Noble Lineage and the Persistence of Privileges in Elite Education[*]

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Abstract

This paper investigates the enduring overrepresentation of aristocratic families in elite higher education. It analyses 269,917 graduates from ten leading French *grandes écoles* between 1911 and 2015, using surname-based indicators of nobility and a linkage to birth records. Despite a decline over time, descendants of aristocrats remain nine times more likely to gain admission than the rest of the population, even two centuries after the French Revolution. While historically most concentrated at Sciences Po Paris, their presence has converged across institutions, though business schools now exhibit the highest overrepresentation. The analysis also reveals a gender gap, with noble men benefiting more from this educational advantage. These findings highlight the persistence of historical hierarchies beyond the end of legal privileges, as noble families convert symbolic capital into academic credentials, ensuring continued access to elite status.

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Keywords: Elite higher education, *Grandes écoles*, Aristocracy.

"The gist of the role of the *grandes écoles* amounts to producing a nobility […]. In the manner of the dubbing of knights according to Marc Bloch (1939), this operation of *ordination* (in both the mathematical and religious sense) transforms scalar differences into a series of discontinuous differences […]. The *grandes écoles* produce individuals who are perceived to be—and who perceive themselves to be—of a different kind, of a 'superior essence' as we say in French, that is, separate in absolute terms, in terms of ascription: no matter what they do, what they do is different."

Pierre Bourdieu, in Bourdieu and Wacquant (1993).

1. Introduction

The French Revolution of 1789 abolished aristocratic privileges, including the formal prerogatives that the nobility enjoyed in accessing universities under the *Ancien Régime*. In a radical break, these universities were dismantled in 1793, while the *grandes écoles* (GE) were newly established and designed to train the nation's leaders. Competitive entrance examinations were introduced for admissions to these elite graduate schools in the late 18th century, a system that has largely remained unchanged. While universities were later reintroduced as a more accessible alternative, their coexistence with the highly selective *grandes écoles*, has maintained a dual higher education system akin to those in Japan, the United Kingdom, or the United States. This system was conceived to promote meritocratic selection for elite positions, yet its longevity raises the question of whether access to the most prestigious *grandes écoles* has truly been democratized or if historical hierarchies continue to shape educational opportunities. Although aristocratic status no longer carries legal prerogatives, it is still recognized and officially registered by the French administration. Besides, families from the former nobility continue to hold influence in various spheres of the society (Harsanyi, 2005). This raises a fundamental question that this study proposes to address: did the abolition of aristocratic privileges truly eliminate the educational advantages once enjoyed by noble families? Or have the descendants of the aristocracy retained greater access to France's most valuable degrees, those from the leading *grandes écoles*?

While higher education has become widely accessible worldwide, the admission to elite institutions continues to serve as a key mechanism of social stratification. Their prestigious diplomas constitute tickets to dominant social and economic positions on the labor market (Hoekstra, 2009; Anelli, 2020), but are marked by substantial inequalities in admission, along social and economic origin (Clark & Cummins, 2014; Chetty et al., 2020). In particular, the French *grandes écoles* have been found to be key institutions of elite reproduction. Covering students over the periods 1966-1969 and 1984-1985, Bourdieu (1989) highlighted the gap in economic and cultural capital between students at the most selective *grandes écoles*, at other *grandes écoles*, and at universities. Further empirical applications span multiple decades in the 20th century: Euriat and Thélot (1995) and Albouy and Wanecq (2003) examined admissions to 3 and 19 elite *grandes écoles*, respectively, while Falcon and Bataille (2018) used a much broader set of schools from the French Labor Force survey. The three studies found substantial but declining social inequalities in access to these institutions. More recent findings using administrative data from the 2006–2017 period confirm this pattern (Bonneau et al., 2021), as does an intergenerational analysis of admissions of *grandes écoles* graduates over five generations (Benveniste, 2023). While inequalities in access to these schools have been clearly documented through the lens of parental occupation and education, the role of aristocratic lineage in shaping admission patterns has received little attention.

Beyond Bourdieu's (1989) comparison between the modern elite and the *Ancien Régime* nobility in *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, where he argues that the *grandes écoles* function as a new mechanism of power legitimization, a strand of research has examined how former European aristocracies have navigated major social and economic transformations, with their descendants continuing to be overrepresented among society's elites (Kuiper et al., 2015). While noble families partly lost their economic dominance, they remained for instance disproportionately represented among the largest inheritances in Paris during the early 20th century (Piketty, 2020). In the Netherlands, Dronkers (2003) found that a great degree of homogamy contributed to the preserved prominence of noble families, materialized in a continued access to elite positions in business and politics. In France, noble descendants also remained disproportionately present in administrative, political and economic elites (Birnbaum et al., 1978) and in prestigious schools and occupations (Coulmont, 2019). Aristocratic families also strategically concentrated in some schools, which favored exclusive social circles and reinforced homogamy (de Saint Martin, 1993). This participated to consolidate a strong noble identity and a sustained collective belief in the continued existence of the aristocracy (Harsanyi,

2005), a perception further legitimized by its ongoing recognition by the French State. The public fascination with noble tradition and heritage is evident in both academic research and cultural representations with the show *Downton Abbey*, or through its deep embedding in classical literature up to Marcel Proust. This highlights a lasting curiosity and interest about the resilience of historical elites. Aristocratic identity is indeed deeply rooted in heredity and stands out for its perpetuation of ancestral memory, shaped by the glorified narratives of its lineage. This heritage imposes exemplarity and obligations ("*noblesse oblige*"), fostering a quest for excellence and a fear of decline. However, this aspiration for continuity and immutability stands in stark contrast to modern egalitarian values, particularly in the context of universally accessible and publicly funded higher education. This tension raises a fundamental question: does the enduring presence of noble families in elite spheres also extend to higher education and its most prestigious credentials?

This article investigates the persistence of an aristocratic advantage in admissions to France's most prestigious *grandes écoles*. It draws on two main data sources. The first is a self-constructed corpus of 269,917 elite graduates. This dataset provides exhaustive coverage of students admitted between 1911 and 2015 to ten of the most selective *grandes écoles*, representing 0.36% of the French population over the period.[1] These nominative lists are matched to the second source of data, i.e., national birth records, which report for different cohorts the number of births associated with each surname in France. This combination allows to compute admission rates to the French elite graduate schools for the former nobility relative to the rest of the population.[2] Two surname-based identifications of noble lineage are alternatively used: (1) surnames containing an aristocratic particle and (2) a list of family names registered at the *Association d'entraide de la Noblesse Française* (ANF; Association for Mutual Assistance of the French Nobility), an organization dedicated to authenticating noble lineage and to networking.

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[1] A detailed description of the dataset is provided in Section 3. While there are approximately 500 *grandes écoles* in France, this study focuses on a select group of 10 institutions that have historically played a key role in shaping the French elite: *École Polytechnique*, *ÉNA*, *ENS Ulm*, *ESCP*, *ESPCI Paris*, *ESSEC*, *Mines Paris*, *Ponts et Chaussées*, *Sciences Po Paris*, and *Télécom Paris*. As explained in Section 3, the baseline does not include *Sciences Po*, which alone accounts for half of the graduates.

[2] Like de Saint Martin (1993) and Coulmont (2019), this study relies on surnames as indicators of aristocratic lineage. Their research provided valuable insights into the presence of noble descendants in the *grandes écoles* by reporting their share of the student body. Considering their relative demography, this paper refines the analysis. By systematically comparing the frequency of noble surnames in the *grandes écoles* to their evolution in the national population, this paper identifies how their admission rates have evolved over time relatively to the rest of the population.

The findings reveal a persistent over-representation of aristocratic descendants in elite education. Members of ANF-registered families born between 1891 and 1915 were, on average, 15 times more likely than the rest of the population to gain admission to the top-tier *grandes écoles*. This advantage gradually declined to 14 (1916–1940), then 12 (1941–1965), and eventually 9 (1966–1990) times higher likelihood of admission. This downward trend does not hinder the significant remaining privilege, with families of noble lineage remaining about 9 times more likely to access these Republican institutions two centuries after the *Révolution*. This has also shaped the composition of the French elite graduate schools. In recent years, depending on the definition used, descendants of aristocratic families—despite representing only 0.2 to 0.6% of the population—accounted for 2 to 4% of students at the most prestigious *grandes écoles*. While they were as much as 51 times overrepresented at *Sciences Po Paris* in the early 20th century, their highest presence is more recently found in business schools. Furthermore, aristocratic families appear to prioritize their sons over their daughters, as boys maintain significantly higher advantages for admissions to the schools where these families are most over-represented.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides historical context on the *grandes écoles* and the French nobility. Section 3 presents the data, including the graduate registers and the nominative birth record, and provides descriptive statistics. Section 4 details the empirical strategy, explaining the use of surname-based indicators and the relative admission rate as a measure of inequality in admissions. Section 5 presents and discusses the results. Finally, Section 6 concludes.

2. Institutional background

The French grandes écoles

The French Revolution of 1789 overthrew a society in which social positions were largely determined by birth, proclaiming the equality of rights. Closely tied to both religious congregations (through ownership of their estate) and the nobility, which enjoyed legal prerogatives regarding admissions, universities of the *Ancien Régime* were dismantled by the *Convention nationale* in 1793. They were replaced with a new system of elite education institutions: the *grandes écoles*. While some of these elite graduate schools predated the Revolution—such as *École nationale des ponts et chaussées* and *École des Mines*—, the year 1794 marked the foundation of two of the most emblematic schools: *École Polytechnique* and

École Normale Supérieure. The competitive entrance examination system, called the *concours*, that remains the hallmark of French selective higher education was implemented since the very first year at *École Polytechnique* and was progressively generalized to all *grandes écoles* (Belhoste, 2002). Admission to these institutions requires an intensive preparatory program[3], after which the *concours* is typically organized in two successive rounds. The initial anonymous written examinations are followed by an oral evaluation for the highest-ranked candidates from the first stage. Unlike universities, the *grandes écoles* admit only a small number of students each year through this rigorous selection process and have therefore remained highly selective. Explicitly designed to train the country's ruling class, and specializing in engineering, business, and humanities, the *grandes écoles* have always remained the royal way for high-level administrative, political, and business careers (Suleiman, 1978; Dudouet and Vion, 2024).

