

CHAPTER 8



State-sponsored education and French identity

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1 INTRODUCTION

Why do French people speak French? And what makes them French? These seem like trivial questions, but they are not. The building of a national identity in a fragmented society is an important driver of economic development and social cohesiveness. Yet, why some countries successfully become nations, and the role of the state in this process, is not well understood.

To understand this, we study France, one of the canonical examples of nation-building (Blanc and Kubo 2021). Only 200 years ago, French was a foreign language to the vast majority of the French population, and most of the population did not identify as French. Today, France is a relatively homogenous country where French is the common language. Eugen Weber (1976) and Eric Hobsbawm (1990) document this in *Peasants into Frenchmen* and *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, but statistical evidence for this change is lacking.

Using a natural experiment and drawing on a detailed survey of the languages spoken across municipalities in France, we document the process of homogenisation and nation building and empirically establish that state-sponsored mass education played a substantial role in the adoption of the French language and in the formation of a national identity in France.

2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“France is diversity” and “the dazzling triumph of the heterogeneous” (p. 38) are two of the phrases used by the historian Fernand Braudel to describe France (Braudel 1986). More than 40 different languages or dialects were spoken in the beginning of the 19th century, in particular the *langues d’oc* (Occitan and its dialects) in the south, the *langues d’oïl*, including French language, in the north, and other regional languages such as Breton or Alsatian elsewhere. On the French identity, Weber (1976) documents that, in the mid-19th century in a remote village in the south of France, “not a single child could answer questions like ‘Are you English or Russian?’ or ‘What country is the department of Lozère in?’”. More than 80% of the population was rural at the time, and French was only spoken by the elites in the cities and in the region around Paris.

3 DATA

We gather data on the languages spoken around 1900 in 577 municipalities from the *Atlas Linguistique de la France*. The *Atlas* was published in nine volumes from 1902 to 1910 and relied on a survey carried out by linguist Jules Gilliéron to study Romance languages in the rural parts of the country.

For four years, Gilliéron’s assistant Edmond Edmont travelled across the country and asked locals for the standard, common pronunciation of 1,920 words or expressions in their municipality. The survey captures spoken language, including vocabulary and pronunciation, and paints a particularly detailed picture of the languages and dialects spoken by ordinary people in their daily life at the time (see Figure 1).

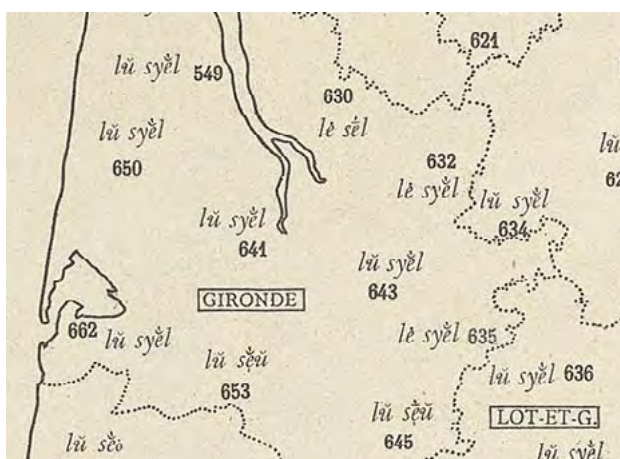
Importantly, the *Atlas* was conducted to capture the common language spoken in the surveyed municipality and not the language spoken by the individuals surveyed. Moreover, the timing of the survey is ideal for studying the effect of state-sponsored education during the time of François Guizot and to abstract from potential confounding factors resulting from the Freycinet Plan and Ferry Laws – the two other important drivers of homogenisation at the time (Weber 1976). Most adults in 1900, at the time of the *Atlas*, had not been affected by the Jules Ferry Laws of 1881 and 1882, which made education free, universal and secular, or by the Freycinet Plan of 1878, which mandated the construction of railways, canals and ports and was only completed in 1914.

