Noble Lineage and Inequalities in Access to Elite Education

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Abstract – This paper examines the overrepresentation of students with aristocratic ancestry in elite higher education. It relies on a sample of 269,917 students from ten leading French *grandes écoles* between 1911 and 2015 and uses surname-based indicators of nobility. Individuals with aristocratic ancestry are between six and nine times more likely to enrol in one of these ten *grandes écoles* than the rest of the population, compared to eleven to fifteen times a century ago. While historically concentrated at Sciences Po Paris, their presence has become more evenly distributed across top-tier institutions, with business schools now showing the highest levels of overrepresentation. The analysis also shows that noble men are more overrepresented than noble women in these top-tier institutions, although this gap has narrowed. These results underscore that beyond the abolition of legal privileges, historical hierarchies persist. Future research could distinguish the extent to which this persistence may reflect the transmission of social, educational, cultural, or economic capital.

JEL: I23, I24, N34
Keywords: elite higher education, grandes écoles, nobility and aristocracy, history of inequality

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The French Revolution of 1789 abolished aristocratic privileges, including the formal prerogatives the nobility held in accessing universities under the *Ancien Régime* (French for "Old Regime," the prerevolutionary political and social system). In a radical break, these universities were dismantled in 1793, and several *grandes écoles* (elite French higher education institutions) were subsequently established to train the nation's future leaders. Universities were later reintroduced to provide broader access to higher education, but their coexistence with the highly selective grandes écoles has sustained a durable dual higher education system. Within this system, competitive entrance examinations for the grandes écoles, introduced at the end of the 18th century, became the cornerstone of selection and have remained largely unchanged ever since. Although designed to promote meritocratic access to elite positions, the persistence of this dual system raises the question of whether access to the most prestigious grandes écoles has truly been democratized, or whether historical hierarchies continue to shape educational opportunities. While aristocratic status no longer confers legal privileges, it is still recognized and officially registered by the French administration. Moreover, families from the former nobility continue to wield influence in various sectors of society (Harsanyi, 2005).

The expansion of access to higher education has not altered the role of elite institutions in social stratification. Their prestigious diplomas serve as entry points to dominant social and economic positions in the labour market (Hoekstra, 2009; Anelli, 2020; Bataille & Falcon, 2022), yet admissions are marked by substantial inequalities related to social and economic origin (Clark & Cummins, 2014; Chetty *et al.*, 2020). In France, the grandes écoles have been shown to play a central role in elite reproduction. Covering the periods 1966-1969 and 1984-1985, Bourdieu (1989) highlighted the disparities in economic and cultural capital among students at the most selective grandes écoles, at other grandes écoles, and at universities. Subsequent empirical studies have extended this analysis over multiple decades in the 20th century: Euriat & Thélot (1995) and Albouy & Wanecq (2003) examined admissions to 4 and 19 elite grandes écoles, respectively, while Falcon & Bataille (2018) used a broader sample drawn from the French Labour Force Survey. All three studies found substantial, though declining, social inequalities in access to these institutions. More recent research based on administrative data from 2006-2017 (Bonneau *et al.*, 2021), as well as an intergenerational analysis covering five generations of grandes écoles students (Benveniste, 2023), confirms the persistence of strong inequalities in access. While these inequalities have been well documented with respect to parental occupation and education, those based on aristocratic lineage have received little attention.

In *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, Bourdieu (1989) draws an explicit parallel between the modern elite and the nobility of the Ancien Régime and argues that the grandes écoles function as a new mechanism for legitimizing power.[1] Beyond this theoretical parallel, a body of research has examined how former European aristocracies have navigated major social and economic transformations. These studies show that their descendants continue to be overrepresented among the elites (Kuiper *et al.*, 2015). Although noble families partially lost their economic dominance, they remained disproportionately represented among the largest inheritances in Paris during the early 20th century (Piketty, 2020). In the Netherlands, Dronkers (2003) explained that a high degree of homogamy helped preserve the prominence of noble families, reflected in their continued access to elite positions in business and politics. In France, descendants of noble families have remained overrepresented in administrative, political, and economic elites (Birnbaum *et al.*, 1978), as well as in prestigious schools and professions (Coulmont, 2019). Aristocratic families also strategically concentrated in specific schools that fostered exclusive social circles and reinforced homogamy (de Saint-Martin, 1993). This contributed to consolidating 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 official recognition by the French State.

Public fascination with noble tradition and heritage persists in both academic research and cultural representations, such as the television series *Downton Abbey*, and is embedded in classical literature, for example in the work of Marcel Proust. This reflects a lasting curiosity

1. As Bourdieu puts it: "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" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1993).

and interest in the resilience and longevity of historical elites. Aristocratic identity is indeed deeply rooted in heredity and marked by the transmission of ancestral memory, shaped by glorified narratives of lineage. This heritage imposes ideals of exemplarity and obligation (*noblesse oblige*), fostering both a pursuit of excellence and a fear of decline (de Saint-Martin, 1993; Mension-Rigau, 2015). Yet this aspiration for continuity and immutability contrasts with modern egalitarian ideals. This tension raises a key question: Does the enduring presence of noble families in elite spheres also extend to higher education and its most prestigious credentials?

This article examines the evolution of the overrepresentation of aristocrats in France's most prestigious grandes écoles, using two data sources. The first is a self-constructed dataset of 269,917 elite students, providing exhaustive coverage of individuals admitted between 1911 and 2015 to ten of the most selective grandes écoles, representing 0.39% of the French population over the period.[2] The second source is an administrative one, which reports the number of births associated with each surname in France across different cohorts. The combination of the two sources enables the calculation of admission rates to elite graduate schools, distinguishing between individuals from former noble families and the rest of the population.[3] Two surname-based indicators of noble lineage are used: (1) surnames containing a particle and (2) surnames belonging to a list of family names registered with the Association d'entraide de la Noblesse Française (ANF; Association for Mutual Assistance of the French Nobility), an organization dedicated to verifying noble lineage and fostering aristocratic networks.

The findings reveal a strong, but declining, overrepresentation 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 top-tier grandes écoles. Their overrepresentation gradually declined to 14 times (1916-1940), then 12 (1941-1965), and eventually to 9 (1966-1990), therefore remaining substantial two centuries after the French Revolution. While they were the most overrepresented at Sciences Po Paris in the early 20th century (up to fifty times), their highest presence is now observed in business schools (up to twelve times). Moreover, aristocratic families appear to prioritize sons over daughters, as noble men are more overrepresented than women in the ten grandes écoles of our study.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 1 provides historical background on the grandes écoles and the French nobility. Section 2 describes the data. Section 3 details the empirical strategy, explaining the use of surname-based indicators and the relative admission rate as a measure of inequality. Section 4 presents and discusses the results, then we conclude.