Two major structural changes have shaped the French higher education system throughout the 20th century. First, the massification of education has led to a universalization of secondary schooling and a considerable expansion of tertiary education. By contrast, the top-tier graduate schools have conserved their status and comparatively maintained strict selectivity (Gurgand and Maurin, 2007). As illustrated in Figure I, the proportion of the population graduating from the most prestigious *grandes écoles* has grown only slightly, especially when compared to the surge in overall university enrollments and the number of *baccalauréat* holders (Appendix Figure A.I).

The second structural transformation of education in the last century is the gradual integration of women into higher education, and in particular into the *grandes écoles*. Historically, these institutions were extremely male-dominated, with women either entirely excluded or subject to restricted admission policies. The first breakthrough occurred during World War I, when women were admitted at *Sciences Po Paris*, though under stricter conditions. Progress stalled during the interwar period, but the granting of voting rights to women in 1945 coincided with the gradual removal of gender barriers in elite education. The *École nationale d'administration* (ÉNA) admitted women since its foundation in 1945, but female students remained a tiny minority, rarely exceeding 10% before the 1970s. A decisive transformation came in the 1970s,

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[3] At the end of high school, French students take the *baccalauréat*, the national secondary school diploma, which conditions their access to higher education. Post-secondary education is traditionally divided between non-selective university programs and selective tracks. Among the latter, the most competitive are the *Classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles* (preparatory classes), which prepare students over two to three years for the *concours* (entrance examinations) of the *grandes écoles*. This system reinforces both social and academic stratification, as admission to these preparatory classes is itself highly selective.

notably when *École Polytechnique*—one of the most male-dominated institutions—opened its doors to female students in 1972. This period opened a rapid rise in female representation at *business schools* and *Sciences Po Paris*, although progress in engineering schools remained much slower. A unique case is that of the *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS), which operated separate institutions for men and women until 1985, when the two schools merged into a single entity. If women are now over-achieving and over-represented in higher education, this slow feminization of the French elite graduate schools reflects remaining gender disparities in scientific fields, where women are significantly under-represented (Kahn and Ginter, 2017).

The French aristocracy

As made explicit in the *incipit* of the present article, Pierre Bourdieu (1989) famously described the *grandes écoles* as institutions that do not merely educate but also consecrate their students, drawing a parallel with the dubbing of knights in feudal societies. This process of symbolic elevation echoes the distinction of the *Ancien Régime* aristocrats, who benefited from legal prerogatives, including a privileged access to educational institutions. The very notion of 'aristocracy', derived from the Greek *aristos* (excellence) and *kratos* (power), originally referred to the ruling of the most capable rather than hereditary privilege. In ancient Athens and Rome, though aristocratic status was initially linked to intellectual, political, or military merit, it was then entrenched by hereditary transmission. Later European aristocracies, still grounded on landownership and military service, solidified a noble identity through stronger hereditary succession and dynastic continuity (Dewald, 1996).

Like in many other societies, the French nobility emerged as a distinct social class in the medieval period (Chaussinand-Nogaret, 1976). The monarchy carefully controlled access to noble status. Unlike the English gentry, which allowed for greater social mobility, the French nobility established strict barriers to entry, although it was not entirely rigid. Demographic, economic, and political changes created opportunities for both upward and downward mobility throughout history. The principal mechanism for noble ascent, *anoblissement*—the formal ennoblement of commoners—, remained exceptional and required significant wealth, or great military or administrative service, but also royal approval (Chaussinand-Nogaret, 1976; Defauconpret, 1999). Maintaining noble status also required strict adherence to codes of conduct: engaging in activities or professions deemed dishonorable could result in the loss of noble status (*dérogeance*).

The French nobility was far from a homogeneous group. A fundamental distinction existed between the *noblesse d'épée* (nobility of the sword), whose lineage traced back to medieval chivalry and military leadership, and the *noblesse de robe* (nobility of the robe), which emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries through the venality of offices, i.e., the hereditary or financial acquisition of high-ranking legal and administrative roles (Doyle, 1996). Further stratifications structured the French nobility with considerable differences in wealth and political influence. Some families held ducal or princely titles, while others were minor landowners with fewer privileges (Defauconpret, 1999). Geographic variations were particularly significant: Parisian aristocrats tended to hold high court positions, whereas provincial nobles were more inclined to limited local governance (Chaussinand-Nogaret, 1976).

Estimating the number of nobles in the outset of the French Revolution is challenging due to the absence of official records, but Chaussinand-Nogaret (1976) suggests a plausible figure of 0.5% of the population, with broader estimates ranging from 0.3% to 1.2% (Mension-Rigau, 2015). Although wealth varied considerably among noble families, the aristocracy controlled overall an estimated 25% of French land before 1789 (Beck, 1981). The Revolution abolished aristocratic privileges and led to the confiscation of some estates, but its primary impact was political rather than economic. Beck (1981) argues that the gradual decline of noble wealth was less a direct consequence of the Revolution and more the result of their reluctance to engage in the economic transformations brought by the Industrial Revolution. As industry and trade became increasingly important to wealth creation, noble families became less prominent in the emerging economic order. Although they retained substantial landholdings throughout the 19th century, they could no longer rely solely on rents and had to gradually enter the workforce, including sectors once considered dishonorable.

In the 19th century, successive regimes—the First Empire, the Restoration, and later the Second Empire—briefly reinstated titles, aiming to integrate both the traditional aristocracy and newly titled military and administrative elites. These titles were purely honorific, and while recognized by the *Association d'entraide de la Noblesse Française*, their noble status remains debated (Mension-Rigau, 2019). In any case, with relatively few titles granted and a deliberate reinforcement of the traditional aristocracy at the expense of these newer elites under Charles X in the 1820s, most noble families today can trace their lineage back to the 18th century (de Waresquiel, 2005). The second half of the 19th century is portrayed as a period of rupture, marked by the emergence of a new society in which modernization led to the decline of the

nobility. However, Mayer (1981) emphasized that this perspective overlooks the social continuities and argues that aristocratic families maintained substantial political and economic power across Europe during this period, largely unchallenged by the rising bourgeoisie. He attributes this to the continued dominance of agriculture, which delayed the disruptive effects of industrial capitalism on social structures. However, he acknowledges that France, having transitioned away from monarchy earlier than its neighbors, experienced a more pronounced decline in noble influence.[4]

At the beginning of the 20th century, while noble families lost some of their economic dominance, many retained significant real estate holdings and they for example remained five times overrepresented among the highest Parisian inheritances (Piketty, 2020). The First World War further disrupted their wealth, with destruction and a reshuffling of economic capital, yet aristocratic families remained among the wealthiest in European societies (Kuiper, 2015). Their overrepresentation in the military also came at a demographic cost: 5 to 6% of French noble descendants died in the war, twice the rate of the general population (Mension-Rigau, 2015). As pathways to elite status evolved in the second half of the 20th century, noble families increasingly turned to education. De Saint Martin (1993) highlights their strategic concentration in a handful of elite educational institutions. Between 1976 and 1985, 19% of pupils at *Notre-Dame des Oiseaux*, a prestigious Parisian secondary school, bore aristocratic surnames. In subsamples from the *Who's Who in France*, noble names were also overrepresented in a few higher education institutions such as *ÉNA*, *Sciences Po Paris*, military schools, and law faculties (de Saint Martin, 1993). Coulmont (2019) demonstrates that descendants of the French nobility continue to be numerous in prestigious social positions, drawing on various nominative lists, including those of bishops, parliamentarians, ambassadors, and elite graduates. Similar patterns can be observed across Europe.[5] Overall, the loss of institutional prerogatives did not diminish the sociological significance of the aristocracy, nor its enduring mystique in the collective imagination. Despite profound social and economic transformations, many noble

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[4] Noble titles and the possibility of ennoblement persist in several parliamentary monarchies, including Spain, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, where the sovereign still has the prerogative to grant peerages.

[5] In Austria and Sweden, aristocratic families gradually transitioned from diplomacy and military service to business and finance (Kuiper et al., 2015). In the more decentralized Switzerland, the influence of patrician families declined throughout the first half of the 20th century (Benz et al., 2024). Political shocks further challenged the stability of elite status. While Soviet nobility faced mass executions or expropriation, Italian aristocrats navigated the fascist regime with relative success, and Polish noble families maintained its influence by serving the communist government (Kuiper et al., 2015). In Hungary, World War II and the Nazi occupation severely weakened the nobility's role in politics and the economy, yet noble descendants remain overrepresented in advantageous socio-demographic positions (Kézdy, 2019).

families adapted to new structures, preserving their influence well into the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

A crucial dimension through which aristocratic families have strengthened their status is the deliberate and active strategies of matrimonial alliances (Elias, 1985). Arranged marriages maintain social exclusivity and ensure the persistence of noble identity across generations (Wagner, 2008). This highly structured practice has deep historical roots. To counter their decline, noble families established national nobility organizations dedicated to preserving their collective interests. In France, the *Association d'entraide de la noblesse française* (ANF), founded in 1932, rapidly became a key institution for reinforcing elite networks, maintaining social capital, and fostering cohesion. Like in the Netherlands (Dronkers, 2003), de Saint Martin (1993) shows that 64% of men registered at the ANF married women of noble lineage. This high level of endogamy among noble families also arises from a strategic desire to preserve the *name* across generations (de Saint Martin, 1993). This helped maintain a distinct noble identity and sustain the collective perception that the aristocracy remains standing (Harsanyi, 2005). Entrenched in the memory of their illustrious ancestors—often depicted in portraits displayed in family homes or even castles—and their role in national history, this heritage inculcates exemplariness and a duty to uphold the family name. It manifests in commitment to traditional customs, the preservation of ancestral values, and the intentional transmission of social rituals, norms, and distinctive cultural practices (Mension-Rigau, 2015, 2019). The preservation of this identity is also reinforced by the French State, which continues to recognize and protect noble titles. Provided they undergo an authentication process by the *Direction des Affaires civiles et du Sceau* (Civil affairs and Seal directorate) of the Ministry of Justice, these titles remain formally attached to surnames and can still be recorded in official documents and administrative records.