FIGURE 1 MAP OF "CIEL" ("SKY")

Panel A: France



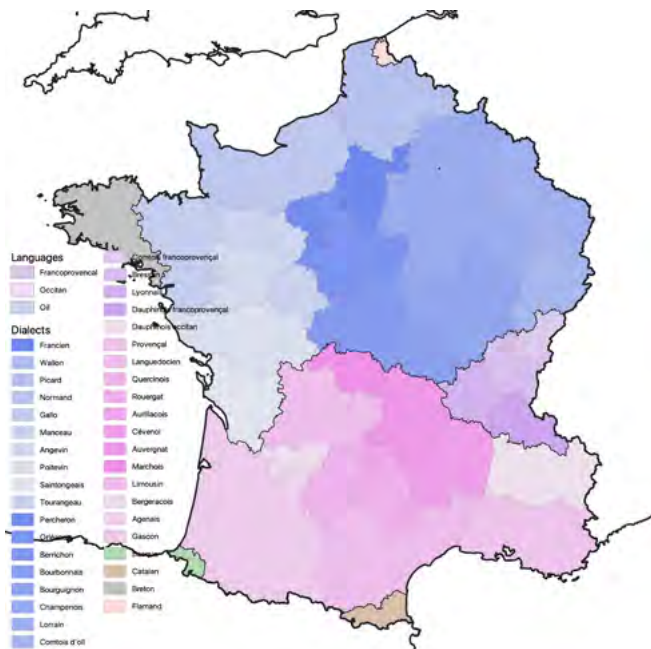
Panel B: Zoomed-in



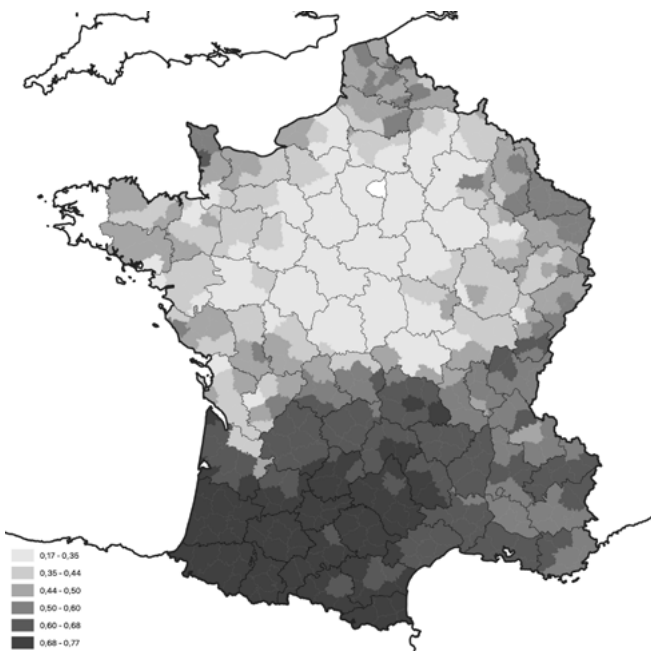
Note: This figure displays a map from the Atlas Linguistique de la France (Gilliéron and Edmont, 1902-1910) showing the pronunciation of "ciel" ("sky") across municipalities in France (Panel A) and in the southern part of France only (Panel B). The map displays "le ciel" ("the sky"), but we only digitised the word "sky."

FIGURE 2 HISTORICAL LANGUAGE REGIONS AND LINGUISTIC DISTANCE FROM FRENCH IN 1900

Panel A: Historical language regions



Panel B: Linguistic distance from French (1900)



We rely on the *Atlas* to measure linguistic distance from French. We use a Levenshtein distance algorithm – defined as the minimal number of edits by insertions, deletions or substitutions between phonetic representation of words – to capture linguistic dissimilarity.

In order to measure linguistic distance, we chose the pronunciation of 50 representative words in the *Atlas* from a list of words that exist in most languages and cultures and correspond to a “standardised universal list of meanings” (Ginsburgh and Weber 2020: 367). We use the list compiled by Swadesh (1952) – including words such as “cat”, “dog”, “drink”, “fruit”, “hand”, “mouth”, “night”, “rain”, “sun”, “trees” and “water” – and show the robustness of our results to using other distance metrics across the entire corpus of 1,681 words in the *Atlas*.