1. Institutional Background

1.1. The French Grandes Écoles

Proclaiming the equality of rights, the French Revolution of 1789 overthrew a society in which social positions were largely determined by birth. Closely tied to religious congregations (through estate ownership) and the nobility, who enjoyed legal prerogatives in admissions, universities of the Ancien Régime were dismantled by the Convention nationale in 1793. They were replaced by a new system of elite educational institutions: the grandes écoles. While some of these elite graduate schools – such as the École nationale des ponts et chaussées and École des Mines – predated the Revolution, 1794 marked the foundation of two emblematic schools: École Polytechnique and École Normale Supérieure. In its first year, École Polytechnique introduced a competitive entrance examination system known as the *concours*, which was subsequently widely adopted across the grandes écoles and remains their hallmark (Belhoste, 2002).

Admission to these institutions requires an intensive preparatory program,[4] followed by

2. A detailed description of the dataset is provided in Section 2. While France has approximately 500 grandes écoles, this study focuses on a select group of 10 institutions that have historically played a central role in shaping the French elite: École Polytechnique, ENA, ENS Ulm, ESCP, ESPCI Paris, ESSEC, Mines Paris, Ponts et Chaussées, Sciences Po Paris, and Télécom Paris. As noted in Section 2, the baseline analysis excludes Sciences Po, which alone accounts for half of all students in the sample.

3. Like de Saint-Martin (1993) and Coulmont (2019), this study uses surnames as indicators of aristocratic lineage. Their work provided insights into the presence of noble descendants in grandes écoles by calculating their share within the student body. The present work extends this approach by explicitly accounting for the demographic weight of the nobility in the national population, allowing to compute admission rates for individuals from former noble families relative to those of the rest of the population.

4. At the end of high school, French students take the baccalauréat*, the national secondary school diploma that determines access to post-secondary education. Post-secondary education is traditionally divided between non-selective university tracks and selective tracks. Among the latter, the most prestigious 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.*

a two-stage concours. The initial anonymous written examinations are followed by oral evaluations for the candidates ranked highest in the first stage. Unlike universities, the grandes écoles admit only a limited number of students through this selection process and are thus selective. Explicitly designed to train the country's future ruling class and specializing in engineering, business, and the humanities, the grandes écoles have long constituted the royal road to high-level administrative, political, and business careers (Suleiman, 1978; Dudouet & 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 substantial expansion of tertiary education. In contrast, top-tier graduate schools retained their elite status and maintained comparatively strict selectivity (Gurgand & Maurin, 2007). As illustrated in Figure I, the share of the population admitted into the top-tier grandes écoles has increased only slightly, especially when compared to the surge in overall tertiary education enrollment rates and the share of *baccalauréat* holders (see Online Appendix Figure S-I, link of the Online Appendix at the end of the article).

The second major structural transformation of education during the 20th century was the gradual integration of women into higher education, including in the grandes écoles. Historically, these institutions were highly male-dominated, with women almost entirely excluded. The first breakthrough occurred during World War I, when women were admitted to Sciences Po Paris, though under stricter conditions than men. Progress stalled during the interwar period, but the granting of voting rights to women in 1945 coincided with the beginning of a gradual removal of gender barriers in elite education. The École nationale d'administration (ENA) admitted women from its foundation in 1945, but female students remained a tiny minority, rarely exceeding 10% before the 1970s. A decisive shift came in the 1970s, notably when École Polytechnique opened its doors to female students in 1972. It initiated a rapid rise in female representation at business schools and Sciences Po Paris, although progress in engineering schools remained slower. A unique case is the École Normale Supérieure (ENS), which maintained separate schools for men and women until their 1985 merger, a change that sharply reduced the number of women admitted in math-intensive fields (Dousset & Thebault, 2025). Although women now outperform men and are overrepresented in higher education overall, the slow feminization of the French elite graduate schools reflects persistent gender disparities in scientific fields, where women remain significantly underrepresented (Kahn & Ginter, 2017).

1.2. The French Aristocracy

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 Ancien Régime aristocrats, who enjoyed legal prerogatives, including privileged access to educational institutions. The very notion of "aristocracy," derived from the Greek *aristos* (excellence) and *kratos* (power), originally referred to government by the most capable rather than to hereditary privilege. In ancient Athens and Rome, aristocratic status was initially linked to intellectual, political, or military merit, but it gradually became entrenched through hereditary transmission. Later European aristocracies, still grounded in landownership and military service, solidified 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 during 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, though it was not entirely impermeable. Demographic, economic, and political changes created opportunities for both upward and downward mobility over time. The main avenue to noble upward mobility, *anoblissement* (formal ennoblement of commoners), remained rare and required significant wealth or distinguished military or administrative service, as well as royal approval (Chaussinand-Nogaret, 1976; Defauconpret, 1999). Maintaining noble status also required strict adherence to codes of conduct: engaging in activities or professions deemed dishonourable could lead to the loss of noble status (*dérogeance*).

The French nobility was far from homogeneous. A fundamental difference separated the *noblesse d'épée* (nobility of the sword), whose lineage traced back to medieval chivalry and military leadership, from the *noblesse de robe*

(nobility of the robe), which emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries through the venality of offices – namely, the hereditary or financial acquisition of high-ranking legal and administrative roles (Doyle, 1996). Further internal stratifications divided the nobility, due to considerable variation in wealth and political influence. Some families held ducal or princely titles, while others were minor landowners with limited privileges (Defauconpret, 1999). Geographic differences were particularly notable: Parisian aristocrats often held high court positions, whereas provincial nobles typically exercised more modest local authority (Chaussinand-Nogaret, 1976).

Estimating the number of nobles at the outset of the French Revolution is difficult due to the absence of official records, but Chaussinand-Nogaret (1976) suggests a plausible figure of 0.5% of the population, with estimates ranging from 0.3% to 1.2% (Mension-Rigau, 2015). Although wealth varied considerably among noble families, the aristocracy as a whole controlled an estimated 25% of French land before 1789 (Beck, 1981). The Revolution led to the confiscation of some estates, but its primary impact was political rather than economic. Beck (1981) argues that the gradual decline in noble wealth was due less to revolutionary expropriation than to the aristocracy's reluctance to engage with the economic transformations brought by the Industrial Revolution. As industry and commerce became increasingly central to wealth creation, noble families lost prominence in the emerging economic order. While they retained substantial landholdings throughout the 19th century, they could no longer rely solely on rents and gradually entered the workforce, including in sectors once deemed dishonourable.

In the 19th century, successive regimes – the First Empire, the Restoration, and later the Second Empire – briefly reinstated noble titles in an effort to integrate both the traditional aristocracy and newly ennobled military and administrative elites. These titles were purely honorific, and although recognized by the Association d'entraide de la Noblesse Française, their legitimacy as markers of noble status remains contested (Mension-Rigau, 2019). In any case, relatively few such titles were granted, and under Charles X in the 1820s, the traditional aristocracy was deliberately reinstated at the centre of political and social life. As a result, most families of noble origin can trace their aristocratic lineage back to at least the 18th century (de Waresquiel, 2005).