3. Data

This study relies on two main types of data: (1) nominative lists from French elite graduate schools and (2) aggregated birth records providing surname distributions in France by cohort over time. The *Grandes Écoles Nominative Elite Sample* (GENES) is a self-assembled dataset, collected from sources such as alumni associations and archive departments. It comprehensively covers graduates from ten *grandes écoles* between 1911 and 2015, with 287,724 curricula corresponding to 269,917 unique students. These ten institutions have

historically been, and remain today, among the most prestigious in France, providing tickets to elite careers in both the public and private sectors (Suleiman, 1978; Dudouet and Vion, 2024). *École Nationale d'Administration* (ÉNA), founded in 1946, specializes in training senior civil servants. *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS Ulm) is a leading research institution in humanities and sciences. The sample includes five public engineering schools—*ESPCI Paris*, *École Polytechnique*, *École des Ponts et Chaussées*, *Télécom Paris*, and *Mines Paris*—, as well as two business schools—*ESSEC* and *ESCP*.[6] Although these institutions are not entirely homogeneous, Bourdieu (1989) describes them as part of an interconnected system of elite formation, a perspective adopted in most empirical studies on the French elite education system that combine these different schools (e.g., Albouy and Wanecq, 2003; Bonneau et al., 2021).

Details on collection and processing of the GENES dataset are provided in Benveniste (2021). Each observation includes the graduate's surname and first names, with gender information partially available. Missing gender data was completed using a gender propensity score derived from a national birth record by first name. To enhance data accuracy, token and bigram fuzzy matching techniques were applied to correct misspellings and abbreviations in school records. To avoid double-counting, individuals who attended multiple *grandes écoles* were then identified. Birth years were estimated based on the typical age of admission, with adjustments at *ÉNA*, where students enroll a few years older on average. For better consistency over time, the analysis focuses on standard curricula, excluding PhDs, MBAs, executive and specialized master programs, as well as international cycles at *ÉNA*.

Table 1 presents summary statistics for each school, including the years covered, total number of graduates, and average annual graduates. Figure I illustrates the evolution of the share of the national population attending these elite institutions over time, revealing noticeable fluctuations, particularly around wartime periods. Following World War I, admissions rose, especially in business schools and at *Sciences Po Paris*. However, the most striking pattern is the remarkable stability of the proportion of the population graduating from these institutions, especially in contrast to the significant expansion of secondary and higher education (see Appendix Figure A.I for a comparison with baccalaureate trends). While university enrollments have risen tremendously over the 20th century, admissions to the most prestigious

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[6] The dataset does not include a few other highly selective and prestigious institutions, such as *HEC Paris* and *École Centrale Paris*, due to data availability constraints. Aside from these two schools, its coverage closely aligns with the scope of top-tier *grandes écoles* examined in Suleiman (1978), Bourdieu (1989), or Bonneau et al. (2021).

Table 1 – GENES data: historical records on graduates from 10 elite *grandes écoles*.

Category	*Grande école*	Data coverage period	Total number of graduates	Average annual number of graduates
Admin. and research	Sciences Po Paris	1911-2015	145,517	1,399
	ENA	1946-2015	7,714	112
	ENS Ulm	1911-2015	15,219	146
Engineering	ESPCI Paris	1911-2015	5,201	50
	École Polytechnique	1911-2013	32,511	319
	Ponts et Chaussées	1911-2014	12,641	120
	Télécom Paris	1911-2012	11,765	120
	Mines Paris	1921-2012	8,476	91
Business	ESSEC	1911-2010	20,267	199
	ESCP	1911-2011	28,394	278

Notes: The *data coverage period* indicates the first and last recorded years of admission in the dataset for each institution. The *average annual number of graduates* is computed by dividing the *total number of graduates* by the number of years covered. The dataset provides comprehensive graduate records up to 2010, with coverage extending to 2015 for some institutions.

Source: GENES data (1911–2015).

Figure I – Share of the French population graduating from the 10 elite *grandes écoles* of the GENES data (1911–2010).
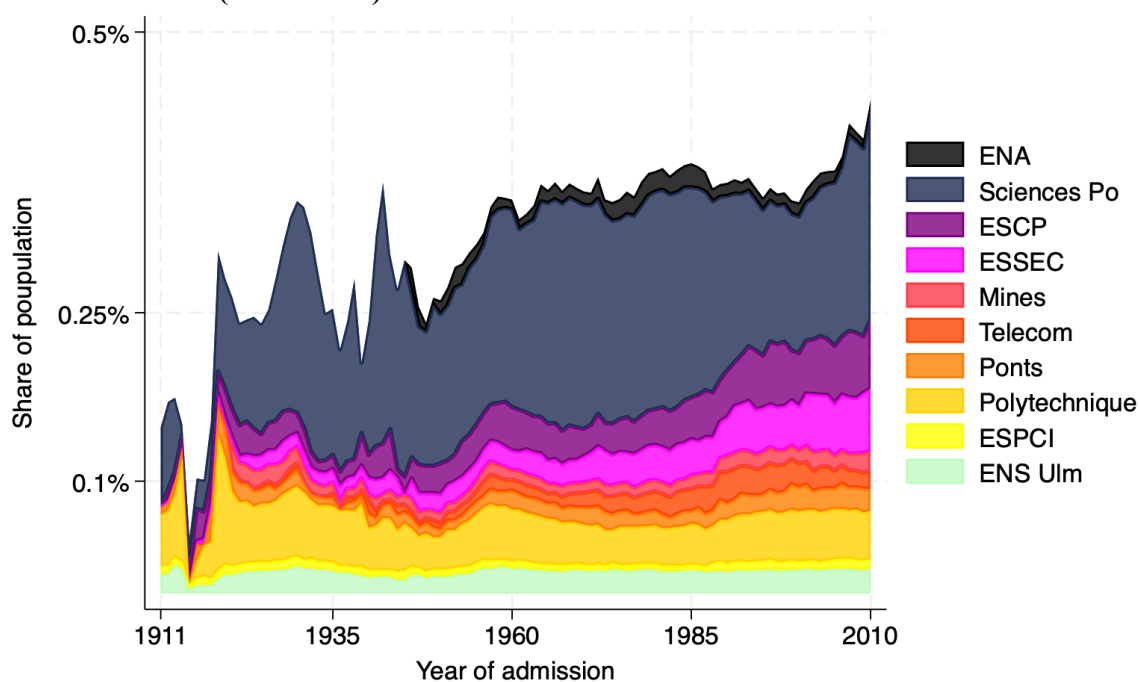
Notes: This figure shows the share of the French population graduating from each of the ten *grandes écoles* over time, with data stacked by institution to highlight their relative contributions. As defined in Section 3, only graduates with 'native' surnames are included, and their annual count is divided by the size of the national birth cohort corresponding to the admission year. Appendix Figure A.2 provides complementary information by displaying the raw annual number of graduates in each school.

Source: GENES data (1911-2010); INSEE population records.

grandes écoles have grown at a much slower pace. Given that *Sciences Po Paris* accounts for nearly half of the graduates in GENES data, most of the analysis focuses on a baseline sample that excludes it. However, results are also presented separately for *Sciences Po*, as well as for the nine-school subset and the full sample of ten schools.

The second key data source is the *Fichiers des noms patronymiques de 1891 à 1990* (1999 edition), a surname-level birth record compiled by the *Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques* (INSEE, French National Statistics Institute). This dataset provides surname-level birth counts for four 25-year birth cohorts: 1891–1915, 1916–1940, 1941–1965, and 1966–1990. To extend the analysis to 1995, a pseudo-cohort (1971–1995) is constructed under the assumption that the surname birth distribution remains unchanged from the 1966–1990 cohort.

As detailed in Section 4, these nominative birth records are matched with the nominative graduate registers. This allows to determine the demographic weight of each cohort and evaluate the admission rates of noble and non-noble surnames in elite schools relative to their respective pools of potential applicants. A key challenge in this long-term analysis is maintaining a consistent measure across generations of this pool of possible applicants. Two factors may introduce bias: (1) birth records exclude students born abroad who immigrated to France during their schooling, and (2) they also omit international students who enter elite schools directly from abroad, whose share has increased in recent decades.

To ensure the most accurate identification of the potential pool of *grandes écoles* applicants— and following prior surname-based studies (Dupâquier and Kessler, 1992)—, the baseline analysis is restricted to surnames present in France at the start of the 20th century, referred to as 'native' surnames.[7] This avoids artificially diluting the persistence of noble families due to missing records of foreign-born students, who are not categorized as nobles and whose births are unrecorded. If this restriction also excludes second- and later-generation immigrants born in France, bearers of their surnames may immigrate to the country across multiple cohorts. Limiting the analysis to 'native' surnames also mitigates bias from self-selection in migration, as migrants often differ in unobserved characteristics (Borjas, 1987). Yet, recent research

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[7] As in Benveniste (2021), the classification of 'foreign' surnames identifies those either completely absent at the beginning of the period or experiencing a significant increase in prevalence over time. The restriction to 'native' surnames applies to both the birth records and graduate data. Table 2 provides statistics on their prevalence.

suggests that immigrants exhibit higher economic mobility than natives, both in the United States (Abramitzky et al., 2021) and in France (Sicsic, 2023). A robustness analysis will therefore include all surnames to assess the sensitivity of results to this sample restriction.

Table 2 – Birth records and *grande école* graduates: descriptive statistics by cohort.