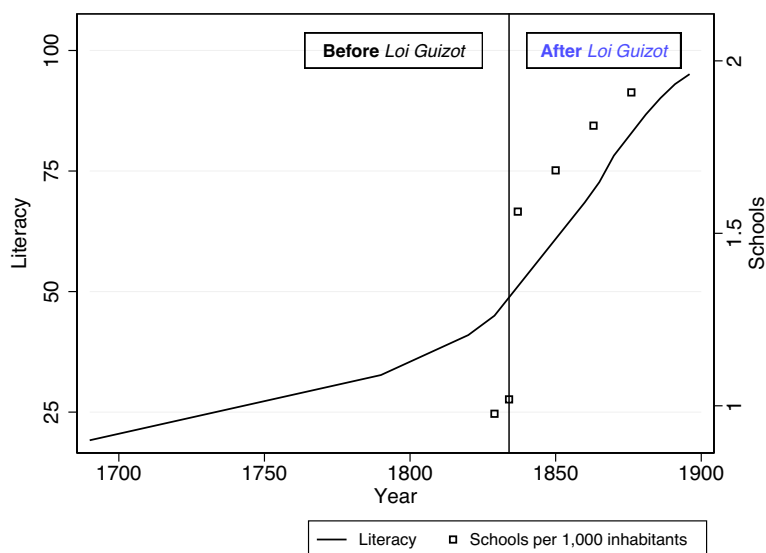
Panel B of Figure 2 displays the spatial distribution of our measure of linguistic distance from French in 1900. The darker areas indicate a larger linguistic distance from the standard language. Our measure closely tracks the historical language regions (Panel A), showing that the *Atlas* captures recent changes but also deep-rooted historical differences – which provides variation we can exploit.

4 EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

We exploit quasi-exogenous variation in the provision of state-sponsored education during the July Monarchy, which laid the foundations of mass public primary schooling and undertook important state-building efforts with the *Loi Guizot* of 28 June 1833 and the municipal law of 21 March 1831.

In municipalities of more than 500 inhabitants, primary schools for boys were built (Furet and Ozouf 1977); a national curriculum designed by the state was followed, with the national language and a national history taught using textbooks created and distributed by the state; schoolteachers benefitted from a standardised education provided by the state in newly created *écoles normales*; a body of nationally recruited school inspectors supervised the schoolteachers and enforced the law; larger municipal councils raised additional taxes and significantly increased state capacity to fund the provisions of the law (Montalbo 2021); and members of a same family could not be on the municipal council together.

Figure 3 shows that the number of primary schools increased nearly two-fold in a decade, from one school for every 1,000 inhabitants to one for every 600, and universal literacy was achieved in the aftermath of the law.

FIGURE 3 LITERACY AND SCHOOLS

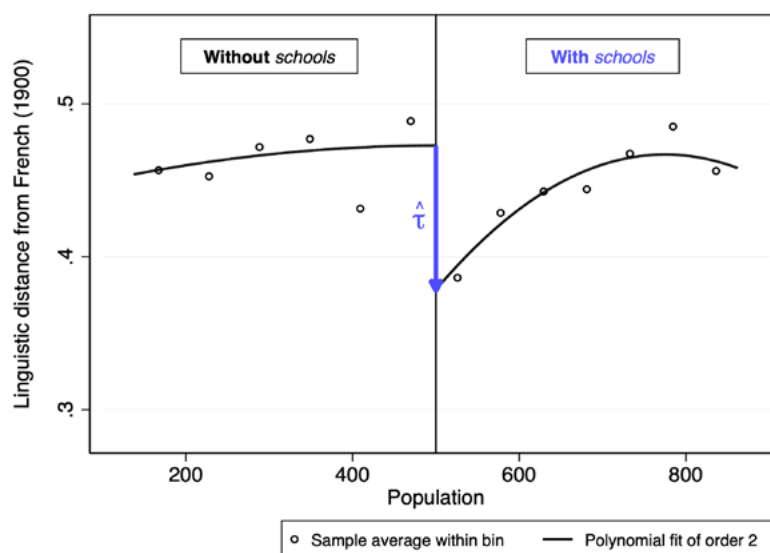
Paul Lorain, a close advisor of Guizot, argued at the time that “each school shall be a colony of French language in a conquered land” (Lorain 1837: 29), while Guizot himself wrote that “through the teaching of the French language, primary schools will instill and spread the spirit and unity of nationality everywhere” (Guizot 1833: 102).

Using a regression discontinuity design exploiting the 500-inhabitant threshold at the time of the *Loi Guizot*, we evaluate the causal impact of state-sponsored education on the adoption of the French language and the formation of a national identity across municipalities in France.