The second half of the 19th century is often portrayed as a rupture, with modernization leading to the decline of the nobility as a new society emerged. However, Mayer (1981) argues that this narrative overlooks important social continuities. He contends that aristocratic families retained substantial political and economic power across Europe during this period, largely unchallenged by the rising bourgeoisie. This persistence, he suggests, was due to the continued dominance of agriculture, which delayed the disruptive effects of industrial capitalism on existing social hierarchies. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that France, having abandoned monarchy earlier than its neighbours, experienced a more pronounced decline in noble influence.[5]

At the beginning of the 20th century, although noble families lost some of their economic dominance, many retained significant real estate holdings and, for example, remained five times overrepresented among the largest Parisian inheritances (Piketty, 2020). The First World War further affected their wealth through destruction and a reshuffling of economic capital, yet these aristocratic families remained among the wealthiest in European societies (Kuiper, 2015). Their overrepresentation in the military 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 private secondary school, bore aristocratic surnames. In a subsample of 323 individuals listed in the *Who's Who in France*, noble names were also overrepresented in select higher education institutions such as ENA, 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 graduates from prestigious schools. Similar patterns can

5. Noble titles and the possibility of ennoblement persist in several parliamentary monarchies – such as Spain, Belgium, and the United Kingdom – where the sovereign retains the prerogative to grant peerages.

be observed across Europe.[6] Overall, the loss of institutional prerogatives did not put an end to either the sociological significance of the aristocracy or its mystique in the collective imagination. Despite profound social and economic transformations, many noble families adapted to these new societies, preserving their influence well into the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

A crucial way in which aristocratic families have preserved and reinforced their status is through matrimonial strategies (Elias, 1985). Assortative marriages maintain social exclusivity and ensure the intergenerational transmission of noble identity (Wagner, 2008). This highly structured practice has deep historical roots. To counter their decline, noble families also established national organizations to defend their collective interests. In France, the Association d'entraide de la Noblesse Française (ANF), founded in 1932, quickly became a key institution for maintaining elite networks, preserving social capital, and fostering cohesion. As in the Netherlands (Dronkers, 2003), de Saint-Martin (1993) shows that 64% of ANF-registered men married women with noble lineage. This high degree of endogamy reflects a strategic desire to preserve the *family name* across generations (de Saint-Martin, 1993). This contributes to preserving a distinct noble identity and to sustaining the collective perception of an enduring aristocracy (Harsanyi, 2005).

Rooted in the memory of illustrious ancestors – often depicted in portraits displayed in family homes or castles – and of their role in national history, this heritage fosters a sense of exemplarity and a duty to uphold the family name (Mension-Rigau, 2019). It manifests in adherence to traditional customs, the preservation of ancestral values, and the transmission of social rituals, norms, and distinctive cultural practices (Mension-Rigau, 2015, 2019). The French State also contributes to the preservation of this identity through ongoing recognition and protection of noble titles. Once authenticated by the Direction des Affaires civiles et du Sceau (Civil affairs and Seal directorate) of the Ministry of Justice, these titles remain legally attached to surnames and may still appear in official documents and administrative records.

2. Data

This study draws on two main types of data: (1) nominative lists of students from French elite schools and (2) aggregated data providing surname distributions in France by cohort of birth.

The Grandes Écoles Nominative Elite Sample (GENES) is a dataset compiled by the author from lists provided by alumni associations and from archival sources held by the schools and their supervisory bodies. It comprehensively covers students from ten grandes écoles between 1911 and 2015, totalling 287,724 student records corresponding to 269,917 unique individuals. The dataset covers students who effectively enrolled in these institutions, regardless of degree completion; dropout rates in the grandes écoles have historically been extremely low (Suleiman, 1979). Accordingly, references to admission throughout the article refer to effective enrolment rather than to graduation. The ten institutions covered have historically been – and continue to be – among the most prestigious in France, serving as pathways to elite careers in both the public and private sectors (Suleiman, 1978; Dudouet & Vion, 2024). The sample includes École Nationale d'Administration (ENA), founded in 1946 to train senior civil servants; École Normale Supérieure (ENS Ulm), a leading institution for advanced research training in the humanities and sciences; five public engineering schools – ESPCI Paris, École Polytechnique, École des Ponts et Chaussées, Télécom Paris, and Mines Paris; and two business schools – ESSEC and ESCP.[7] Although these schools differ in nature, Bourdieu (1989) describes them as part of an interconnected system of elite education, which justifies their joint analysis in most empirical studies (e.g., Albouy & Wanecq, 2003; Bonneau *et al.*, 2021).

Details on the collection and processing of the GENES dataset are provided in Benveniste (2021). Each observation includes the student's school, its entry year, surname and first names, with gender information available for one third of the sample. For the remaining two thirds, gender was imputed using a gender propensity score derived from national birth records by

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6. In Austria and Sweden, aristocratic families gradually shifted from careers in diplomacy and military service to business and finance (Kuiper et al.*, 2015). In the more decentralized context of Switzerland, the importance of patrician families declined throughout the first half of the 20th century, although they retained some influence in specific spheres (Benz* et al.*, 2024). Political shocks further destabilized elite status across Europe. While Russian nobility faced mass executions or expropriation under the Soviet regime, Italian aristocrats navigated the fascist regime with relative success, and Polish noble families maintained their influence by serving in the communist government (Kuiper* et al.*, 2015). In Hungary, World War II and the Nazi occupation severely weakened the nobility's political and economic roles, yet noble descendants remain overrepresented in high-level socio-professional positions (Kézdy, 2019).*

7. 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 omissions, its coverage closely matches the set of top-tier grandes écoles analysed in previous studies, including Suleiman (1978), Bourdieu (1989), and Bonneau et al. *(2021).*

first name. To improve data accuracy for first and last names, fuzzy matching was applied to correct misspellings and abbreviations sometimes used in school records. This technique computes similarity scores between character strings to identify minor spelling variants. To avoid double-counting, individuals who attended several grandes écoles were identified and consolidated. Birth years were imputed for all individuals based on the age of enrolment of 20 in the grandes écoles.[8] To ensure consistency over time, the analysis focuses on standard curricula, excluding PhDs, MBAs, executive and specialized master programs, as well as international cycles at ENA.

Table 1 presents summary statistics for each school, including coverage years, total number of students, and average annual students. Figure I shows the evolution of the share of the national population enrolled in these elite institutions over time, highlighting notable fluctuations, particularly around wartime periods. After World War I, these shares rose, especially for students from business schools and from Sciences Po Paris. However, the most striking pattern is the relatively slow increase of the proportion of the population enrolled in these institutions, particularly in contrast to the substantial expansion of both secondary and higher education throughout the 20th century (see Online Appendix Figure S-I for a comparison with the share of *baccalauréat* graduates). Given that Sciences Po Paris accounts for nearly half of the students in the GENES dataset, 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 full ten-school sample.

The second key data source is the *Fichiers des noms patronymiques de 1891 à 1990* (1999 edition), a file of surnames collected from birth certificates, compiled by the Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (INSEE; French National Statistical Institute). The dataset reports 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 by assigning to each surname the same number of births as observed in the 1966-1990 cohort, under the assumption that the surname birth distribution remained unchanged over the five-year extension.