		Full period		Cohorts				
		Number of surnames	Total # of births	Births 1891-1915	Births 1916-1940	Births 1941-1965	Births 1966-1990	
Birth records	Births	807,229	65,423,121	10,686,923	14,149,274	20,099,847	20,487,077	
	Births of native	541,426	59,938,195	10,574,454	13,700,315	18,655,322	17,008,104	
	Share of native	67%	92%	99%	97%	93%	83%	
		Number of surnames	Total number of graduates	Graduates cohort 1891-1915	Graduates cohort 1916-1940	Graduates cohort 1941-1965	Graduates cohort 1966-1990	Graduates pseudo-cohort 1971-1995
Nine *Grandes Écoles*	Graduates	63,155	133,363	13,962	20,331	36,287	57,437	53,407
	Native graduates	48,073	110,340	13,291	19,202	31,920	42,438	38,240
	Share of native	76%	83%	95%	94%	88%	74%	72%
	Top educ %		0.17%	0.13%	0.14%	0.17%	0.25%	0.22%
	Women %		20%	6%	6%	18%	32%	33%
Sciences Po Paris	Graduates	77,496	145,517	14,364	26,273	52,752	45,025	43,346
	Native graduates	49,956	107,618	11,088	21,508	39,993	30,837	28,592
	Share of native	64%	74%	77%	82%	76%	68%	66%
	Top educ %		0.17%	0.10%	0.16%	0.21%	0.18%	0.15%
	Women %		35%	6%	20%	36%	51%	53%

Notes: This table presents the number of *births* and *graduates* across different cohorts, distinguishing between all surnames (first row in each section) and native surnames (second row), along with the *share of native* surnames (third row). The first two columns provide statistics for the entire period, while the five columns on the right break down data by birth cohorts. The upper panel reports statistics on birth records, while the two lower panels focus on graduates from the nine *grandes écoles* or from *Sciences Po Paris*. For students with native surnames, the table also includes the proportion of each cohort admitted to the baseline grandes écoles or *Sciences Po Paris* (*Top educ %*) and the share of women among graduates (*Women %*). Since some students attended multiple institutions, the sum of both the total number of graduates from *Sciences Po Paris* and from the nine *grandes écoles* exceeds the total number of unique students reported (269,917 overall; 210,438 for native surnames). Additionally, students may appear in both the 1966–1990 cohort and the 1971–1995 pseudo-cohort.

The study includes graduates and other individuals born between 1891 and 1995. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics on birth records and graduates from both the nine *grandes écoles* in the baseline sample and from *Sciences Po Paris*—mostly analyzed separately due to its outsized representation. In total, 107,618 Sciences Po graduates and 110,340 graduates from the baseline schools have native surnames, each group representing approximately 0.17% of the native French population over the period.

4. Empirical strategy

This section first explains how surnames serve as historical markers of noble lineage. It then introduces the relative admission rate (RAR), the key measure used to assess disparities in

access to the *grandes écoles*, comparing admission likelihoods between noble and non-noble families.

Surnames and the legacy of history

Surnames offer a unique lens on long-term social mobility, particularly in historical contexts where administrative or survey data are lacking. Surname-based methods have been widely applied in intergenerational mobility research (Santavirta and Stuhler, 2024), but they also extend to a broader scope of questions.[8] These approaches rely on the premise that surnames act as stable family identifiers and are therefore not randomly distributed across different socioeconomic dimensions. While surnames do not causally influence admissions to elite schools, they encapsulate valuable historical information about social background and status.

Their usefulness comes from their intergenerational transmission. In France, surnames have been patrilineally inherited since the 12th century, with their spelling standardized by 1870. Although legal reforms in 2003 and 2008 allow children to inherit their mother's surname, surnames provide a reliable paternal link across generations, as this study focuses on individuals born between 1891 and 1995. A limitation of this approach is that individuals of mixed noble-commoner ancestry are classified as noble only when their noble lineage comes from their father. However, this is unlikely to introduce substantial bias, as endogamy within the French nobility remained highly prevalent until at least the late 20th century (de Saint Martin, 1993). As discussed in Section 2, noble marriages were carefully managed to preserve family name and status.

This study identifies individuals of noble descent among native surnames using two complementary approaches. The first identification includes all bearers of surnames containing a particle, which is commonly associated with aristocratic lineage.[9] However, while most noble surnames include a particle, not all surnames with a particle belong to noble lineages. The second method relies on the *Table des familles* from the *Association d'Entraide de la Noblesse Française* (ANF), which maintains a list of authenticated noble families and whose mission is to ensure the "authentication of true nobility." As detailed below, this list includes a significant portion of the French nobility and provides a more accurate identification of noble lineage.

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[8] Historians, demographers, and economists have long relied on nominative sources. For instance, Galton and Watson (1875) studied surname attrition as a marker of aristocratic decline over a century ago, while Stone (1971) emphasized how such data help understand the interactions and social networks of historical figures.

[9] This includes all surnames containing the prefixes "d'", "de ", "du ", as well as those containing the sequences " d'", " de ", " du ", or " des ", to the exclusion of Dutch equivalents like "van de ".

A challenge with the ANF list is that some surnames included are also common in the general population, weakening their direct association with an aristocratic lineage. For example, surnames such as *Mercier*, *Fabre*, *Leblanc*, *Michaud*, *Lejeune*, and *Duhamel* collectively account for more than 50,000 births per 25-year cohort. To avoid this dilution and ensure comparability in the estimates, only surnames within two standard deviations of the mean number of births per cohort in the ANF list are considered. This limits the sample to surnames with at most 125 births per cohort, each representing no more than 0.1% of the total ANF-registered nobles. This excludes a small number of 53 surnames. In total, out of the 2,539 ANF surnames that match national birth records, 2,486 remain in the final ANF-registered sample.

These two identification methods generate two binary indicators of noble lineage. The ANF-registered nobles largely form a subset of surnames with a particle. Among the 14,363 surnames containing a particle, 2,415 (17%) appear in the ANF register, and these registered nobles account for 30% of births with particle-bearing surnames. Conversely, 97% of ANF-registered noble surnames contain a particle, while only 3% (71 surnames) do not. This confirms that most—although not all—aristocratic families bear a particle, and that not all bearers of an apparent particle are of noble origin (see Beck, 1981, as well as Coulmont, 2019, referring to the latter case as "nobility of appearance"). Therefore, the use of particle-based identification provides a convenient yet imperfect proxy for noble lineage, introducing measurement error that likely leads to an underestimation of the persistence of nobility in elite graduate schools. In contrast, ANF registration is selective: not all noble families are registered, though the association declares that more than two-thirds are. If ANF-registered families represent a high-status subset of the nobility, this measure may slightly overestimate persistence. Using both definitions allows for bounding the persistence of noble advantage in admissions to the *grandes écoles*, capturing both a broad and a possibly more selective definition of noble lineage.

Relative Admission Rates

To quantify the extent of elite persistence, the relative admission rate (RAR) is used as a straightforward measure, conceptually similar to an odds ratio but more intuitive to interpret.[10] The RAR to a given school or set of schools (GE) in cohort c compares the admission rate (AR)

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[10] Empirical studies often rely on odds ratios, calculated as $\frac{p/(1-p)}{p'/(1-p')}$, where p and p' are the probabilities of admission for two groups, for example. The RAR simplifies this by computing $\frac{p}{p'}$. Given that admission rates to these elite schools are very low, both measures yield nearly identical results, but the RAR is easier to interpret.

of noble descendants (group X identified through surnames S) to that of the rest of the population, i.e., the goup X', without a noble origin. The RAR is computed as:

$$RAR_{c,X}^{GE} = \frac{AR_{c,X(S)}^{GE}}{AR_{c,X'(S)}^{GE}} = \frac{G_{c,X(S)}^{GE}/N_{c,X(S)}}{G_{c,X'(S)}^{GE}/N_{c,X'(S)}}$$

The admission rate of descendants of the nobility is defined as the number of noble graduates from the *grandes écoles* in cohort c ($G_{c,X(S)}^{GE}$) divided by the number of noble births in the same cohort ($N_{c,X(S)}$). In other words, it represents the proportion of noble-born individuals in cohort c who graduate from a *grande école* (GE). The same calculation applies to the rest of the non-noble population, where $G_{c,X'(S)}^{GE}$ over $N_{c,X'(S)}$ yields the admission rate of non-nobles. The definition of GE alternatively encompass all *grandes écoles* in the sample, the nine schools in the baseline, a single school, or specific subsets such as business schools. The RAR indicates how much more (or less) likely individuals of noble descent are to be admitted compared to the rest of the population. A value of $RAR_{c,X}^{GE}$ equal to 1 implies that nobles and commoners have a comparable likelihood of admission. If $RAR_{c,X}^{GE}$ is below 1, nobles are under-represented, while if it is above 1, nobles have a higher likelihood of admission relative to commoners.

Relative admission rates can be directly computed, but log-binomial models are employed to estimate confidence intervals and account for surname-level variations in admission rates, as surnames serve as the unit of observation. For each cohort, the probability of graduating from a *grande école* is estimated using the following specification, where $X(S)$ is a binary indicator for noble lineage (alternatively based on particles or on ANF registration):

$$\log[P(GE = 1|c, X(S))] = \alpha_c + \beta X(S)$$

The RAR is the exponentiated β coefficient from this regression.

5. Results

This section emphasizes the persistent overrepresentation of noble families in France's most prestigious *grandes écoles* over the last century, despite a gradual decline in their relative advantage. Table 3 reports the relative admission rates (RAR) of noble families to the nine *grandes écoles* in the baseline sample (excluding *Sciences Po Paris*) across cohorts. It presents findings for both identifications of noble lineage separately, the surnames with a particle and the ANF-registered families. The admission rate of the whole French population to these elite schools fluctuates between 0.13% and 0.25%, as shown in column 2. Columns 3 and 7 indicate

the share of the population with an aristocratic lineage. Registered noble families are about three times less numerous than those with a particle in their surname. In both cases, birthrates among noble families remained relatively dynamic: whereas 1 in 278 French natives bore a particle in the 1891–1915 cohort, this figure increased to 1 in 170 for the 1966–1990 cohort.[11,12]

Columns 4 and 8 reveal that the share of noble families among admitted students has remained remarkably stable over the entire period. On average, 4% of admitted students bear a surname with a particle, and just under 2% belong to registered noble families. This stability is partly explained by the demographic growth of noble families, as their admission rates to the French elite graduate schools remained largely unchanged (columns 5 and 9), while overall admissions slightly increased (column 2). Across the period, approximately 1.5% of individuals with a particle surname and 2% of those from registered noble families were admitted to one of the nine elite *grandes écoles*.