5 THE ADOPTION OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

We find that state-sponsored education decreased linguistic distance from French by 10 percentage points at the threshold – a 20% decrease relative to the counterfactual mean. The effect is statistically significant at the 1% level and robust across a wide range of alternative and placebo specifications, suggesting that state-sponsored education fostered the adoption of the French language.

Additionally, building on the regression discontinuity framework, we show that we can estimate a lower bound on the speed of homogenisation over time from our cross-sectional data.

FIGURE 4 STATE-SPONSORED EDUCATION AND LINGUISTIC DISTANCE FROM FRENCH

Note: This figure plots linguistic distance from French against population around the discontinuity at the time of the *Loi Guizot*. Each point plots the average value within a bin, partialled out of distance from Paris, administrative region fixed-effects, and historical language region fixed-effects. Linguistic distance from French is defined as the Levenshtein distance from Le Plessis-Robinson. We apply a local-polynomial fit of order 2 and a mean-squared-error optimal bandwidth for local-polynomial estimation. Observations are at the municipality level.

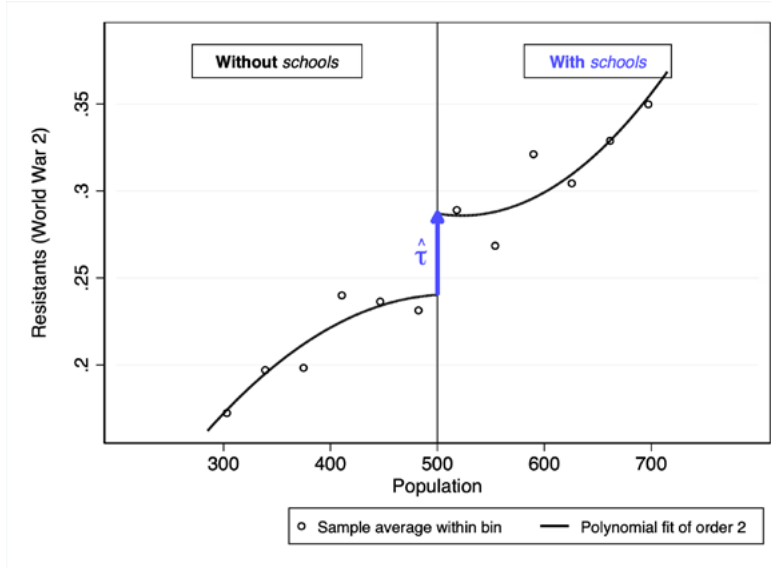
How fast homogenisation took place is an unknown parameter of interest in the literature. While our data allow us to observe linguistic distance from French in 1900, we do not observe it before the July Monarchy. However, we expect that it should be smooth at the threshold. Moreover, if the policy only contributed a portion of the total change over time – that is, if the total change over time and the effect of treatment are of the same sign – then the rate of change estimated from the policy alone (i.e. the percentage change relative to the counterfactual) will be lower than the total rate of change (i.e. the speed of homogenisation). Hence, our results suggest that linguistic distance from French decreased by at least 20% from 1833 to 1900 in municipalities at the threshold.

6 THE FORMATION OF A NATIONAL IDENTITY

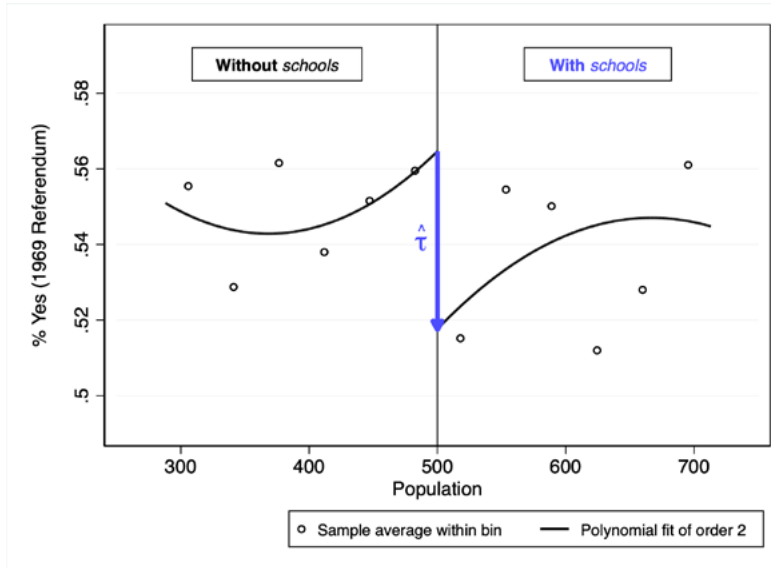
We also explore the persistent effects of the policy on the salience of national identity and preferences for the centralisation of political authority. We leverage data on a set of different outcomes to proxy for national identity and political preferences, in particular data on the birthplace of heroes resisting Nazi Germany during World War II and on votes against the regionalisation of political authority in 1969.

