSME of the prediction of models that either contain or do not contain the variable in question. Figure A.3 in the Appendix shows the result. We find that geographical variables have high predictive power, as does the skill composition of the population. Shallow Christianity is the fourth-strongest predictor of Nazi voting in our sample, ahead of province fixed effects or the share of blue-collar workers (who remained more immune to the Nazi message than other occupational groups).

Figure 5: Shallow Christianity and Nazi Support



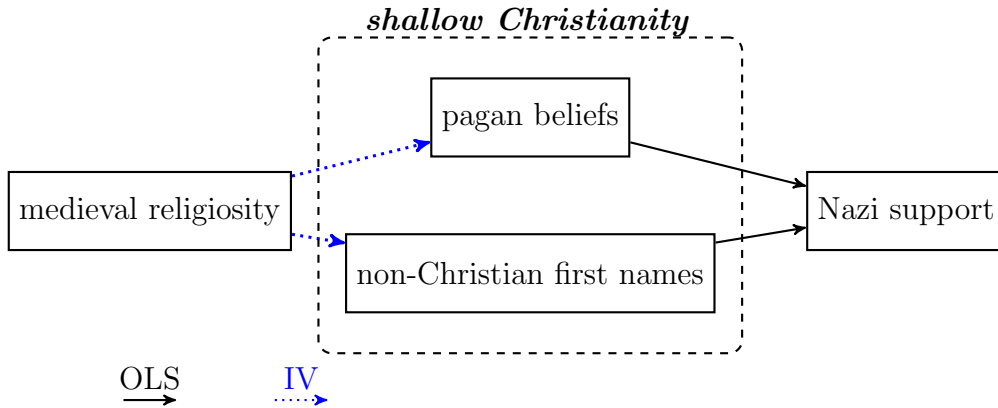
Note: Bin-scatters of measures of Nazi sympathy on shallow Christianity. Data is at the county level. The shallow Christianity variable is the first principal component of the Andersen/Bentzen index and the measure of clairvoyant beliefs. A higher Shallow Christianity scores indicates less rooted Christian beliefs.

Table 1: Nazi Support and Shallow Christianity

	Vote Share NSDAP 1933			Vote share NSDAP 1930			Cumulative party entries NSDAP 1938-32		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Shallow Christianity	0.04*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	5.43*** (0.81)	2.91*** (0.98)	1.61* (0.96)
Latitude		0.01*** (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.00)		0.02*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)		3.61*** (0.61)	-2.83** (1.30)
Longitude		0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)		0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)		-0.63** (0.28)	-0.31 (0.68)
Share white collar workers 1925		-0.22*** (0.07)	-0.29*** (0.04)		0.20*** (0.05)	0.18*** (0.04)		76.94*** (16.06)	70.26*** (12.60)
Share blue collar workers 1925		-0.23*** (0.04)	-0.40*** (0.03)		-0.06** (0.03)	-0.14*** (0.02)		-13.23 (8.44)	-28.09*** (7.38)
Population density		-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)		-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)		-1.32** (0.67)	-0.92* (0.50)
Share protestant 1925			0.34*** (0.01)			0.19*** (0.01)			37.98*** (3.09)
R^2	0.116	0.248	0.748	0.083	0.175	0.550	0.048	0.113	0.474
Observations	850	825	758	928	886	765	910	886	765
Province FE	N	N	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	Y

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance indicated at the * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Note: Measures of Nazi sympathy regressed on the *principle component analysis* of Christian names and clairvoyance (shallow Christianity) with varying sets of controls. Columns (3), (6) and (9) run regression with all control variables and province fixed effects. The variable population density is divided by 1000.

Figure 6: Conceptual Framework



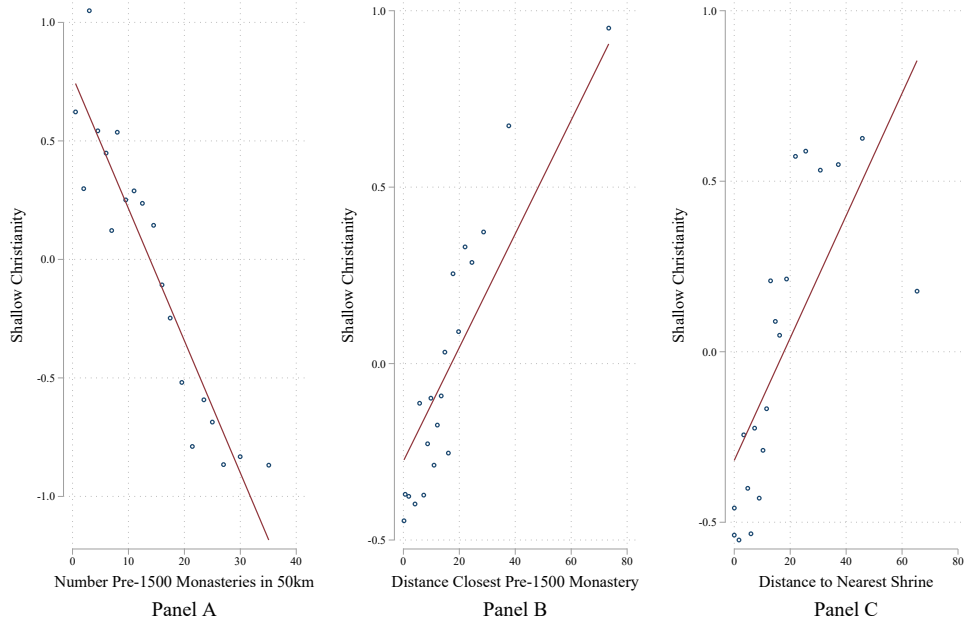
5.2 Instrumental variable results

Our OLS results may suffer from omitted variable bias – places with more Shallow Christianity may share other characteristics associated with Nazi voting. They are also, on average, more in the North and the East of Germany. These places may differ from the West and South in several dimensions other than their Shallow Christianity – for example, they were more agricultural on average. While province fixed effects and the use of latitude and longitude help to address these concerns to some extent, we ideally want to isolate an exogenous component of Shallow Christianity.

To resolve this issue, we use an instrumentation strategy that builds on the way in which Christianization took place. Monasteries were a key driving force of Christianization, especially outside the formerly Roman areas. We consider distances to pre-1500 monasteries and their density in a district as instruments, and also examine the impact of distances to saints’ shrines. All of these are indicative of the depth of medieval religiosity. They are correlated with each other – and they predict conversion to Protestantism. To clarify our approach, we summarize hypothesized relationships in Figure 6. We expect that patterns of medieval religiosity, determined by the late arrival of Christianity in some parts of Germany, will find an echo in continued pagan beliefs (such as superstitions) and non-Christian first names. These, in turn, should be predictive of Nazi support.