As a result of this stable high admission rate for nobles and of slightly increasing admissions for the rest of the population, the relative admission rates of noble families have declined over time. A century after the French Revolution, individuals born between 1891 and 1915 bearing a particle in their surname were 11.6 times more likely than the rest of the population to be admitted to the g*randes écoles*. This advantage was even more pronounced among members of the *Association d'Entraide de la Noblesse Française* (ANF), who were 15.1 times more likely to enroll. While this historical advantage has gradually diminished, descendants of the French aristocrats remain significantly overrepresented more than two centuries after the *Révolution*. They still exhibit in the latest cohort (1971–1995) between 6.5 (for particle bearers) and 8.9 (for ANF-registered families) higher likelihood of admissions than descendants of commoners.

Although estimates for ANF-registered nobles are based on a stricter definition of a noble lineage, both identifications confirm the persistent overrepresentation of their descendants in the most prestigious *grandes écoles*. These results hold when expanding the analysis to non-native surnames, as reported in Appendix Table B.2. While noble families with native surnames saw their RARs decline from 11.6 to 6.6 (particles) and 15.1 to 8.9 (ANF-registered), the

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[11] Appendix Table B.2 shows a moderately lower increase when considering the full population, including non-native surnames. Given the significant demographic losses endured by aristocratic families during World War I (see Section 2), their increased birth rates in the 1916–1940 cohort could reflect a conscious effort to restore their lineage.

[12] Chaussinand-Nogaret (1976) estimated that noble families made up approximately 0.5% of the population at the end of the *Ancien Régime*.

inclusion of all surnames results in slightly lower levels, with declines from 11.1 to 5.6 (particles) and 14.5 to 7.6 (ANF-registered).

Table 3 – Families of aristocratic lineage in the nine baseline *grandes écoles*.

(1) Cohort	(2) Global admiss. rate	Surnames with a particle 14,363 surnames - 4,184 students				French Nobility Association register 2,486 surnames - 1,943 students			
		(3) Popula-tion share	(4) Share among graduates	(5) Group admiss. rate	(6) Relative admiss. rate*	(7) Popula-tion share	(8) Share among graduates	(9) Group admiss. rate	(10) Relative admiss. rate*
1891-1915	0.13%	0.36%	4.0%	1.4%	**11.6** [10.4-12.9]	0.12%	1.7%	1.9%	**15.1** [12.8-17.9]
1916-1940	0.14%	0.44%	4.3%	1.4%	**10.0** [9.1-11.0]	0.14%	1.9%	1.9%	**13.9** [12.0-16.0]
1941-1965	0.17%	0.48%	3.7%	1.3%	**7.9** [7.3-8.6]	0.15%	1.8%	2.0%	**12.0** [10.6-13.6]
1966-1990	0.25%	0.59%	3.6%	1.5%	**6.4** [5.9-6.9]	0.20%	1.7%	2.1%	**8.5** [7.6-9.7]
1971-1995	0.22%	0.59%	3.8%	1.4%	**6.6** [6.0-7.1]	0.20%	1.8%	2.0%	**8.9** [7.8-10.1]

Notes: *Admiss.* stands for admission. This table presents, by cohort, the relative admission rates to the nine *grandes écoles* for two distinct groups: individuals bearing a surname with a particle (columns 3 to 6) and families registered at the French Nobility Association (columns 7 to 10). The table includes the *population share* of these groups. The *share among graduates* refers to the proportion of noble descendants among graduates, while the *group admission rate* represents the percentage of individuals of noble lineage enrolling in at least one of these schools. The *relative admission rate* compares this admission rate to that of individuals without a noble lineage. Confidence intervals at the 95% level appear in brackets. Additionally, the *global admission rate* for these schools, relative to the entire population, is reported. The total *number of surnames* and *graduates* across the full period are also provided.The figures concern the 'native' population, as defined in the paper. Appendix Table B.2 is comparable but includes all surnames for robustness, while Appendix Table B.3 presents similar findings for the full sample of ten schools, both for the native and full population.

Beyond overall trends, specific institutions play distinct roles for the nobility. Figure II presents a breakdown of the noble overrepresentation across different school categories and schools, including *Sciences Po Paris*. Historically, *Sciences Po* stood out as the most aristocratically concentrated institution. Among the 1891–1915 cohort, nobles were 38 times more likely to enroll than their non-noble counterparts, and this advantage reached 51 higher likelihood for ANF-registered nobles. Although bearers of particles represented only 0.36% of all births in this cohort, they accounted for 12% of *Sciences Po* students. However, noble overrepresentation at *Sciences Po* steadily declined throughout the 20th century, aligning with other elite schools in recent cohorts, with slightly more than five times the likelihood of admission.[13]

Figure II further highlights how noble families distributed their educational investments across different institutions. Created in 1945, the *École Nationale d'Administration* (ÉNA) initially admitted a significant number of students of noble lineage, with a RAR of 13 in its early decades. However, by the 1971–1995 cohort, this had fallen to 5, also making it comparable to other *grandes écoles*. In contrast, the *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS) historically showed a

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[13] Harsanyi (2005) describes the strong presence of noble families in Paris's *faubourg Saint-Germain*, where *Sciences Po* is located.

low overrepresentation of descendants of aristocrats in the early 20th century. However, this specificity progressively faded, and noble students gradually reached levels comparable to those at other *grandes écoles*. Business schools now have the highest concentration of students from noble backgrounds. Except for the first cohort, *ESSEC* and *ESCP* have consistently shown the highest RAR for noble families, setting them apart from other institutions.[14]

Figure II – Institutional differences in the relative admission rates of families of aristocratic lineage.
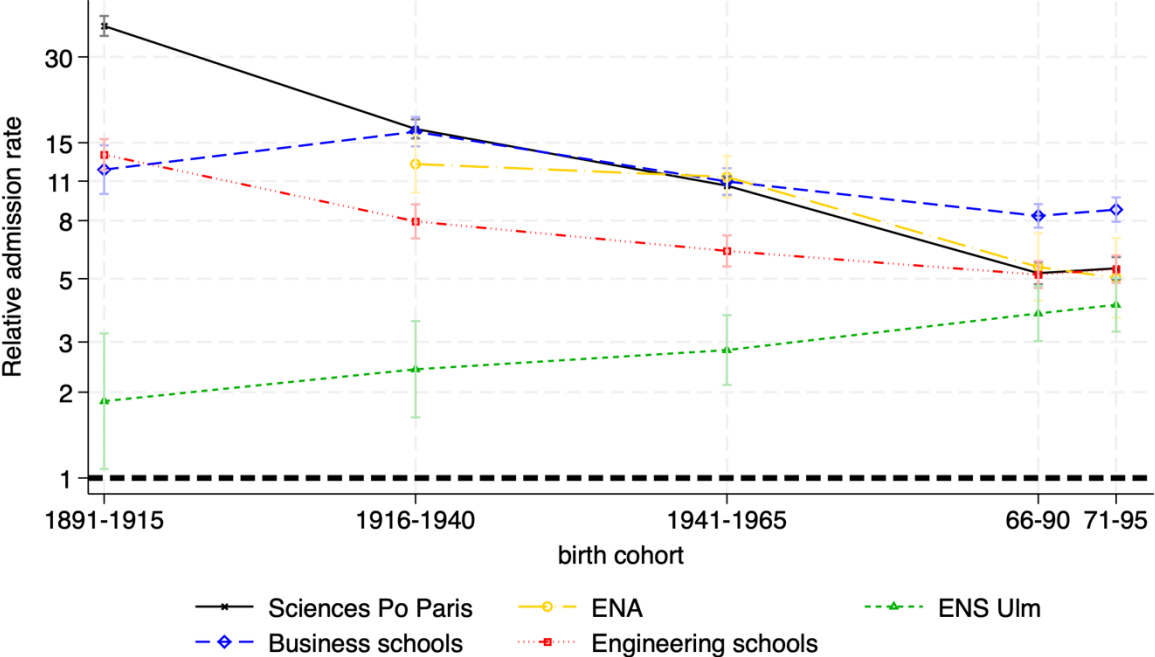
Notes: This figure shows the evolution of the relative admission rates of those of aristocratic lineage identified through a particle in their surname across different elite graduate schools and school categories, by birth cohort. The ordinate uses a logarithmic scale, and 95% confidence intervals are displayed in brackets.

Table 4 provides a more granular breakdown of noble overrepresentation across each school. Notably, substantial differences exist between the two business schools. In the two cohorts of the first half of the 20th century, the RAR of ANF-registered noble families was 40.5 and then 36.9 at *ESSEC*, compared to just 5.5 and then 16.1 at *ESCP*. However, the advantage of noble families in admissions to both schools converged from the 1941–1965 cohort onward.[15] A similar trend is observed in engineering schools, where *École Polytechnique* and *Mines Paris* historically enrolled a higher proportion of noble students than other scientific institutions in

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[14] Coulmont (2019) and de Saint Martin (1993) documented the proportion of noble students in some of these institutions. This study extends the scope and period covered, revealing that business schools now exhibit the highest noble overrepresentation, while the aristocratic advantage at *Sciences Po* and *ÉNA* has converged to levels similar to engineering schools. More importantly, by explicitly relating surname frequency in admissions to their prevalence in the general population, this analysis provides a more precise measure of the persistence of historical advantage in France's elite graduate schools.

