

# Light of Their Life: Country Leaders' Spouses and Regional Favoritism

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## Abstract

We investigate whether and to what extent marriage to country leaders affects economic development. Specifically, we focus on birth regions of national leaders' spouses and test how the regions the spouses were born develop, compared to how the same regions would develop at other times. To this end, we collect data on leaders' spouses—for a sample of 175 countries worldwide in the 1992-2018 period—and the sub-national regions they were born. We then test whether a birth region's development surges at the time the spouse's partner is in office, making use of data on night light, education, and health. We test transmission channels using (country-level) data on corruption and institutional quality and (sub-national) data on development finance. Data on marriage characteristics allow us to shed further light on the inherent power structures driving our results. Controlling for the birth regions of the leaders themselves, in tandem with their ethnicity, the focus on spouses allows us to test the effect of informal influence on governments, and the settings that facilitate such influence.

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