Section 4.1 already showed that areas with more Shallow Christianity were more likely to support the Nazi party. We now use measures of medieval religiosity as instruments for Shallow Christianity. The logic of our instrument is that medieval conversion of pagans should not have a direct effect on Nazi voting other than through Shallow Christianity in the interwar period. In Figure 7, we bin-scatter the Shallow Christianity index from section 3.1. against the number of pre-1500

Figure 7: Shallow Christianity and medieval religiosity



Note: Bin-scatter of shallow Christianity variable on measures of medieval religiosity. Data at the county level. We drop observations where the closes monastery is over 200km away. Distances in kilometers and calculated with respect to the county centroid. In table 2, we instrument shallow Christianity on the distance to the closest medieval monasteries.

monasteries within 50 km, the distance to the closest monastery in existence in 1500, and the distance to the nearest religious shrine. There is a strong, highly significant relationship between Shallow Christianity and all of these measures of medieval religiosity.

We use one of these indicators – distance to nearest pre-1500 monastery – as our preferred instrument. We find a highly significant relationship between our instrument and the Shallow Christianity indicator (Table 2). The F-statistic of 35.5 is in our main regression specification, and we obtain an Anderson-Rubin statistic of 60.7 (p-value < 0.0001). Next, we use the instrument to estimate the relationship between Nazi support and Shallow Christianity. In cols 1-3, we find that we can explain Nazi voting in 1933 with Shallow Christianity, instrumented with medieval religiosity. The fact that the second-stage coefficients are not precisely estimated in specifications with many controls is second-order as the first-stage is highly significant. Similarly, we find positive effects on Nazi support in 1930 and on entry rates up to the end of 1932.

Never-takers. One way to demonstrate the validity of our exclusion restriction is to examine the effect of our instrument on “never-takers”: if measures of me-

Table 2: Instrumental variable estimation - Nazi voting

	Vote Share NSDAP 1933			Vote share NSDAP 1930			Cumulative party entries NSDAP 1938-32		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Shallow Christianity	0.14*** (0.02)	0.03 (0.05)	0.05 (0.06)	0.06*** (0.01)	0.03 (0.04)	0.14 (0.09)	2.73 (4.00)	23.93* (14.06)	7.33 (14.79)
Latitude		0.01 (0.02)	-0.05*** (0.01)		0.01 (0.01)	-0.03** (0.02)		-2.96 (4.44)	-3.63 (2.44)
Longitude		0.01*** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)		0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)		-0.49 (0.36)	-0.28 (0.68)
Share white collar workers 1925		-0.21 (0.19)	-0.14 (0.21)		0.25** (0.13)	0.70** (0.35)		141.95*** (47.62)	91.40 (55.99)
Share blue collar workers 1925		-0.24** (0.10)	-0.44*** (0.05)		-0.08 (0.07)	-0.26*** (0.09)		-48.45* (25.66)	-33.25** (15.22)
Population density		-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)		-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)		-0.48 (1.00)	-0.89* (0.50)
Share protestant 1925			0.32*** (0.04)			0.10 (0.06)			34.11*** (10.46)
\bar{R}^2	-0.653	0.248	0.692	-0.154	0.152	-0.719	0.036	-0.351	0.449
Observations	850	825	758	928	886	765	910	886	765
Province FE	N	N	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	Y

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance indicated at the * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Note: Shallow Christianity is instrumented by a proxy for medieval religiosity (distance to monastery founded before 1500). Columns (3), (6) and (9) run regressions with all control variables and province fixed effects. The variable population density is divided by 1000.

dieval religiosity had an effect on Nazi voting even if there is no evidence of Shallow Christianity, our IV-strategy might seriously be called into question.

Since Shallow Christianity in our analysis stems from the predicted values of the first principal component, we have no cases of *zero* Shallow Christianity; instead, we use the bottom 5% of the distribution (Table 3). We perform the same analysis as in Table 2 on this subsample. While the number of observations is low, we find not only insignificant coefficients, but they are also overwhelmingly negative. That suggests that where Christianity was not “shallow”, medieval religiosity has no direct effect on Nazi support.

5.3 Other explanatory variables

The rise of the Nazi party has attracted substantial scholarly attention in recent years. To what extent does Shallow Christianity constitute a separate, additional explanation? Or does it simply reflect other, already-examined variables? We focus on three variables in particular – medieval pogroms (Voigtländer and Voth 2012), the presence of the Danat Bank (Doerr et al. 2022), and the density of clubs and associations (Satyanath, Voigtländer and Voth 2017). In Table 4 we add these variables to the basic regression setup from Table 1, using the specification in column (2) as a baseline, with NSDAP voting in 1933 as the dependent variable. The other variables are shown in Appendix A.4 and A.5.

Table 3: Never-taker analysis: Shallow Christianity and Nazi voting

	Vote Share NSDAP 1933			Vote share NSDAP 1930			Cumulative party entries NSDAP 1938-32		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Shallow Christianity	-0.21 (1.05)	0.13 (0.29)	0.05 (0.07)	0.08 (0.53)	-0.01 (0.12)	-0.09 (0.07)	-49.85 (227.50)	-9.14 (48.65)	-4.97 (13.87)
Latitude		0.01 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.03)		0.03 (0.02)	0.05* (0.03)		9.04 (9.40)	-4.86 (5.38)
Longitude		0.01 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.02)		0.02 (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)		5.48 (4.80)	-4.42 (4.72)
Share white collar workers 1925		0.03 (0.66)	0.01 (0.17)		0.38 (0.29)	0.51*** (0.18)		-10.74 (115.09)	108.16*** (33.26)
Share blue collar workers 1925		-0.39 (0.29)	-0.42*** (0.09)		0.02 (0.13)	-0.03 (0.09)		27.14 (52.38)	-9.34 (16.51)
Population density		-0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.01)		-0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)		1.46 (5.16)	0.28 (2.39)
Share protestant 1925			0.31*** (0.03)			0.12*** (0.03)			41.45*** (5.65)
R^2	-1.037	-0.096	0.824	-0.418	0.374	0.552	-1.313	0.143	0.762
Observations	43	42	41	47	46	41	47	46	41
Province FE	N	N	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	Y

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance indicated at the * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Note: Same specification as in table 2 but only with observations in the bottom 5% of the distribution of shallow Christianity. As shallow Christianity is the first PCA of Christian names and clairvoyance there are no observations for which it is 0.