[15] ESSEC's foundation by Jesuits in 1907 is a particularity, as most *grandes écoles* were originally secular. Even though its governance was transferred to the Chamber of Commerce of Versailles in 1980, its origins may have played a role in its initial attractiveness to noble families.

the early 20th century, though this progressively converged among scientific schools over time. These convergences likely reflect a broader trend of institutional alignment, shaped by competitive dynamics between schools that have progressively transformed the field of the *grandes écoles* (Bourdieu, 1989).[16]

Table 4 – Relative admission rates of families of aristocratic lineage by school.

| Cohort	Sciences Po Paris	ENA	ENS Ulm	ESPCI Paris	Polytech-nique	Ponts	Télécom Paris	Mines Paris	ESSEC	ESCP	Schools combined	
											Nine baseline schools	All 10 schools
all	Particle nobility											
1891-1915	**38.5**	**-**	**1.9**	**3.2**	**15.0**	**8.4**	**6.3**	**18.0**	**34.2**	**4.0**	**11.6**	**23.2**
	[35.6-41.8]	-	[1.1-3.2]	[1.6-6.1]	[13.0-17.2]	[6.0-11.7]	[2.8-14.1]	[13.7-23.8]	[27.3-42.9]	[2.7-5.9]	[10.4-12.9]	[21.6-25.0]
1916-1940	**16.8**	**12.6**	**2.4**	**4.6**	**9.1**	**4.9**	**5.3**	**9.3**	**25.0**	**11.0**	**10.0**	**13.5**
	[15.5-18.1]	[10.0-15.9]	[1.6-3.6]	[2.9-7.4]	[7.8-10.7]	[3.3-7.1]	[3.5-7.9]	[7.0-12.4]	[21.4-29.1]	[9.3-13.0]	[9.1-11.0]	[12.6-14.5]
1941-1965	**10.6**	**11.4**	**2.8**	**6.3**	**6.8**	**6.8**	**4.0**	**5.4**	**11.1**	**11.1**	**7.9**	**9.3**
	[9.8-11.4]	[9.6-13.4]	[2.1-3.7]	[4.4-9.1]	[5.8-7.9]	[5.4-8.5]	[3.0-5.3]	[4.0-7.3]	[9.7-12.8]	[9.7-12.6]	[7.3-8.6]	[8.6-9.9]
1966-1990	**5.2**	**5.5**	**3.8**	**2.9**	**6.2**	**5.6**	**4.0**	**4.9**	**8.6**	**8.0**	**6.4**	**5.9**
	[4.8-5.7]	[4.2-7.2]	[3.0-4.7]	[2.0-4.3]	[5.4-7.1]	[4.6-6.8]	[3.3-5.0]	[3.9-6.2]	[7.7-9.7]	[7.2-9.0]	[5.9-6.9]	[5.4-6.3]
1971-1995	**5.4**	**5.0**	**4.1**	**3.2**	**6.2**	**6.2**	**3.8**	**5.4**	**9.2**	**8.3**	**6,6**	**6.1**
	[5.0-6.0]	[3.7-6.9]	[3.3-5.0]	[2.3-4.6]	[5.4-7.2]	[5.2-7.5]	[3.0-4.9]	[4.3-6.9]	[8.1-10.4]	[7.4-9.4]	[6.0-7.1]	[5.6-6.5]
all	French Nobility Association register											
1891-1915	**51.3**	**-**	**0.4**	**3.2**	**21.0**	**10.0**	**9.6**	**21.7**	**40.5**	**5.5**	**15.1**	**31.2**
	[45.5-57.9]	-	[0.1-3.1]	[1.0-10.1]	[17.1-25.8]	[6.0-16.8]	[3.1-30.0]	[14.2-33.0]	[28.7-57.1]	[3.1-9.9]	[12.8-17.9]	[27.9-34.9]
1916-1940	**23.1**	**16.9**	**3.8**	**4.9**	**11.1**	**6.2**	**7.6**	**9.0**	**36.9**	**16.1**	**13.9**	**18.7**
	[20.6-26.0]	[12.1-23.7]	[2.2-6.7]	[2.2-10.9]	[8.7-14.1]	[3.5-11.0]	[4.2-13.9]	[5.5-14.8]	[29.7-45.9]	[12.5-20.9]	[12.0-16.0]	[16.8-20.8]
1941-1965	**15.0**	**17.9**	**4.0**	**11.6**	**9.4**	**8.0**	**5.0**	**8.1**	**17.4**	**16.6**	**12.0**	**13.4**
	[13.3-16.8]	[14.3-22.6]	[2.7-6.1]	[7.3-18.7]	[7.4-12.1]	[5.6-11.5]	[3.1-7.9]	[5.1-12.8]	[14.3-21.2]	[13.7-20.1]	[10.6-13.6]	[12.1-14.9]
1966-1990	**6.6**	**6.2**	**5.3**	**4.2**	**8.3**	**7.3**	**5.1**	**7.7**	**12.1**	**10.2**	**8.5**	**7.8**
	[5.7-7.6]	[4.0-9.8]	[3.8-7.3]	[2.4-7.4]	[6.8-10.2]	[5.5-9.8]	[3.7-6.9]	[5.6-10.6]	[10.1-14.3]	[8.6-12.1]	[7.6-9.7]	[6.9-8.6]
1971-1995	**6.8**	**6.4**	**5.9**	**4.0**	**8.6**	**7.8**	**4.5**	**7.8**	**12.9**	**10.9**	**8.9**	**7.9**
	[5.9-7.8]	[3.9-10.6]	[4.4-8.0]	[2.3-6.9]	[7.0-10.5]	[5.9-10.3]	[3.2-6.5]	[5.4-11.3]	[10.7-15.4]	[9.1-13.0]	[7.8-10.1]	[7.1-8.9]

Notes: This table presents, by cohort (rows), the relative admission rate to each school (columns) for individuals of aristocratic lineage, identified either by a surname with a particle (upper panel) or through registration with the French Nobility Association (bottom panel). The last two columns on the right aggregate results for the nine baseline schools and the full sample of ten schools, including *Sciences Po Paris*. 95% confidence intervals are provided in brackets below each point estimate.

Finally, the recent feminization of elite higher education, coupled with historically distinct educational strategies for sons and daughters in noble families, raises the question of whether the aristocratic advantage in the *grandes écoles*—long dominated by men—exhibits any gendered pattern. Figure III examines these gender disparities by comparing the noble advantage for men and women in *Sciences Po Paris* (Panel A) and business schools (Panel B).[17] The results indicate a clear male advantage: noble descent has been significantly more beneficial for men than for women in gaining admission to the *grandes écoles*.

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[16] Several factors may contribute to this growing uniformity, including adaptations to market demands, curriculum standardization in line with global standards, the rising influence of international rankings and accreditations, and the increasing homogenization of student and faculty recruitment processes. Recently, the consolidation of entrance *coucours* into shared examination pools for multiple schools may have further reinforced this trend, promoting greater institutional similarity.

[17] Relative admission rates were calculated separately for men and women, comparing noble men to non-noble men and noble women to non-noble women. This approach ensures a direct comparison within each gender, avoiding distortions caused by historical gender disparities in school admission policies.

Figure III – Gender disparities in the aristocratic advantage for admissions to *Sciences Po Paris* and business schools.

(a) *Sciences Po Paris.*   (b) Business schools.
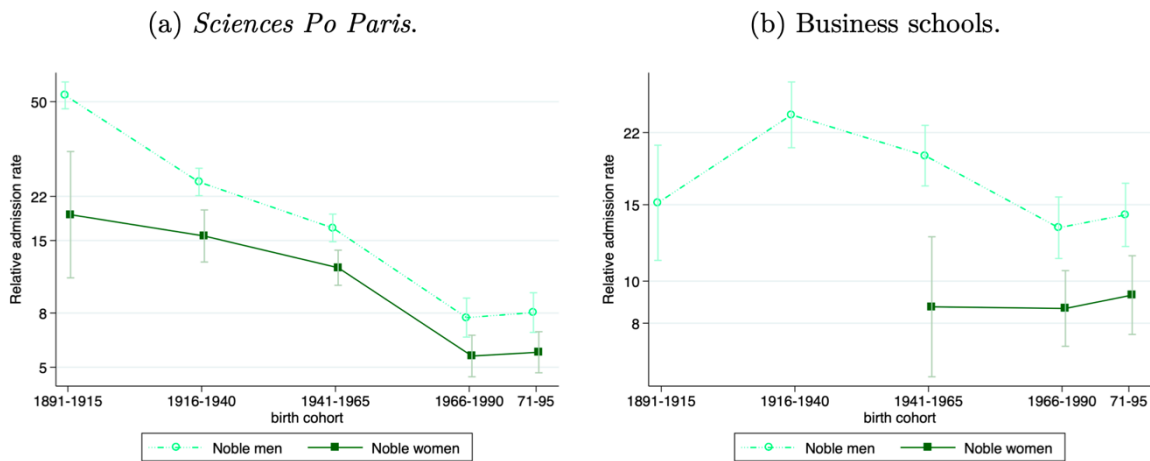
Notes: This figure presents gender differences, by birth cohort, in the relative admission rates of aristocratic men and women to *Sciences Po Paris* (panel a) and business schools (ESCP and ESSEC; panel b), based on surnames registered with the French Nobility Association. Brackets indicate 95% confidence intervals. The vertical axis is displayed on a logarithmic scale.

While prior research suggests that intergenerational transmission of elite education is not strongly gendered, and may even slightly favor daughters (Benveniste, 2023), these findings align with historical accounts of gendered educational strategies in noble families. Indeed, de Saint Martin (1993) observed that, even in the mid-20th century, noble families systematically sent their sons to high school, while it was often discouraged or seen as inappropriate for daughters. Thus, noble families have maintained their overrepresentation in elite education, but this advantage has historically been unevenly distributed between genders.

6. Discussion

This study highlights the remarkable persistence of noble families in France's elite higher education system, even two centuries after the Revolution. By combining two complementary surname-based indicators of noble lineage—bearing a particle and being registered in the *Association d'entraide de la noblesse française*—the analysis captures both a broad and a more rigorous definition of aristocratic status. Merging these two indicators with birth records accounts for demographic evolutions and allows to identify how admission rates for noble families have evolved relatively to the rest of the population.

Across cohorts born between 1891 and 1995, the former aristocracy accounted for roughly 0.5% of the French population but approximately 4% of *grandes écoles* graduates, reaching as high as 12% at *Sciences Po Paris* in the early 20th century. Despite a decline in their relative

advantage, descendants of authenticated aristocratic families born at the end of the 20th century remain nine times more likely than other families to attend the most prestigious *grandes écoles*. While the observed downward trend could be interpreted as evidence of democratization, it is primarily the result of a slight expansion in the number of seats in these institutions—albeit far less pronounced than the overall expansion of higher education—rather than a more fundamental erosion of admissions of descendants of aristocrats.

