Does landholding inequality undermine democratization? Pointing to endogeneity concerns, recent contributions have challenged the established argument that elites oppose suffrage extension if fixed assets are unequally distributed. We advance research on this long-standing question by exploiting exogenous variance to (re)investigate the relationship. Using climate suitability for wheat production as an instrument, we find that landholding inequality decreases support for suffrage extension. In addition, by focusing on traditional patterns of social control, we explore a hitherto empirically neglected mechanism linking landholding inequality and democratization. Taking advantage of four direct democratic votes between 1866 and 1877 in Switzerland, we demonstrate that landholding inequality also influences the political preferences of local citizens who do not control these resources. The paper thus shows that elites can align the local population’s voting behavior with their political goals. Supplementary analyses using qualitative and quantitative data further substantiate this social control mechanism.

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