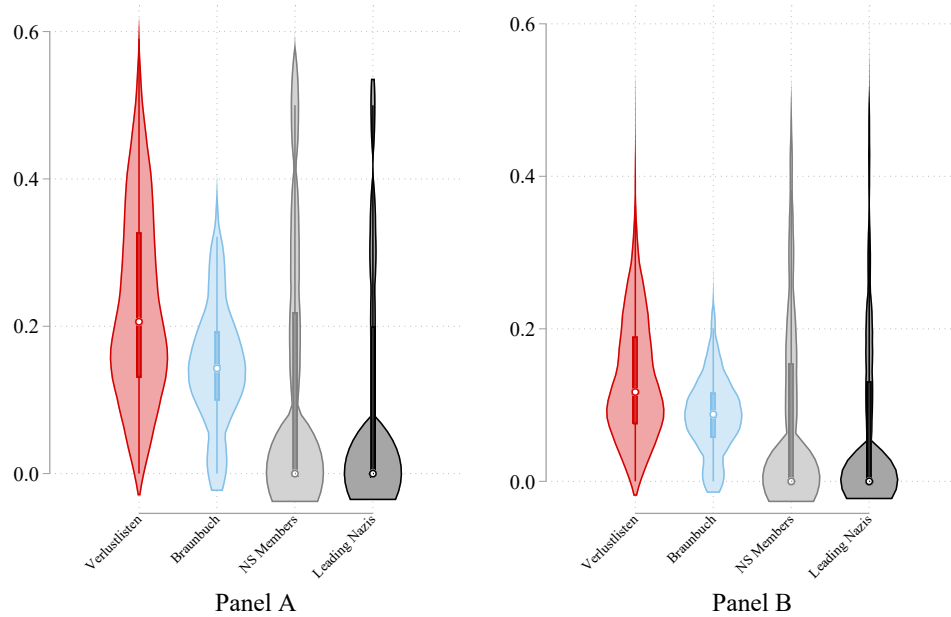
We find that alternative mechanisms do not play an important role in our data. Importantly, they do not reduce the effect of Shallow Christianity on Nazi support. Why is the well-documented role of medieval pogroms, of association density and bank exposure so different in our data? [Voigtländer and Voth \(2012\)](#) argue that the effect of medieval pogroms should only influence 1928 voting, when anti-Semitism was a prominent electoral issue. The lack of an effect on 1933 is therefore not surprising. The nature of our data is also markedly different from most of the studies that have previously examined Nazi support and voting. While most of the papers in this literature have examined towns and cities, one of the advantages of our approach is that it looks at the countryside – instead of focusing on municipalities, we analyze counties. This allows us to say something about the countryside, where a significant share of Nazi supporters lived. Here, much of the sample is not affected by the explanatory variables used in earlier studies. For example, most counties had neither a Jewish presence in the Middle Ages nor big banks in the interwar years because they are too small and not densely populated enough. The same logic applies to associations, which only become more common from a certain population size. The absence of effects is therefore unsurprising, and it shows that – for the large parts of Germany outside the big cities – we need other explanations than the factors previously used to explain the vast surge in support for the Nazi Party after 1928.

Table 4: Alternative Explanation - Nazi vote share 1933

	Vote share NSDAP 1933				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Shallow Christianity	0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)
Latitude	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Longitude	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.01* (0.01)
Share white collar workers 1925	-0.21*** (0.07)	-0.21*** (0.07)	-0.23*** (0.07)	-0.34** (0.14)	0.03 (0.12)
Share blue collar workers 1925	-0.26*** (0.04)	-0.25*** (0.04)	-0.26*** (0.04)	-0.39*** (0.09)	-0.21** (0.08)
Population density	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Pogrom 1349		0.03** (0.01)			
Any Pogrom			0.00 (0.00)		
Exposure to the Danatbank				-0.05 (0.05)	
Associations per capita					0.00 (0.00)
R^2	0.383	0.388	0.383	0.562	0.504
Observations	758	758	758	149	158
Province FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance indicated at the * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Note: Nazi vote share in 1933 regressed on different control sets. Pogrom 1349 is a dummy from [Voigtländer and Voth \(2012\)](#) for medieval programs. Any pogroms is a measure of pogrom intensity from the 1400s-1900s constructed from [Becker and Pascali \(2019\)](#). Danatbank exposure captures a country's exposure to the Danatbank's failure taken from [Doerr et al. \(2022\)](#). Density of associations is from [Satyanath, Voigtländer and Voth \(2017\)](#).

Figure 8: Christian name distributions (Christian name share and Andersen/Bentzen index) in the general population and among Nazis



Note: The panels compare the religiosity of Nazi first names to the general population at the county level. Panel A shows the distributions of the share of Christian names. Panel B shows the distribution of the Bentzen Religiosity Index. The distribution in the general population is taken from the roll of WWI casualties, the “Verlustlisten.” Names of mid-ranking Nazi figures come from the “Braunbücher” (Podewin 2012, Kappelt 2009) published in 1965, while names of NSDAP members stem from party lists. Names of prominent Nazi figures are from the “Personenlexikon” (Klee 2003).

6 Mechanism and Causality

6.1 Christian First Names and Nazi Leaders

So far, we have used Christian first names for the population as a whole, using it as an indicator of religiosity in a single location. However, we have not examined whether people who joined the Nazi party had fewer Christian first names. Second, we can also analyze whether more influential Nazis were more or less likely to have Christian first names. Our hypothesis that Christian upbringing, as reflected in family names, reduces involvement with and commitment to the Nazi ideology would receive support if Nazi Party members themselves had fewer Christian first names, and if higher functionaries had even fewer/less Christian first names than the rank-and-file. Finally, we will want to analyze if Nazi Party members *within any one location* are less likely to have Christian names.

We first analyze naming practices *for Nazi Party members* compared to the rest of the population. In Figure 8, left panel, we calculate averages of the share of Christian first names by county for the German population as a whole (taken from the roll of WW1 casualties), of *mid-ranking* Nazi party officials, party members, and of *leading* Nazi figures. As is immediately apparent, Nazis were much less likely to have Christian first names; the higher a member stood in the party hierarchy, the lower the share of Christian names and the Christian index score.

The distinctly different distributions in Figure 8 could reflect different geographical origins of Nazi party members and the general population. If Nazis overwhelmingly came from areas with low shares of Christian first names, these patterns may not necessarily indicate that they come from *families* with lower commitment to the Christian church than other, similar, compatriots.

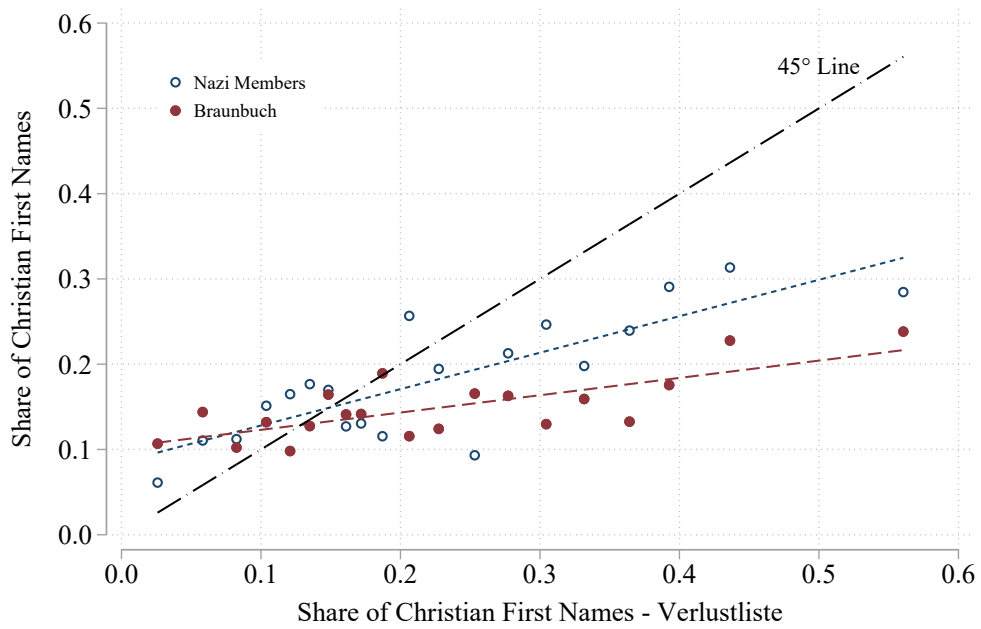
In Figure 9, we bin-scatter the share of Christian first names from NS party members at the county level, and from leading Nazi officials and politicians against the population share. Observations along the 45° line would suggest that Nazi members are as likely to have Christian first names as the population in their town of residence. Points below indicate that they are less likely to have such names. For the vast majority of towns and cities, we find points below the 45° line.