This file of surnames allows us to calculate the proportion in the population of the groups of people with noble and non-noble surnames. Combining it with the nominative school registers makes it possible to estimate, for each birth cohort, the admission rates of each group in the grandes écoles. A key challenge in this long-term analysis is ensuring comparability in estimating population sizes of both nobles and commoners across birth cohorts.

Because birth certificates record only births in France, they exclude foreign-born individuals who migrate to France during childhood, as well as international students enrolling directly from abroad, whose numbers have increased in recent decades. As these groups overwhelmingly bear non-noble surnames, the measurement error in

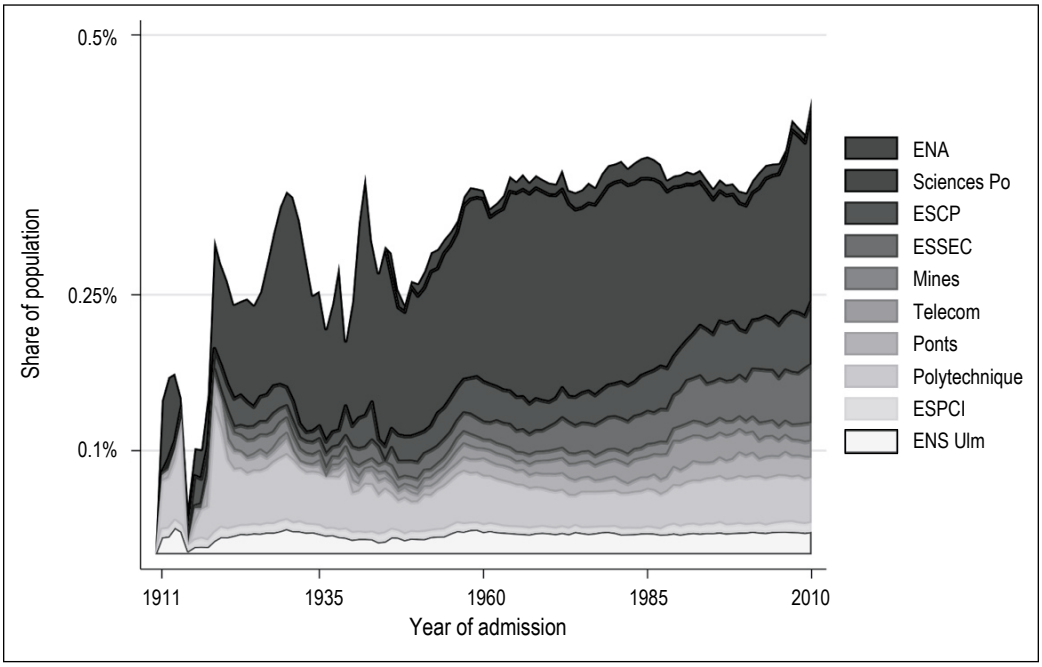
8. For ENA, a higher age of enrolment (26) was used, reflecting the later stage at which students enter this school on average. In most cases, ENA students had previously studied in another school in the sample; their birth year was therefore inferred from the entry year into that earlier institution. When individuals appear in multiple schools, the birth year is inferred from the earliest enrolment observed.

Table 1 – **GENES dataset for 10 prestigious grandes écoles**

Category	Grandes écoles	Data coverage period	Total number of students	Average annual number of students
Administration 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
	Polytechnique	1911-2013	32,511	319
	Ponts et Chaussées	1911-2014	12,641	120
	Télécom ParisTech	1911-2012	11,765	120
	Mines ParisTech	1921-2012	8,476	91
Business	ESSEC	1911-2010	20,267	199
	ESCP Europe	1911-2011	28,394	278

Source: GENES data (1911-2015).

Figure I – **Share of the French population admitted to 10 elite grandes écoles (1911-2010)**



Note: Only graduates with native surnames, as defined in Section 2, are included. Annual counts are divided by the national birth cohort corresponding to the admission year. Online Appendix Figure S-II shows the raw annual number of enrolees by grande école.
Source: GENES data (1911-2010); *Statistiques de l'état civil* (population records), INSEE.

their births would lead to an undercount of the non-noble population, mechanically inflating non-noble admission rates and biasing comparisons between nobles and non-nobles over time. This bias would therefore tend to understate the overrepresentation of nobles relative to non-nobles.

To address this potential issue and ensure a consistent measure of population sizes of both groups over time, the baseline analysis restricts the sample to a stable set of surnames that were present in France at the start of the 20th century, hereafter referred to as "native" surnames.[9] Consistent with established practice in prior surname-based studies (Dupâquier & Kessler, 1992), this restriction limits distortions caused by missing birth records for foreign-born individuals, who are rarely classified as nobles. A robustness analysis includes all surnames to assess the sensitivity of results to this sample restriction.

The study includes individuals born between 1891 and 1995. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics on births and students at both the nine grandes écoles of the baseline sample and at Sciences Po Paris, which is analysed separately due to its substantial weight. In total, 107,618 Sciences Po students and 110,340 students from the baseline schools have native surnames. Each group represents approximately 0.17% of the native French population over the period.

3. Empirical Strategy

This section describes the surname-based identification of noble lineage and introduces the relative admission rate (RAR) as a measure of inequality in access to the grandes écoles.

3.1. 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 scarce. Surname-based methods have been widely used in intergenerational mobility research (Santavirta & Stuhler, 2024), but they also apply to a broader range of questions.[10] These approaches rely on the premise that surnames act as stable family identifiers and are therefore

9. Following Benveniste (2021), in addition to surnames absent at the beginning of the period we also exclude surnames exhibiting a marked increase in frequency over time. These exclusions are applied to both the birth and student data. Although this procedure primarily targets first-generation migration, surnames already introduced through migration continue to enter the population across successive cohorts. Consequently, restricting the analysis to a stable set of surnames also excludes some second- and later-generation immigrants born in France, who cannot be reliably distinguished from first-generation migrants using surname data alone. Table 2 shows the prevalence of native names in the data.

10. Historians, demographers, and economists have long relied on nominative sources. For example, Galton & Watson (1875) studied surname attrition as a marker of aristocratic decline over a century ago, while Stone (1971) highlighted how such data illuminate the interactions and social networks of historical figures.