More generally, this suggests that historical privileges have not disappeared but have instead adapted to a modern educational landscape where prestigious degrees are increasingly essential for reaching elite positions. This dynamic can be understood through Bourdieu's concept of capital conversion. As argued by de Saint Martin (2015), noble families maintain their status through a combination of symbolic, cultural, social, and economic capital, that materialize in their titles, estates, networks, or wealth. While symbolic capital remains central to noble identity, its practical influence depends on its strategic transformation into forms of capital that hold contemporary value, particularly elite academic credentials.

Beyond education, kinship and homogamy remain critical mechanisms for the preservation of this aristocratic advantage. Historically, noble families have relied on dense and exclusive family networks to consolidate power, wealth, and influence across generations (Hálden, 2020). Kinship ties not only reinforce the returns on elite degrees through social capital (Kramarz and Skans, 2014) but also serve as a key mechanism for securing privileged positions in politics, business, and the administration (O'Brien, 2023). This interconnected web of elite families ensures resilience and continuity for the former nobility at the top of the social hierarchy.

The analysis also reveals a gendered pattern in the persistence of noble advantage, with noble sons exhibiting higher relative admission rates than noble daughters. As unions between graduates of the same institutions have become more prevalent (Goux and Maurin, 2003; Ford, 2020) and as elite education—in particular the *grandes écoles*—plays a growing role in fostering endogamous unions (Bouchet-Valat, 2014), the unequal presence of aristocratic men and women in these institutions underlines the continued role of exclusive social practices— such as rallyes—in maintaining aristocratic lineage, beyond educational assortative matching.

Future research could provide deeper insights into patterns of elite continuity, though it would require additional data collection. A more detailed differentiation within the nobility could

distinguish between long-established aristocratic lineages and families ennobled during the 18th or early 19th centuries. Additionally, examining variations between higher-ranking noble families (e.g., dukes and princes) and those with lesser titles could refine our understanding of the persistence of internal hierarchies within the aristocracy.

By integrating long-standing social hierarchies into the broader literature on educational inequality and social mobility, this study reveals how historical divisions continue to shape access to elite degrees. Rather than a simple decline in noble privilege, what emerges is a strategic reconfiguration, one in which aristocratic families adapt to changing institutional landscapes to maintain their presence in elite circles. These enduring vestiges of history, in turn, ensure their continued influence at the highest ranks of French society.

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Online Appendix

**A. Complementary figures**

Figure A.I – Long-term trends in the share of *baccalauréat* holders in France.
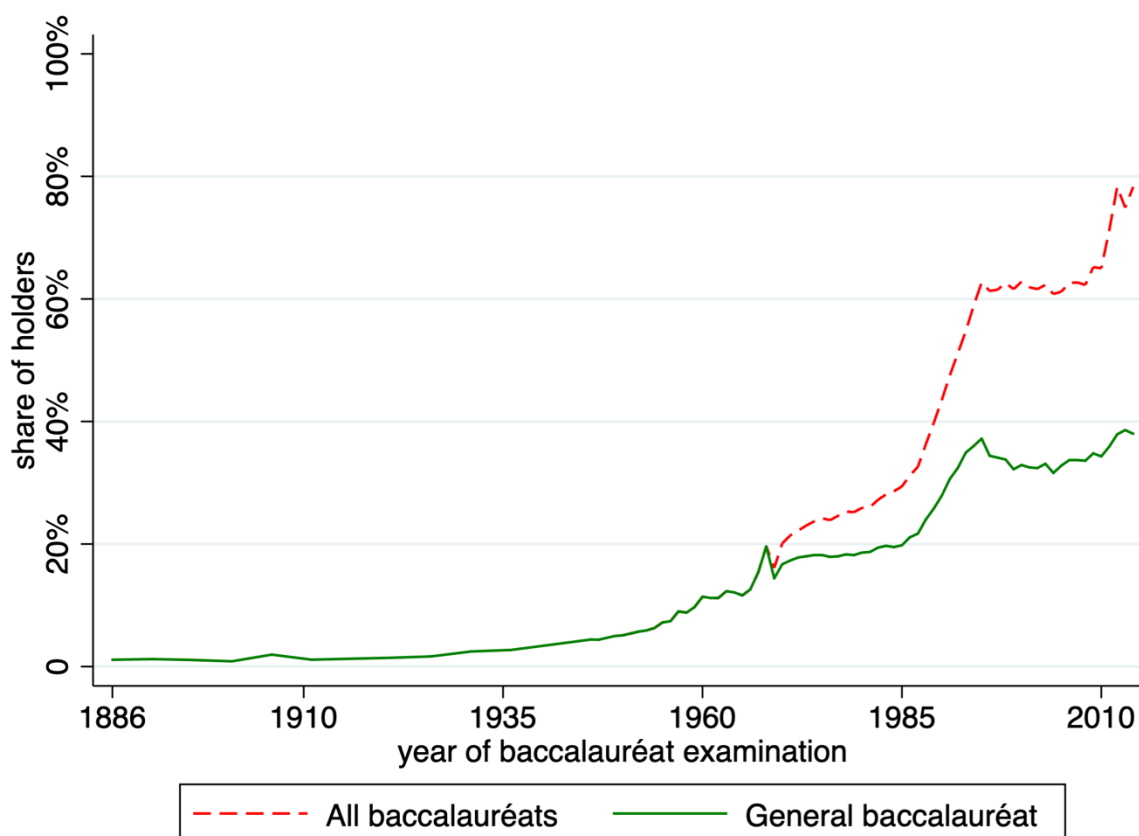
Notes: This figure illustrates the historical evolution of the proportion of the French population obtaining the *baccalauréat*—the national secondary school diploma—each year, illustrating the expansion of the pool of candidates eligible to apply to the *grandes écoles* preparatory classes, for which the *baccalauréat* is a prerequisite. While all types of *baccalauréat* formally grant access to the preparatory classes and the *concours*, in practice, fewer than 10% of admitted students hold a diploma other than the *baccalauréat general*, i.e., technological or professional degrees (Bonneau et al., 2021).

Sources: The Ministry of National Education—*L'évolution du nombre des bacheliers (1851-1979)*—until 1949; the Ministry of Higher Education and Research—*Les évolutions de l'enseignement supérieur depuis 50 ans*—from 1950 to 1969; data.gouv.fr—*La proportion de bacheliers dans une generation*—from 1970 onwards. The 1970 drop may be attributed to a change in data source.

Figure A.II – Annual number of graduates from 10 elite *grandes écoles* (1911–2010).
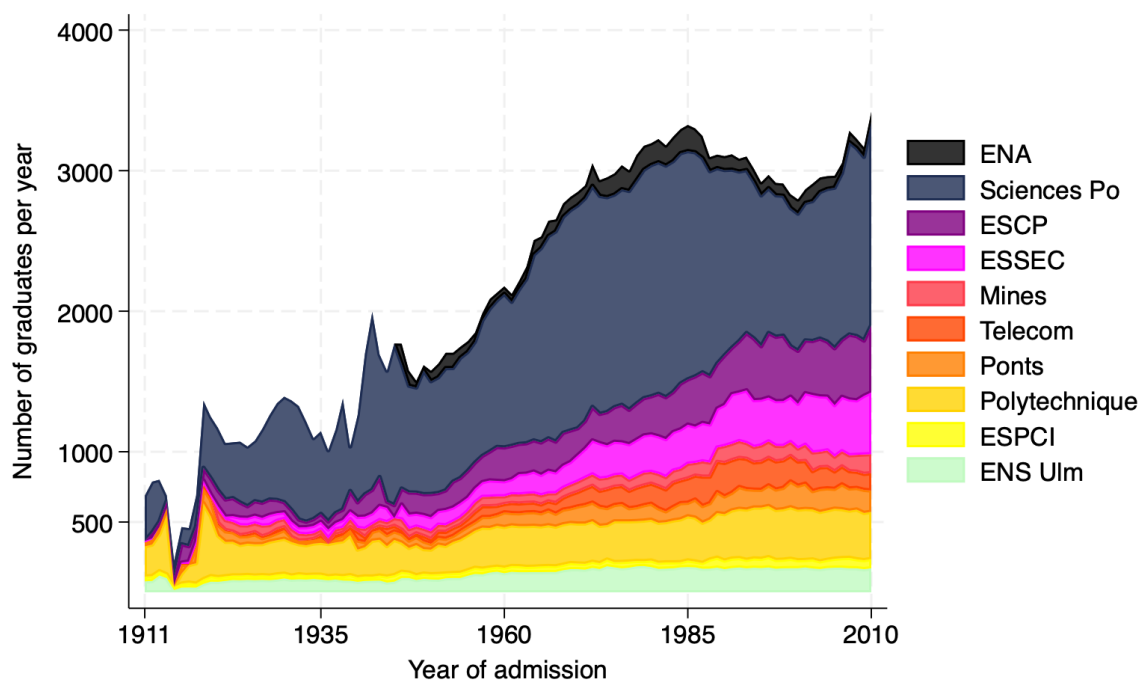
Notes: This figure reports the total number of graduates from each of the ten *grandes écoles* over time, with data stacked by institution to illustrate their relative contribution. The count includes only graduates with 'native' surnames, as defined in section 3. The figure complements Figure I, which expresses these numbers as a share of the overall population.

Source: GENES data (1911-2010).