While not every single municipality records lower rates of religious name usage among Nazis than in the general population, the overwhelming share of locations does so – and often by a large margin. Also, while party members show some correlation with the naming conventions in places where they live, this is not true for top officials, where this share is much lower and does not vary with local Christian naming practices. These results – at the individual level, controlling for location fixed effects – strongly suggest that religiosity at the family level, as reflected in naming conventions, is a strong, negative predictor of Nazi involvement.

6.2 The role of Protestantism

We argue that Shallow Christianity created latent susceptibility to Nazi ideology. Shallow Christianity in the 16th century arguably also led to more rapid adoption of Protestantism – a variable known to have high predictive power for Nazi voting. We already showed that controlling for the percentage of Protestants in our main sample – using county-level variation – did not affect our main results. Here, we investigate the effect of Protestantism in more detail, using municipality-level variation. This is important because most municipalities were either almost entirely Protestant or Catholic – while counties are almost always mixed. Because most census-derived variables are only available for counties, this switch in granularity means that we

Figure 9: Name Religiosity by location – General population and Nazis



Note: Share of Christian names among Nazi party members and Nazi figures in the “Braunschweig” compared to the share in the general population. Data is at the county level. The 45° line indicates a perfect match. The area below the 45° line shows a lower share of Christian names among Nazis than in the general population.

lose a range of control variables.

In Table 5, we first show baseline results regressing three indicators of Nazi support – Nazi voting in 1933 and 1930, and cumulative party entry until 12-1932 – on our composite indicator of Shallow Christianity. As the contrast between panels A and B shows, two of three outcome variables show high significance even if we restrict the sample to areas with 70% or more Protestants in 1925, but the magnitude of coefficients declines somewhat. This makes it much less likely that we simply proxy for the share of Protestants.¹⁶

In Panel C, we add Protestantism directly to our estimation – as we have done in the analysis above. It could be argued that this is actually a bad control – controlling for an *outcome* of shallow Christianity. To examine the impact, we conduct intermediation analysis in the spirit of Imai, Keele and Tingley (2010). While the main outcome variable – Nazi voting in 1933 – continues to show an effect, the coefficients for the other two outcomes become small or negative. However, shallow Christianity and Protestantism are strongly associated. In the intermediation analysis, this results in very high shares of shallow Christianity’s influence being transmitted through Protestantism – ranging from 78% to over 100%.

In Panel D, we use entropy balancing to overcome the challenge of a lack of balance in terms of the share of Protestants, as well as of geographical area. Appendix Table A.2 shows that our sample is significantly unbalanced – stratifying by the median of our shallow Christianity indicator, we find that areas with above-median shallow Christianity are more Protestant, more Northern, and more in the East. If we use entropy balancing Hainmüller (2012), we can create weights that eliminate this imbalance (weights and balance statistics are reported in Table A.2). As panel B shows, the two samples are now evenly matched in terms of the share of Protestants and in terms of geography. Estimating with the entropy balancing weights yields a strong and highly significant effect for 1933, a significant but smaller coefficient for 1930, but no effect for party entry.

6.3 Pagan worship and shallow Christianity

Why did Christianity spread in some parts of Germany, but not others? The largest differences – like the nearly 1,000 years separating conversion in the Rhineland and on the Baltic coast – are driven by the limits of Roman conquest and Christianiza-

¹⁶We also examined corresponding results for a cut-off of 90% and 95%. For Nazi voting in 1930 and 1933, we find significant effects for both cut-offs; for party entry, there is no effect. Overall, we find an effect of shallow Christianity on Nazi voting in 1933 throughout the range of Protestant shares in the German population, except for the lowest quartile (Figure A.4).