Table 2 – **Number of births and grandes écoles students by cohort**

	All cohorts		Cohorts				
	Number of surnames	Total number of births	Births 1891-1915	Births 1916-1940	Births 1941-1965	Births 1966-1990	
All population							
Births	807,229	65,423,121	10,686,923	14,149,274	20,099,847	20,487,077	
Native births	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	
Nine baseline grandes écoles							
	Number of surnames	Total number of students	Students cohort 1891-1915	Students cohort 1916-1940	Students cohort 1941-1965	Students cohort 1966-1990	Students pseudo-cohort 1971-1995
Students	63,155	133,363	13,962	20,331	36,287	57,437	53,407
Native students	48,073	110,340	13,291	19,202	31,920	42,438	38,240
Share of native (%)	76	83	95	94	88	74	72
Share of women (%)		20	6	6	18	32	33
Top educ (%)		0.17	0.13	0.14	0.17	0.25	0.22
Sciences Po Paris							
Students	77,496	145,517	14,364	26,273	52,752	45,025	43,346
Native students	49,956	107,618	11,088	21,508	39,993	30,837	28,592
Share of native (%)	64	74	77	82	76	68	66
Share of women (%)		35	6	20	36	51	53
Top educ (%)		0.17	0.10	0.16	0.21	0.18	0.15

Note: The top panel records births; the two lower panels record students from the nine grandes écoles and from Sciences Po Paris. For individuals bearing a native surname, the table also reports the proportion of the total population that enrolled in the nine baseline grandes écoles as well as in Sciences Po Paris (Top educ). Because some individuals attended several grandes écoles, the sum of students from both Sciences Po Paris and at least one of the nine grandes écoles exceeds the total number of unique individuals reported (269,917 overall; 210,438 for native surnames). Besides, some students may appear in both the 1966-1990 cohort and the 1971-1995 pseudo-cohort.
Source: *Fichiers des noms patronymiques de 1891 à 1990 (1999 edition)*, INSEE; GENES data (1911-2015).

not randomly distributed across socioeconomic characteristics. While surnames have no causal effect on admission to elite schools, they encapsulate valuable information about family histories and social backgrounds.

Their usefulness stems from their intergenerational transmission. In France, surnames have been patrilineally inherited since the 12th century, with standardized spelling established by 1870. Although a law adopted in 2003 now allows children to inherit their mother's surname, surnames provide a reliable paternal link across generations for individuals born between 1891 and 1995, which is the focus of this study.[11] One limitation of this approach lies in individuals of mixed noble–commoner ancestry being classified as noble only when their paternal line is noble. This results in a measurement error, albeit one that is likely to be small, given the persistence of high levels of endogamy within the French nobility until the early 1990s (de Saint-Martin, 1993). As discussed in Section 1, noble marriages were carefully managed to preserve family name and status.

This study identifies individuals of noble descent using two complementary approaches. The first method includes all bearers of surnames containing a particle, which is commonly associated with aristocratic lineage.[12] However, while most noble surnames include a particle, not all surnames with a particle correspond to noble lineages. The second method draws on the *Table des familles* compiled by 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 covers a substantial share of the French nobility and provides a more precise identification of noble lineage.

The ANF list poses a challenge in that some registered surnames are also widespread in the general population, because only certain family

11. Law No. 2003-516 of 18 June 2003 on the transmission of surnames.
12. This includes all surnames containing the particles d', de, du, *or* des.

branches bearing these names are of aristocratic origin. Such surnames would not precisely identify noble lineage. For example, listed surnames such as Mercier, Fabre, Leblanc, Michaud, Lejeune, and Duhamel together account for more than 50,000 births per 25-year cohort, only a fraction of which have a noble lineage. Because of their large demographic weight, retaining these surnames would contribute to considering a large number of people who are not of aristocratic origin as being so. To limit this dilution effect, the analysis retains only surnames whose number of births per cohort falls within two standard deviations of the mean in the ANF list. 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. As a result, 53 surnames are excluded from the initial set of 2,539 ANF surnames, leaving 2,486 surnames in our final ANF-registered sample.

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 list, accounting 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 – but not all – aristocratic families bear a particle, whereas not all bearers of a particle are of noble origin (see Beck, 1981 or Coulmont, 2019, who refers to the latter as "nobility of appearance"). Particle-based identification therefore provides a convenient yet imperfect proxy for noble lineage. By misclassifying some non-nobles as nobles, this measurement error overstates the number of noble descendants and likely understates noble overrepresentation in elite graduate schools. By contrast, ANF registration is selective: not all noble families are registered, though the association states that it covers more than two-thirds of the nobility. This measure both understates the total number of noble descendants in the population while potentially overstating the degree of noble overrepresentation in elite graduate schools. Using both definitions allows us to bound empirically the proportion of noble descendants in the whole population and among students at the grandes écoles.

3.2. Relative Admission Rates

To quantify inequalities in access to elite higher education, we use the relative admission rate (RAR), a simple measure that, in our case, is closely related to an odds ratio but easier to interpret.[13] For a given school or set of schools and cohort c, the RAR compares the admission rate ($AR_{c,N}$) of noble descendants (N) to that ($AR_{c,N'}$) of the rest of the population (N'):

$$RAR_c = \frac{AR_{c,N}}{AR_{c,N'}} = \frac{S_{c,N} / B_{c,N}}{S_{c,N'} / B_{c,N'}},$$

where the admission rate of descendants of the nobility is defined as the number of noble students in the grandes écoles in cohort c ($S_{c,N}$) divided by the number of noble births in the same cohort ($B_{c,N}$). The same calculation applies to the population of non-nobles (N'). The rate will alternatively be calculated for the ten grandes écoles of the sample, the nine grandes écoles in the baseline, a single grande école, or specific subsets such as business schools. A value of RAR equal to 1 indicates that nobles and commoners have comparable admission rates. A value above 1 (resp. below 1) indicates that nobles have higher (resp. lower) admission rates than commoners.

Although relative admission rates can be computed directly, we estimate them using log-binomial models to obtain confidence intervals. For each cohort c, we estimate the probability of admission to a grande école using the following specification:

$$\log\left[P\left(GE = 1|c, N\right)\right] = \alpha_c + \beta_c N$$

where GE is a dummy equal to 1 for admission to the grandes écoles, and N is a dummy for noble lineage, defined either by a surname with a particle or a surname registered with the ANF. The exponentiated β_c coefficient provides the relative admission rate of cohort c.

4. Results

This section shows that, despite a gradual decline, noble families have remained highly overrepresented in France's most prestigious grandes écoles throughout the past century. Table 3 reports the relative admission rates (RAR) of descendants of noble families to the nine grandes écoles in the baseline sample (i.e., excluding Sciences Po Paris) across cohorts. Results are presented separately for both identifications of noble lineage: surnames with a particle and those registered with the ANF.

13. Empirical studies often use the odds ratio as an indicator of inequality, calculated as $\frac{p/(1-p)}{p'(1-p')}$*, where* p *and* p' *represent the probabilities of admission for two groups, for example. The RAR is simpler, equal to* $\frac{p}{p'}$*. Because admission rates to the then grandes écoles we consider are very low, both measures yield very similar results; the RAR nevertheless offers a simpler interpretation.*

The admission rate to these elite schools among the overall French population ranges from 0.13% to 0.25% depending on the cohort (column 2). Columns 3 and 7 show the population: ANF-registered noble individuals are about three times less numerous than individuals with a particle in their surname. Using either indicator of nobility, the share of individuals from noble families in the French population increased over the course of the 20th century, reflecting higher fertility among noble families. For instance, the proportion of natives bearing a surname with a particle rose from 1 in 278 in the 1891-1915 cohort (0.36 %) to 1 in 170 in the 1966-1990 cohort (0.59%).[14,15]

Columns 4 and 8 show that the share of people from noble families among admitted students has remained quite stable over the period: around 4% of admitted students bear a surname with a particle, and just under 2% belong to ANF-registered noble families. Their admission rates to elite French graduate schools also remained largely unchanged (columns 5 and 9), while overall admission rates increased (column 2). Over the full 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 the stability of the admission rate for nobles and the increase for the general population, the relative admission rate of noble families has declined over time. A century after the French Revolution, individuals born between 1891 and 1915 who bore a particle in their surname were 11.6 times more likely than the rest of the population to be admitted to a grande école. The advantage was even greater among members of the ANF, who were 15.1 times more likely to enrol. Two centuries after the Revolution, for the most recent cohort (1971-1995) of our sample, the advantage remains, though attenuated, reaching 6.5 for particle bearers and 8.9 for ANF-registered families.