Figure A.III – Distribution of surname frequencies in France (1891-1990).
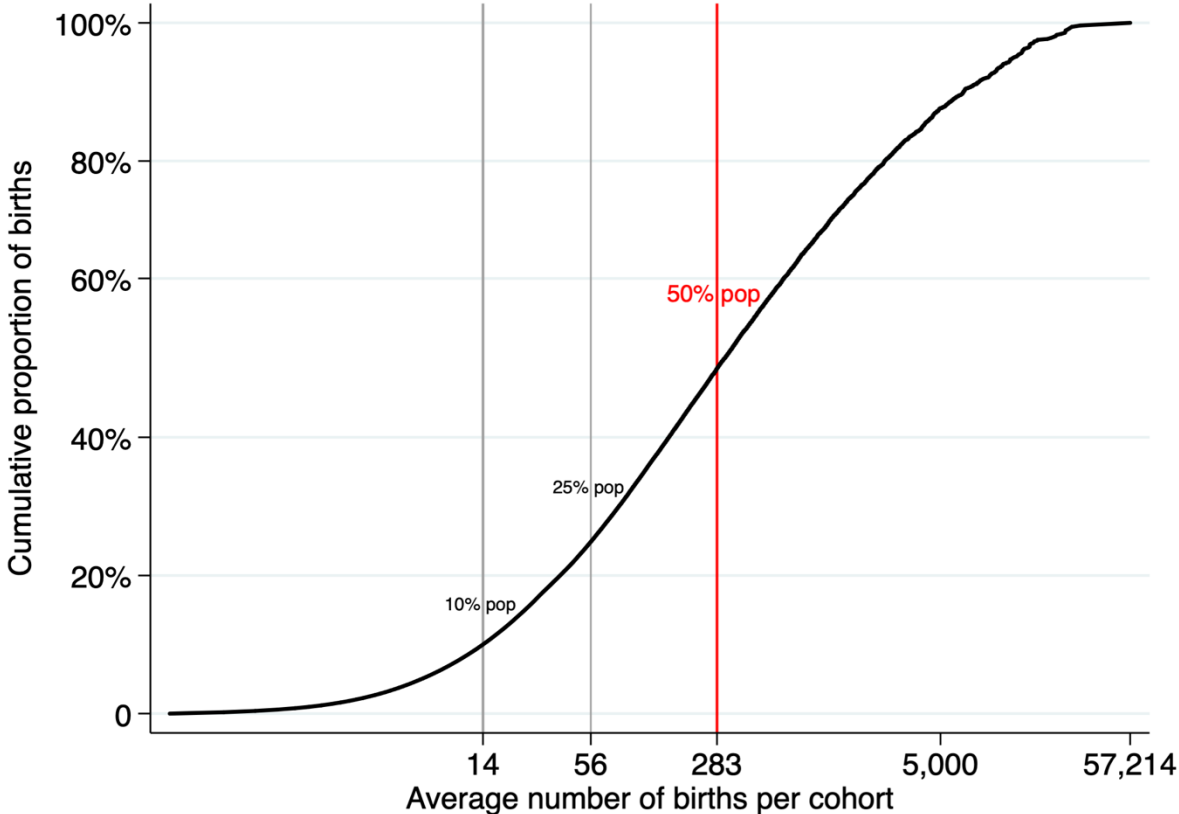
Notes: This figure represents the frequency distribution of surnames in France using birth records from 1891 to 1990, averaged over 25-year cohorts. The logarithmic scale on the horizontal axis highlights the predominance of rare surnames. While surname occurrences vary widely—from 0.5 births per cohort to 57,214 for the most common surname (*Martin*)—rare surnames account for a substantial share of the population. Specifically, surnames with fewer than 14 births per cohort represent 10% of all births, those with 56 or fewer births account for 25%, and half of all individuals born during the period had a surname with fewer than 283 births per cohort. These figures restrict to 'native' surnames. When including all surnames, the 10%, 25%, and 50% cutoffs correspond to even rarer names, with respective thresholds of 11, 48, and 246 births per cohort.

Source: *Fichiers des noms patronymiques de 1891 à 1990* (1999 edition).

B. Complementary tables

Table B.1 – Relative contribution of each school to the baseline sample of graduates by cohort.

Cohort	Polytech-nique	Ponts	ESPCI	Mines	Télécom	ESCP	ESSEC	ENS Ulm	ÉNA
1891-1915	45%	10%	6%	7%	2%	15%	7%	15%	0%
1916-1940	31%	7%	5%	7%	5%	19%	12%	13%	9%
1941-1965	22%	8%	3%	6%	9%	19%	17%	13%	11%
1966-1990	20%	9%	4%	7%	10%	23%	20%	10%	4%
1971-1995	21%	10%	4%	7%	9%	22%	19%	11%	4%

Notes: This table displays, for each cohort, the proportion of total graduates in the baseline sample of the nine *grandes écoles* who attended each institution. Though they are counted once when pooled, as some students pursued multiple degrees across different schools, they appear in more than one column, leading to row totals exceeding 100%.

Source: GENES data (1911-2015).

Table B.2 – Families of aristocratic lineage in the nine baseline *grandes écoles*: full sample including all surnames.

		Surnames with a particle				French Nobility Association register			
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Cohort	Global admiss. rate	Popula-tion share	Share among graduates	Group admiss. rate	Relative admiss. rate*	Popula-tion share	Share among graduates	Group admiss. rate	Relative admiss. rate*
1891-1915	0.13%	0.35%	3.9%	1.4%	**11.1** [10.0-12.4]	0.12%	1.7%	1.9%	**14.5** [12.3-17.1]
1916-1940	0.14%	0.43%	4.1%	1.4%	**9.8** [8.9-10.7]	0.13%	1.8%	1.9%	**13.5** [11.7-15.6]
1941-1965	0.17%	0.44%	3.3%	1.3%	**7.5** [6.9-8.1]	0.14%	1.6%	2.0%	**11.3** [10.0-12.8]
1966-1990	0.25%	0.49%	2.9%	1.5%	**5.6** [5.2-6.1]	0.17%	1.3%	2.1%	**7.5** [6.7-8.5]
1971-1995	0.22%	0.49%	2.9%	1.4%	**5.6** [5.2-6.1]	0.17%	1.4%	2.0%	**7.6** [6.7-8.6]

Notes: *Admiss.* stands for admission. This table presents the relative admission rates to the nine *grandes écoles* by birth cohort for two distinct groups: individuals with a surname containing a particle (columns 3–6) and families registered at the French Nobility Association (columns 7–10). The figures are based on the full sample and complement Table 3, which restricts the analysis to the 'native' population as defined in the paper. The table reports the *population share* of each group, along with the *share among graduates*, which indicates the proportion of noble descendants among *grande école* graduates. The *group admission rate* reflects the percentage of individuals of noble lineage admitted to at least one of these institutions. The *relative admission rate* compares this admission rate to that of individuals without noble lineage. Values in brackets represent 95% confidence intervals. Additionally, the *global admission rate* of the whole population is reported.

Table B.3 – Families of aristocratic lineage in the ten *grandes écoles*, including *Sciences Po*: 'native' surnames only and full sample.

					Native population				
		Surnames with a particle 14,363 surnames - 9,608 students				French Nobility Association register 2,486 surnames - 4,397 students			
(1) Cohort	(2) Global admiss. rate	(3) Popula-tion share	(4) Share among graduates	(5) Group admiss. rate	(6) Relative admiss. rate*	(7) Popula-tion share	(8) Share among graduates	(9) Group admiss. rate	(10) Relative admiss. rate*
1891-1915	0.23%	0.36%	7.8%	4.9%	**23.2** [21.6-25.0]	0.12%	3.5%	6.9%	**31.2** [27.9-34.9]
1916-1940	0.29%	0.44%	5.7%	3.7%	**13.5** [12.6-14.5]	0.14%	2.5%	5.2%	**18.7** [16.8-20.8]
1941-1965	0.37%	0.48%	4.2%	3.3%	**9.3** [8.7-9.9]	0.15%	2.0%	4.9%	**13.4** [12.1-14.9]
1966-1990	0.41%	0.59%	3.4%	2.4%	**5.9** [5.4-6.3]	0.20%	1.5%	3.1%	**7.7** [6.9-8.6]
1971-1995	0.38%	0.59%	3.5%	2.2%	**6.1** [5.6-6.5]	0.20%	1.6%	3.0%	**7.9** [7.1-8.9]
		Full population							
		Surnames with a particle 14,363 surnames - 9,608 students				French Nobility Association register 2,486 surnames - 4,397 students			
(1) Cohort	(2) Global admiss. rate	(3) Popula-tion share	(4) Share among graduates	(5) Group admiss. rate	(6) Relative admiss. rate*	(7) Popula-tion share	(8) Share among graduates	(9) Group admiss. rate	(10) Relative admiss. rate*
1891-1915	0.24%	0.35%	7.1%	4.9%	**20.0** [18.6-21.4]	0.12%	3.3%	6.9%	**27.1** [24.2-30.2]
1916-1940	0.30%	0.43%	5.1%	3.7%	**12.1** [11.3-12.9]	0.13%	2.3%	5.2%	**16.7** [15.0-18.6]
1941-1965	0.40%	0.44%	3.6%	3.3%	**8.0** [7.4-8.5]	0.14%	1.7%	4.8%	**11.5** [10.4-12.8]
1966-1990	0.44%	0.49%	2.6%	2.4%	**5.0** [4.6-5.3]	0.17%	1.2%	3.1%	**6.5** [5.8-7.3]
1971-1995	0.41%	0.49%	2.6%	2.2%	**5.0** [4.6-5.3]	0.17%	1.2%	3.0%	**6.5** [5.8-7.3]

Notes: *Admiss.* stands for admission. This table presents the relative admission rates by birth cohort to the full sample of ten *grandes écoles*—including *Sciences Po*—for two distinct groups: individuals with a surname containing a particle (columns 3–6) and families registered with the French Nobility Association (columns 7–10). The upper panel focuses on individuals with 'native' surnames, while the bottom panel includes the full sample of surnames. The total *number of surnames* and *graduates* over the full period is reported at the top of each panel. The table also reports the *population share* of each group, along with the *share among graduates*, which indicates the proportion of noble descendants among *grande école* graduates. The *group admission rate* reflects the percentage of individuals of noble lineage admitted to at least one of these institutions. The *relative admission rate* compares this admission rate to that of individuals without noble lineage. Values in brackets represent 95% confidence intervals. Additionally, the *global admission rate* of the whole population is reported.