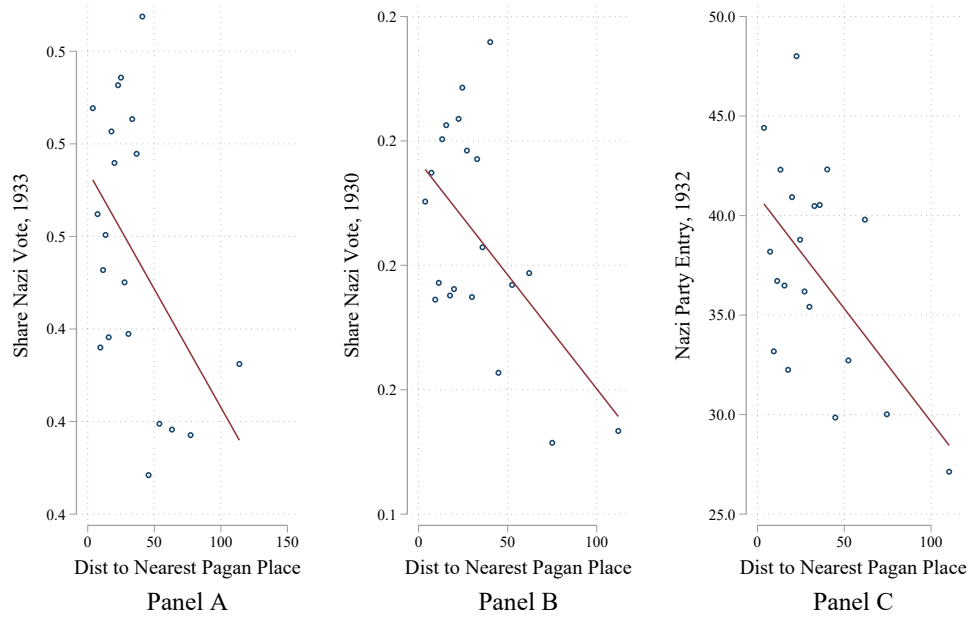
Table 5: Protestantism analysis

dep var	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Nazi voting 1933	Nazi voting 1930	Nazi party entry cum1932
Panel A: Full sample			
shallow Christianity	0.0270*** (0.00220)	0.0142*** (0.00172)	2.013** (0.610)
Constant	0.475*** (0.00378)	0.192*** (0.00278)	37.30*** (0.926)
Observations	926	1004	986
R^2	0.119	0.059	0.011
Panel B: Share Protestant > 70%			
shallow Christianity	0.0126*** (0.00338)	0.00881** (0.00269)	-0.411 (0.966)
logpop25	-0.0287*** (0.00604)	-0.0198*** (0.00473)	-7.105*** (1.697)
Constant	0.836*** (0.0649)	0.436*** (0.0506)	121.6*** (18.15)
Observations	492	539	539
R^2	0.069	0.050	0.032
Panel C: Full sample + Protestantism control			
shallow Christianity	0.00573* (0.00228)	-0.00202 (0.00168)	-1.691* (0.676)
share Protestant 1925	0.192*** (0.0102)	0.145*** (0.00674)	33.67*** (2.548)
Constant	0.357*** (0.00704)	0.101*** (0.00403)	16.33*** (1.400)
Observations	923	985	986
R^2	0.383	0.333	0.152
Percentage intermediated	78%	114%	182%
Panel D: Entropy balancing			
shallow Christianity	0.0218*** (0.00337)	0.00439* (0.00220)	-0.0660 (0.845)
Constant	0.489*** (0.00641)	0.215*** (0.00479)	42.50*** (1.402)
Observations	923	985	986
R^2	0.064	0.005	0.000

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 10: Nazi support and distance to places of pagan worship



Note: Bin-scatters of measures of Nazi sympathy on distance in kilometers to places of pagan worship. All data at the county level. Data is restricted to counties within the geographical boundaries of modern Germany.

tion policies of medieval kings. In addition, local factors such as the strength of local pagan beliefs will have influenced the timing and location of attempts to convert the pagans, as well as the success of such attempts. One way to proxy for the strength of local pagan beliefs prior to the Christianity’s arrival is to use archaeological information on places of pagan worship. These include sites where sacrifices (including human sacrifices) took place, as well as locations with ritual symbols and structures. Our assumption is that, where pagan rituals were held for centuries prior to the arrival of Christianity, the latter’s hold over the minds of worshippers is potentially weaker.

To examine this idea empirically, we geo-code the most comprehensive of the atlases of such locations (cf. Section 3), and then examine how distances to such places condition medieval religiosity, shallow Christianity in the interwar period, and subsequent support for the Nazi party. We first show the equivalent of reduced form regressions, using three indicators of Nazi support and distance to places of pagan worship. Figure 10 gives an overview:

The further away places of former pagan worship are, the lower Nazi support is in the 1930s. In Appendix A.6, we also show that distance to pagan worship is a strong predictor of both medieval religiosity and of shallow Christianity in the

Table 6: Nazi support, shallow Christianity, and distances to pagan worship

	Shallow Christianity	Vote share NSDAP 1933	Vote share NSDAP 1930	Cumulative party entries NSDAP 1928-32
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Shallow Christianity		0.06*** (0.02)	0.04*** (0.01)	11.83*** (4.48)
Distance to places of pagan worship	-0.01*** (0.00)			
Mean of Dependent Variable	0.20*** (0.06)	0.47*** (0.01)	0.19*** (0.00)	38.01*** (1.11)
\bar{R}^2	0.045	0.045	0.010	0.029
Observations	785	721	785	781

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance indicated at the * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Note: Column (1) states the first stage between out proxy of medieval religiosity and shallow Christianity. Columns (2), (3) and (4) show IV regressions on measures of Nazi sympathy without controls or fixed effects. Observations are restricted to the borders of modern-day Germany

interwar period. Next, we estimate IV-regressions, using distance to pagan worship sites as an instrument for shallow Christianity in the interwar period (Table 6):

We find a strong first stage, with an Anderson-Rubin statistic significant at the less than 1% level. In the second stage, we find strong, positive, and highly significant coefficients for the effect of shallow Christianity on Nazi support, across indicators. In other words, the component of Shallow Christianity that reflects the proximity of places of pagan worship is a significant predictor of Nazi Party support and membership.

7 Conclusion

“Choosing Hitler was not an act of political decision, not the choice of a known programme or ideology; it was simply joining a quasi-religious mass movement as an act of faith.”

– Walter Lacqueur (1962)

Why do some people fall for the siren song of dictatorship and authoritarianism? A long lineage of research in social psychology has sought to answer this question (Adorno et al. 1951, Tajfel and Turner 2004). Theodor Adorno’s list of characteristics of the authoritarian personality included, amongst others, “superstition” – a form of magical thinking, a need to imbue everyday events with hidden meaning. Here, we directly measure superstitious beliefs (in clairvoyance) in the German population and examine whether they facilitated support for an anti-democratic, authoritarian, militarist, and genocidal regime – the Nazi dictatorship. While never receiving a majority of the popular vote, the NSDAP was the largest party in par-

liament from 1932 onwards; mass support swept it to the gates of power. Many aspects contributed to its mass appeal. We argue that not only superstition but shallow Christianity in general – a lack of deeply-held Christian beliefs – made parts of the German electorate more susceptible to the Nazi message.

Contemporaries regularly described Hitler’s ”charisma”, and his ability to enthrall thousands at mass rallies and personal meetings (Fest 1973, Kershaw 2000). The word has two original meanings – compelling attractiveness, inspiring devotion, or a divinely conferred power or talent. While many observers have subsequently referred to the former, numerous followers thought of Hitler in terms of the latter meaning – referring to Hitler as a second Messiah, redeeming Germany from its shameful state of national humiliation. The party itself staged quasi-religious rituals and public events, from the “sanctifying” of banners and the elevation of the movement’s “martyrs” to the constant reference to Hitler as the “redeemer”. Long noticed by political scientists and historians, the quasi-religious imagery and language of the Nazi party have often been dismissed as a propaganda trick and an analytical category of limited empirical importance.

Here, we examine charisma in the literal sense as a source of political legitimacy. To gain analytical traction, we exploit cross-sectional variation in vulnerability to a quasi-religious message: Areas of Germany where Christianity only had shallow roots were more supportive of the Nazi movement. We measure shallow Christianity by naming practices, with religious first names chosen by parents being less common. Using a highly granular anthropological survey from the 1930s, we also demonstrate that superstitious beliefs in clairvoyance were much more common wherever Christianization was only skin-deep.

We trace the geography and depth of religious practice in the Middle Ages to pin down a causal channel. Monasteries were a key driving force of Christianization, especially outside the formerly Roman areas. We consider distances to pre-1500 monasteries and their density in a district as instruments and examine the impact of distances from saints’ shrines. Both reflect the strength of “medieval religiosity.” The intensity of medieval proselytizing by the Church, in turn, can be traced back to the presence of pagan places of worship. These often existed for centuries before the arrival of Christianity. Where such places existed, the founding of monasteries and erection of saint shrines was less likely, which in turn explains why the Church’s teachings failed to spread in some parts of Germany.