Whether estimates are based on the narrow indicator of noble lineage (ANF-registered nobles) or on the broad one (name with a particle), both show that the overrepresentation of descendants of nobles among students at the most prestigious grandes écoles, although in steady decline, remains significant. As shown in Online Appendix Table S-2, these findings hold when the analysis is expanded to include non-native surnames: this yields slightly lower magnitudes but comparable trends of the relative admission rates of nobles, which decline over the period from 11.1 to 5.6 for particle bearers and 14.5 to 7.6 for ANF-registered families.

Beyond overall trends, there are differences of overrepresentation across schools. Using surname with particle as indicator of nobility, Figure II presents relative admission rates for the nobility across school categories and for three specific schools, including Sciences Po Paris. Historically, Sciences Po stood out as the most aristocratically concentrated institution.

14. Online Appendix Table S-2 shows a smaller increase when the full population is considered, including non-native surnames. Given the substantial demographic losses suffered by aristocratic families during World War I (see Section 1), the rise in birth rates among nobles in the 1916-1940 cohort could reflect a deliberate strategy to restore their lineage.

15. Chaussinand-Nogaret (1976) estimated that noble families constituted approximately 0.5% of the French population at the end of the Ancien Régime.

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

		Particle surnames				ANF-registered surnames			
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Birth cohort	Global admission rate (%)	Population share (%)	Share among students (%)	Group admission rate (%)	Relative admission rate	Population share (%)	Share among students (%)	Group admission rate (%)	Relative admission 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]

Note: For both bearers of surnames containing a particle and bearers of surnames registered with the ANF, the table reports their population share, the share of noble descendants among grandes écoles students, and their group admission rate (the percentage of individuals of noble lineage enrolled in at least one school). The relative admission rate is the ratio between this latter rate and the admission rate of individuals without noble lineage. 95% confidence intervals are in brackets. The table also reports the global admission rate for the entire population. Figures refer to the population with a native surname as defined in Section 2. Online Appendix Table S-2 reports robustness results including all surnames, while Online Appendix Table S-3 extends the analysis to all ten schools for both the native and full populations.
Source: GENES data (1911-2015); *Fichiers des noms patronymiques de 1891 à 1990* (1999 edition), INSEE.

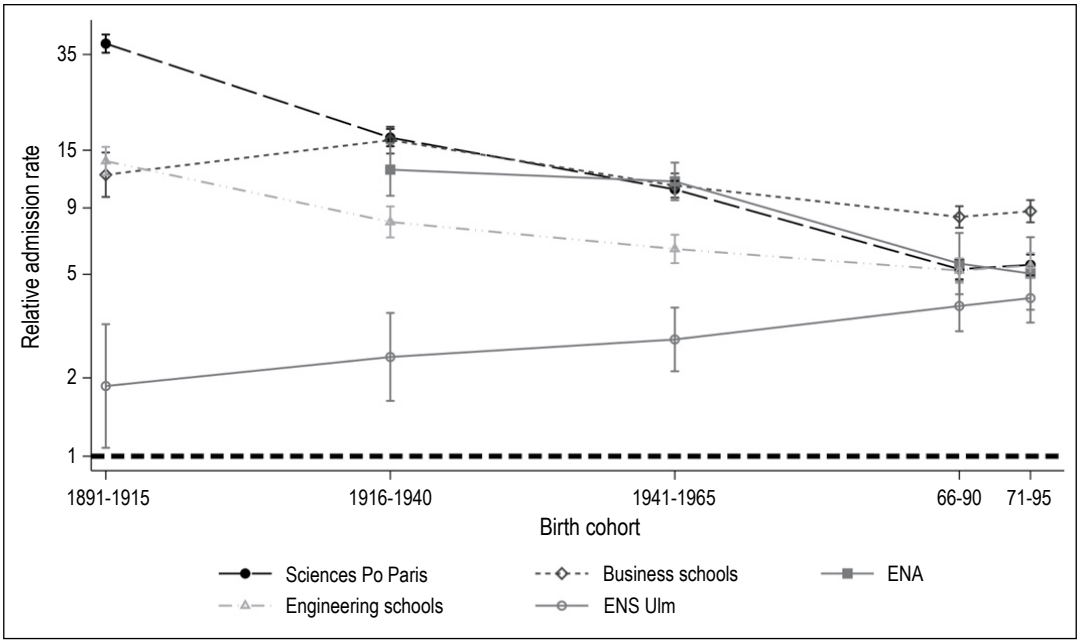
Among the 1891-1915 cohort, individuals with a particle surname were 38 times more likely to enrol than their non-noble counterparts, and ANF-registered nobles had a 51-fold higher likelihood of admission. Although bearers of particles represented only 0.36% of all births in this cohort, they accounted for 12% of Sciences Po Paris students. In this cohort, as many as 5.1% of ANF-registered family members studied at Sciences Po Paris. While noble overrepresentation at Sciences Po declined steadily throughout the 20th century, aligning with other elite schools in recent cohorts, their likelihood of admission nevertheless remains five to seven times higher than that of non-nobles.[16]

Figure II further illustrates how noble families allocated their educational investments across the different grandes écoles. Established in 1945, the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA) initially admitted a substantial number of students with noble lineage, with a RAR of 13 in its early decades. By the 1971-1995 cohort, however, this figure had declined to 5, aligning ENA with other grandes écoles. Conversely, the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) showed low overrepresentation of aristocratic descendants in the early 20th century. This exception gradually faded, and the proportion of noble students eventually reached levels comparable to those of other grandes écoles. Ultimately, business schools have become the institutions with the highest overrepresentation of students from noble backgrounds.

Table 4 presents a more granular breakdown of noble overrepresentation, school by school. Notable differences emerge between the two business schools of our sample. In the two cohorts from the first half of the 20th century, the RAR of ANF-registered nobles was 40.5 and then 36.9 at ESSEC, compared to just 5.5 and 16.1 at ESCP. However, the overrepresentation of noble families converged across both schools starting with the 1941-1965 cohort.[17] A comparable pattern can be observed in engineering schools. In the early 20th century, École Polytechnique (an institution with military status) and Mines Paris enrolled a higher proportion of noble students than other scientific institutions, but these differences gradually faded over time. These convergences likely reflect a broader process of alignment among the different grandes écoles, driven by competitive dynamics and international standardization that have progressively reduced

16. Harsanyi (2005) also highlights the strong presence of noble families in Paris's faubourg Saint-Germain, the district where Sciences Po is located.
17. ESSEC's foundation by Jesuits in 1907 is a notable particularity, as most grandes écoles were originally secular. Although governance was transferred to the Chamber of Commerce of Versailles in 1980, its religious origins may have contributed to its early appeal among noble families.