FIGURE 5 STATE-SPONSORED EDUCATION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Panel A: Resistance heroes (WWII)



Panel B: 1969 referendum on regionalisation



Note: This figure plots measures of the salience of national identity against population around the discontinuity at the time of the *Loi Guizot*. Each point plots the average value within a bin, partialled out of distance from Paris, *département* fixed-effects, and historical dialect region fixed-effects. In Panel A, French Resistance during World War II is defined as a dummy variable that equals 1 if at least one individual born in the municipality was awarded a *Médaille de la Résistance* for documented "remarkable acts of faith and courage that contributed to the resistance of the French people against the enemy." In Panel B, votes on the 1969 constitutional referendum on regionalisation are defined as the vote share in favour of the referendum. We apply a local-polynomial fit of order 2 and a mean-squared-error optimal bandwidth for local-polynomial estimation. Observations are at the municipality level.

The policy significantly increased the likelihood that individuals born in treated municipalities were heroes of the French Resistance who were awarded a *Médaille de la Résistance* for documented “remarkable acts of faith and courage that contributed to the resistance of the French people against the enemy” (Figure 5, Panel A).

Then, we leverage data on votes against the regionalisation of political authority in the 1969 referendum on regionalisation, where Charles De Gaulle proposed to return significant power and autonomy to regional authorities. The outcome of the vote is not readily available at the municipality level. We obtained this data in the Lorraine region from Dehdari and Gehring (2022) discussed in Chapter 23 of this eBook, and digitised it in Provence from the archival records of a local newspaper, *Le Petit Varois*, which published the municipality-level results the day after the election.

Using the municipality election data, we show that state-sponsored education significantly reduced the vote share in favour of regionalisation by 2 to 6 percentage points – a particularly important effect since the referendum was rejected by 52.4% of voters. The referendum would have been adopted and France would look more like Spain today had nation building not taken place in the 1830s.

7 SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Last but not least, we use data on migration flows across *départements* and trade links across districts to estimate the relationship between linguistic proximity and the exchange of ideas and goods. There are unfortunately no data on migration and trade flows across municipalities, either historically or in contemporary times, hence we can only provide suggestive evidence of the role of the policy on these variables.

We find that a one standard deviation increase in linguistic distance between municipalities is associated with a decrease in migratory flows of more than half of a standard deviation and a decrease in trade of one-fifth of a standard deviation. The estimated coefficients remain statistically significant even after accounting for gravity forces. Our results suggest that language shapes migration and trade and that the homogenisation brought about by state-sponsored education had far-reaching and persistent impacts.

8 WHY WAS NATION BUILDING SUCCESSFUL?

Why was the policy successful? There are numerous examples of state initiatives to shape ideology and identity that have resulted in backlashes (see Chapter 14 of this eBook on Bazzi et al. 2021, Chapter 13 on Fouka 2020 and Carvalho and Koyama 2016). Looking at the heterogeneous effects of the policy, we contend that the answer is found in a variety of elements.

Where the returns to education were high and schools were very much needed, the policy was successful. We also show that local elites played a significant role in the implementation and enforcement of the policy, and that the policy was more successful where state building went hand-in-hand with nation building – in municipalities where state capacity was initially weak. Last but not least, another important factor could be that the population had a long shared history within stable and long-established national borders. This might be an avenue for future research.

9 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Using a novel, detailed dataset on spoken languages in France and a natural experiment, we document the adoption of a common language and the formation of a national identity in the process of nation building in a fragmented society.

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