Importantly, we find evidence of the role of Christian belief at the individual level. Areas with fewer Christian first names saw greater support for the Nazi Party. In addition, rank-and-file Nazi members were much less religious in each municipality,

judging by their first names – and higher-ranking Nazi politicians, even less so. This suggests that the degree of Christian belief in the families in which they grew up (which would have influenced the names their parents gave) was a first-order determinant of their susceptibility to the Nazi message.

In combination, our results suggest that Adolf Hitler’s startling appeal may at least partly reflect the spiritual “emptiness” of large parts of the German population. Nazi policies and propaganda were leaning on an open door when they publicly rejected Christian morality. Since the late 19th century, large parts of the intelligentsia and bourgeois society had come to accept Nietzsche’s claim that “God is dead”.¹⁷ Where Christianity arrived late in Germany and never developed deep roots, people readily turned to new idols and saviours. This is true of both the arrival of Protestantism and the rise of the Nazi party. Protestants’ well-known susceptibility to the Nazi message is arguably not a direct consequence of Luther’s teachings and Protestant society. Instead, the rise of Protestantism and the Nazi party share a common root: Shallow Christianity.

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¹⁷[Whyte \(2008\)](#).

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8 Appendix

Figure A.1: Google Ngram for “Charisma”

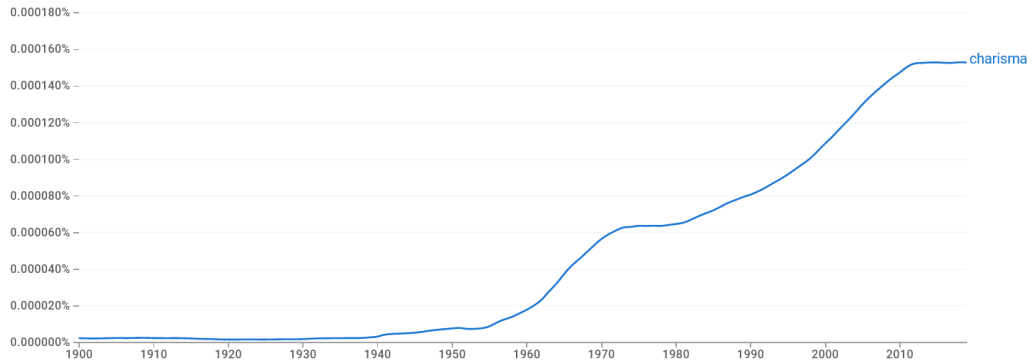


Figure A.2: Bin-scatters of Nazi vote share in 1933 against indicators of shallow Christianization

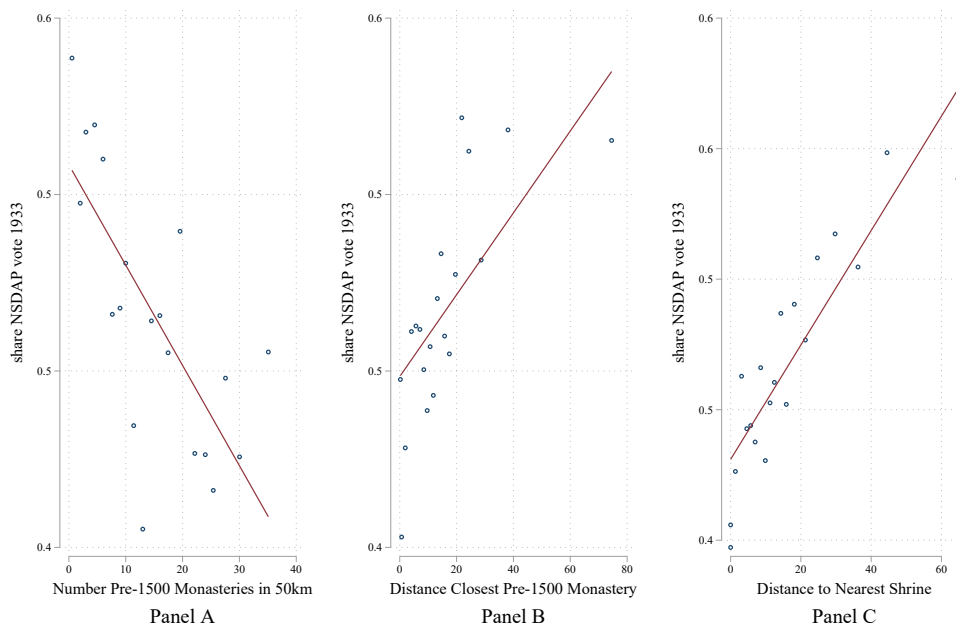


Figure A.3: Variable importance from random forest estimation (dependent variable: NSDAP vote 1933)