Figure II – **School differences in the relative admission rates of individuals with aristocratic lineage**



Note: Aristocratic lineage is identified using surnames with a particle. The vertical axis uses a logarithmic scale, with 95% confidence intervals represented by the vertical bars. Online Appendix Figure S-IV replicates this Figure using ANF-registered surnames.
Source: GENES data (1911-2015); *Fichiers des noms patronymiques de 1891 à 1990* (1999 edition), INSEE.

Table 4 – **Relative admission rates of individuals with aristocratic lineage, by school**

Bearers of surnames with a particle					
Cohort	1891-1915	1916-1940	1941-1965	1966-1990	1971-1995
Sciences Po Paris	**38.5** [35.6-41.8]	**16.7** [15.5-18.1]	**10.6** [9.8-11.4]	**5.2** [4.8-5.7]	**5.4** [5.0-6.0]
ENA	-	**12.6** [10.0-15.9]	**11.3** [9.6-13.4]	**5.4** [4.2-7.2]	**5.0** [3.7-6.9]
ENS Ulm	**1.8** [1.1-3.2]	**2.4** [1.6-3.6]	**2.8** [2.1-3.7]	**3.7** [3.0-4.7]	**4.0** [3.3-5.0]
ESPCI Paris	**3.1** [1.6-6.1]	**4.6** [2.9-7.4]	**6.3** [4.4-9.1]	**2.8** [2.0-4.3]	**3.2** [2.3-4.6]
Polytechnique	**14.9** [13.0-17.2]	**9.1** [7.8-10.7]	**6.7** [5.8-7.9]	**6.1** [5.4-7.1]	**6.2** [5.4-7.2]
Ponts et Chaussées	**8.3** [6.0-11.7]	**4.8** [3.3-7.1]	**6.7** [5.4-8.5]	**5.5** [4.6-6.8]	**6.2** [5.2-7.5]
Télécom Paris	**6.2** [2.8-14.1]	**5.2** [3.5-7.9]	**3.9** [3.0-5.3]	**4.0** [3.3-5.0]	**3.8** [3.0-4.9]
Mines Paris	**18.0** [13.7-23.8]	**9.3** [7.0-12.4]	**5.3** [4.0-7.3]	**4.9** [3.9-6.2]	**5.4** [4.3-6.9]
ESSEC	**34.2** [27.3-42.9]	**24.9** [21.4-29.1]	**11.1** [9.7-12.8]	**8.6** [7.7-9.7]	**9.1** [8.1-10.4]
ESCP	**4.0** [2.7-5.9]	**11.0** [9.3-13.0]	**11.0** [9.7-12.6]	**8.0** [7.2-9.0]	**8.3** [7.4-9.4]
Nine baseline schools	**11.5** [10.4-12.9]	**10.0** [9.1-11.0]	**7.9** [7.3-8.6]	**6.3** [5.9-6.9]	**6.5** [6.0-7.1]
All 10 schools	**23.2** [21.6-25.0]	**13.5** [12.6-14.5]	**9.3** [8.6-9.9]	**5.9** [5.4-6.3]	**6.1** [5.6-6.5]
Bearers of surnames registered with the ANF					
Cohort	1891-1915	1916-1940	1941-1965	1966-1990	1971-1995
Sciences Po Paris	**51.3** [45.5-57.9]	**23.1** [20.6-26]	**14.9** [13.3-16.8]	**6.5** [5.7-7.6]	**6.7** [5.9-7.8]
ENA	-	**16.9** [12.1-23.7]	**17.9** [14.3-22.6]	**6.2** [4.0-9.8]	**6.4** [3.9-10.6]
ENS Ulm	**0.4** [0.1-3.1]	**3.8** [2.2-6.7]	**4.0** [2.7-6.1]	**5.2** [3.8-7.3]	**5.9** [4.4-8.0]
ESPCI Paris	**3.2** [1.0-10.1]	**4.8** [2.2-10.9]	**11.6** [7.3-18.7]	**4.2** [2.4-7.4]	**3.9** [2.3-6.9]
Polytechnique	**21.0** [17.1-25.8]	**11.0** [8.7-14.1]	**9.4** [7.4-12.1]	**8.3** [6.8-10.2]	**8.5** [7.0-10.5]
Ponts et Chaussées	**10.0** [6.0-16.8]	**6.1** [3.5-11]	**8.0** [5.6-11.5]	**7.3** [5.5-9.8]	**7.7** [5.9-10.3]
Télécom Paris	**9.5** [3.1-30.0]	**7.6** [4.2-13.9]	**4.9** [3.1-7.9]	**5.0** [3.7-6.9]	**4.5** [3.2-6.5]
Mines Paris	**21.6** [14.2-33.0]	**8.9** [5.5-14.8]	**8.1** [5.1-12.8]	**7.7** [5.6-10.6]	**7.8** [5.4-11.3]
ESSEC	**40.4** [28.7-57.1]	**36.9** [29.7-45.9]	**17.4** [14.3-21.2]	**12.0** [10.1-14.3]	**12.8** [10.7-15.4]
ESCP	**5.5** [3.1-9.9]	**16.1** [12.5-20.9]	**16.5** [13.7-20.1]	**10.1** [8.6-12.1]	**10.9** [9.1-13]
Nine baseline schools	**15.1** [12.8-17.9]	**13.8** [12.0-16.0]	**12.0** [10.6-13.6]	**8.5** [7.6-9.7]	**8.8** [7.8-10.1]
All 10 schools	**31.2** [27.9-34.9]	**18.7** [16.8-20.8]	**13.4** [12.1-14.9]	**7.8** [6.9-8.6]	**7.9** [7.1-8.9]

Note: 95% confidence intervals are shown in brackets. For each panel, the last two lines aggregate results for the nine baseline grandes écoles and the full sample of ten schools (including Sciences Po Paris).
Source: GENES data (1911-2015); *Fichiers des noms patronymiques de 1891 à 1990* (1999 edition), INSEE.

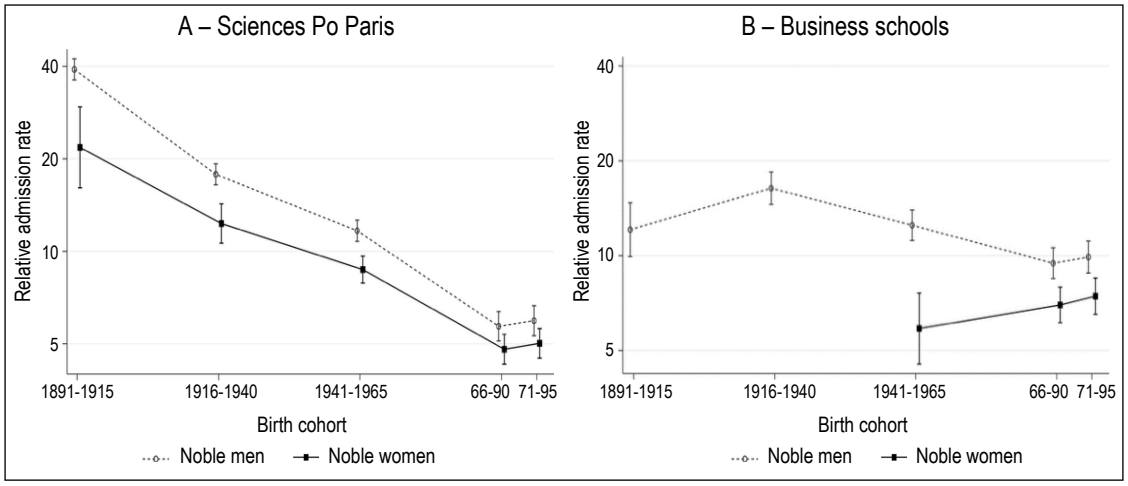
differences in their curricula, recruitment, and positioning (Bourdieu, 1989).[18]

Historically male-dominated, the grandes écoles have undergone a process of feminization over the past decades. The question arises as to how this change has been reflected in aristocratic spheres, where educational strategies are traditionally distinct for girls and boys. Figure III compares the noble advantage for men and women at Sciences Po Paris (Panel A) and in business schools (Panel B), where noble families have been the most represented across cohorts.[19] The results reveal a clear male advantage: the relative admission rates are higher for men than for women, but the gap has also progressively narrowed across cohorts.

While prior research suggests that intergenerational transmission of elite education is not strongly gendered – and may even slightly favour daughters (Benveniste, 2023) – these findings are consistent with historical studies of gendered educational strategies in noble families. De Saint-Martin (1993), for instance, noted that even in the mid-20th century, noble families systematically ensured that their sons attended high school, while doing so for daughters was often discouraged or regarded as inappropriate.

18. Several factors may explain the growing uniformity among institutions, including adaptation to market demands, curriculum standardization in line with international norms and standards, the increasing influence of global rankings and accreditations, and the homogenization of recruitment practices for both students and faculty. More recently, the consolidation of concours into shared examination pools across multiple schools may have further reinforced this trend by encouraging institutional convergence.
19. 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 thus accounts for differences in gender diversity between schools.

Figure III – **Gender differences in relative admission rates of aristocrats**



Note: Aristocratic lineage is identified using surnames with a particle. Business schools of Panel B include ESCP and ESSEC. The vertical axis uses a logarithmic scale, with 95% confidence intervals represented by the vertical bars. Online Appendix Figure S-V replicates this Figure using ANF-registered surnames.
Source: GENES data (1911-2015); *Fichiers des noms patronymiques de 1891 à 1990* (1999 edition), INSEE.

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This study highlights the overrepresentation of noble families in France's elite higher education system, even two centuries after the Revolution. The use of two surname-based indicators of noble lineage (bearing a particle and registration with the Association d'entraide de la Noblesse Française) allows for either a broad or a narrow definition of aristocratic status. Applied to data on elite school students and aggregated data on surnames, these two indicators enable tracking how admission rates for individuals from noble families have evolved relative to those of the rest of the population.

Among cohorts born between 1891 and 1995, bearers of particle surnames accounted for around 0.5% of the French population but 4% of grande école students (excluding Sciences Po Paris), reaching up to 12% at Sciences Po Paris in the 1891-1915 cohort. Despite a decline in their overrepresentation over time, descendants of aristocratic families remain, in the most recent cohorts, six to nine times more likely than others to attend the nine grandes écoles considered. This decline results from the combination of relatively stable admission rates among nobles compared to rising admission rates among children of commoners.

More broadly, these findings show that despite the abolition of historical aristocratic privileges, inequalities between children from noble and from commoner families have not vanished. Noble families instead adapted early to the Republican educational landscape in which prestigious degrees became crucial for accessing elite positions. This dynamic aligns with the model of capital conversion as described by Bourdieu. As de Saint-Martin (2015) argues, noble families maintain their status through a combination of symbolic, cultural, social, and economic capital, which is manifested in their aristocratic titles, estates, academic credentials, networks, and wealth. While symbolic capital remains central to noble identity, its capacity to confer advantage depends on its strategic transformation into forms of capital with contemporary value, particularly elite academic credentials.

Beyond education, this aristocratic advantage is also preserved through the key mechanisms of family lineage and homogamy (de Saint-Martin, 2015). Historically, noble families have relied on dense, exclusive family networks to consolidate power, wealth, and influence across generations (Haldén, 2020). Kinship ties not only enhance the returns on elite degrees through social capital (Kramarz & Skans, 2014), but also serve as a channel for securing prestigious positions in politics, business, and the civil service (O'Brien, 2024). This interconnected web of families ensures both resilience and continuity for the former nobility at the top of the social hierarchy.

The analysis also reveals a gendered pattern in the noble overrepresentation, with noble sons showing higher relative admission rates than noble daughters, although this gap has gradually narrowed over time. As unions between graduates of the same institutions have become more

common (Goux & Maurin, 2003; Ford, 2020) and as elite education – particularly grandes écoles – increasingly fosters endogamous unions (Bouchet-Valat, 2014), the unequal presence of aristocratic men and women in these institutions suggests that exclusive social practices still exist today. For example, because educational assortative matching may be insufficient to maintain aristocratic lineage, events such as *rallyes* (formal coming-of-age social events encouraging matches) can serve as vehicles for preserving noble bloodlines (de Saint-Martin, 1985).

Though it would require additional data collection, future research could provide deeper insight into patterns of elite continuity, in particular the social mechanisms underlying this noble advantage, its magnitude relative to that observed for other social groups, as well as the internal hierarchies within the nobility. A more fine-grained classification of the nobility could distinguish long-established aristocratic lineages from families ennobled in the 18th or early 19th centuries, as well as higher-ranking noble families (e.g., descendants of dukes or princes) from those holding lower titles, thereby refining our understanding of internal hierarchies within the aristocracy. Furthermore, in order to better disentangle a possible status- or culture-based effect of nobility from that of cultural, social, or economic capital, information on parents' educational attainment or income would help shed light on the mechanisms underlying the overrepresentation of students of noble descent in the most prestigious grandes écoles. Finally, comparing the magnitude of this overrepresentation with that observed for other social groups would help better assess its significance.

By integrating long-standing social hierarchies and distinctions into the broader literature on educational inequality and social mobility, this study suggests that such legacies still contribute to shaping access to elite degrees. Rather than a straightforward disappearance of noble privilege, our results are consistent with a process of strategic reconfiguration, whereby aristocratic families adapt to evolving institutional landscapes to maintain their presence in elite circles. These enduring legacies of history thus seem to continue to shape access to elite positions in French society. □

Link to the Online Appendix:
www.insee.fr/en/statistiques/fichier/8743921/ES548_Benveniste_Online-Appendix.pdf

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