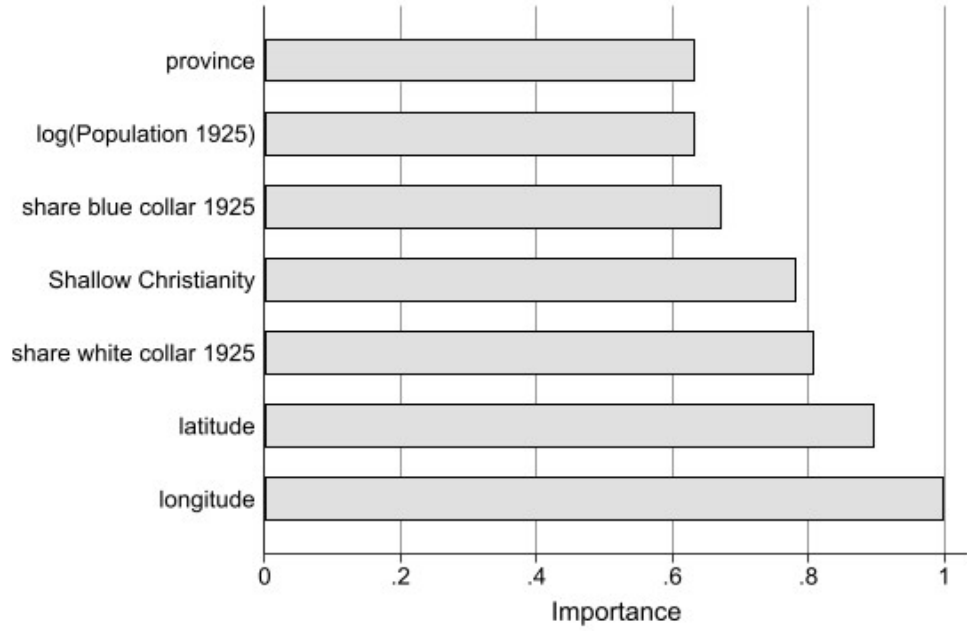


Figure A.4: Nazi voting and shallow Christianity by quartile

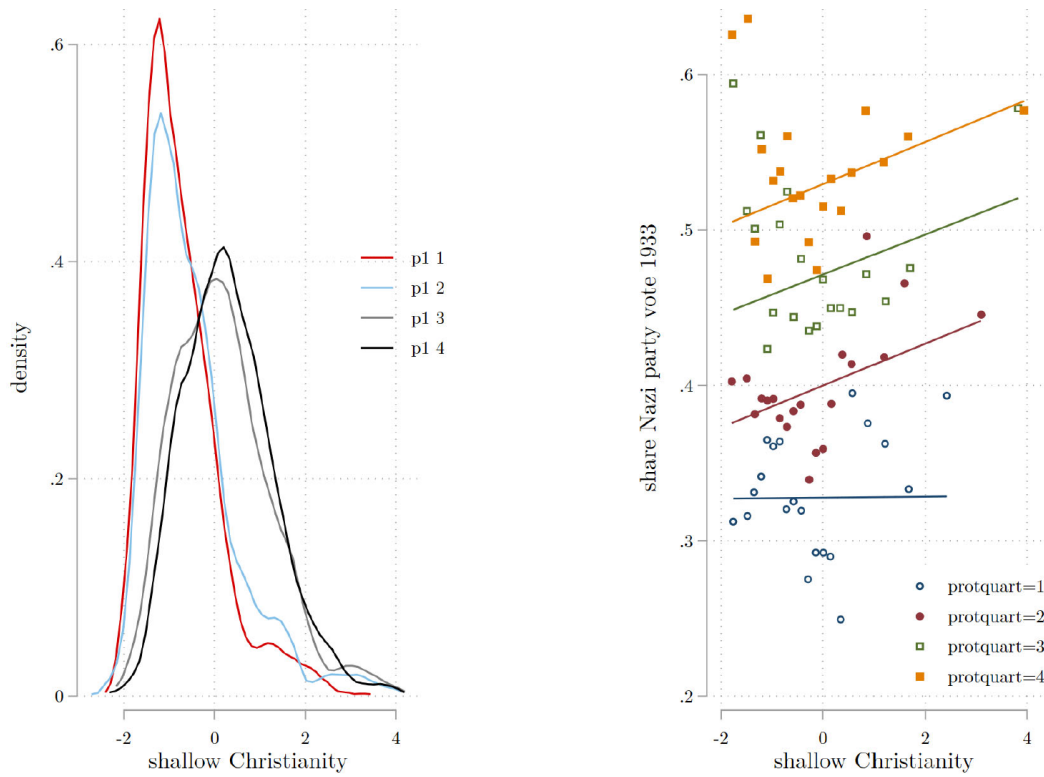


Figure A.5: Share of Protestants and shallow Christianization

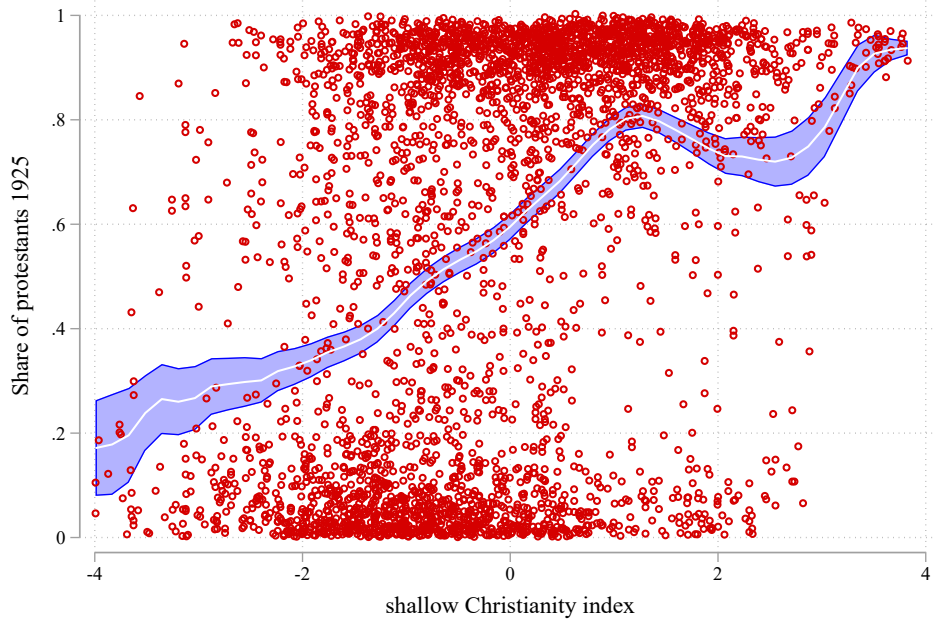


Figure A.6: Bin-scatter of distance to nearest pagan place and shallow Christianity and medieval Christianity

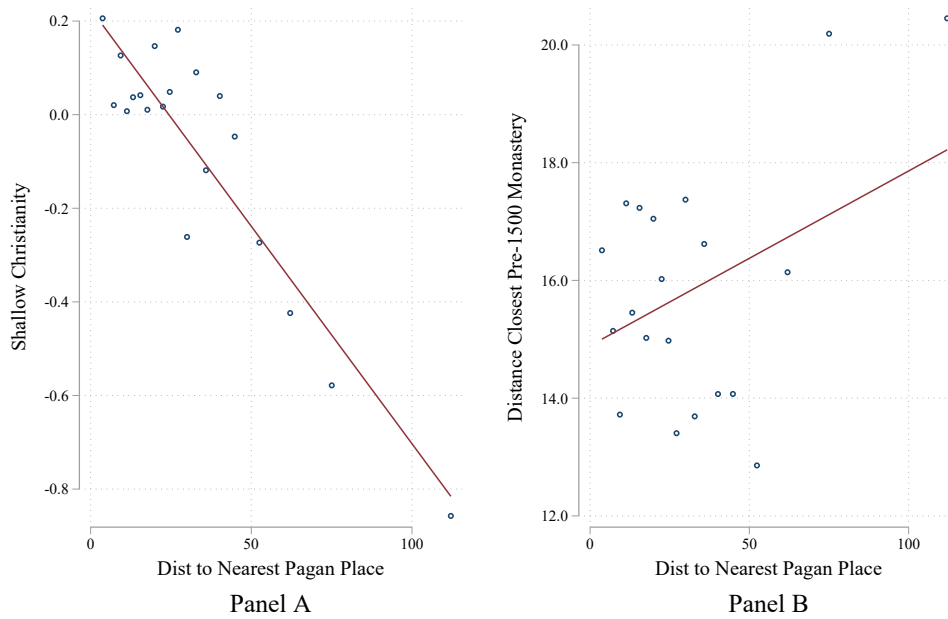


Figure A.7: Bin-scatter of distance to nearest pagan place and shallow Christianity and medieval Christianity

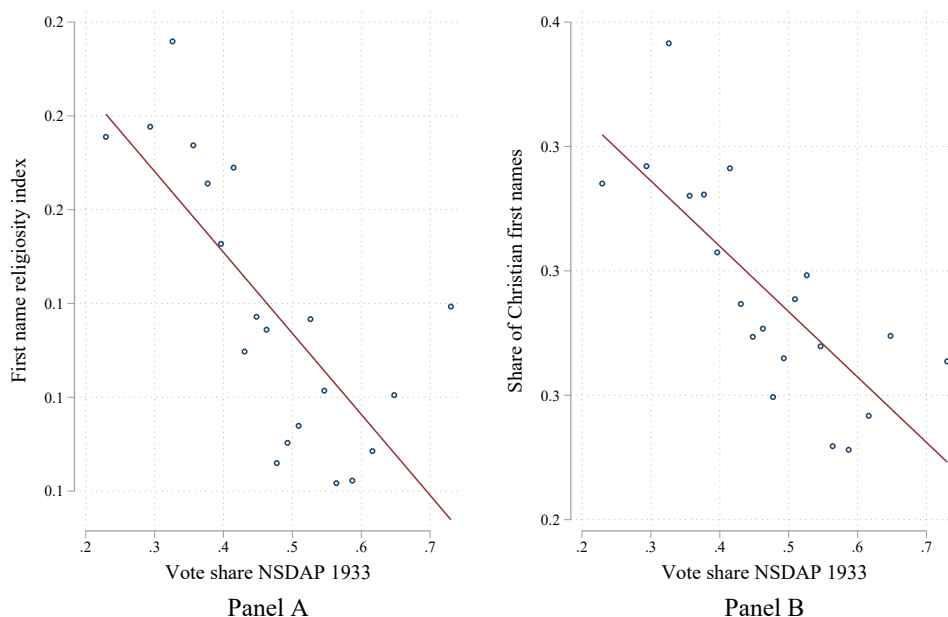


Table A.1: Clairvoyance and Christian first-names as predictors of Nazi support

	Vote Share NSDAP 1933			Vote share NSDAP 1930			Cumulative party entries NSDAP 1938-32		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Clairvoyance	0.01*** (0.00)		0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)		0.00*** (0.00)	0.83*** (0.15)		0.70*** (0.15)
Christian names		-0.37*** (0.05)	-0.31*** (0.05)		-0.27*** (0.03)	-0.23*** (0.03)		-51.87*** (11.06)	-41.94*** (10.87)
\bar{R}^2	0.074	0.064	0.116	0.040	0.061	0.085	0.032	0.022	0.048
Observations	855	919	850	933	997	928	915	979	910

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance indicated at the * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Note: Same specification as in table 2 but only with observations in the bottom 5% of the distribution of shallow Christianity. As shallow Christianity is the first PCA of Christian names and clairvoyance there are no observations for which it is 0.

Table A.2: Covariate balance, with and without entropy balancing

Panel A: Without balancing					
Variable	(1)		(2)		(3)
	Below median	Shallow Christianity	Above median	Shallow Christianity	T-test Difference
	N	Mean/SE	N	Mean/SE	(1)-(2)
Vote share NSDAP 1933	478	0.442 (0.006)	448	0.501 (0.005)	-0.059***
Share protestant 1925	498	0.436 (0.016)	488	0.784 (0.013)	-0.348***
Latitude	503	49.765 (0.060)	502	52.261 (0.062)	-2.496***
Longitude	503	9.708 (0.080)	502	12.874 (0.174)	-3.166***
Panel B: With entropy balancing					
Vote share NSDAP 1933	475	0.476 (0.004)	448	0.501 (0.005)	-0.025***
Share protestant 1925	498	0.784 (0.012)	488	0.784 (0.013)	-0.000
Latitude	498	52.284 (0.080)	488	52.284 (0.063)	-0.000
Longitude	498	12.776 (0.103)	488	12.776 (0.177)	-0.000

Table A.3: First name analysis – population vs Nazi officials

	Christian name share, NSDAP	Christian name share, Braunbuch
	(1)	(2)
Christian Name Share, Verlustlisten	0.43*** (0.07)	0.16*** (0.05)
Mean of Dependent Variable	0.09*** (0.02)	0.11*** (0.01)
R^2	0.045	0.074
Observations	810	123

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance indicated at the * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Share of Christian names among Nazi party members and Nazi figures in the Braunbuch compared to the share in the general population.

Table A.4: Additional controls - NSDAP voting 1930

	Vote share NSDAP 1930				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Shallow Christianity	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)
Latitude	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Longitude	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01* (0.01)
Share white collar workers 1925	0.23*** (0.05)	0.23*** (0.05)	0.22*** (0.05)	-0.06 (0.14)	0.24** (0.11)
Share blue collar workers 1925	-0.06** (0.03)	-0.05* (0.03)	-0.06* (0.03)	-0.28*** (0.09)	-0.12* (0.07)
Population density	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Pogrom 1349		0.02** (0.01)			
Any Pogrom			0.00 (0.00)		
Exposure to the Danatbank				-0.13** (0.05)	
Associations per capita					0.00 (0.00)
R^2	0.320	0.324	0.320	0.399	0.419
Observations	765	765	765	149	158
Province FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance indicated at the * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Note: Nazi vote share in 1930 regressed on different control sets. Pogrom 1349 is a dummy from [Voigtländer and Voth \(2012\)](#) for medieval pogroms. Any pogroms is a measure of pogrom intensity from the 1400s-1900s constructed from [Becker and Pascali \(2019\)](#). Danatbank exposure captures a country's exposure to the Danatbank's failure taken from [Doerr et al. \(2022\)](#). Density of associations is from [Satyanath, Voigtländer and Voth \(2017\)](#).

Table A.5: Additional controls - Party Entry

	Cumulative party entries NSDAP 1928-32				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Shallow Christianity	4.08*** (1.03)	4.15*** (1.02)	3.97*** (1.03)	1.52 (2.95)	6.11** (2.39)
Latitude	2.64** (1.35)	2.06 (1.37)	2.41* (1.35)	-0.63 (3.44)	0.79 (3.28)
Longitude	-0.41 (0.74)	-0.37 (0.74)	-0.41 (0.74)	-0.88 (1.74)	2.80 (1.93)
Share white collar workers 1925	78.76*** (13.81)	78.20*** (13.78)	72.59*** (14.35)	8.99 (40.65)	61.87** (29.27)
Share blue collar workers 1925	-12.77 (7.98)	-10.69 (8.02)	-10.04 (8.16)	-58.16** (25.36)	-25.35 (18.59)
Population density	-0.87 (0.55)	-0.83 (0.54)	-0.85 (0.54)	0.21 (0.56)	-0.17 (0.57)
Pogrom 1349		5.39** (2.51)			
Any Pogrom			1.32 (0.84)		
Exposure to the Danatbank				-20.07 (14.91)	
Associations per capita					-0.03 (1.01)
\bar{R}^2	0.366	0.370	0.368	0.385	0.442
Observations	765	765	765	149	158
Province FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance indicated at the * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Note: Cumulative party entries NSDAP 1938-32 regressed on different control sets. Pogrom 1349 is a dummy from [Voigtländer and Voth \(2012\)](#) for medieval pogroms. Any pogroms is a measure of pogrom intensity from the 1400s-1900s constructed from [Becker and Pascali \(2019\)](#). Danatbank exposure captures a country's exposure to the Danatbank's failure taken from [Doerr et al. \(2022\)](#). Density of associations is from [Satyanath, Voigtländer and Voth \(2017\)](#).